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***Paris on a Shoestring***

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A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the  
degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

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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.

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## **Descriptive Abstract for Creative Writing Masters Dissertation.**

**Title:** *Paris on a Shoestring*

**Author:** Sarah Lotz (LTZSAR001)

Set in Paris in the late 1980s, *Paris on a Shoestring* is narrated progressively by the two main teenage protagonists, who, through a series of events, find themselves living on the streets of Paris and begging for money. The two narrators, Vicki and Sage, flee to France after deliberately vandalising their art college. Penniless, homeless and lost in an unfamiliar environment, they're easy prey for various opportunistic chancers.

Although predominantly a character driven novel, it also explores the protagonists' relatively seamless acceptance of radically different norms and values, as the girls go from living a fairly benign British middle-class existence to a way of life dependent on other people for survival.

### **Main Characters (Narrators)**

#### **Vicki Evans:**

It's through Vicki that much of the action in the novel is revealed. Not given to introspection, Vicki ostensibly appears to have a somewhat dispassionate attitude towards everything that happens to her and Sage. Her observations on the events that unfold (which she tellingly calls 'experiences') are narrated in the immediate present tense, and are often flippantly related. This flippancy and seeming nonchalance are devices she employs to deflect some of the more harrowing episodes the girls endure. Many of Vicki's intentions and motivations remain fairly opaque to the reader, which highlights the fact that, for Vicki, even the most damaging experiences are somewhat unreal. Deep down, Vicki knows that she can step out of this particular lifestyle anytime she chooses and return to normalcy again.

**Sage (Sharon) Watling:**

Sage is revealed through the words she angrily scrawls in her diary (that she nick-names 'Gladys'). A far more prickly yet accessible character than Vicki, Sage's feelings about those around her are often antagonistic and aggressive. She's also deeply secretive, and finds it almost impossible to talk or write about her past, even in the private sphere of her journal. A medication-dependent depressive, Sage is in a far different position than Vicki, having no background support.

**Peripheral characters:**

Many of the characters with whom Vicki and Sage interact in Paris directly influence their eventual slide into homelessness. As these characters are revealed only through the voices of the two teenagers, it's up to the reader to discern the real motive behind many of the peripheral characters' actions. They include: Bobby, a manipulative and opportunistic art dealer; Jules, a sexual predator in his mid-fifties; Hervé, a benign student in his twenties who the girls don't hesitate to exploit; the various members of the Pompidou Posse (Sage's name for the tramp group the girls join); Alex, an alcoholic ex-con who begs for money using a pair of bananas, and Taffy, a one-legged psychopathic Welsh beggar.

**PARIS ON A SHOESTRING**

By

Sarah Lotz

University of Cape Town

**PARIS, 1988.**

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Bobby Experience

“Hey! Engleesh!”

Then again, this time louder:

“Hey! Engleesh! Over here! *Viens ici!*”

The voice cuts through the background roar of the traffic screaming up and down the Boulevard Montmartre, and I immediately suspect it’s targeted at us. Sage is obviously thinking the same thing.

“Christ,” she mutters. “What the fuck’s that about?”

“Dunno,” I say, trying to catch a glimpse of whoever’s shouting at us through the mass of touristy bodies.

“Why do nutters always bleeding well pick on us?” Sage says.

“Who knows?” I shrug.

“What do you think he wants?”

“I’m buggered if I know, Sage.”

But it looks like we’re about to find out. We’re being swept along by the momentum of a crowd of eager British and German tourists, and we’re definitely heading closer to where the voice seems to have originated: a solid stone building that floats like the prow of a cross-channel ferry between two large intersections. As soon as we’re jostled across the wide boulevard, the crowd dribbles away, and we’re left on the pavement, an island of two.

“Fuck me,” Sage says under her breath, taking the words out of my mouth. For a second or two, all I can do is stare. Sage throws me a ‘what the hell?’ expression and, not knowing what else to do, we make our way over to where the owner of the voice is frantically motioning us to join him.

Unbelievable. He looks just like a round bath toy my brother had when he was a baby. Named Mr Ballso, the toy was impossible to tip over due to its bulbous round shape and a weight at the base of its plastic blue arse.

“Ah. *Bonjour!* You are Engleesh, am I right?” Mr Ballso says when we get within a couple of feet of him.

I nod. He looks like he's wearing some sort of eighteenth century costume. His stumpy legs are clad in sausage-skin jodhpurs and riding boots and his barrelled stomach strains at the fabric of a bright blue polyester shirt. A blood red cravat is tied jauntily around his neck. The icing on the cake is a black top-hat that balances on his round brown ball of a head.

"I am always right! In fact, you are Engleesh punks, *non?*" The fact that Sage and I are still staring at him, gobsmacked expressions frozen on our faces, doesn't seem to faze him in the slightest. He's probably used to it.

"Er, I'm not quite sure what we are," I say.

He throws back his head and laughs like I've said something hilarious. Sage rolls her eyes at me and mouths 'wanker'.

"Ah. But I can see you are artistic. Am I right?"

Again I nod.

Sage leans over and loudly whispers, "Just tell him to fuck off, and let's go."

I ignore her. Right now I'm willing to clutch at any straw, even one offered by someone who looks like an extra from *The Wizard of Oz*.

"You see. I can tell you are artists by the way that you dress. And that is how I know from where you come, too. That you are, indeed, Engleesh."

He has a point, I suppose. Everyone else surging up and down the boulevard seems to be dressed in crap anoraks and drab overcoats, so I guess Sage and I do stand out in the crowd a bit. I'm wearing my Scully Jack painted leather coat, a floor length Victorian velvet dress and an embroidered waistcoat. Sage spent a good twenty minutes on my hair, and it's piled on my head in a complicated design of dreadlocks and porcupine quills. She also looks fairly dapper. After only a week of growth, her head is peppered with spiky greyish stubble and she's decked out in red silk Persian trousers and a pea-green leather jacket I found for her at one of my Nan's jumble sales back at home.

Mr Ballso pops a fag into his mouth and I can't help but glance greedily at it. He eagerly offers me a crumpled pack of Marlboros.

"You need cigarettes? Here, *voila*, take."

I take two and pass one to Sage.

"*Merci*," I smile, and Sage mumbles a nearly inaudible "ta".

As he lights my cigarette I'm hit by a waft of industrial strength aftershave, and now he's up close I realise he's quite a short-arse. He's only a few inches taller than Sage, in fact.

I greedily inhale. Beautiful. The smoke helps calm the demanding hole where my stomach used to be. How can it be possible to feel so fucking hungry? I mean, it actually *hurts*. Since we'd left Emma-the-Bitch's, the time when I date our last half-reasonable meal, it's like my stomach's taken over my entire body. It's as if it's changed from the innocent pink organ we'd had to draw in biology class into an insatiable gaping maw – a bit like the Sarlaac monster that almost scoffs Han Solo in *Return of the Jedi*. God, I hope it isn't true that your stomach starts digesting itself if you haven't eaten for ages.

Mr Ballso's been saying something, and as Sage is still blasting 'fuck-off' vibes at him, it's up to me to at least attempt to be polite.

"Pardon," I say. "I didn't hear you."

"I said you are artists? That is what you do?"

"Yes, I mean *oui*," I say. "Well, students, really... kind of."

"You speak French?"

"*Oui, mais pas bien*," I mumble.

"No problem! I like to practice my Engleesh." He pauses.

"And you speak it very well. You must have had lots of practice." I know this is exactly what he expects me to say. Although his accent sounds typically French, there's something different about the way he draws out the word Engleesh: I imagine it stretching out of his mouth like chewing gum.

"You sell these?" Sage motions with her cigarette to a wall of paintings on display behind us. I've been so entranced at Mr Ballso's appearance I haven't even noticed them till now.

"*Oui*," he says proudly. "You like?"

We feign an interest in the artwork. The art he sells is the sort of paint-by-numbers you see on the walls of really old people's houses. My Nan has a similar one next to her gold-plated sunburst wall-clock. Hers is of a stag staring pensively over a gleaming forested landscape. God knows why she has it, she hates nature and animals. Who the hell buys shit like this in Paris, though?

“What you think of my paintings? You like?”

“Um... Very good. You do these yourself?” I ask before Sage can add something sarcastic.

He laughs again.

“No, no! I am an agent. I sell the others’ work.”

Sage and I exchange glances.

“So, you are on holiday in Paris?” he asks.

“Not exactly...” I say.

“What do you mean, ‘not exactly’. You come here to work? You are *au pairs*?”

“Well, kind of...”

“We’re trying to find work, actually,” Sage says, managing to make even this harmless sentence sound like a threat.

“Ah. What kind are you looking for? I know people, many people. It is possible I can help.”

“We’re on our way to Montmartre actually – we were told it might be a good place for artists,” I say.

Mr Ballso looks blank. “Ah, you mean selling paintings?”

“Yes. Well...” I hesitate. Our plan hadn’t stretched as far as what we’d actually *do* when we got there. “We were just going to check out the scene, really.”

“It is not easy to find a place there. There is a lot of competition.”

I smoke my cigarette right down to the filter. The last drag tastes bitter and burnt, but I don’t care. I crush the butt under my boot.

“I cannot believe it!” Mr Ballso almost shrieks. “You are artists, I am an artist, but we have not been properly introduced!”

“Oh, right.” I hold out my hand. But this is France. I try not to flinch as he leans forward and kisses me on both cheeks. Although his lips feel dry, I have to clench my fists to stop myself wiping my face free of imaginary Mr Ballso spit.

“*Bien*. I am Bobby.”

“I’m Vicki.”

“Vicki, like Queen Victoria?”

“Yeah. But everyone calls me Vicki.”

“It is a good name for you.” Bobby grabs one of my hands and theatrically bows down to kiss it. “You are indeed a queen.”

I quickly speak to distract him from catching a glimpse of Sage pointing her finger down her throat.

“And this is Sage.” I try not to smirk as Sage reluctantly submits to the same cheek-kissing ritual. This should be good. I’ve never seen her share any kind of intimate contact with anyone before, apart from the odd fight. Curiously, she seems to take it in her stride.

“Sage?” Bobby says. “That is unusual, *non*? What does it mean?”

“It’s a herb,” I say, a tad maliciously. “Sage’s folks were flower children in the sixties.”

“Ah. You are a ... hippy, Sage? A punk and a hippy?”

“No. I’m not a fucking hippy. And I’m not a fucking skinhead or whatever label you want to put on me,” Sage says, deadpan.

Shit. At the very least I’d been hoping to hit Bobby for another couple of fags, but it looks like Sage’s blown it again. I rack my brain for something to say, but he jumps in before I can speak.

“I like you!” he says to Sage. “You have balls, *ne c’est pas*? You don’t take shit?”

“You taking the piss?” she’s incredulous.

“What is this: taking the piss?”

“Are you fucking with me?” she says, drawing each word out slowly.

Bobby doesn’t get it. He looks at me and shrugs.

“I am not sure what you mean, but I understand you in a way.” He turns to me, “You are the soft one, and your friend, the herb, she is the strong one. That is why you are friends. Tell me I am right.”

“Wow, Bobby, you’ve figured us out,” Sage smirks. “Any chance of another cigarette?”

He hands her the pack.

“So. Tell me more about Vicki and Sage,” Bobby says, as he lights our fags.

“What do you want to know?” I ask.

Bobby shrugs. “Why it was that you decided to leave your home.”

Sage shakes her head warningly at me.

I ignore her. “A friend of mine -- her name is Emma -- said she could find us a job as *au pairs* here,” I say. “So we left home, came out here and stayed with Emma in her flat just outside Paris where she’s working. But it turned out that there wasn’t any work for us after all. You know, no job, nothing. So we had to leave her place and come to the city.”

“She basically told us to fuck off,” Sage adds. She never misses an opportunity to slag off Emma.

“*Pourquoi?*” Bobby says. “Why did she do that?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. “There wasn’t much room where she was staying, I guess. She didn’t *exactly* tell us to fuck off,” I glance at Sage and receive a scowl in return, “I reckon the people she worked for didn’t like us being there. And maybe she didn’t realise I was really serious about also getting a job.”

“She knew,” Sage says. “She knew we were serious all right.”

“Ah, so you were... stranded,” Bobby says.

“Yeah, that’s right, stranded.” Sage said, actually grinning at him for the first time.

“With no job.”

“That’s right.”

“And how long have you been in this country?”

I look at Sage. It *feels* like forever.

“About two weeks,” I say.

“So, why do you not go home?” Bobby asks, as I knew he would. This one isn’t so easy to answer.

I mumble something about being disappointed with England, about always having wanted to come to Paris and living the artistic dream, which I suppose is half true. I don’t mention the fire, the cops, the shit we’re in with the folks back at home. I’m not stupid. It looks like this guy may help us out and I’m not going to ruin our chances with the truth.

“Vicki,” Sage says pointedly. “We’d better get going. We’ve got to get our stuff soon.”

“Stuff?” Bobby asks.

“Our luggage. We left it at the hotel. We can only keep it there till four,” I explain.

“Where are you staying?”

“No where. Well, we’ve left our stuff at the hotel where we stayed last night.”

“And you are going to go where, then?”

“Er... we hadn’t really thought about it.”

“What you mean? Where is the place that you are staying?”

We don’t really have an answer for that. I wait for Sage to speak but she doesn’t. Instead she busily inspects the end of her cigarette.

Bobby puts a hand on my arm and looks at me seriously. For a horrible second I think he’s going to lean forward and kiss me. “Are you in trouble? Do you need money?”

I glance over at Sage. She shrugs. It’s up to me.

“We’re in deep shit,” I say.

Bobby beams as if we’ve given him fantastic news.

“Then it is a wonderful thing that you have met me! I will help you!”

He roots around in the inside of his polyester shirt without taking his eyes off me. He retrieves a bulging leather wallet, opens it, and triumphantly whips out a crisp 200 franc note.

“Take it,” he says to me.

I hesitate, not sure what to do.

“What’s this?” Sage asks, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

Bobby’s wide grin doesn’t waver. “It is for you, of course.”

For a panicky second I’m sure Sage is going to tell him to stick it up his arse.

“Er... Bobby, *je ne comprends pas...*” I say, before she can speak.

He shrugs in an over-the-top French fashion. “What is there to understand?” I’m about to speak again, but he waves me into silence. “I have decided I will help you. This money is for another night in the hotel where you are staying. Tomorrow I will have somewhere else for you to live until you find work.” He lights another cigarette and grins at me through the smoke.

“You serious?” Sage jumps in. “And what *exactly* do you want in exchange?”

“Nothing.” Bobby shrugs expansively again. “You need help. I am here to give.”

Taking her time, Sage drops her cigarette on the pavement and grinds it out under her boot.

“You married, Bobby?” she asks, somehow managing to make the question sound less barbed than I know it is.

For the first time, Bobby looks slightly ill at ease.

“*Pourquoi?* Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering,” Sage says, overly brightly. “Are you?”

“My wife and I are... separated,” Bobby says.

“Any kids?” Sage asks, in the same sneaky tone.

“*Non.* Again, why do you ask?”

“No reason! Just getting-to-know-you stuff.” She pauses. “Like friends do, you know?”

“Ah, *bon.*” Bobby looks different when he’s not smiling; he looks older, somehow.

I watch Sage carefully, willing her not to screw up our only hope of a roof over our heads. There seems to be some sort of mental struggle going on behind the scenes, then she makes her decision.

“Ta very much like, Bobby,” she says, and the note disappears into one of her waistcoat pockets. “We’ll pay you back. Where’s this place you think we could live?” Bobby’s habitual grin is suddenly back on his face, as if it had never left. “I have a friend who likes the people who are... bohemian... artistic... *interesting.* You know, like you. Like me.” He shrugs modestly. “He will be happy for you to stay with him for a couple of days, I am sure.”

“What does he do?”

“He is a student. He is about your age, I think?” he looks at me appraisingly. It may be my imagination, but his eyes seem to linger a little too long on my chest. “What *is* your age, in fact?”

“I’ve just turned eighteen,” I say, and Sage scowls.

Bobby claps his hands.

“*Bien,* my new friends, now business is done we must eat! Come, help me to pack away the paintings and I will take you for lunch! You are hungry?”

Without thinking I accept. I look over at Sage and give her the 'thumbs-up' sign. I get no response. As soon as Bobby's back is turned she pulls me aside.

"Vicki, what are you doing? We can't just go off with some vile pervert," she hisses.

I sigh. "You don't know he's a perve. Anyway, you got any better ideas?"

Sage shakes her head. "All I'm saying is -- What sort of a...a...*man* gives complete strangers a bunch of money for free?"

"Maybe he's just a nice guy, how should I know?"

Sage snorts. "Let's just take the money and leg it, okay?"

"Think about it, Sage. We're fucked. If this guy wants to help us out, let's let him." I pause. "We haven't really got much of a choice, have we? I mean, do you want to go back home? You know what'll happen if we do."

"All's I'm saying is this is as dodgy as fuck--"

"Right now, Sage, I couldn't give a shit." I say, and I mean it. Right now there isn't much I wouldn't do for even a fried egg on toast. "Let's just go eat. We'll have time to get our stuff afterwards. Anyway, we've got to do *something*, haven't we?"

Sage doesn't reply and I turn my back on her to help Bobby load the paintings into a metal container next to the wall of the bank.

## SAGE

*We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year,  
Running over the same old ground.  
What have we found?  
The same old fears.  
Wish you were here.  
Blah blah blah*

That is all I can remember of bastard Pink Floyd, don't ask me why I just wrote that, it just popped into my head. I mean, I don't even have any Pink Floyd here with me, thank God. Because it's basically shite anyway.

Okay, let me get something straight here. I AM NOT writing this because Bastard Shilling Doctor Perve Pilkington said I should. "Try and work through your feelings, Sharon, by putting pen to paper. It could help you deal with your anger issues". Yeah right. As if writing stuff down would have stopped me from calling him a cunt. He deserved it for ignoring me when I told him to call me by my Proper Name. TOTAL BASTARD.

Speaking of names, I'm not going to do the crappy Anne Frank 'Dear diary' bollocks. From this day on I hereby name this book... Gladys. That sounds better.

So...Dear Gladys...I did mean to write stuff down when we were at Emma-the-Bitch's, but this is actually the first time I've been properly on my own for fucking weeks. I know you're supposed to start diaries and shit with dates and stuff, but I'm not sure of the EXACT date. It's sometime in February 1988. That'll do.

So...We're back in another crappy old hotel room that STINKS of other people's BO and old fags, and Vicks is off out buying food for us with the money we had left over from that pervert's stash. I told her to take her time, which probably wasn't a very NICE thing to say, but then, who cares??

But I have a huge confession to tell you, which is one of the reasons I wanted to write this. It's not like I'm a CATHOLIC or anything. But I do feel a bit bad.

But First things first. Me and Vicks have met this VILE guy called Bobby who SAYS he wants to help us, but I want you to know, Gladys that I DO NOT TRUST HIM AT ALL.

I mean, NOBODY just gives money away for FREE. I know he wants something, and it makes me SICK that Vicks can't see the way he looks at her TITS all the time. I should NEVER have helped her look so GOOD this morning, or this may never have happened. Anyway, after he'd given us some cash he says he'll take us for some FOOD. I was DEAD suspicious and didn't want to go, but I went anyway for Vick's sake ONLY. So we help the pervert load up his DISGUSTING paintings and follow him for hours through this maze of streets. All the time he's talking non-stop to Vicks about HIMSELF and about how well-known he is. He goes on and on and I'm very surprised he can even find a hat big enough for his HUGE FAT HEAD. Just as I'm about to say, "Oy, where the FUCK are we going?" he finally shuts his trap and we stop outside this building that doesn't look like a restaurant at all – I mean it didn't have a sign on it or anything. I wanted to drag Vicks away right then, but she just followed him in through the door like a little lamb, so of course I had to go in there as well.

I had a HUGE shock. We were suddenly in the BIGGEST restaurant I've ever seen. There were hundreds of tables (I'm not exaggerating, honest, Gladys), and the place was heaving with FROGS babbling away loudly in their crap FROG language. I felt sorry for the waiters though. There were loads of them, all dressed up in penguin suits twirling round the tables trying to balance trays full of plates and looking dead stressed and overworked. It was a far cry from Kath's café where we used to go when we were skiving from fart college, I can tell you.

It was a weird place though. It had a huge glass ceiling, and lots of different floors. Over in the corner there was this little brown bird flitting around the pot plants and everyone ignored it as if it was a NORMAL thing to have birds inside places where you eat.

OK, so maybe then I started to feel a bit less suspicious, as the pervert couldn't really do MUCH with all these people around, could he?

We're shown to a table near the back and for some reason the head waiter bloke looks REALLY happy to see Bobby, but he looks at me and Vicks as if we're pieces of dog shit on his shoe. SNOOTY. But I didn't care Gladys, because the smell of the food was so IMMENSE and I've never been so hungry EVER.

So we sit down, and IMMEDIATELY this waiter plonks down a basket full of cut up French bread on the table. Well, obviously me and Vicks fall on it like zombies on a

corpse, and I don't even bother putting butter on mine (which is weird because I normally HATE dry bread). Then, just as we're both going for the last piece, bowls of boiling hot soup appear in front of us. At first I didn't know what to do with mine – there was something floating in it which turned out to be a huge round piece of bread and melted cheese. Frogs have BIZARRE ideas about food and stuff obviously. Even though the soup's as hot as fuck, I slurp it into my mouth as fast as I can (I've still got juicy bubbled blisters on the roof of my mouth) and because I'm not sure what to do with the big cheesy bread dollop, I shove it into my gob in one go!!! You should have seen the pervert's face!! He almost SHAT himself.

Anyway, I'm getting to the PROBLEMATIC part, Gladys...

The very second we finish our onion soup, our bowls are whisked away and on comes the second course.

Both Vicks and I looked down at our plates, TOTALLY gobsmacked.

The pervert stared at us, looking dead confused. And he's like, "There is a problem?" and Vicks says, "We're vegetarians." And he goes, "You mean, you do not eat meat?" And I'm like, "DUH, that IS what being a vegetarian means, asshole". And then he says something like, "Oh, this is a REAL pity, because this is no ordinary meat it's (GUESS WHAT, Gladys)?? VEAL".

You should have seen our faces. Everyone knows that veal is the cruellest of meat. Me and Vicks had been on an anti-veal protest just before all the shit hit the fan at home.

So the pervert says: "You want that I order you something different?"

But, thing was, Gladys, it just smelled so amazing I couldn't resist it. It was like it was calling to me, going, "Saaage, Saaage, no one will eeeveer know if you eat me..."

And Vicks goes, "I suppose we could just eat the potatoes". But suddenly my stomach made the decision and I found my fork mysteriously going to my mouth piled high with meat! And the next thing I remember is the pervert saying, "Slow down you will be sick!" and me saying "no fucking way" and spraying food all over the place. Of course now the snotty head waiter guy is looking at us as if we're dog shit on his OTHER shoe. So, that's why I feel so guilty, Gladys. And I feel even worse because I didn't actually get sick or anything after I ate it. Quite the opposite. I want MORE!!!

Vicks has promised the vile perve that we'll meet him tomorrow morning so that we can meet his friend who might put us up for a while. I could tell while we was eating that he was scamming for an invite to our hotel room, but no such FUCKING luck!!!

Okay, I can hear someone coming down the corridor.

REMIND ME TO CHECK ON THE TABLET SITUATION !!!!

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Hervé Experience

“*Pardon,*” I mumble, as the exit door slips out of my fingers, bangs uncomfortably against my rucksack and almost brains a rotund woman behind me. Sage and I are struggling to heft our luggage through the slim glass exit doors of the Metro station at Opera. We’d decided to splurge the last of Bobby’s hand-out on Metro tickets. The thought of lugging our stuff on foot from the hotel to Bobby’s corner was too much to bear.

“Our bags weren’t this heavy when we left home, were they?” I say, trying to break the ice.

Sage just shrugs. She’s spent the morning carefully maintaining a pissed-off, aloof expression and we’ve barely said a word to each other, even when I managed to get us lost on the Metro ride. As we struggle up the stairs I try and brighten the mood.

“You know what I feel like?” I say.

“What?” she snaps.

“You know that movie, *Labyrinth*?”

“No.”

“Yeah, you do. The one with the Muppets and David Bowie in tights.”

Sage looks blank. “No, I really don’t.”

“Well, anyway. In the movie there’s this character that carries all her shit on her back – everything -- her whole life, history, everything she ever owned.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, what I’m saying is I feel like her.”

“Really.”

I give up.

\*

We’d had one of our massive fights that had erupted out of nowhere last night. I’m never sure how or why they start. I mean, we’d had a great afternoon, despite the fact

she was still pissed-off about the Bobby situation. I'd even agreed to go and fetch some food and fags by myself, and she seemed to be in a good enough mood when I left. And when I got back to the hotel we'd spent a few minutes doing impressions of Bobby and Emma-the-Bitch and having a good laugh before Sage decided to go down the corridor for a shower. I'd just made myself comfortable on the lumpy bed when she returned. She wasn't looking charmed.

"Just look," she said.

"At what? What you talking about?"

"My feet."

I looked down. Her favourite pair of hiking boots appeared to be soaking wet.

"What the hell --?"

"You don't want to know," she mumbled.

"You been outside or something? Is it raining?"

"Course I haven't been outside. Is my head wet?"

"Well, what then?"

"The bloody toilet."

"What, you fall in?"

"It's one of those funny fucking French ones – those ones that are just holes in the ground with nothing to sit on like normal toilets. I couldn't figure out how to flush the fucking thing, and when I did --"

I collapsed into giggles. Big mistake.

"It's not funny," she snapped. "Fuck it! My socks are soaked!"

"I hate those loos," I said, trying to diffuse the situation. "They creep me out. I'm positive that one day I'll look down one and a large blue eye will blink up at me."

It wasn't working. Her face was still etched with a tell-tale scowl. "If I have to go again I'll go to the one on the other floor. And the state of the shower! Jesus. These people are pigs! You never told me French people were such fucking slob, Vicks."

She sat down on the bed and removed the sodden hiking boots which she forcefully hurled into a corner of the room. Then, grimacing, she unpeeled the soaked socks and chucked them straight into the bin.

"Fuck it. That's my last clean pair."

“You’re lucky, I haven’t worn clean underwear since we were at Emma’s,” I said, still trying to keep the tone of the conversation above danger zone level.

Ignoring me, she rummaged around in her rucksack. I sank back again on the bed. “I suppose I’d better phone Emma,” I said. Second big mistake.

Sage looked disgusted.

“What the fuck for?” We don’t owe that bitch anything. She screwed us, remember?”

“Look, the folks have her number. If they’re trying to get us, we need to let Emma know we’re fine.”

“So just phone your dad and say you’re okay.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Just leave it. Fucking hell. When we get sorted at the place Bobby the bastard’s got for us you can phone her then, `kay?”

“Sage, don’t call him that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because he’s helping us out. It’s not right. Besides, he’s not that bad.”

Sage turned her back to me and started stuffing clothes roughly back into her bag. There was a pause. I knew what was coming.

“Obviously you know he just wants to fuck you,” she said, dangerously softly.

“Oh Sage. C’mon, you don’t know that.”

“Don’t be so stupid. His eyes didn’t leave your tits for one second.”

“Yeah? Well he spoke to you most of the time. Anyway, what does it matter?”

“It matters,” she said.

“So, what do you suggest we fucking do? We’ve got no fucking choice in the matter. Even if we *could* go home we haven’t got the fucking money.”

“Do you have to swear so much?” She pulled on her dry socks. “We’d make a plan, we always do.”

“Jesus, I don’t believe you”.

“Yeah, well, I hope Bobby’s friend isn’t as weird as he is.”

“Even if Bobby did want to – you know – what does it matter? Anyway, he’s bloody old – he must be at least forty or something.”

“So? He’s a creepy old perve.”

“Look at us – we’re getting a place to stay, maybe a job, we’re sorted. What’s your problem?”

“It matters,” she repeated.

She threw herself down on the other end of the bed and turned her face to the wall. Seconds later I heard the tinny sound of Led Zeppelin’s *Song Remains the Same* ghosting out of the earphones of her walkman.

*Fuck you too*, I’d thought. I fished out *Pet Semetary*, but couldn’t concentrate on it. I tried my best to shut out the faint bass track floating out and let myself spiral down into a delicious daydream: Bobby’s friend turned out to be a cross between River Phoenix and Jean-Hugues Anglade in *Subway*, and his apartment was huge and lined with books and antique writing desks. Best of all, the guest rooms were lovely and comfy, with double beds and patchwork duvets. My room had roused curtains that partially obscured a tantalising glimpse of the Paris skyline and was the only one with a view (fuck Sage, she didn’t deserve one). I was just fantasising about River/Jean-Hugues entering my room carrying a tray piled high with *pain au chocolat* when Sage nudged me with her foot and snarled:

“Just don’t fucking blame me when it all turns to *shit*.”

\*

We emerge into the winter sun. Even from the island that houses the Metro exit I can make out Bobby’s round blue shape hustling and working the crowd on the other side of the boulevard. I’ve deliberately tried to look less noticeable today, opting for a green-spotted 1940’s dress and my red overcoat. Unfortunately the coat’s not very warm, and I can feel the cold bite of the air through the fabric. Sage also looks like she hasn’t given much thought to the day’s outfit, which is unusual for her. She hardly makes a fashion statement at all in her long grey jumper and matching crocheted hat.

But there’s no hope of sneaking up on Bobby.

“Hey! Engleesh!” he waves his arms over his head. Several people turn to look at us curiously.

“What a fuckhead,” Sage mutters.

I’m suddenly furious with Sage.

“For fuck’s sake, Sage. He’s trying to help us out! Can you at least *try* for five minutes not to be such a bitch?”

Third big mistake. It only takes a second for Sage’s face to close down completely. My stomach sinks. I’m in for another round of the silent treatment. We hobble across the last intersection and into Bobby’s waiting ‘hello’ embrace. I’ve barely put down my rucksack before he’s grabbed me and planted three violent kisses on my cheeks. He does the same to Sage.

Without having to be asked, he takes out his cigarettes and offers the pack. Sage grins at him. Obviously Bobby isn’t so much of a fuckhead when he’s handing out freebies.

“So, Bobby,” Sage says cheerily. “How *are* you this morning?”

He looks slightly off-guard. “Er, I am well, and how did you sleep?”

“Fine, thank you for asking. I had a lovely night,” Sage says, glancing at me. I know exactly what she’s doing. She’s deliberately being sugary sweet to Bobby to try and wind me up.

“*Bien*,” Bobby says, still confused at her apparent overnight change of personality. He turns to me. “And how is the queen today?”

“Great,” I say.

“*Bon*. Now, Hervé – my friend -- will arrive in a few minutes to take you to your new home.”

“Hervé? What kind of name is that?” Sage snorts, before she can stop herself.

Bobby ignores her. I smirk.

“Where does this...Hervé live, then?” she asks, voice practically dripping with sugar. “Far away is it?”

Bobby laughs. “*Non*. Five minutes away. Just around the corner.”

“And you’re sure it is alright by him, Bobby? This is so very kind of you!” I say. Two can play at this game.

“But of course! He is my friend. And as you are my friends, he is more than happy to help. You see, Hervé is very nice.” ‘Like me’, I can see he wants to add. “After you went to your hotel, I go to his place and tell him all about you. He is very excited.”

“That’s great!” I chirp. “We’re excited too!”

Sage pretends to spot something fascinating in the distance.

“You have a lot of clothes I see?” He looks down at the pile of bags at our feet.

“A girl can’t have too many clothes, eh Bobby?” I say.

“Especially when she is a queen!” he exclaims. I force a laugh. Sage looks like she’s about to throw up.

“*Bien*. Now. Do you mind waiting? I must do some work until Hervé arrives.”

“No problem,” I say, cheerily. “I’m looking forward to seeing how you operate.”

Bobby beams; and Sage turns her back on both of us and pretends to fiddle with the strap on her rucksack.

While we wait, luggage stacked against our legs, Bobby continues to loudly attract the attention of passers-by. ‘*Hola!*’ greets anyone with olive skin, ‘*Buon giorno!*’ is directed at anyone who could conceivably be Italian, and he even throws in the odd ‘*Aloha*’ or two. He’s shameless. I try and clock Sage’s reaction to Bobby’s mortifyingly embarrassing antics, but she’s staring solidly at the pavement.

Suddenly I spy something that’s bound to snap her out of her self-inflicted sulk. I try to catch her eye. Finally she peers at me from under dark eyelashes.

“Carpet leg alert,” I say.

I point to where an old lady is hobbling past. She’s not the best example of carpet leg syndrome I’ve ever seen. Old French ladies obviously don’t have as much of a talent for developing a really good carpet leg as their English equivalent. This is a mediocre example: puffy ankles, dark tan tights, no noticeable break where the calf stops and the ankle begins. The faintest promise of a serious case of varicose veins.

Sage’s mouth twitches. The knot in my stomach loosens a bit.

“Surprised you noticed that,” she says.

“Eh?”

“Aren’t you more interested in watching Bobby *operate*?”

“You’ve got to admit, that was good.”

She cracks a smile. “Yeah. Fair play, *Queenie*.”

“When you’re good, you’re good.”

Sage rolls her eyes. She sneaks out a couple of cigarettes from her pocket and passes me one without Bobby seeing. We’re friends again. Simple as that.

We watch Bobby again in silence. He’s tireless. No one appears to be safe.

“You like art? All originals...Ah! *Guten tag*, my friends!”

I concentrate all my attention on the pavement and smoke. Sage chooses to pretend to be fascinated by the goings on in the Credit National bank behind us. We seem to be the only people on the crowded pavement completely unaffected by the movement of the jostling crowd. In fact, we appear to have created an invisible two metre perimeter around us. Then, Bobby’s dismal but enthusiastic attempt to attract the attention of a throng of Japanese tourists (“*Konitchiwa!* Paintings, you want paintings?”) is mercifully cut short.

“Hervé! My friend! You are here! *Viens ici!*” he shrieks.

Through a cluster of gabbling school children I can see that the new arrival is at least a foot taller than Bobby. Hervé immediately reminds me of how I’ve always imagined the fawn in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. His tightly curled hair is perm perfect, and his goatee does nothing to disguise an unfortunate, over-large chin. I can’t wait to discuss this with Sage. The fawn had always given me the creeps when I was little, benevolent character or not. I’d always liked the witch best. But what was its name? Mr Tubble, Mr Tuttle? Mr Tumtum?

“Sage,” I hiss, while Hervé and Bobby are kissing each other ‘hello’.

“Yeah?” She’s also busy checking Hervé out.

“What was the name of the fawn in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*?”

She looks confused for a second. Then she shrugs. “Buggered if I know. Begins with a ‘T’, doesn’t it?”

Within seconds we’re being introduced and Sage and I uncomfortably kiss the fawn. His beard tickles.

“This is very kind of you--” I start. I’m getting sick of saying this.

“Nonsense!” Bobby guffaws. “You need help? We are there to give! Am I right, Hervé?”

Hervé looks at the pavement, shyly.

Suddenly I remember.

“Mr Tumnus!” It slips out before I can stop it.

“*Pardon?*” Hervé stares at me, confused.

Sage snorts with laughter.

“Er... nothing.” I can feel colour rushing up to my cheeks.

“Oh yeah,” Sage whispers to me. “See what you mean, now.”

Bobby’s in his element. “Hervé will take you now to his home, where you will live until you are able to find a job. *Ne c’est pas?*”

“*Oui, bien sur,*” the fawn replies.

Bobby rubs his hands together.

“Can I help?” Hervé gestures nervously towards the third bag Sage and I carry between us. It’s the heaviest as it contains my books, odd bits of clothing, our collection of 2000AD comics and the sculptures we couldn’t bear to part with when we’d made our hasty getaway from England.

“Nah. We’ll manage. Thanks, though,” Sage says.

Hervé looks relieved. My bright pink lacy knickers are peeking out from the spilt seam of the bag, and I know they’re none too clean.

Hervé and Bobby march off down the boulevard, chatting non-stop. Sage and I struggle to keep up. We’re bent double under our rucksacks like babushkas and are desperately trying to keep the third bag balanced as it yaws and pitches.

“So, what d’you think?” I murmur to Sage, “About the fawn?”

“Looks all right. Well... he’s a wanker, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Suddenly Bobby whirls around and points at me.

“Hey! Foxy Lady!”

To his credit, Hervé looks slightly embarrassed.

“Eh?” I say, not catching on.

Sage rolls her eyes.

“You know Hendrix?” Bobby says excitedly.

“Not personally,” Sage says, not bothering to keep the disgust out of her voice.

“You know the song, *Foxy Lady*?” Bobby points at me. “That is your name!” He’s practically dancing down the street. Oh God. I want to die with embarrassment. It’s even worse than the time my Nan fetched me from school without remembering to put her teeth in first.

\*

We cut down a narrow alleyway and follow Hervé and Bobby down a smartish-looking road. When they reach a pair of ornate green doors set into a large stone apartment block they stop and wait for us to catch up. The building shares a corner with a black-fronted Irish pub. I can hardly believe our luck. I catch Sage’s eye.

“Blimey,” I whisper. “Looks all right, doesn’t it?”

“Nice neighbourhood,” she says, out of the corner of her mouth. “At least we won’t have to go far for a pint.”

There’s a keypad on the wall next to the door, and Hervé taps in a code. Sage looks at me and raises her eyebrows. The door opens with a clunking sound and we follow Bobby and Hervé into a dark hallway that’s dominated by a wide scuffed staircase.

“You sure you manage? With the bags?” Hervé asks again. “We must go up the stairs, quite far.”

“Yes. We’re *absolutely* sure, thanks,” Sage says, and I shift the weight on my back again to try and make it more comfortable. As usual it doesn’t help. Bobby motions us forward. He doesn’t offer to carry anything.

I can hear the muted strains of Duran Duran floating out, presumably from the Irish pub, but there is nothing muted about the hallway’s stench. At first I think it’s just the smell of cooking and stale beer from the pub’s kitchen; but, as we follow Hervé up to the second floor and *Her Name is Rio* is left behind, the overcooked cabbage and old alcohol odour is replaced with something else. At first I think I’m imagining it, but the look on Sage’s face tells me different.

“Blimey,” she says under her breath. “Is that what I think it is?”

It’s the unmistakable stench of hashish.

Hervé strides ahead. The staircase spirals upwards, breaking on each floor with a narrow landing that fronts a pair of posh-looking double doors. He isn't even slightly out of breath. Sage and I are gasping like we've just chain-smoked forty of my Nan's woodbines. The rucksack has turned into a gorilla that's unmercifully squeezing my shoulders and my legs feel like jelly. Even though Bobby's far behind us, we can still hear him quite clearly.

"Hey, Foxy Lady – You know you're a heartbreaker, duh duh duh duh..."

"Jimi Hendrix rest in peace," Sage mutters.

"Hervé?" I gasp.

He turns around.

"*Oui?*"

"What's behind these doors?"

He looks bemused.

"Apartments."

"Of course. Sorry. And where do you live?"

"I live on the top floor. Do not worry, it is not too much further."

We peer upwards. The stairs seem to go up and up endlessly.

"Great," Sage mutters.

The hashy smell gets stronger with every step. No prizes for guessing from which floor it originates.

\*

There's an uncomfortable moment while the three of us hover on the top floor landing waiting for Bobby. It's nothing like the other floors. It's narrow and badly lit with an interrogation-room bare bulb on a wire. No grand double-doored entrances here.

"The toilet is here," Hervé says abruptly, motioning towards a wooden door that looks exactly like the other five or six on the floor.

"Right," Sage says. "That's...good to know."

"You want to see it?"

"*Definitely*," she grins. I struggle to stop myself giggling.

We peer into the gloom. With a click and a faint hissing sound the toilet's light sputters on. A sad looking lavatory is shadowed within. It's bare and stained and has no toilet seat. On a hook next to it is a ragged wedge of newspaper. It's a toilet as Hitchcock would imagine it. It appears to be the only space unoccupied by the aura of stale hash, mainly because it has its own immense marshy shitty smell. I need to pee, but I'm too embarrassed to say so with Hervé standing there. It can wait.

"Oh shit," Sage mutters, nodding at the newspaper. "But at least it's not one of those stand-up jobbies."

We can hear the muffled sounds of the other occupants on the floor – someone is playing the Doors' *People are Strange*.

"How apt," Sage says in her pseudo-intellectual voice.

"All the people on this floor use this toilet, so we must try to keep it clean," Hervé smiles at us, somewhat nervously. His teeth are very white, although the bottom ones overlap.

"I see," Sage says solemnly. To me she murmurs: "What does he think we're going to do? Shit on the floor or something?" I quickly turn my snort of laughter into a cough.

Bobby finally makes it. He's taken off his cravat and is using it to wipe his brow. Wiry brillo pad hairs peep through the top of his shirt.

Hervé strides down the corridor and hesitates outside the door at the end. We clump along behind him.

"*Et ...Voilà!*"

Fuck. What a let down. It's just a room, a single room. It's gloomy and hazy with smoke and is obviously the source of the hash stench. There's a large mattress covered with clothes against one wall; opposite it is a narrow bed on which two bodies are sprawled. As Sage and I follow Hervé in, the bodies sit up and wobble to their feet. A blond heavy-set twentyish man and a skinnier dark-haired bloke greet Hervé in a gabble of incomprehensible French. They don't seem to notice us until Hervé points us out to them.

I immediately forget their names as we're introduced. As usual, I'm uncomfortable with the whole French greeting thing. Do I kiss first? Allow myself to be

kissed? Just make kissy noises in the direction of the recipients' faces? Despite practicing with Bobby, this doesn't come naturally to me. I almost butt noses with the smaller of the two. As they're kissing Sage, I check them out. Like Hervé, they're dressed in narrow-legged jeans and yachting shoes. Bugger. They're definitely not my type. And they both reek of dope.

"Take a seat, please," Hervé motions us towards the mattress. Sage and I plop gratefully down, discarding our luggage on the floor. Hervé and the two guys flop back down on the bed directly opposite us. One of them immediately starts rolling a joint. Bobby's hovering in between the two camps. His face is bright crimson, and he's still using his cravat to wipe away the beads of sweat that keep peppering his forehead.

"*Bien!*" he says. "I must go back to work. You be okay here?"

"Yep," Sage says, leaning her back against the wall and crossing her legs. I push a bundle of musty-looking clothes aside and do the same.

"That is good. I see you tomorrow?" Bobby says to me.

"Sure," I say. Bugger. He's waiting for us to kiss him '*au revoir*'. I get up, and with a sigh, Sage does the same. As he kisses me goodbye, Bobby squeezes my waist. I pretend not to notice. Luckily Sage doesn't seem to have noticed either.

He shoots a '*salut!*' at the other guys in the room, and is gone. Sage immediately bounces back onto the mattress again.

"You smoke?" Hervé's balancing a *Time* magazine on his knees and twisting tobacco from a cigarette into a jumbo-sized rizla.

"Of course," Sage says. "That's quite a stash you got there, Hervé."

Using the flame from his lighter, he's burning pieces of hash off a solid block as long and thick as his thumb.

"How much did that set you back?" Sage asks.

I nudge her. "You can't ask something like that!"

"Why not?" she snaps. "It's drugs. No one gives a shit."

Hervé isn't listening anyway. Blondie has finished making his, and he lights it and takes a deep drag with relish. After two hits he gets up and passes it to me.

"*Merci!*" I say. I don't really want it, but take a drag anyway. It's way stronger than I'm used to, and I almost gag as I suck the smoke into my lungs. I pass it to Sage.

Blondie's staring at us, a stoned fixed grin on his face.

"You like?" he says.

"Great. Thanks," I say.

"Don't you worry about the police, like?" Sage says to him, letting the smoke curl up slowly from her mouth.

"*Pardon?*" he peers politely at Sage, obviously not understanding the question.

"Cos it stinks in here. Don't your neighbours complain?"

Blondie looks over at Hervé and shrugs. There's a quick babbled conversation in French, followed by giggling.

"Ah! The hash!" Blondie says. "*Non*. No complaints."

"Lucky," Sage shrugs. "Where we come from you'd be locked up for that."

"Not lucky. Most of the people on this floor, they smoke."

"Ah."

Hervé passes me the joint he's just made. I take another hit. I'm beginning to feel a bit disorientated. I'd better slow down, but I don't want to look like I can't handle myself. I take another, shallower hit, trying not to inhale so deeply.

Sage's voice helps break up the fug in my head.

"So, how do you know Bobby?" she's asking Hervé.

"He is someone that I see everyday," Hervé says in between drags. "One day we start talking. He is... *tres interessant* – very different."

"Yeah. You can say that again," Sage says, which everyone seems to find hilarious. She nods towards the other guys on the bed.

"And you guys. Sorry – I forgot your names."

"Michel and Claude," Blondie says.

"You live here as well?" She looks dubiously at the tiny room.

"Of course not!" Hervé giggles. "They are just my friends. They cannot smoke where they stay."

Thank God for that, at least. But it looks like we've ended up in some sort of yuppies' drug den. There are now three joints making the rounds, and Claude, the dark-haired guy, appears to be continuously and expertly skinning up.

I'm suddenly hit with a wave of dizziness. I try and concentrate on the room to ground myself. There's not much to look at. It's just a box, with no windows and a single door. There are a few text-books in amongst the piles of discarded clothes, but they look brand new, as if they've never been opened. I can't see any other reading material: no novels, comics or anything I'd be interested in. Next to us stands a camping stove, a crusty pot and a large bag of rice. There's a small, stained sink wedged into a corner.

Sage follows my gaze.

"Jesus, Vicks. Aren't there any fucking clean sinks in France? The one in our hotel was almost as bad."

Although there's no heating I can see, the room is uncomfortably warm. Apart from the hash fog, it also smells quite a bit like my brother's room – it's got that particular *man* smell about it. Like old farts and dirty socks.

The room isn't doing much for me, so I concentrate on the faces of the others. The blond has a large oblong head, which looks almost too big for his body. The other one has bad skin, slightly uptilted eyes, and pointy teeth. "Potato Head and Dracula," I whisper to Sage. She snorts with laughter and sets me off.

Hervé has just taken a huge hit of one of the two joints making the rounds.

"What is so funny?" he says.

"Everything," Sage says.

Hervé and Potato Head/Michel nod their heads sagely as if she's said something profound.

Dark-haired Dracula speaks for the first time.

"You are from London?" he says. The rims of his eyes are a scary shade of red, like Christopher Lee's.

"Nah. Wolverhampton," Sage says.

All three look completely blank.

"I have been to London," Potato Head says. "Very interesting. Is it near to you?"

"Nah. We're near Birmingham."

"Birmingham, I have heard of it. And what are you doing in Paris?" Potato Head says to me. I open my mouth to answer, but I can't seem to form the words.

"We're escaping," says Sage, dramatically.

I can tell Potato Head fancies himself the intellectual.

“You are escaping from Birmingham? *Pourquoi?* Why is that?”

“It’s a right shit-hole,” Sage says.

“Ah. What sort of a place is it? It is industrial?”

“Yeah. Guess so. Not surprised you don’t know it. Practically no one famous comes from there. Except crap bands like UB40.”

“Ah. I know them!” Dracula starts singing *Red, Red Wine*. The other guys join in.

Everyone, including Sage, explodes into giggles. With a jolt I realise I’m giggling as well. The room lurches again, and I go from buzzing to nauseous instantly. I clamp my mouth shut and concentrate on a fixed point on the wall in front of me.

“You got music here, Hervé?” Sage asks.

“*Non*. Sorry,” he says.

Dracula says, “What music you listen to?”

“Mostly retro. You know, late sixties stuff, Incredible String Band, Gong, that kind of thing.” Everyone looks blank again. I hadn’t heard of Gong either, till Sage. “But Vicki loves Jimi Hendrix, don’t you, Chuck?”

She starts humming *Foxy Lady*.

Potato Head and Dracula both wear head-phones around their necks. Maybe we can score some batteries off them. Both mine and Sage’s walkmans are out of power. This time when I’m handed a joint, I pass it straight to Sage. No one seems to notice. I’m now at the stage where if I had something in my stomach to puke up, I know I probably would.

I’m trying to will myself to stand up and leave the room for air that’s less thick with smoke, when Dracula passes me a packet of M&Ms. I scarf down a handful. The blast of sweetness helps stem my out-of-control feeling; but for a scary second I think that I can’t swallow. Oh crap on toast. If this passes soon, I will never smoke again *I promise*. Sage doesn’t pass the packet back, but sneaks it into her waistcoat pocket. She hands me a cigarette. Why didn’t I think of that before? This way I can legitimately pass on the joint without having a hit. Sage surreptitiously passes me some more sweets and I cram them into my mouth.

Potato Head is saying something to me. I try to speak, but all that comes out is a croak. Luckily Sage appears to be in control.

“We’re cousins,” she’s saying.

Eh? What’s she on about? Then I get it – she’s talking about us.

“And your parents?” Potato Head asks.

“Dead.”

For a moment I’m shocked. I should be used to this by now, though. Sage’s motto: why tell the truth when a lie will do?

“Oh. I am sorry.”

Sage shrugs. “Yeah. Children’s home and all that, you know.”

I feel a stab of shame. The two boys look genuinely sympathetic.

There’s a gap in the conversation. But, as hash is involved, it isn’t one of those awkward ones. Hervé is still grinning inanely and keeps looking from Sage and me to his two friends. I tune out, and concentrate all my energy on getting myself under control.

\*

When I regain reality again Sage appears to be trying to teach the Frenchies English/American slang.

“Wicked,” she says.

“Ah. So if I say that something is wicked, it means that I think it is rather good?”

Potato Head looks as if he’s taking this very seriously, as if he’s in a lecture or something. Both Hervé and Dracula’s eyes look alarmingly bloodshot.

“No. ‘Wicked’ means something’s fucking excellent. You know, really cool, like.”

“*D’accord*,” Potato Head says. For absolutely no reason, Hervé and Dracula start giggling again. Thank God there doesn’t seem to be a joint on the go.

“And you can also say, ‘Crucial’. That means the same sort of thing. So does ‘def’.”

“Ah, I understand.”

“Vicks?” Sage says, “you okay?”

“Yeah. Bit bombed, is all.”

“Listen to this,” she whispers to me. “Okay,” Sage claps her hands. “Now. If you say someone is a ‘right tosser’, it means you think they are a great bloke.”

“Sage!...,” I start.

“Ssssh. I’m just having a bit of fun.” She turns her attention to the others again.

“Right, Michel, you go first.”

I shut my eyes again, ignoring the fact that I’ve needed to pee for what feels like forever. But on the whole I’m feeling much better. I mean, all things considered, Sage and I are doing okay.

From the sounds of things she’s got them eating out of her hand.

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

### **Things I miss about crappy old England:**

*Pints.*

*Good old English fags.*

*Kath at the café.*

*Kath's mushroom on toast.*

*Cadburys Crème eggs.*

*Stars newsagents.*

*PRIVACY!!!!!!*

*Money.*

*Easy access to batteries for music listening purposes.*

*Crappy old pubs full of nutters.*

*Showers.*

*NORMAL toilets.*

### **Things I don't miss:**

*Being arrested.*

*Coronation Street or Eastenders.*

*Reg Varney.*

*Art College.*

*Art College lecturers.*

*Being thrown out of pubs.*

*Fights on buses.*

*Bonjour, Gladys, comment sa va?* (Or however the fuck you spell it, I mean, how should I know?)

Vicks has been sleeping all morning, and Hervey the Pervy is off out somewhere.

Probably out scoring more black. I HAVE NEVER been so stoned for so long. Ha ha.

Hervey and his cronies just smoke ALL THE TIME!!!! It feels like we've spent a week doing nothing else. It's almost like a JOB. I still haven't figured out where Hervey gets his money. He hardly ever seems to leave the room. At first I thought it was because he didn't want me and Vicks pawing through his stuff, but I reckon it's actually because he's too stoned to walk down the fucking stairs most of the time. He must go to university even less than me and Vicks used to go to fart college. VERY INTERESTING. Just what me and Vicks need, another professional waster in our lives. And he's like twenty-five or something, which is basically quite old to be doing NOTHING, isn't it? Vicks isn't in to

the whole smoking thing. She keeps coming up with excuses not to take drags on the joints. Like she's got tonsilitus and stuff. No one seems to have noticed that it doesn't stop her smoking everyone's fags.

Dracula and Potato Head slept over last night and left (thank God) with Hervey this morning. Vicks says she doesn't fancy either of them. Actually, if you scrunch your eyes up and make your sight blurry, Dracula isn't that bad. He giggles like a girl, though, which is not very attractive to say the least. Weirdly, neither of them has tried it on with Vicks, although when Hervey was shit-faced the other night he said to her (and I quote) "One day, I will fuck you like King Arthur". Can you believe it? What a tosser. Vicks says that Dracula asked her where we go to wash ourselves. Well, where does he think? What are we supposed to do? We're hardly ever alone here, so we can't very well strip off and wash in the (gross vile) sink while everyone's sitting around, can we? SO INSENSITIVE. Vicks says that there's a place we can go and PAY for a shower, but she's not too sure where it is. Tomorrow Hervey says he'll take us to the laundrymat. THANK GOD. All of my clothes stink like a TRAMP'S.

What else can I whinge about? Lots, actually. Like the FOOD SITUATION.

All Hervey gives us to eat is this sloppy ricey gunk. The chopped-up veggies that he adds to it look far too bright to be real. Like bits of plastic or the carrot bits you always find in sick. Prison food. And you know what rice does to your bowels, don't you Gladys? Yeah, but that's a good thing considering what the TOILET PAPER SITUATION is at the moment.

ONE GOOD THING is that the TABLET SITUATION is still quite good. I think I have about three months left. I need to count them, and I did -- everyday when I got a chance. But it's the sort of obsessive behaviour I'm supposed to AVOID, so I'm not sure of the EXACT NUMBER right now. Sorry.

Dr Bastard Pilkington didn't say what would happen when I stop taking them. Maybe I'll turn into even more of a FREAK.

He DID say that I should not:

Drink alcohol (excessively).

Take drugs (especially mind-altering ones – what a wanker).

Yeah right. Shows how much HE KNOWS. Me and Vicki drank a sixth of whiskey a day AT LEAST, as well as lots of pints in England and I was COMPLETELY fine. Fuck him. I've just remembered that my sister Karen calls the tablets: 'medicine for a broken heart.' Sounds much better than their REAL NAME.

Oh, almost forgot. Bobby the Bastard introduced us to another friend of his yesterday who's also about a hundred years old. His name is Jude, or something like that. What a wanker. Supposed to be another artist or some crap. Anyway, he couldn't take his eyes off Vicki as per usual. Jude looked like a reject from JETHRO TULL, like he should be on the cover of 'Songs from the Wood' or something. He was all dressed in leather and had long long grey hair that almost came down to his WAIST. PATHETIC. Him and Bobby started having some gross conversation about who'd be first to paint Vicki in the nude. They pretended it was a joke, but I could see they were having some sort of competition and what they REALLY meant was who would be the first one to FUCK her. I hate them. Vicks gets pissed off when I sulk with Bobby, so I'm careful not to do it around her. And when it's my turn to help Bobby the Bastard with the paintings we don't say much to each other. He NEVER offers to buy me any food. I HATE him. I tried to talk to Vicks about the new BASTARD but she didn't seem to want to. I think she fancies him, which SUCKS. Especially as he was trying so hard to be COOL and ALOOF.

The WORK SITUATION is rather dire at the moment. Vicks and I pretend to go off and look for work, but really all we do is wander around a bit. We're getting to know the area quite well. My favourite place to walk to is SACRE COUER by MONTMARTRE. Long lines of steps like railway tracks that go up and up. Vicks keeps getting me to run up them like that guy in Rocky, but I get too out of breath. Also don't want tachycardia to visit again. NOT telling Vicks this though. But do need to resume old exercise habits at some stage. Also really LOVE Pigalle. Crazy place full of trannies who just LOVE Vicks. Everyone here either thinks I'm a bloke or a skinhead unless I wear one of my floppy hats. I like that. It keeps them away. But the art they sell in MONTMARTRE is crap! Almost as bad as the EMBARRASSING paintings Bobby sells. Even the tossers at

fart college can do better than that. Me and Vicks keep talking about maybe setting up there. We'll have to do it soon, before Hervey gets FED UP with us eating all his rice.

Dear Gladys,

How are you? I'm very well, thank you.

I found out the Date!!! Today is Valentine's Day, as if you didn't know. I HAVE loads to tell you and luckily I managed to nick a new pen from Dracula.

Yesterday, Potato Head came to the flat and said he was going to take us to his place for a shower!! That's when I realised that me and Vicks were probably stinkier than we thought.

Potato Head lives so far away from Hervey's dump that we had to go on the bus, which was quite an EXPERIENCE. French buses are totally different from good old English buses. They're weird and long and are stuck together with tubing like they're out of *Blade Runner* or something. The journey was wicked though, because I got to see all the things I haven't yet, like the EIFFEL TOWER close up and Potato Head was dead nice and acted like some sort of tour guide. As we were walking from the bus stop to his apartment (through this dead posh area) he starts saying things like, "when do you think you'll be able to leave Hervey's place? It's quite small for so many people, don't you think," etc etc. He was really nice about it though, so me and Vicks lied to him and said we'd be gone soon as we had a plan.

You wouldn't BELIEVE the place Potato Head lives in!!! Potato Head's parents must be millionaires or something. His apartment was like a palace. Full of antiques, African masks and white sofas. Me and Vicks were scared to sit down in case we fucked things up.

Potato Head looked a bit embarrassed when me and Vicks said how posh we thought the place was and then he left to make us some coffee. Then, the front door opened and this AMAZING woman came in. She was dressed in this Jackie O suit and was the thinnest person I've ever seen! She had bright red lipstick and long red nails and her short black hair looked as if it was painted on her head. She looked dead surprised to see us, but then

Potato Head came in and spoke to her and introduced us to her, saying she was his MOTHER. She was chain-smoking these long black cigarettes and she offered them to me and Vicks. They were dead strong, like woodbines or something, and I saved half of mine for later. She spoke to us for a bit, but although she was polite she had this SUPERIOR look on her face all the time. ONE GOOD THING about this though, was that she told us about a place called the AMERICAN CHURCH where they advertise for *au pairs*. Then she sort of dismissed us and went to talk on the phone, which was a relief, as Vicks had spilled some of her coffee on the sofa, and we needed to try and smear it in a bit without her seeing.

The shower was fantastic! My hair needs shaving again, though. It would be HORRIBLE if it grew out too long. I was GOOD and didn't nick anything from there, just in case we were ever invited back.

As we were leaving the scary mother was STILL ON THE PHONE, and she waved goodbye to us as if we were servants who had been there cleaning up or something. We found our way back to the bus stop by ourselves and I told Vicks that we didn't need to buy a ticket, we could just use the discarded old ones on the floor and PRETEND to push them in the slot. She wasn't too keen, but guess what – IT WORKED. Now we can travel around Paree for free!

Anyway, so it means that me and Vicks are NOW CLEAN.

But back to Valentine's day....

Totally fucking hysterical day today! Vicks and me were eating breakfast (cold yesterday's rice AGAIN) in the flat as per usual. Hervey had gone on one of his mysterious errands. Me and Vicks joke that he is some sort of SPY for the government because he's always sneaking off without saying where he's going. He carries around this PATHETIC satchel thing that looks just like the one I had at school. He NEVER leaves it alone for a second, so I haven't had a chance to look and see what's in there (yet).

So Bobby the Bastard knocks on the door. He's holding a big bunch of flowers for Vicks for Valentine's Day. Ha Ha. Vicks didn't know what to do with them. She had to stuff bits of flowers in empty wine bottles. Stupid asshole, did he think we'd have a vase or

something? In this dump? WHAT A MORON! He could have at least bought chocolates or something USEFUL. While Vicks was doing this I said to him, “Did you get the same for your wife?” And for once he had NOTHING to say. He went a bit red, but as he’s Moroccan or something it wasn’t really obvious.

Then he says that he wants to take Vicks for dinner at this Vietnamese place in the evening, but Vicks says, no, she’s not leaving me alone on Valentine’s Day, so B the B says something like, “But I meant both of you”. LIAR. At that moment Hervey arrived back. But GUESS WHAT? He had a girl with him! Amazing! Me and Vicks were dead excited. We’ve never seen Hervey with anyone except for Potato Head and Dracula. We’d been having these long discussions about whether or not Hervey was gay (the only evidence we came up with that he WASN’T a pouf was that King Arthur thing he said to Vicks but a) he was pissed then and b) it was such a CRAP thing to say, so we figured it didn’t really count).

And the girl was VERY good-looking, which was more of a surprise. She looked very FRENCH and beautiful. Thin and tall (almost as tall as Hervey himself) with long straight brown hair. One of those girls who you just KNOW looks fabulous even first thing in the morning, like Cindy Crawford or something. Vicks said, “Do you want us to leave, Hervey?” but the girl said, “*Non*, we are not boyfriend and girlfriend just friends”, and poor old Pervy looked very SAD. Bobby said he would take us for breakfast, but I said “No thanks, we’ve eaten”, so he just left, and we didn’t kiss him!!! Hurrah! He gave me a LOOK as he left, like he wished I was dead or something.

Anyway, Hervey’s non-girlfriend’s name is Genevieve, which is probably French for Guinevere – very funny, considering Hervey thinks he’s King Arthur reincarnated. (Not sure if he knows that Guinevere fucked off with one of Arthur’s best mates, but I don’t think there’s much of a chance of Genevieve screwing around with Potato Head or Dracula, because she’s BEAUTIFUL and they’re UGLY). We had a lovely chat with her and she seemed to really like us and be interested in the fact that we’re artists etc. She came up with some GREAT ideas for work. She said that lots of people sell small drawings and paintings outside the Pompidou Centre for like ten francs a go (about a quid), and that we should do a whole bunch of little sketches and sell them. Me and Vicks were dead excited about this, although neither of us have even been to this Pompidou

place. We'll go there next time we're 'looking for work', for a RECCE. She smoked a joint with us (even Vicks had some this time), and then she left.

Obviously we were FULL of questions for the old perve. He is such a sappy git though, and he said straight away that he was in love with Genevieve, and had been for ages. So we sat him down and gave him some dating advice. HILARIOUS!!! Especially as Vicks has never had a proper boyfriend (just lots of sex), and you know what I'm like.

The rest of the day was dead boring, but then Bobby the Bastard showed up again, and talked Vicks into going to supper with him and that vile guy whose name ISN'T Jude but JULE. Vicks just can't say no to anyone. I said I wasn't going to go, and Vicks and me had a bit of an argument without anyone else really knowing we were fighting. When they'd left, Hervey asked what me and Vicks were doing about work. I think he wants us to leave soon, but is too polite to say anything. SO UNGRATEFUL especially after all the help we'd just given him about his love life and stuff. I don't think he'll just THROW US OUT, but me and Vicks must make some sort of a PLAN soon. It's not our fault though. Most of the time we're too STONED to do anything except cook a bit of rice etc. Then Hervey went out with his school bag and I was ALONE. I searched through all his clothes but didn't find any money at all, worst luck.

Oh – forgot. We've been totally confused about Hervey's neighbours. We've lived here FOREVER and we've never even seen ONE. It's like they don't exist, except for the music you hear sometimes. Me and Vicks have been dead keen to meet whoever lives next to the TOILET OF DEATH, because their music taste's quite good (apart from the Beatles, which is crap, obviously). We've been daring each other to knock on the door, but NO ONE EVER ANSWERS. Anyway, after Hervey had left I went out and I met the guy who lives there. He's about a million years old and looks like a tramp! I said '*bonjour*' (which is like the only French word I remember from school, really) and he just nodded and then SLAMMED his door behind him. RUDE or WHAT! Cannot wait to tell Vicks this when she gets back from going out with the horrible Bastards, but I'm supposed to be sulking. If she brings me some food I'll tell her. If she doesn't I WON'T.

## **VICKI: The Jules Experience**

*Where the fuck am I?*

One thing I know immediately and for sure -- this is not Hervé's room. There's no tell-tale smell of hash for a start, and although the room is shadowed and dark, I can sense that it's bigger than Hervé's pokey dump. It's freezing in here, even though there's some kind of heavy duvet on top of me. Something's odd though... Shit! No wonder I'm cold -- I'm completely fucking naked! I peek under the duvet. Even in the dark I can tell that the skin over my entire body is puckered with goose-pimples.

"Hello?" I call out tentatively.

No answer.

My mouth's dry and bitter tasting and my tongue feels like it's coated with fag ash. What was I drinking last night? I make myself burp, and taste the familiar chemical after-effects of too much whiskey. That explains my thumping woolly head. Whiskey hangovers are always the worst.

By some miracle there's a glass of water next to the bed. I drink it down in one go, even though it tastes stale and brackish. My head clears a bit, and I feel ready to try and sit up. There's a cord next to the bed connected to a table lamp. I fumble around for the switch, and struggle for a few seconds while my eyes adjust to the light. Bloody hell! The ceiling is swathed in swooping sheets of shiny brightly coloured fabric which makes the room seem exotic, like a harem or something. Stacks of records are piled along the entire length of one of the walls, the multi-coloured sleeves adding to the closed-in atmosphere. Christ. How can I not remember any of this?

Apart from the massive bed and the stack of records, there's nothing in here except for a large oval mirror in the far corner of the room. Now my head's clearing a bit, I'm beginning to feel a bit panicky. Where the fuck are my clothes, for a start? I jump up and stumble to the end of the bed, catching a glimpse of myself in the huge full-length mirror in the corner. I can't resist taking a good look. Blimey. There's no doubt I've lost weight. My hip bones point rudely out at me, and I can trace hollow arcs in between my ribs. Shit, it looks like I've lost about a stone. In three weeks? That can't be good. I turn

around. There's a huge purple and yellow bruise about the size of a fist on the back of my thigh. Where the hell did I get that?

There isn't a sign of any of my clothes or boots on the floor. I peer under the duvet, but they're not there, either. Fuck. What now? There's a door opposite the mirror, but I don't want to walk through it naked. I heft the heavy eiderdown off the bed and drag the sheet from underneath it. I wrap it around me like a toga.

It takes a minute for me to get my bearings as I shuffle through to the adjoining room. It's like entering another universe, but at least it's familiar. I was definitely here last night, although I don't remember it being so filthy. I recognize the battered green armchair and the murky glass table in the middle of the room, and take note of the upturned, nearly empty bottle of whiskey and two glasses on the floor next to the table leg. There are cigarette butts everywhere: on the floor, scattered on the table and even stubbed out on the arm of the chair. No wonder my mouth feels like an ashtray. I pick up the bottle and stand it upright, and the waft of alcohol makes me gag. With a surge of relief I notice that my clothes and doc martens are piled messily next to a chest of drawers. The room is absolutely silent.

"Jules?" I call out, my voice sounding cracked. "Are you there?"

No answer. Of course there's no answer. I'd know if he were here. I'd *sense* it. Stupid. I have a hazy recollection of stumbling down a corridor to a filthy toilet – one of the French hole-in-the-floor ones Sage hates – last night, so maybe that's where he is. I drop the sheet on the floor and pick up my clothes. Everything goes black as I bend down, and I struggle with a sudden surge of nausea. I can't remember ever being so thirsty. Aha. I spy a sink in the little kitchenette behind a tattered curtain. Clutching my clothes to me I push the curtain aside. It's even filthier in here. The tiny sink is packed full of mouldy plates and dirty mugs, and the counter tops are covered with grease and thick smeared dust. There's an overflowing plastic bin in the corner that seems to heave with rubbish and stinks like rotten meat. Sticking my head under the tap (there's no way I'm using those glasses) I gulp down rusty tasting water. It soothes my throat and helps me get my balance.

Something skitters over my foot and I jump, painfully knocking my knee on one of the cupboards. Fuck! A massive cockroach is blindly feeling its way along the bottom of the kitchen cupboards.

There's an old rag next to the sink. It doesn't smell too bad, so I decide to use it. The pipes moan loudly as I turn on the hot tap. I furtively dampen the cloth and wipe myself all over as quickly as possible: I'm pretty sure he'll be back at any moment and I don't want him to catch me doing this in his kitchen. Did we do it? It doesn't feel like it – I don't feel sore or... used. Even after wiping myself with the cloth I can still smell my body: old sweat tinged with the alcohol already seeping out from my pores. There's no hope of getting clean, though. I can't see a cake of soap or even a bottle of washing up liquid anywhere. I open the cupboard under the sink. Its shelves are black with mould and there's nothing in there except for a long length of rusty metal chain. The water isn't hot enough – it's barely lukewarm – and I'm shivering uncontrollably.

I throw on my clothes as fast as possible. As I pull my dress over my head I notice that there's a large tear under one of the arms.

As I wander back into the living room. I try and piece together last night, but it's like trying to remember someone else's life, or a scene from a crap movie or something. I have a vague recollection of the disastrous meal in the restaurant – somehow I knocked over a huge clay pot containing soupy stuff that was supposed to go with the couscous Jules had ordered for us. I can still smell its garlicky odour on my clothes. I remember apologizing profusely, but by that time Jules, Bobby and I had got through at least three carafes of wine (or was it four?). They'd laughed and said something about not being able to take punks anywhere. We'd had coffee -- I think -- and then Jules and I had walked Bobby back to his van.

Then Jules and I'd come back here. Yes, that's it. I remember clearly following him up flights of stairs. We came in here and as I entered the room his little dog started growling at me. It didn't stop until he'd shouted at it. He'd sat down on the green armchair and opened the bottle of whiskey. I think at first I'd sat at his feet. I'd had no choice. There's only one chair in the room.

Jules started stroking my head, gently at first, then harder, his fingers tangling painfully in my dreadlocks, and then I realised he was trying to push my head down into

his lap. I remember thinking, “when the fuck had he taken his kit off?” I hadn’t even noticed he was sitting there half naked until it was too late. Had I tried to say ‘*non*’ or something? *Had* I? I know he said, “Don’t worry, just catch your breath,” although he was the one who sounded out of breath. Then he grabbed the back of my head again and pushed me down on him. Oh God, I’d felt it being forced down the back of my throat, and, unable to help it, I’d retched and almost choked. The room was whirling, my eyes were streaming with tears from my choking fit, and I tried to lurch to my feet. I think Jules was laughing by that stage – I’m sure of it in fact -- and then he said, “You okay?” and then I think I said something like, “sure,” and then he said, “Good, stay down there, you can’t start something and not finish it...”

I barely make it to the tiny sink and spew yellowish vomit over the dirty plates. The sight of it makes me sick again. I turn on both taps as far as they’ll go and watch with relief as the bile washes away, mingling with the caked old food on the plates. Shit. Don’t think about it. What now? I’d better sort out the bedroom before he gets back. Put the sheet back, put the eiderdown in place.

I gather up the sheet and go back into the freakishly spotless bedroom. I’m still shaking. Will a swig of the whiskey from the bottle in the other room help? Better not.

I pull the duvet back into place. It doesn’t look perfect but at least I’ve tried. Even though all I want to do is get the fuck out of here, I can’t resist checking out the record sleeves. There’s a lot of sixties’ stuff and tons of jazz LPs I’ve never heard of. The record on the turntable is a Nona Hendrix album. Weird fucking coincidence, although for all I know maybe the Hendrix family is huge in France. Then I hear the door in the other room opening.

“Allo? Vicki? You are awake?”

I walk through.

His face is covered with grey stubble, which makes him look older than I remember. He’s tied his hair in a pony tail, but it still reaches almost halfway down his back. There are deep furrows on either side of his mouth. His little dog growls at me, and he jerks it sharply back by its leash. It yelps. I’m glad. I hope he hurt it.

“You want *café*? Before you go?”

I do, but not in one of the mugs in the sink.

“No thanks, Jules.” My voice sounds rusty, unused.

“You sleep well?” he asks.

“*Oui, merci.*” It’s automatic.

The little dog starts yapping. It hurts my head.

“Brigitte – ssshhh! *Arret!*” Jules snaps at it.

He smiles at me. For the first time I notice that his incisors are sharper and longer than the rest of his teeth.

“You’ll come again.” It isn’t a question. “I see you next to the café? The big one, across from the Metro. At nine. On Wednesday.”

“Yes,” I say.

“*Bon.* I will say goodbye, then. You find your way home? It is not far, I think, to where you stay. Five minutes.”

“Sure. I’ll be fine.”

I want to ask him how I ended up in his bed, alone – was I? -- last night. Had I taken my clothes off? Did he do that? I don’t want him to think I’m some sort of fucked-up alcoholic though, someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing. So I just leave.

\*

It’s far brighter outside than I’d expected. The sun seems to ricochet off the white stone of the buildings. Why is winter sun brighter than summer sun? The streets, as always, are packed with tourists wandering up and down. For a moment I’m completely disorientated and can’t figure out which way to turn to get home. Then I see the reassuring shape of the Paris Opera house in the distance, and I get my bearings. As I make my way back and buildings become more and more familiar, *friendlier* somehow, I start to feel more connected.

I cross the Boulevard des Italiens and walk down the narrow alleyway towards Hervé’s street, passing the dark cosy restaurant which taunts me with its smoky windows and expensive smells as if it knows I’ll never be rich enough to eat there on my own. As I wait to cross the road, a string of gleaming black chauffer-driven cars glides serenely

around the corner. I peer into the blacked-out windows but get nothing but my own reflection thrown back at me.

The Irish pub next to Hervé's building is dead at this time of day, and I don't meet anyone as I tap in the door key code and start the long climb up the stairs. As usual the posh-looking double doors on every floor are shut. I creep up close to the ones on the third floor and listen for any sounds from within. Nothing. Not even the tinny sound of a radio or television. In the three weeks Sage and I've been crashing at Hervé's place I've never met anyone who lives behind the doors, or caught a glimpse inside one of the apartments. Come to think of it, we've hardly seen any of the occupants who share the top floor with Hervé, although we often hear snatches of their music. It's almost as if we're living in a building full of ghosts. Sometimes, as we use the stairs, Sage and I make up stories about the apartments' inhabitants. Sage's stories always involve serial killers who can't afford to be seen on account of the body parts stashed in their freezers.

I stumble into the Toilet of Death. Whoever lives in the flat next to the toilet wall is playing *Sympathy for the Devil* again.

I don't want to knock on Hervé's door, in case they're all in there, sleeping. I fish out my useless Barclays bank card, slide it in the gap between the door and the frame, and click up the latch. I sneak in as quietly as I can. At first I think the room is empty. The light's off, and the place is swathed in shadow. I flick the switch, and almost jump out of my skin. Sage is sitting cross-legged on the mattress. She's moistening the edge of a roll-up with her tongue.

"Where've you been all night?" She says this lightly, but there's an edge to her voice. I'd better tread carefully.

"At Jules's," I say.

"Oh. I was dead worried."

I can't meet her gaze.

"Sorry," I say. "It wasn't planned or anything. I kind of...forgot the time."

"Have fun?"

"Yeah. It was all right. What did you do?"

"Usual. Got stoned with Hervé. Potato Head and Dracula were asking after you."

"Really? That's nice."

I lie back on the mattress and close my eyes. I'm exhausted. All I want to do is sleep.

"Isn't it your turn to help Bobby the Bastard with the paintings?" Sage says.

Shit. She's right.

"Can't you go, Sage?" I can hear the whine in my voice, but I don't care.

"No fucking way, Chuck," she says.

"Please, Sage," I say. "I feel like shite."

"Tough," she says. There's a careful calculating Sage pause. "Are you going to tell Bobby you spent the night with Jules?"

"Why should I? It's none of his business. Anyway, we had dinner with him last night."

"Okay. Just asking." She pauses again, and lights her roll-up with Hervé's Zippo. "He probably already knows anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what those two are like. It's almost been a competition with them." She puts on her fake French accent. "Oh, Vick-ee, you are soooo bootifule, come to my place so I can draw you naked."

I prop myself up on my elbows, suddenly wide awake. "Don't be fucking crazy."

Sage shrugs and blows smoke rings. They break apart just in front of my face.

"Dunno what you want to hang around with those *wankers* for."

"Fucking hell, Sage. For the thousandth time, if it wasn't for Bobby, where the fuck would we be?"

"Well, I don't want to burst your bubble, Chuck, but I reckon we're going to be back to square one pretty soon."

"What do you mean?"

"Hervé the Pervy keeps asking if we've found a place to stay."

"Yeah, so? He's always doing that."

"But last night he said he was going to give us a deadline for when we have to fuck off. Zee place is too small, Sage, for you and Vick-ee and me as vell."

I lie back again.

"Bugger."

“Bugger is right, Chuck. And I’m pretty sure we’re not going to bump into anyone else on the street that’s going to help us out like Bobby the Bastard did. And I can’t see him pulling his finger out to help us again now that you’ve fucked his bosom buddy.”

I groan. I suppose now’s not really the time to talk to Sage about my other piece of bad news. The mood she’s in she’ll probably freak out and probably never talk to me again.

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

OK Gladys, I'm a bit pissed at the moment, so I'll try not to fuck this up too badly. But today was too BRILLIANT not to write down. Vicks and Hervey have completely passed out and Hervey's snoring like a pig again. Which is good as it means I have PEACE to write this.

I AM SO CHUFFED!!

But I'll start at the beginning...

The morning was the usual shite, eating old rice, waiting for Pervy to leave the room so we could brush our teeth etc. The thing was, Vicks was behaving really strangely. She was acting dead nervous, like she was scared to tell me something.

At first I thought maybe she had some HORRIBLE secret about Bobby the Bastard, like she'd SLEPT with him AS WELL or something. Or, I thought she was going to try and talk to me about VILE JULES again. Even THE THOUGHT of him and Vicks DOING STUFF makes me sick to my stomach, actually.

But it wasn't about EITHER bastard.

So, as soon as Hervey had gone, she sits down on the mattress and says to me that she's got something IMPORTANT to tell me, and that I'm not to be angry with her. And then she says, "I spoke to Emma-the-Bitch yesterday. I phoned her."

I was pissed off, but relieved that it wasn't about Bobby or Jules at the same time. I didn't tell her this though. I had a RIGHT to get pissed off. But Vicks looked so sorry, that I couldn't be angry for long. So, I'm like, "what did she say when you spoke to her?" And Vicks couldn't meet my eyes and she's like, "She's coming to Paris today, and I said we'd meet up with her."

Okay, Gladys, bit of a shocker, that one. Understandably I'm angry again and I say, "What you do that for? Etc etc". Anyway we had a BIG fight and didn't talk to each other for a bit. Vicks and I can do this sometimes on and off for days. It's almost like a competition. Like that time when we decided to try eating morning glory seeds from the garden centre because they're supposed to be hallucinogenic. They weren't though, so we got very pissed instead, and as always happens when we get badly drunk, had a big fight, missed the last bus, and had to walk home from STOURBRIDGE. We ended up spending

some hours with the 24hr security guard and his dog on a building site in Wombourne, which was an ADVENTURE. So the fact we had a fight was good in the end.

Anyway, eventually we started speaking again, and Vicks says that Emma wants to stay the night with us. I start feeling a little bit panicky on account of all the lies I've told Hervey, so this is OUT OF THE QUESTION. And Emma-the-Bitch is the only person (apart from me and Vicks, obviously) who knows why we're really in Paris and not AT HOME. Anyway, I don't want her here. This is OUR SPACE and she's vile and jealous of OUR FRIENDSHIP. So I have to think up a PLAN, and fast, because we have to meet her in a couple of hours outside Les Galleries Lafayette. Then Hervey arrives back, and I think of something. (It took me AGES to convince Vicks that the plan would work, and even longer to get Hervey to agree to help).

I spotted Emma before she saw us. The thing about Emma, when you first see her you think at first that she's really good-looking. She has lovely long straight Demi Moore hair (a bit like Genevieve's), but her face is all pinched and cross-looking like a pug dog's. She looked really relieved to see us, as we were a bit late. But tough shite, as she'd invited herself, and for all she knew we could have busy EXCITING lives now.

The first thing she says to Vicks is "You look so thin – what's happened?" But I could tell she was saying this in a jealous way, not in a CONCERNED way.

And she says she's bought an overnight bag and can't wait to see where we're staying etc. Vicks looks all worried at this, but I'm like, "I'm afraid you can't stay. The guy we're living with won't allow strangers". And she says something like, "Why not?" And I tell her it's because Hervey's involved with this dead secret work for the government and only me and Vicks know about it. And I can tell she doesn't believe me, but then I say, "You'd better be careful, he could be watching us right now." And she looks at Vicks as if to say 'what is this crap?', but Vicks is BRILLIANT and looks all serious and says, "Sorry Emma, we REALLY can't tell you much about it."

Then Emma says that the least we can do is go for a coffee with her, and I say, "sure, but it will have to be fast." And Emma's really pissed-off and snottily goes on about expecting to stay with us blah blah blah.

While we have coffee at this posh place Emma wants to go to, she tells us about her job, how crap it's getting, and how sorry she still is that she couldn't find us work, but that

we'd arrived at such short notice etc etc and she didn't expect there to be two of us. Usual Emma crap. Then she says, "Can I ask you a question?" Which is what BASTARDS always say when they're going to ask you something horrible. And she goes, "Did you take any money from Justine when you stayed with her?"

At first I have no idea what she's talking about. I'm about to say, "Who the fuck is Justine?" Then I remembered. So weird: I'd COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN about horrible sloany Justine, and I could see Vicks had as well!! Like we'd blocked it out of our minds or something! And Justine had grassed us up to Emma, which just proves she was totally VILE in the first place. I suppose it was nice of her to put us up after we had to leave Emma's, and so we had a roof over our heads on our first night in Paris. But she'd made it obvious that she thought me and Vicks were weirdos or druggies or hippies or something, and didn't try to help us with jobs or anything, even though she was ALSO an *au pair* and quite connected. When Justine went out that evening I searched through her stuff and took twenty quid, which Vicks cashed in at a money change place the next day.

I pretended to get all angry with Emma, and Vicks did as well, and we were saying stuff like, "What do you think we are?" And eventually I think Emma believed us. But she had ANOTHER HORRIBLE thing to say that she'd been saving till last.

She goes, "Vicki, you had better phone your father."

And Vicks is like, "Did you speak to him?" And she says, "Yes, he's worried about you, and the police have been around again wondering where you are." And Vicks is like, "Well, you did tell him we were all right, didn't you?" And Emma looks all superior and says, "How could I? I didn't know where you were, either." BITCH!! I could see Vicks was getting dead worried and I asked Emma if she knew what the police wanted in more detail. I could see she wanted to string it out and make it more dramatic, but I gave her a dead-eye so she just said that they knew that the art college pottery shed had been burned down on purpose and that they needed to interview us because we'd been seen leaving afterwards. She didn't know who'd grassed on us though. Then she said she had to go to the loo. While she was gone I tried to make Vicks feel better – she had gone really white. Then Emma came back from the bogs and started asking us more about Hervey. But she didn't get very far as with BRILLIANT TIMING he walks in.

He was EXCELLENT!! He was wearing dark glasses and was really pretending to be this dead mysterious guy. He'd even brought his satchel and everything, like I'd asked him to. He comes up to our table and says to me and Vicks in this dead good put on SPY voice, "I think it's time you should be going. We have work to do." And Emma goes bright red and says, "Who are you?" And Hervey says in a scary serious voice, "If I tell you I'll have to kill you," and me and Vicks almost killed ourselves trying not to laugh.

When Hervey leaves, Emma (for once) doesn't know what to say, but I could see she wanted to ask all sorts of questions, but Vicks said she'd love to tell her all about it, but that it wouldn't be safe. I told Emma that Hervey was glad for us to join his organization because we'd told him we'd burned down the pottery shed as an act of rebellion and he needed people like me and Vicks to help him. We walked Emma to the Metro station and she made Vicks promise to call her and let her know we were all right. I made sure she knew that Hervey was following us.

As soon as she'd gone Vicks ran up to Hervey and gave him a big hug for being so FANTASTIC!! He wanted to know more about why we needed to get rid of Emma, but I just told him what I'd said before – that she was a BITCH and a pain in the arse and wouldn't leave us alone etc. Which is true if you think about it. Then I said we should all go and have drinks to celebrate, and Vicks says, 'with what?' And I pulled out a hundred Franc note that I took out of Emma's wallet when she went to the toilet in the café!! Vicks hadn't even seen me doing this, which is a sign that I'm getting better at nicking stuff.

Then me and Hervey and Vicks went for drinks at the *tabac* bar place near the flat to celebrate and we told Hervey he was brilliant and thanked him for following us and helping us out with Emma. But I can see he really loved doing it, stupid sod that he is. So it's all good APART FROM:

I have to try and tell Vicks to stay away from vile Jules though. But I reckon now he's got what he WANTS, he'll get bored and LEAVE HER THE FUCK ALONE!!!! But the trick is NEVER to let her know that this BOTHERS me.

## VICKI: The Jules Experience #2

I'm still feeling a bit shaky as I let the door to Hervé's apartment building slam shut behind me. Even though I'm expecting it, the loud bang makes me jump. The street seems unusually busy and noisy this evening, but maybe I'm just being over-sensitive. Traffic seems to roar down the road in front of me, and the Irish woman who owns the pub next door is warbling and crooning *Danny Boy* in her horrible pub-singer voice. I can't believe Sage and I still haven't been in there for a pint. When we first arrived here we'd been dead excited about living next door to it. But even on the rare occasions we've had the money we just haven't been tempted for some reason. Probably because it would remind us of home.

I shiver. It's so cold that my breath curls out in white wisps like I'm smoking an invisible cigarette. I've stupidly come out without my jacket, but I can't face going back in to fetch it, even though I'm sure I'm early. It's only a five minute walk to the café where I'm to meet Jules, but after what's just happened I just had to get out.

Everything had been fine a few minutes ago. I'd been feeling quite chipper, actually. We'd been spaced out in Hervé's flat as per usual: me sprawled on the mattress finally getting over my monstrous hangover from the night before, Sage and Hervé passing a joint between them and working on Hervé's battle plan to get Genevieve interested in him. Thanks to the Emma Experience Sage had forgiven me for staying out all night with Jules the other evening, and when I'd plucked up the courage to tell that I was seeing him again, she'd just shrugged and said: "It's your funeral."

I'd left the room and was on my way to the Toilet of Death when the neighbour Sage had bumped into stuck his head around the door.

"*Bonsoir!*" I said, cheerily.

He just stared at me. He immediately gave me the creeps. His raggedy hair was matted and grey, and his yellowish face was heavily scored as if the lines on his face had been inked in by a Marvel comic artist. His eyes were hard shiny stones.

Getting no response I shrugged and moved on. As I passed him he said something in French that I couldn't catch.

“*Pardon?*” I said, turning round and politely smiling in his direction.

“*Putain!*” he hissed. The tone of his voice was pure poison and, as he spat out the word, I caught a glimpse of dark brown teeth beneath the snarl of his top lip.

“You what?” I said.

“*Putain!*” he hissed again; this time pointing at me, in case I was under any illusion that he meant someone else, even though the corridor was deserted as usual. Then he disappeared back into his room, slamming the door behind him.

“Fuck you!” I shouted, but it sounded pathetic, defeated somehow.

Within seconds Sage shot out of Hervé’s room into the corridor.

“What the fuck’s going on, Chuck?” she said.

“Bastard shilling next door just called me a... *putain*, or something.”

“Eh? What’s a *putain*?”

“Fuck knows. Didn’t sound very nice though.”

“You do something to piss him off?”

“Nah. I was just on the way to the bog. Wasn’t doing anything.”

Not one to miss out on anything, Hervé poked his head around the door.

“*Qu’arrive-t-il?*” he said. “What’s happening? I heard you shouting, Vicki.”

“That guy next door just called me something. Hervé, what’s a *putain*?” I asked, not really wanting to know the answer. “I’ve heard you guys saying it a couple of times.” He looked down at the floor and scuffed the floorboards with his boot.

“Well?” Sage snapped.

“A whore.” He didn’t look me in the eyes.

“Blimey,” Sage breathed. She looked at the old man’s door for a few contemplative seconds, then walked up to it and aimed a sideways karate kick at it.

“*Motherfucker*,” she said almost matter-of-factly as she lashed out with her stocky strong right leg. “Next time I see you, you’re dead. You hear me, you old fuck!”

“Sage!” Hervé looked aghast.

“What? He’s just insulted my friend! You want me to invite him for fucking tea and scones?”

“Just leave it, Sage,” I said.

“Bastard,” Sage yelled at the door and kicked at it again. This time I was sure I heard something rattle loudly from within. “Don’t worry, chuck,” she put her arm around me. “Next time that fuckhead sticks his head out of the door, he’s dead meat.”

Hervé shook his head and disappeared back into the safety of his room.

“Yeah!” I tried to shrug it off, but there was a sick feeling starting inside me.

“Look, Sage. I think I’m just going to split.”

“I thought you was only going later?”

“Yeah, but I need some fresh air.”

“Don’t let it get to you,” she sniffed. Then, in a different, softer, unSage-like tone of voice she said: “You don’t have to go, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“To meet that bastard, tonight. Why don’t you just stay here with me and Hervé? Genevieve’s popping round later for some blow. “

“I’ve said I would, now, Sage. It would be... rude not to.”

She shrugged. “Kay. It’s all going to end in tears though. That Jules is a right bastard. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” As she returned to Hervé’s room, she aimed another bent-kneed karate kick at the old man’s door.

\*

I usually love Opera at night time. If it’s not too cold, Sage and I sometimes escape Hervé’s smoky atmosphere and spend a couple of hours at our spot on the front steps of the opera house making fun of passers-by. You can see everything that’s going on from there. We like to dare each other to bum fags from the commuters and tourists making their way to and from the Metro station. We’ve long since given up trying to spot carpet legs, though. There just aren’t enough in Paris to make the game worthwhile. But I’m not feeling at all comfortable here tonight, hovering outside the fancy smantzy café where I’m to meet Jules. I don’t think I’ve ever been this cold. My teeth chatter crazily and the skin on my face feels tight and numb. For a second I seriously consider going back for my jacket. Now the shock of what the old bastard said to me has worn away slightly, I’m starting to feel the beginnings of a numb, creeping anger. Wrapping my

arms around me I pace up and down outside the café, head filling with what I should have said to the old fuck in response. *Bastard.*

Across the boulevard from the café, Bobby's spot looks bare without his little blue figure bustling around. God, I'd kill for a cigarette, but I'm feeling too self-conscious to bum one from one of the smugly overcoated passers-by. The maitre'd of the café looks at me questioningly as I pass the glass door for what feels like the thousandth time.

To keep my mind off the cold and to scrub away the bitter mental after-effects of the confrontation with the nutter in the corridor, I make a mental inventory of the books I brought with me from England. They're seriously sparse on the ground. I left the *Brothers Karamazov* at Emma-the Bitch's, but I've read it twice anyway. I could probably manage to re-read *The Shining* and *Pet Semetary* without getting too bored, but I'm bugged if I can be bothered to re-read *Norma Jean: the Untold Story*, which Sage had given me for my birthday in December. Sage had scratched out 'Norma Jean' on the front cover and written 'Vicki Evans' in biro. Which is probably one of the reasons I can't re-read it. Not that I'm a dead movie star or anything, but it's a seriously depressing story. Poor old Marilyn. She had her fair share of nutcases to contend with as well.

Now I'm getting really nervous, and butterflies flutter crazily in my stomach. I feel exactly like I do just before an exam. I need to know the time, but can't decide who to ask. A woman would be safest, but everyone's travelling in pairs. Half of me hopes that Jules won't pitch, but I'd feel like a total spazz if I went back to the flat right now. I can't face one of Sage's knowing glances; and I really don't feel like watching Hervé fawning over Genevieve this evening either.

Another one of those mysterious chauffeur-driven limousines creeps past me. As it passes the back window slides down and a dark-skinned Italian-looking man pokes his head out and wolf-whistles. I ignore him and look down at the pavement. Everyone passing looks like they have a purpose, a destination. No one else is hanging around like me. It's as if there's a spotlight on me: Look, it's Vicki-no-friends. Suddenly, all I want is to be at home in England in my bedroom, surrounded by the comforting posters of the Dead Kennedys and The Violent Femmes, listening to Sunday night John Peel on Radio One and deciding what crap outfit to wear to college. Or hanging about in the lounge

waiting for the folks to fall asleep so I can sneak into the kitchen to nick some cash, so that Sage and I can get pissed the next day.

\*

I've just about made up my mind to bugger off before I freeze to death when Jules arrives. My stomach flips when I see him, but I try to ignore it. At least he hasn't brought his vile little dog.

"*Bonsoir, Vicki!*" He leans forward and kisses me twice on each cheek. "*Ca va?*" He smells like soap and Gitanes.

"*Oui. Merci, Jules. How are you?*"

"I am okay. I have been working all day."

"Painting?"

Jules's eyes slide to the right. "*Ah. Oui. Bien sur.*"

Hang on. For someone who is supposed to be an artist, Jules had bugger all artwork in his flat. That I can remember, anyway.

"I'd love to see your studio," I say.

"*Pardon?*"

"Your studio. Where you work. Where you paint."

"*Ah. Oui. D'accord. Anytime you want.*"

"Now?"

"*Non. It is not possible. We are to meet someone. A friend of mine.*"

"Who?"

"Just a friend, you will see. I think you will like her."

"It's not your dog, is it?"

Jules looks at me for a second and then throws his head back and laughs. I get a good look at his pointy Dracula teeth.

"*Non. We are in for quite an evening, Vicki. You will see.*"

\*

It's getting late. We're in one of those brightly lit *tabac* bar places slotted down a side street off the Boulevard Des Italiens. It's all Formica tables and linoleum floors. I don't care what anyone says about scummy English pubs, the French just can't do pubs like we can. Pubs should be places where you can get pissed in muted lighting, sitting on a comfy upholstered booth stained with years of spilled bitter and fag ash, and not these bare, bland uninspiring places where the tables are too tiny and the plastic chairs stick to your bum. I squirm in my seat trying to get more comfortable, and glance over at the Japanese woman sitting opposite me. She's the 'friend' Jules wanted me to meet. We picked her up from where she was waiting outside a cut-price men's clothing boutique on the Boulevard Montmartre. I've tried to have a conversation with her, but it's not working and both of us have given up. Her English is as crap as my French, and since we arrived hours ago we've basically just swapped names and where we're from. I forgot her name instantly. I put this down to the fact that I've been downing countless shot glasses of pastis, which tastes like the insides of the aniseed balls I used to nick from the corner shop down the road from my Nan's. The nameless Japanese woman is sitting lolled back in her chair. She has a broad flat face and her eyes are practically hidden by her fringe. She's wearing high black heels and a cheap-looking skin-tight lacy dress. She's fatter and shorter than I am, and thick make-up at least two shades darker than her natural skin tone cakes the join-the-dot bumps of bad skin.

Jules has left us 'to get to know each other' while he sits with his back to us in a darkened corner of the *tabac*, opposite a dark-skinned scary-looking guy. The guy arrived soon after we'd entered, and acts as if the Japanese woman and I don't exist. Every so often Jules turns around and motions the stony-faced barman to fill up our glasses. The barman refuses to meet my eyes when he pours the drinks. I can tell he disapproves of us. Apart from a couple of crusty old men at the counter, we're the only people in here.

"*Ca va?*" I say to the Japanese woman, who's swaying gently on her chair totally out of time to *Love plus One* by Haircut One Hundred. She doesn't answer but simply smiles lazily at me, and then tips her shot glass upside down on the sticky table in between us.

“Jules!” she calls, without turning round. Her voice sounds slurry, but she speaks with a perfect French accent as far as I can tell, sounding nothing like the Japanese tourists who chatter up and down the boulevards around Opera or who congregate in front of the paintings at Montmartre.

Jules ignores her.

“Jules!” she turns the volume up a notch. This time he looks round in irritation.

“*Oui?*” he snaps.

She holds up her empty glass and waves it above her head.

“*Salut, Jules!*” She laughs a crazy *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* laugh. She’s either off her head on drugs or she’s completely cooked. Or both. Jules motions to the bartender again.

While nodding my head to *Fantastic Day*, I surreptitiously watch what Jules’s up to. He’s taken a shoebox-sized parcel out of his rucksack, and has passed it to the man sitting opposite him. The two of them talk intensely for a while, waving their arms at each other in an over-the-top French manner. I can’t make out what they’re saying. The music’s too loud, and I doubt I’d understand their quickly-spoken French anyway. The man begins to unpeel the brown paper from around the parcel and opens the box. I lean over as far as I can to try and see what’s in it, but Jules’s body hides it from view. The Japanese woman has downed her drink in one go and is humming a completely different tune to the background music.

She bites off the tip of one of her perfectly manicured nails and uses the ripped edge to pick her teeth. When she catches me looking at her doing this she grins at me slyly.

“Jules!” she snaps again, her voice shrill and slurry.

This time when he turns around I get a glimpse of the contents of the parcel. It’s a pile of brand new cassette tapes, still wrapped in shiny cellophane. I recognise the familiar cover of Blondie’s *Parallel Lines* in amongst the others. I have it at home.

“*On y va!*” The Japanese woman shrieks, unsteadily trying to get to her feet.

Jules shakes his head in exasperation and gets up.

\*

The room's spinning. I bite the inside of my cheek hard. It feels numb, but this is an old trick I use to try and sober up whenever I've drunk too much and things start to spiral out of control. I bite harder, and this time I can feel the reassuring salty irony taste of blood in my mouth, and the room steadies slightly. We're in Jules's scummy living room, and for the life of me I can't remember walking here from the *tabac*. The Japanese woman is lying stretched out on the tatty green armchair. She's tapping her heels crazily on the carpet, again out of time to the record Jules has just put on. It sounds like the same Nona Hendrix LP he played last time I was here. Her sharp jitterbugging stilettos are perilously close to where I'm sitting cross-legged, and I try and move away slightly.

The woman languidly pushes her fringe away from her forehead, and I finally check out her eyes. They're caked in thick black kohl and are glassy and unfocused. Jules is clattering about in the kitchen, his horrid yappy dog pattering about his heels. It hasn't stopped yapping since we arrived, but the Japanese woman's silent. She wriggles around a bit and my stomach lurches as I realise what's she's up to. Fucking hell – she's pulling up the skirt on her tight black dress, revealing a pair of almost see-through black lacy pants. She's not wearing tights and her cellulite-pitted thighs are clearly on show. Gross. I try and look anywhere about the room but there, but my eyes keep being drawn back. Staring up at the ceiling, stoned smile on her face, she spreads her legs wider and idly strokes the tops of her thighs. I get a sickening glimpse of the ugly black stubble of shaved pubic hair. Oh shit.

I reach over to the table to grab a cigarette, but before I can react she leans down, grabs my hand and thrusts it into her crotch. For a second I'm too shocked to do anything, least of all snatch my hand back. She closes her eyes and arches her back. Her tongue peeks between her tiny white teeth.

I don't want to be here, doing this.

Fuck, I have to get out of here! But for a second it's like I'm up on the ceiling watching myself, watching as my hand's squirmed around in the woman's lap as if it no longer belongs to me. I can't move.

She starts murmuring something I don't understand in French. A shadow falls over us. It's Jules: he's standing behind her chair and has thrust his hands down the front of her dress.

"I see you two are now good friends, eh, Vicki?" he murmurs, his voice sounding thick as if he's speaking through treacle.

I snatch my hand out of the woman's clammy grasp. Her breath hisses out from between her teeth.

"I've got to go!" I say, trying to get to my feet.

"*Pourquoi?*" Jules murmurs hoarsely. "We are all friends here."

I manage to get up to my haunches, but my body doesn't want to do what I'm telling it to. For a second the room lurches again and I lose my balance.

"At least just stay for tonight," Jules croons. "We don't have to do anything. Just rest."

"*Oui,*" the Japanese woman murmurs, arching her back again.

Suddenly she sits up.

"*Viens,*" she slurs, beckoning me closer. "*Viens ici.*"

I kick back with my legs and wriggle further away from her. She shrugs and then flops back down on the armchair again as if this has exhausted her.

Jules whispers something in her ear that I don't catch, and she nods knowingly. She looks straight at me and runs her tongue over her lips. Oh God. My stomach lurches again. Get out of here now! Right this fucking second. Before it's too late.

"I just need to go to the loo." I say, and I'm relieved to hear that my voice doesn't sound too forced. "I'll be back in a sec."

I jump up unsteadily, nearly tripping over Jules's little dog that has raced over to snap at my ankles. I kick it out of the way with more force than necessary and leg it over to the door. For a second I think it's locked and I'm trapped, but then I manage to pull it open. I hear Jules's voice behind me, but I daren't turn around. I race out and for a second can't get my bearings. Then I see the shadowy shape of the banisters flanking the stairs to my left.

"Vicki! That is not the way to the toilet!" Jules's voice calls after me.

I hear the scrabbling of claws on the wood behind me, and Jules swearing at his dog as it escapes and tries to run after me.

My first thought is to run straight out of the building, but I'm not sure I'll make it in this state. Fuck, fuck, fuck! My body doesn't seem to want to listen to what I'm telling it to do. I leg it towards the staircase and, clinging for dear life to the banister, practically throw myself down the narrow steps. As I reach the bottom, almost turning my ankle over, the corridor in front of me seems to shift sickeningly and I fight against a swooping feeling of disorientation. Shit! I'll never make it down the next flight. What now? I check out the dark silent shadows creeping from the corridor to my left. It's a similar set up to Jules's floor – could I hide in the bogs at the end? Doesn't look like I've got a choice.

“Vicki! *Arret!*” Jules's voice sounds like it's right behind me. I stumble on blindly, bouncing and ricocheting off the corridor walls. My legs feel like heavy weights are strapped to them, and for a second I just want to give up and crumple onto the floor. Oh crap! The corridor is suddenly blasted with light -- I must have bashed into the timer switch! Stupid, stupid, stupid! I have to clamp my teeth together to stop myself from screaming in frustration. Bugger, bugger, now where? I hover uncertainly for a few precious seconds. Think! The corridor looks like it stretches towards a dead end. Should I hammer on one of the doors? Ask for help?

Then I see it. Oh thank fuck! There's a shallow alcove carved into the wall to the right of me. I throw myself into it, squashing my body into a sideways position and drawing my knees up to my chin to make myself as small as possible. I can hear every breath that escapes raggedly out of my chest.

Thankfully, the timer switch blinks the corridor back into darkness. I can hear Jules's heavy footsteps again, and this time I'm able to place them as coming from over by the stairwell. I could've sworn he'd been on my heels all that time! I let out a silent gasp of thanks to his vicious little dog. If it hadn't scrabbled after me, he'd probably be right behind me now.

The steps echo closer, and I bite my lip to stop myself from screaming.

“Vicki?” he stage-whispers. This time it sounds as if he's speaking right into my ear. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter. “Vicki! Come! What is the matter?”

The footsteps seem to retreat a little, and then, “*Merde!*”

I don't allow myself to relax. I hold my breath as I hear him clumping back up to the floor above. Thank fuck. I only allow myself to take in a shuddering breath when I hear a faint trace of Nona Hendrix and the muffled bark of his little dog as he opens the door to his apartment. I'm shaking like a spastic and my teeth are chattering. I can't believe Jules didn't hear them.

But I'm still not going to risk poking my head out to check if he's really gone. I've seen enough horror movies to know that it could all be a trick and he's just biding his time, waiting for me to let my guard down. And even if I could escape the building, I don't want to go back to Hervé's in this state either. I can't bear the thought of Sage's knowing look and 'told-you-so' expression. Fair play to her, though. I should have fucking well listened to her. I'd better stay where I am for now until I come up with something better.

\*

*Sage and I are in the Swedish Chef's kitchen, which is set up in the centre of the stage. The Muppet Show theatre in front of us is eerily silent, and the seats are sinisterly shadowed and dark. We're helping the chef make spaghetti, but it keeps escaping out of our grasp and wrapping itself around our legs and arms. "Look at this, Chuck!" Sage is laughing as she allows herself to be wrapped into a spaghetti version of a roly-poly pudding. I try to smile at her, but truth is I'm terrified and I'm beginning to panic as the spaghetti snakes itself around my legs and arms. The Swedish Chef's ignoring us, and is banging pots and pans around singing "Do de do de do" in his Swedish Chef voice. "Please help me," I say to him, but he acts like he can't hear me, as if I'm not there. "I'm stuck!" I plead. "I can't move my arms!" The spaghetti feels like twine and is digging into my arms and legs cutting off my circulation. It climbs up my body and begins writhing and twisting around my neck trying to force its way into my mouth. "Sage!" I yell before it finally gets me.*

\*

I wake up gasping for air. I try to move my right arm. It's completely dead. I jump up and shake it wildly. I slam into a wall and finally manage to get some feeling back into my fingers. They wriggle reassuringly. Where the hell am I? Oh Christ, yeah. Jules's fucking building. The corridor is still dark, but light is filtering through from the other end. Daylight. Thank fuck. I breathe with relief. I take stock. My whole body feels as if it's made out of stone, or if it's been coated in Plaster of Paris. My legs are painfully stiff from being in the difficult position for God knows how long. I'm desperate for a glass of water but daren't go looking for the bathroom, and the last thing I'm going to do is go back up to Jules's floor and use the one there. My mouth feels gummy, like I've spent the evening licking envelopes or something.

The building is still silent. I count to ten, take a deep breath and then leg it down the corridor. At least my body's listening to me now. I pray that I don't bump into Jules or the creepy Japanese woman, but I don't meet anyone as I fly down the stairs. Within seconds I'm pushing open the front door and blundering out into the deserted safety of the street.

Again, I've absolutely no idea of the time, and this makes me feel doubly disorientated. I concentrate on just putting one foot in front of the other, staring down at the pavement, counting the cracks in the concrete. I'm pretty sure I'm going in the opposite direction to Hervé's flat, but I carry on walking regardless. I find myself trailing up a narrow side street and follow it up higher and higher. I don't meet anyone on the way up, so it must still be very early. It's hard to tell, as Sage and I rarely get up early enough to experience morning. But the streets and shops and apartments still have a drowsy hush about them. It feels good to walk. It's warming me up, and loosening my stiff leg muscles. I hesitate at the top of a narrow cobbled street, but decide not to turn back just yet.

As I make my way to the top of a steepish hill flanked by tiny *boulangeries* and dusty *patisserie* shop windows, I recognise the tell tale windmill sign of the Moulin Rouge. I know exactly where I am. Even Pigalle is practically deserted at this time of day, but I spy a solitary diehard transvestite, snuggled into a doorway and swathed in a thick blond fur coat, bright red wig and way too much make-up.

"*Bonjour, mignon,*" she greets me as I pass. I stop. What the hell.

*“Avez-vous une cigarette s’il vous plait?”* I say.

*“Ah, Anglais?”* She smiles at me and passes me a packet of Marlboros. She’s got lipstick on her teeth.

*“Merci!”*

She loses interest in me as a guy dressed in a business suit exits the Metro station and appears to be making his way towards us.

I sneakily take out two cigarettes and pass the packet back. She lights the cigarette for me without taking her eyes off the approaching man. I nod my thanks, and move on. Pulling the smoke into my lungs, I walk up one of the side-streets towards Montmartre. I find myself striding along as if I know where I’m going, as if I have a destination in mind, although no one’s watching me. The shops selling tourist tat are still shut, and I don’t meet a soul as I climb up the endless stairs towards Sacre Coeur.

\*

I sit on the one of the tourist benches and look out over Paris. Smog and mist shroud the city in a semi-heavy cloud. I’m suddenly horribly homesick for crap utilitarian architecture. For the Wolverhampton Mander centre, a piss-stinking collection of concrete, glass and shops. For buses that reek of fags and old ladies. For the perfume warmth of the Beatties department store. For cold milky tea at the British Home Stores coffee bar. I take a deep breath that turns into a sob.

\*

As I navigate the train-track stairs back down to Pigalle, it starts to drizzle. The rain doesn’t bother me; it’s impossible for me to feel any colder. I look out for the transvestite again as I cross the main road. She’s gone. Maybe she got lucky with the smart-suited businessman.

Suddenly I can’t wait to get back to the apartment. I try and take a short cut down from Pigalle to Opera, but end up instead outside a massive but beautiful old church I’ve never seen before. There’s a greenish tarpaulin strung up to the side of one of the eaves.

A bunch of scruffy looking tramps are sitting outside it, smoking and looking impervious to the rain.

“*Bonjour,*” one of them says to me, knowingly and lasciviously.

I stalk past them, head down and hurriedly cross the road in front of the church without waiting for the green man ‘walk’ signal. There’s the blast of a horn and I step back just in time to avoid being hit by a moped. The driver shakes his fist at me. The tramps laugh. Bastards. I take another side-street at random and pass a *boulangerie*, and the smell of newly baked *pain au chocolat* seems to wrap itself around me. I’m starving as usual, and my head is throbbing from the pastis hangover which has decided finally to catch up with me.

Oh thank God. I’m almost overcome with relief as I see the comforting female shapes of the sculptures that surround the opera house. The drizzle has stopped and the anaemic sun is trying its best to filter through. There are more people around now, and no one gives me a second glance as I cross the road from the Metro stop. I’m invisible. Everyone’s comfortably wrapped in overcoats and carrying umbrellas. Even the tourists look like they have a purpose today. Nearly home, thank fuck.

\*

“Vicki!” the voice is overly loud. I whirl around. Bobby is waving his hands over his head like someone demonstrating semaphore. His face is tinged a dark red and he’s huffing and puffing as if he’s out of breath. He looks like he’s been trying to get my attention for a while. I didn’t even glance at his corner as I joined the crowd crossing the boulevard.

But for once I’m absurdly pleased to see him, and for once I hug him back when he greets me. He reeks of aftershave as usual; his stubble scratches my face as I pull back.

“Vicki, you are OK?” he says.

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“You do not look too good, Foxy Lady, eh? Where is your coat? You must be very cold.”

“Nah. I’m fine, really.”

“*Bon!*” he says. “I have fantastic news for you. I have been up to Hervé’s to find you, but Sage said you were not there.” He pauses and looks at me quizzically. “Where were you?”

In a stinking freezing corridor escaping from a pervert. “Nowhere,” I say.

Bobby looks confused for a second. It doesn’t last long though. I can see he’s practically bursting to tell me something.

“*Bon!* Let us go and get some café. All of your troubles are now over, thanks to me!”

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

### 5 horrible (but fitting) ways to kill Bobby:

- 1) *Sneak poisonous spider eggs under his skin so that they hatch and eat him alive.*
- 2) *Peel off his skin slowly then cover him with Spray n' Cook and fry him in a jumbo-sized pan.*
- 3) *Pop out his eyes with a rusting spoon and lock him in a dark room for two weeks with NO food or water.*
- 4) *Make him drink drain cleaner while listening to Barry Manilow records.*
- 5) *Bury him alive in a damp grave after filling it with stink bombs and those ants that hurt when they bite you.*

DARK, DARK, DARK DAY. WORST DAY EVER IN FACT!!!!

OK, Gladys. I'm so fucking angry my hands are shaking like an old alky's.

So much for putting things down on paper helping you deal with ISSUES. OK. Deep breath, Sage. Hang on. Let me get a fag.

That's better.

Hervey has taken Vicks off somewhere. He was totally freaked out by what happened and just ushered her out of the door. So I'm here, alone. Except for you, Gladys, of course. And a spliff that Hervey left 'to calm me down'. AS IF!!!

Today was worse than when me and Vicks were arrested by the police in Stourbridge after we were stopped in the underpass because they thought we were carrying a body. It was actually a rolled-up piece of carpet that we'd found outside a shop and were going to use to sleep on in the Abandoned Church. But we lied about our names and they made us spend the night in the HOLDING CELLS because they said we were INDIGENT. And the cell smelled of OLD SICK and was vile and grimy and the next day we were in DEEP TROUBLE because everyone was worried about us. But that SITUATION is NOTHING compared with this one.

The whole thing started yesterday. Vicks arrived back home in the morning AGAIN after spending another night with vile Jules. She was really hungover and looked like shite. I had to give her a right bollocking as she'd gone without her coat, and it would be totally crap if one of us got flu or something now. She didn't say FUCK ALL about what she'd been up to with Jules, but I could guess obviously as he's a FUCKING PERVERT. The GOOD thing was that she said she didn't think she'd be seeing him again, but she didn't

say WHY. I must make a note to ask her about this LATER. If I ever speak to her again. Which at the moment doesn't look very likely after what's HAPPENED.

Anyway, Vicks was dead excited about something ELSE and says that "Bobby has found her a job, working in a shop."

Then Vicks says she must have a nap, because later she's going to go and talk to Bobby the Bastard about the details of the job and everything. Okay, so at that moment I wasn't thinking that Bobby was so much of a bastard. But I should have followed my INSTINCTS and I didn't. And when B the B comes over later, I'm actually nice to him and ask him all sorts of questions. Anyway, he's really cagey, which is nothing new for B the B, because as you know, he HATES my guts. He says it's a friend of his who owns this shop she's to work in, and when Vicks asks what she should wear he says "Just look bootifule, like always," which makes Vicki look all embarrassed but makes me want to PUKE. And he also says that she doesn't need an interview as he's told this guy all about Vicks and she can start the next day.

So I say, "Great, I'll go with Vicks tomorrow, where is this place?" And he's like, "No, it's fine, I'll take her myself." And he looks dead superior in a totally SMUG BASTARD sort of way. Anyway, he says that it pays really well, about 500 francs a day!!!

Here's where I'm STUPID. Fifty quid a day for working in a shop??? I should have known something was up. But all I could think about was FINALLY having some cash so we could buy fags and get something nice to EAT. And me and Vicks were so excited we didn't ask any more questions. We had a lovely afternoon talking about what we were going to BUY with the money. Batteries and books and hair stuff and mostly FOOD. And when Hervey arrives after with Dracula and Potato Head everyone's really excited as well, and we have a little party, although Vicks doesn't drink or smoke as she wants to LOOK her best for the JOB. (This, Gladys, is very very IRONIC).

Vicks gets up dead early in the morning and asks me to do her hair and stuff. It takes ages, as I do this wicked complicated arrangement, with it all piled on top of her head with strands coming down. WHAT A WASTE!!! Anyway, Vicks leaves to meet B the B and I drop back to sleep for a little bit. Then I wake up as Genevieve is knocking on the door and as usual Hervey is all smarmy with her and acts like a TOTAL WANKER. He goes out to get some fags and while he's gone, me and Genevieve get talking. I tell her all

about this job that Vicks has got. And Genevieve says, “How much does it pay?” but I don’t really want to tell her in case she grasses to Hervey and he starts asking for rent money or something. But I think, ‘what the hell’, so I say, “500 francs,” and she looks dead surprised. Then she says something like, “That sounds weird, what sort of shop is it?” And I say, I don’t know, but maybe it’s one of those dead posh ones round the corner near Concorde or something. And fuck, Gladys, I’m feeling really stupid now because I can’t believe we didn’t ask B the B what sort of shop hires a COMPLETE STRANGER and pays them a fortune. But Genevieve says something like, “It’s not likely to be those shops because Vicks doesn’t speak very good French and loads of people want to work there.” And I’m starting to feel really worried. Then Hervey comes back and we tell him about this. He gets a funny ‘why didn’t you tell me this last night’ look on his face, but I ignore this and he’s like, “Why don’t you go and ask Bobby about it?” And he says that he’s sure it should be fine, as he’s known Bobby for ages so he doesn’t think he’d be up to anything DODGY. But I know BETTER.

By this stage I’m REALLY worried, Gladys. All kinds of things are running through my head, like what if the bastard has sold her into white slavery to Arabs or something stupid like that, which as it turns out, isn’t too far from the truth, anyway. And as you know, Vicks is DEAD naïve when it comes to shit like this. So I storm up to Bobby, who’s trying to flog his CRAP to this bunch of English tourists and I’m like, “Where the FUCK is Vicks???” and the English tourists can see the expression on my face and one guy says “Steady on, chick,” in a Birmingham accent and I tell him to fuck off as well. He looks dead angry but they leave anyway as they can see that I mean business, and being English they don’t want to get involved. And Bobby’s face is all red and puffy and GROSS looking and he says, “Vicki is working,” and I say “I KNOW she’s working you CUNT but where?” And he says, “Why should I tell you?” And I’m like “Because if you don’t you’re fucking DEAD”. And he says Vicks is a big girl, blah, blah, blah, and she doesn’t need me to hold her hand and I’m getting angrier and angrier and all the people in the street and the bank behind us are stopping to see what’s going on, and I can see the last thing the bastard wants is a SCENE. And so he’s FORCED to tell me where she is because he can see that I’m not going to just BUGGER OFF like he wants me to. But

when he finally spills his guts with a dead sulky look on his face, I don't know where he means and I MAKE him give me directions. But all the time he's like dead pissed off and keeps saying things like "You should just let her live her own life blah, blah, blah."

Before I rush off to her though, I punch one of his crap paintings and it crashes to the ground. It felt dead good, Gladys, although it should have been the BASTARD'S face I punched. But that comes later.

It takes me AGES to find the shop, as it's in this side street near to where me and Vicks used to hang out in Pigalle. Fuck, I had to ask loads of people where the street was and most of them didn't understand me being FRENCH FROGS, and it's only by accident that I found it in the end.

Fuck, Gladys. It was fucking HORRIBLE.

Hang on, I'm just going to light this pathetic joint Hervey left me.

Anyway, so I get to the shop, but it doesn't have a name on it or anything, just a number and I can see WHY immediately. The windows are all dirty and grimy, and there's these cheap-looking dayglo labels that say TOYS and CINEMA and BOOTHS on the outside, and one window has this gross display of bondage gear and stuff like that which makes me feel SICK. There's no door, just this beige-coloured dirty curtain. It's like something out of SOHO. Even the shops in Pigalle aren't that bad. Weird to think me and Vicks spent loads of time laughing at them.

I push open the curtain. The place is just FULL of like dildos and PORN photos and RACKS of dirty videos with pictures on the front of naked women sucking guys' dicks, and at first I don't see Vicks. She's sitting behind a counter in front of this corridor which looks dead creepy and grimy. I can hear deep breathing sounds and CRAP seventies porno music coming from there. And all Vicks is wearing although it's dead cold is this leather bra thing which doesn't cover much, I can tell you. You could practically see her tits. For a few seconds I watch her and she's looking dead embarrassed as there's this old perve in the shop who's pretending to look through the racks of porn but actually he isn't because he's looking at her and I SWEAR he has his hand down his trousers playing with himself.

Then Vicks looks up and sees me and I'm like, "Get the fuck out!" and she bursts into tears, and says, "I can't!" and I shout something like, "Now, Vicks!"

And this HUGE guy comes out of the back. He also looks Moroccan like B the B and he says something in French like, "What's going on?" And I say, "Fuck you!" And Vicks is still crying, but I can see she's getting her stuff together, and the old pervert in the shop rushes out. And the Moroccan guy starts shouting at me and Vicks and I grab her arm and start pulling her out of the shop. Then Bobby the BASTARD appears and he's sweating like he's been running or something. Him and the Moroccan guy start shouting at each other, and I drag Vicki out of the shop and get her to put on her coat while we're running away. I turned around once and the Moroccan guy looks like he's going to chase us down the street, but he doesn't though because like the BASTARD he's fat and SLOW. I feel bad though now because I didn't think fast enough to nick some of the PERVERT'S money out of the till.

We run all the way into Opera and we're dead out of breath, and Vicks keeps trying to speak to me to EXPLAIN stuff, but I just ignore her and walk dead fast all the way to Hervey's without saying ANYTHING because I'm THAT angry.

When we get back into the room I'm glad that Genevieve's gone, but HERVEY'S there lying on his back on the bed and as usual getting stoned. He looks dead surprised when we walk in and quickly pulls his jumper down over his trousers, like we've caught him having a WANK or something.

I'm still SEETHING with anger and Hervey reads this on my face because even he can see something's up, and although Vicks has stopped crying all her mascara is like half-way down her face. And Hervey says, "What's going on?" And before I can say anything Vicks says, "I did it for us, Sage." Like I'd REALLY want her to go and prostitute herself or something. So naturally I lose my temper again and I have to punch the door so that I don't hit her which REALLY hurts, and I can see that Hervey looks dead scared. But Vicks doesn't shut the FUCK up, she carries on saying things like how much pressure she's under to find us work blah blah blah, which was totally UNFAIR because it's MUCH harder for me to find work here on account of the fact I don't speak FROG. Then

we hear a banging on the door and Hervey opens it, and GUESS WHO IT IS? Yes, the BASTARD himself.

He doesn't look at me straight away, but says to Vicks, "Can we talk outside?" and I say, "Of course you can't you fat FUCK, you'll never talk to her again," and I can feel the anger building up in me again.

And Vicki goes, "Sage!" in a warning way.

And that sets me off.

There's something weird that happens to me when I'm angry. I suppose it's a bit like the Incredible Hulk, where Bruce Banner loses his temper and goes completely fucking mental. I mean, I do actually LITERALLY see red. It's like a force that takes over my body, which would be quite cool and MAGICAL if I could fucking well control it.

Anyway I just LAUNCHED myself at Bobby. He's a lot softer and weaker than I imagined and obviously isn't used to fighting. He is PATHETIC, and he looked like he was going to CRAP in his horrible jodhpurs. It wouldn't have taken much for me to seriously fuck him up. I've had loads of practice fighting hard BASTARDS from Gornal, so compared to them it was like hitting a little GIRL. He's a coward with a very podgy weak stomach. I know this because when I punched him in the stomach he kind of went, 'whoof', sounding JUST LIKE one of those whoopee fart cushions. Then Vicks tried to grab my arm before I could elbow him in the face, but by reflex I jerked it away and I elbowed her in the mouth.

OK. I felt a bit bad about that, Gladys, it was B the BASTARD I was after, not Vicks, but it was a GENUINE accident.

Then Hervey starts yelling and shouts 'Arret'! which means 'stop' in French and Bobby slinks out holding his stomach and trying to breathe. Vick's face is covered in blood and she hobbles over to the sink. I calm down almost immediately when I look at Hervey. It's the shock of it I suppose. He's angrier than I've ever seen him (well, we've NEVER seen him anywhere close to anger). His eyes are wide-open and starey like a shilling's crazy eyes. He looked quite hard, actually, Gladys. I didn't think he had it in him to be honest. Then Hervey says something like, "Enough is enough" or some such obvious shite, and says that he's going to take Vicks away for a while till we calm down and that he's never

seen anything like this. And Vicks is still sobbing and says first she must just get changed and she grabs some clothes and heads out to the Toilet of Death and me and Hervey just sit there staring at nothing and not saying anything until she gets back. Then he hands me a joint and takes Vicks out.

And that's what I'm smoking now, Gladys. I keep wondering if I should just fuck off out of it now. If I shouldn't just leave and go somewhere else. But I haven't got much of a choice, have I, Gladys? I'm stuck here. And me and Vicks have had some shit-hot fights in the past but nothing like this.

I've never hit her before. Even by accident.

I wish B the B was fucking DEAD (see ways to kill him above, Gladys for CREATIVE ideas).

I'm not sure it's going to be all right with Vicks after this, Gladys. I'm not sure of that at all.

And then what the FUCK am I going to do?

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Pompidou Police Experience

I gingerly prod the inside of my mouth with my tongue. My top lip feels enormous and out of proportion -- as if someone sadistic has stuck a tractor tyre to the side of my face. I probably look like the Elephant Man or something. No wonder Hervé's stiffly stalking down the pavement without checking to see that I'm still following him -- he's probably trying to pretend I'm not with him. So much for Foxy fucking Lady.

"Hervé?" I call out nervously. "Where are we going?"

"You need space away from your friend. And I need to talk to you," he says abruptly without turning around. I'm not used to harsh words from him and for some reason this makes me want to cry again. I swallow hard and blink my eyes frantically. I concentrate on the uneven pavement and the lipstick-stained cigarette butts that lie discarded in the gutter, and almost crash into Hervé's back when he stops suddenly.

"*Une moment,*" he snaps and disappears into a corner shop next to us. It's starting to drizzle lightly, and for the first time I notice that it's getting dark. I have absolutely no idea where the time's gone, or even what the time *is*. The day's slipped away without me knowing; as if it's popped out for a packet of fags and is never going to come back. Tears are still threatening again and I distract myself by checking out the notices stuck onto the grubby glass of the shop's door. I can read French better than speak it, so I learn that someone's lost their dog, massages are available at a very reasonable 200ff a pop, and someone else is looking for a place to live. Join the club, I think. A plumpish overcoated guy with a Yorkshire terrier dancing round his heels stares at my face as he passes. I mouth 'fuck off' at him and he drops his eyes.

Hervé finally emerges with a clinking carrier bag. He doesn't look quite so pissed off.

"Let us walk. And then we will sit and have a drink. Where would you like to go?" He says this kindly, and I feel the lump in my throat again. Shit, I'm getting sick of this. Why can't I get myself under control? I can't believe there are any tears left. I must have over-active tear ducts or something. I take a deep breath. I almost say the first thing that pops into my head, which is: Home. Not meaning his crap flat, but *proper* home.

England. My parents' house. My Nan's comfy, cluttered fag-smelling flat. Even the Abandoned Church Sage and I used to sleep in when we missed the last bus home from Stourbridge. Anywhere but here, in fact.

"The Pompidou Centre?" I say, aware that my voice sounds thick and scratchy.

Hervé looks at me quizzically. "*Pourquoi?*"

Good question. "Because Sage and I haven't seen it yet," I answer lamely.

But this seems to be a good enough reason for Hervé. He shrugs and nods.

"*D'accord*. It is far though."

"The further the better," I mumble.

Again I follow him mutely. As I bend and weave around the other pedestrians, I keep replaying the afternoon's horrible incident over and over again in my head. It's really winding me up. How could I have been so fucking stupid? Admittedly when Bobby steered me into the horrible sex-shop at first I thought he was joking. I mean, Bobby *was* supposed to be our friend (well, my friend at any rate). But when I realized what was happening I should have put an end to it. Certainly I shouldn't have stood mutely behind the counter like a stuffed toy while the vile guy showed me how to use the till, his hand snaking around my waist and down to my bum, his breath hot and heavy with garlic ("*After the work today, you and me go for a drink?*"). Certainly I hadn't needed to get changed in front of him and Bobby -- trying to squash on the uncomfortable leather bra that smelled of another woman's sweat and was meant for someone at least two sizes smaller. I didn't need to just sit there, behind that stinking counter, while that putrid old man wanked in front of the magazine stand.

Hot shameful tears spring up from where they've been lurking traitorously for an opportunity to reappear again. I grit my teeth and scowl as hard as I can.

\*

I don't look up from where my feet are mechanically following Hervé's long lanky stride until he grabs my arm to cross a wide boulevard and leads me down a slipway to the banks of the river. It's fully dark now, and I'm glad of this. I take a deep

shuddering breath and concentrate on the gently bobbing yellow streetlight reflections on the dark river's surface. Water is supposed to be soothing, isn't it?

It's colder down here, but it's not unbearable, and the sound of the traffic above us is strangely muted. The buildings that flank the river look other-worldly and far away in the orangey evening light, and I'm relieved to see that we're the only people walking here. It's the first time I've walked down the banks of the Seine and I'm surprised. Even though loads of people must walk past it every day, it doesn't smell nearly as bad as the Thames or the canals in Birmingham. And unlike them it's not skimmed with the rainbow swirls of spilled diesel or littered with Walkers Crisp packets, floating turds and condoms.

Hervé finally slows so that I can walk next to him, but doesn't speak. I lower my head again as we pass an elderly couple. The woman is wrapped in a massive black fur coat and she's pinching the collar of it together under her chin. She's clinging tightly to her companion's arm and they're obviously totally at home in each other's company. They nod and smile at us knowingly. They probably think that we, like them, are off for a romantic stroll. *As if.*

\*

"Bloody hell," I say. "The guy who built this must have been on crack."

"Eh?" Hervé says.

"This is one ugly fucking building."

We're the only two people on the massive sloping forecourt in front of the Pompidou Centre. Even though I've seen pictures of it in art class at school, it's still quite a shock taking it all in. It's the kind of building Willy Wonka would create if he'd been let loose with a box of Meccano after dropping a tab of bad acid. I mean, what the fuck are all those pipes and bits of metal for, anyway? I'm about to ask Hervé what he thinks, but all his attention's concentrated on trying to re-light the soggy joint he's been failing to fire up since we left the relative shelter of the river.

The drizzle is still deciding whether or not to turn into full-blown rain, and the area feels weirdly desolate. Behind us the tourist shops and cafes are shuttered and silent and, despite its massive size, the Pompidou Centre reminds me of a discarded and forgotten children's toy left out in the rain. After we'd left Notre Dame behind, the tourists and traffic had seemed to peter out into nothing. It doesn't feel like the middle of a city at all. Probably because most people have had the fucking brains to get out of the rain.

"Sage will freak when she sees this," I say without thinking.

"It will be all right, between you and Sage?" Hervé asks, giving up on the spliff and pointlessly grinding it under his trainer.

I shrug. I try and get my head around the fact that Sage may never want to see or speak to me again. I've got no idea what it would be like not to have her lurking somewhere in my life. I feel a sinking, pukey emptiness in my stomach – it's the same feeling I get after we've had one of our fights, only this time it feels oddly permanent.

I take a swig of wine from the bottle we've been sharing since we left the river. Unsurprisingly there's not much left – I've been knocking it back like a wino. I drain the last drop, trying not to gag at the thought of Hervé's spit mixed in with the last dregs. I close one eye to focus and lob the bottle into a metal bin ten yards in front of us. It crashes in with a satisfyingly loud smash that sounds too loud in the echoey cobblestoned area.

"She shoots, she scores," I say under my breath without much enthusiasm.

Hervé unscrews the top of the second bottle (only the best for Hervé) and hands it to me without a word. He walks over to a low wall to the right of the forecourt and sits down. I do the same with relief -- my legs are aching like buggery.

He immediately begins to roll a joint on his knees, his hands shaking slightly from the earlier excitement or from the chill in the air. I shiver, but not from the cold. The desolate atmosphere's still getting to me. In the distance I can just about make out the murmur of traffic, but there's another louder eerie metallic screeching sound I can't place at all. Behind us, a couple sharing an umbrella rush past the building without glancing at it or us.

Hiding his head in the collar of his jacket, Hervé manages to light the joint. He takes a deep drag, but it doesn't seem to calm him down. He's fidgeting like a little boy who needs to go to the toilet but is too afraid to ask the teacher. I know he wants to say something to me, and I know what it is. I toy with letting him squirm for a bit, but then decide to put him out of his misery.

"Hervé?"

"*Oui?*"

"Just say it."

I take another long pull of the wine and pass it to him. He hands me a cigarette.

"*Merci.*"

His eyes dart everywhere and anywhere that's not my face. His curly hair is jewelled with drizzle droplets and his eyes are bloodshot and saggy looking. Without looking at me he begins to speak.

"Okay, Vicki. It has been fun. But you and Sage must leave now. And very soon." The words come out in a rush and I have to strain to understand what he's saying. "It has been three weeks, Vicki. It is too long now."

I pause, take a drag of my cigarette and blow a smoke ring that fizzles out lamely.

"I know, Hervé," I say.

"You do?" he looks surprised. "You will leave? No hard feelings?"

"Absolutely." I turn to face him and he reluctantly meets my eyes. "Look, Hervé," I say. "I realize what you've done for us. I'm not stupid. Neither is Sage. If you want us to leave, we'll leave. Just give us twenty-four hours, and we'll be out of your hair."

"My hair? *Je ne comprends pas.*" He shakes his head to underline this and I'm splattered with raindrops that I squeamishly imagine are coated with hair oil.

"Fuck it." I sigh, taking another swig of wine "We'll go, Hervé. Me and Sage will leave your flat."

"That is excellent! *Bien!* We must celebrate, Vicki! As Sage says, you are a 'right tosser' *ne c'est pas?*"

He takes a huge relieved gob-full of wine and almost gags as it goes down the wrong way. It leaks out of the corners of his mouth and spills down the front of his denim

jacket. He's stopped looking shaky and nervous, but I can see there's something else on his mind.

"Vicki?" He concentrates on brushing away the dribbles off wine so he doesn't have to look at me. "May I ask you something else?"

"Sure," I say, "as long as it's personal." It's a line from a crap Molly Ringwald movie I've been dying to use for ages. It falls flat. Hervé just looks confused again. Fucking frogs.

"You and Sage," he begins. "I was wondering. Why is it that you do not wash? Especially down there?" he points towards my crotch.

"You what?" I hadn't expected him to take the weak 'personal question' joke so seriously. I'm squirming with embarrassment, but Hervé looks completely at ease, as if he's just asked me about the last novel I've read.

"Because Michel and Claude have also noticed that you guys are..."

"Stinky?" I say.

"*Oui.*"

"It's too damn hard to wash ourselves in the flat, and we don't have the money to pay for one of those shower places," I snap.

"Ah, I see," Hervé nods. "That's cool."

Typical. What a question! But hadn't the fawn in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* also ended up being a bit of a dead loss in the end? Didn't he get turned into stone or something?

"Doesn't really matter now, though, Hervé," I say, pulling him to his feet. "You won't have to smell our stinkiness much longer. Come. I want to see what's making that funny fucking noise." The queer metally sound is louder now that the wind has dropped somewhat, and the drizzle has also given up and gone home, as if it's picked up on Hervé's lighter mood.

This time I'm in the lead as we cross towards a deserted café to the right of the centre. Its seats are packed away for the evening, and although I know it must be bustling with life during the day, in the darkness it looks like it's been abandoned for good. The menu boards are still up, but I don't read them in case they make me feel hungry.

\*

The second bottle of wine is almost empty, and I'm feeling much warmer and less freaked out. Hervé and I are sitting on the slippery metal wall that surrounds a pond full of arty-farty surreal sculptures. They look a bit like the pretentious crap the other students at fart college used to cobble together out of papier-mâché. I'm glad my back's turned to the sculptures, though. They might be fun to look at during the daytime, but at night they look sinister and oddly scary. One of them is the source of the creepy, metallic sound: every so often it shrieks as it's tickled by the breeze or is swung by its own momentum. I wish it would shut the fuck up – it sounds like a giant breathing through a throat full of rusty nails.

Then, with no warning, I suddenly begin to feel a familiar but curious sensation: I know immediately what it is. It's what Sage terms a 'random money shot life moment.' Where, just for a second, everything becomes brighter, sharper, clearer -- as if it's caught instantaneously by the flash of a camera. I'm simultaneously aware of the eerie gravelly sound of the sculpture, the feel of the cold metal on my bum, the vomity taste of the sour cheap wine, the ache in my legs from the long walk here, and the peaty smell of Hervé's dope wafting my way. According to Sage, this means that all these tastes, smells and feelings will be caught in my memory forever, as crystal clear as if I'd just felt them.

Or, I could just be very, very pissed.

I'm about to ask Hervé if this ever happens to him, but he speaks first.

"There is an art gallery up there." He points to the top of the building.

"No shit?" I say.

"Yes shit."

He slugs back the last dregs of the wine and turns the bottle upside down. "All gone, *finis*," he says mournfully. He hands it to me and watches as I pitch it expertly into a nearby bin. This time there's no satisfying crash of breaking glass.

I look up at the metal fence directly in front of where we're sitting. It's criss-crossed with large tempting metal pipes, and through the chain-link I can make out a stairwell. There's no indication as to where the shadowy staircase leads, but it's got to go somewhere, hasn't it?

“There’s seriously an art gallery up there?” I say.

“*Oui.*”

“I’d love to see it.”

“Me too, some day.”

“I reckon we could go in and have a look now, Hervé,” I say, standing up.

“*Non*, Vicki. It is very late. The place is closed up long ago. Anyway, it is time we were getting back.”

But I’m not ready to face Sage just yet.

“Come on, Hervé. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

I do a quick recce. There’s still not a soul to be seen. I check out the buildings around us. To my right, there’s another café that looks as if it’s been abandoned, and the church behind us is similarly silent. Perfect. It would be a crime not to, wouldn’t it?

Before Hervé can stop me, I take a deep breath, clamp my fag between my teeth and run at the fence. The metal is slippery but I’m determined. I force my stiff fingers around the freezing metal and pull myself up, using the thoughtfully placed pipes as leverage. I throw one leg over the metal pole at the top. Suddenly I’m hit with one of those uncontrollable giggling fits you can’t stop. I’m stuck half over the fence, my one leg flapping like a cod on Hervé’s side as I try in vain to heft it over. I’m pretty high up and if I fall now I’ll be in serious trouble. This thought doesn’t sober me up. I’m laughing so hard I can hardly breathe and I’m forced to spit my cigarette out. It narrowly misses landing on top of his head.

“Hervé! Help! I’m stuck! Give me a boost!” I call down to him.

“Vicki!” Hervé hisses, “What are you doing? Get down!”

“Push my other leg up and over, will you?”

He takes a feverish look around, climbs onto the lowest pole and pushes my dangling leg upwards. I swing my body over and land with a *clang* behind the fence. It’s quite a drop, but I’ve somehow managed to land on both feet. Easy peasy, as things always are when I’m a bit pissed. I look up at the fence. I’d never have managed that sober.

I look through the mesh to where Hervé’s hovering and wringing his hands like a character out of a BBC Dickens mini-series.

“Come on!”

He looks up at me mournfully. “I’m not sure, Vicki...”

“What are you, a chicken?” I start doing a chicken impression, flapping my arms and clucking my tongue. But what is chicken in French? *Lapin*? No, that’s rabbit. Suddenly I have it. “*Poulet, poulet, Hervé is a poulet!*” I strut back and forth on the narrow landing.

Hervé sighs. “Okay,” he says resignedly. “*Une minute.*”

He backs up as far as he can go (narrowly avoiding tumbling backwards into the sculpture pond), fixes a determined expression to his face and takes a running jump. The sound of him crashing into the fence is immense. For a second I expect a legion of cops to come running from the alley next to the church, but when the chain-link has stopped shuddering the place is still as deserted and silent as before.

Hervé hefts himself up and over the top with a complete lack of grace, and lands with a *whoomp* besides me.

We crouch down at the base of the fence. Hervé looks at me, and we both crack up.

“I cannot believe that I am doing this!” he gasps.

“Come on,” I whisper. “Let’s go.” We start up the steps, our boots clattering on the metal rungs. For some reason I start humming *The Teddy Bears’ Picnic*. I don’t bother to keep my voice down. We’re invincible. Maybe I’m cut out for this sort of work. Vicki Evans: cat burglar.

“Meow!” I say for no reason, setting Hervé off again.

We clatter up higher until we reach a pair of glass doors. I grasp hold of the handles and shake them roughly.

“Let us in!” I yell. “We are tourists, lost in Paris, heeeellp uss!”

“Vicki! Do not shout so loudly!” Hervé splutters, then bursts out into a fresh stream of giggles.

“Look!” I point upwards. “Perhaps we can break in up there.”

The stairwell continues upwards to our right, and seems to end at a low-ceilinged concreted room that looks as if it could be a parking lot for cars belonging to midgets. We head up into the gloom. It’s pitch black and it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust.

The room seems to stretch on forever, and appears to be empty. It smells of dust and that uriney damp concrete smell.

“Booring,” I sigh. I motion Hervé to follow me deeper into the space, but then my heart plummets. Oh fuck. There’s a bright light creeping closer to where we’re hovering, and I’m sure it’s the glow of a torch.

“Get down!” I hiss, pushing and pulling Hervé back towards the steps. Shit. There’s no chance we’ll be able to leg it back to the fence and throw ourselves back over it before the light catches up to us.

Hervé looks bewildered. “Vicki? What is happening?”

“Sssssh, Hervé!” I whisper in his ear, pulling him down so that we’re crouching just below the end of the stairwell. The torch’s eye sweeps our way, and now we’re not moving around I can make out the *clop clop* sound of its owner’s footsteps. The steps falter, hesitate and then move on. For a second I think we’re going to be okay.

“Oh, *merde*,” Hervé whispers mournfully, and before I can tell him to shut up again, he lets off a fart that sounds like a shotgun blast.

“Fuck,” I say, no longer bothering to whisper. There’s not really any point.

\*

We’re in a room as bland and uninspiring as British cop shops. Same peppermint-coloured walls and posters of men with squint-eyed stubbled faces. I’m not sure what I expected, but for some reason I thought French police stations would be more *chic*. I try and catch Hervé’s eye to give him a reassuring grin, but he’s too busy panicking. I can’t really blame him. The cop shops may be the same, but the cops aren’t. Sage and I always treat British cops like Mr Plod figures of fun. It was always a piece of piss talking our way out of tricky situations that were the normal result of drunken jaunts around Birmingham or Stourbridge. But French policemen mean business. They wear guns at their hips and avoid eye contact.

A podgy moustachioed policewoman motions for me to empty my pockets onto a steel table in front of us. Next to me Hervé is doing the same. It doesn’t take me long as

all I'm carrying is my passport, a chewed rizla paper, a dusty eczema-ridden M&M and a tampon that is swollen and bulging out of its cellophane wrapper.

"*Tu est Anglais?*" The policewoman flicks through my passport and curls her lip up at my photograph. With obvious distaste she pushes my stuff around the table using the end of a biro, loudly snapping and popping her chewing gum. If I'm heading for a strip search, I hope she won't be the one doing it.

She points to my swollen lip.

"What is this?" she nods over to Hervé. "He do this? You `ave a fight?"

"Nah," I say, trying to look innocent. "I walked into a door."

She snorts in disbelief then disappears with my passport.

I check out Hervé's side of the table. Hervé's cop could be my policewoman's twin: he has the same steely-eyed stare and the same sensible haircut and moustache. Hervé's pockets seem to contain an almost never-ending stream of crap and he's nervously fumbling and dropping his stuff on the floor. The cop's eyes are beginning to glaze over. Just when it looks as if Hervé's done, he brings out another item for inspection, as if his pockets are like those clown cars in circuses. I watch in disbelief as, in addition to the pile of stuff already littering the table, he hauls out: a money clip wadded with cash (I file this for later); two packets of Camel cigarettes; a plastic lighter; an ID document; a brand-new packet of XXX strong mints; a huge bunch of keys; a notebook; a purse bizarrely embroidered with ladybirds; a breath freshener spray; a packet of rizla that the policeman picks up and inspects knowingly, and then something quite unexpected.

The policeman contorts his mouth into an expression that could possibly be a smile and points to me sneeringly.

"*C'est pour elle?*" He picks up the last item -- a jumbo packet of condoms -- and waves them suggestively in my direction.

"Ahhhhh," the policeman says, reading the label out loud, "*Avec ribbing.*"

Hervé turns the colour of Heinz tomato ketchup.

The cop leaves the room with Hervé's ID, sniggering the *ha ha ha* laugh of a cartoon character baddy. The minute the cop's out of the door, Hervé starts piling his stuff back into his pockets. I don't bother with mine. They can keep them.

“Hervé,” I say. “It’ll be fine.”

He ignores me.

“We’ll just get a caution or something, you’ll see.”

Still no response.

I reach over and grab his cigarettes and the lighter before he can sweep them back into the black hole that masquerades as his jacket pocket and swing myself up onto the table. Legs dangling, I light two cigarettes and pass one to Hervé. He takes it wordlessly. Both of us ignore the ‘no smoking’ signs.

Then my stomach drops to the floor and I almost choke on the smoke.

How could I be so fucking stupid?

They’ve got my passport!

Fuck! What if I’m wanted via Interpol? Will I be deported? The police aren’t that organized, are they? Am I being paranoid? I glance over at the door – they’ve left it open, and I wonder if I should try to make a run for it. But where would I go?

I see the SUN headlines now: *Busty businessman’s daughter in fugitive flight*. I realize I’d better tell Hervé the situation in case the shit is about to hit the fan.

“Hervé,” I say. “There’s something I need to--”

The policewoman walks back in tapping my passport on her hand: *Slap slap slap*. I stub the fag on the underside of my boot, and wait for her to slap the handcuffs on and wheel me down to the cells. But she pauses, hands the passport to me and nods to both of us. She looks over at Hervé and babbles something in French. I don’t understand any of it, but catch the word ‘general’. Hervé looks faint with relief.

“Hervé? What she say?”

“We can go,” he says.

“Eh? how come?” Relief makes me feel almost faint.

Hervé doesn’t answer me and looks at the floor. Although I know I shouldn’t push my luck (what if they change their minds?) I turn to the policewoman.

“*Pourquoi libre?*” I say to her in my rubbish French.

“Why are we letting you go?” She nods curtly at Hervé. “Ask your boyfriend. He has a very famous father.” She chuckles humourlessly. “Very well known here.”

As we leave the police station the two cops who were dealing with us are leaning nonchalantly against the charge desk in the front of the station. Hervé collects his ID book and they wave us away with knowing smirks and a cheery '*au revoir*' as if we'd been there for tea instead of being arrested for breaking and entering. Weird.

Outside it's stopped raining and the morning light is seeping through the greyish clouds. Again time seems to have disappeared. I take a deep breath of fresh morning air and it's a few seconds before I realize Hervé's striding away from the police station at a cracking pace.

I run to catch up to him.

"Hervé, what's going on? Why the fuck did they let us go?"

He stops and turns to face me, but he doesn't meet my eyes.

"They realized we were only having a little bit of fun," he says innocently, but I can tell he's lying. I think about prying further, but decide to leave it. It seems that like Potato Head, Hervé also comes from money and influence. I can't wait to tell Sage about this, but then I remember – we're not talking.

As we walk on, I check out our surroundings. I don't recognize where we are at all. Luckily Hervé seems to know where we're going. He pauses and hands me a cigarette. I stop dead as I realize there's something I've completely forgotten about. I can't believe I didn't think of it before – especially after we were arrested.

"Hervé! Shit, what did you do with your dope?" I say.

"Eh?"

"Your hash! When the police got us -- did you dump it?"

Hervé turns around and grins at me for the first time since we left the cop shop. He holds up his tightly clenched fist, swivels it like a magician doing a trick and opens it up. The pound-coin-sized block of black sits on his palm.

"You were holding it all this time?"

"*Oui*," he grins.

"Fucking hell, Hervé, you have serious balls! No wonder you looked so shit-scared!"

Hervé shrugs modestly then offers me his arm.

We stroll companionably through a series of cobbled streets, again the only people in the deserted city.

\*

My legs are really killing me as we pass the *tabac* at the end of Hervé's street. We're no longer the only people around, and a squat green street-sweeping machine hums past us, spraying the pavement with water. I breathe in the smell of the freshly wet concrete and am immediately hit with another 'random money shot life moment'. Two in one night – a record. Another thing I can't tell Sage.

Hervé stops me as we reach the Irish pub.

"Vicki, I do not think it is a good idea for you to come to the flat," he says, seriously. "You wait somewhere and I will bring Sage. *D'accord?*"

He's obviously shitting in his pants at the thought of another Sage vs Vicki bout. I don't blame him though.

"Yeah. Good thinking. I'll wait by the opera house steps. OK?"

Hervé nods agreement and turns to go. Just before he keys in the door code he turns around and kisses me gently on the cheek.

"What was that for?" I say, resisting the urge to wipe my face.

He shrugs. "*Merci*, Vicki. It was a good night."

I wonder if this is French sarcasm, or if he really means it.

\*

My eyes are gritty and scratchy from no sleep and my throat is sore again. I shift my bum around a bit to try and get the feeling back into it. I feel like I've been sitting on the cold stone steps of the opera house for hours. My Nan's always going on about how sitting on concrete gives you piles, but this is the least of my worries right now. I look up at the naked sculptures surrounding me. I'm fond of them. Their bodies are the size and shape of real women -- not false Barbie bodies with thin legs and big fake tits.

My heart lurches as I make out the familiar shapes of Hervé and Sage rounding the corner over by the café. Sage seems to be lagging behind. Maybe Hervé struggled to convince her to meet me here. There's another shock as a figure that looks like Jules crosses the road next to the Metro. I can't be absolutely sure it's him, but it's certainly the same long hair, little dog combination. I try to make myself seem smaller, less substantial, but the figure disappears down into the bowels of the Metro station. My hands are shaking. Fuck. I can cope with the fight with Sage, but I'm not sure about facing Jules again.

I don't get up from my stair as they approach.

Hervé takes his time walking towards me. Even from here I can see the dark circles under his eyes. He's obviously coming down from last night's surreal experiences. Sage is a little quicker, but she doesn't look at me directly. There's a slight cut above her eye; but I can't remember if I did that, or if it is a result of her scuffle with Bobby.

"Allo, Vicki," Hervé says, eyes frantically darting from me to Sage. He looks completely out of his depth.

"Don't worry, Hervé," Sage sighs. "We're not going to cause a scene." She pauses. "Are we, Vicks?" She doesn't look too sure about this, either.

I shake my head.

"Go back to the flat, Hervé," she continues. "We'll be along later." Her face looks tired and drawn, paler than normal. We both know this is a make-or-break situation. Especially after what I promised Hervé last night. I wonder if he's told her?

"You are sure?" he looks at me.

"*Bien sur*," I say. Hervé nods and smiles with relief.

Sage sits stiffly down next to me, and we both stare straight ahead, not speaking. We watch as Hervé makes his way down the steps and impatiently waits for the green man crossing signal. He throws us a last nervous glance over his shoulder. Even though he's way out of earshot, we allow the silence to stretch. Finally Sage takes out a packet of Camels and passes me one. She lights it with Hervé's Zippo, although she probably sees it as her lighter now. The flame flickers weakly and she has to shake it to fire up her own.

"Thanks," I mumble.

"Pleasure," she says.

“Where did you get the fags?”

“Nicked `em from Hervé, of course.”

“Nice one.”

We smoke in silence.

“You all right, then?” she says, before the silence has fully stretched into place-of-no return awkwardness.

I shrug. “Yeah.” Then, after a well placed pause: “You?”

“You know.” She stubs the last dregs of the cigarette under her boot. “Sorry about your lip, like.”

Sage never apologises. For a second, I don’t know what to say.

“No worries.” I touch the tender swelling with my tongue again. “It’s quite cool, actually.”

“Yeah. Makes you look hard.”

I smile. I can’t help it. Sage grins crookedly. I’ve finished my cigarette. She immediately passes me another, but this time the Zippo refuses to spark into life. Without getting up or asking in French, Sage cadges a light from a bemused passer-by, who is forced to climb up several steps to light our cigarettes.

Sage sighs. “Look, Chuck, we’ve got to get another place to live. Hervé’s had enough.”

“Yeah, I know. He told me last night.”

“We need a plan.”

I’m encouraged. Things look to be getting on a better footing. At least she’s said ‘we’.

“Time to do what we should of done ages ago, I suppose.” I say, my voice sounding almost normal to my ears.

“What’s that?”

“Go to the American Church. Get some sort of naff *au pair* job like Potato Head’s mom said.”

“Hervé’s given us twenty-four hours. That’s one day,” Sage says.

“Yeah, I know. We’d best get cracking, then, hadn’t we?” Even though I’ve had no sleep, I’m suddenly energized. “Look. Let’s get cleaned up. Head over there right now. You never know.”

“Yeah,” Sage grins. “We’ve done all right up till now, haven’t we, Chuck?”

“Course.” I say.

We have a plan. We’re always okay when we have a plan.

Both of us get to our feet. My legs are stiff and sore, but I couldn’t care less. As we walk down the steps, Sage nods towards the direction of Bobby’s corner.

“I see Bobby hasn’t got the balls to show up today.”

The knot in my stomach threatens to reappear. I don’t want to talk about Bobby or Jules right now.

But Sage grins wolfishly and cracks her knuckles. She winces proudly, and I notice her hands are bruised and swollen.

“I don’t think he’ll be bothering us again, do you?” she says.

“I don’t think so, no.”

“What the fuck did you and Hervé get up to last night, then, Vicks? He won’t say.”

“You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

“Try me.”

\*

By the time I’ve finished there are tears of laughter steaming down her face. She’s laughing so hard she can barely make it up the stairs to the flat.

## SAGE

### Bobby poem

*Bobby is an ugly git,  
Who made my best mate cry,  
He looks just like a pig's arsehole,  
I wish he'd bloody die.*

*His tummy's fat, he's such a twat,  
His eyes are small and brown,  
But one day soon, I'll get him back  
And bring the fucker down.*

What do you think? I wrote that last night, Gladys – thought it was quite good myself, although Vicks said I didn't get the 'scansion' quite right (whatever the fuck that is when it's at home.) Just shows she went to a POSH GIRL'S school to know BORING stuff like that.

Anyway: the best news ever. Vicki's got a JOB!!!! I know, I know I can hardly believe it myself!!! And I'm writing this in our NEW HOME!!! Sitting on our NEW BED!!! Which is a thousand times better than Hervey's stinking mattress.

Talk about cutting it fine. We were about to be thrown out on our arses. Anyway, I'll fill you in on the details, as I've got fuck all else to do at the moment.

After the BIG FIGHT DAY (also known as the BEATING UP BOBBY EXPERIENCE), me and Vicks had to get seriously sorted and FAST because Hervey had given us 24 hours before we were history at his place. I helped Vicki try and 'smarten up' a bit, which wasn't easy, let me tell you. I did her dreadlocks up in this dead neat bun, and we did our best with make-up -- luckily her big fat lip had gone down quite a bit. The main problem we had was clothes, as Vicks's wardrobe isn't exactly kosher for a job interview, consisting as it does of mostly skin tight 1950's dresses and leather stuff. And mine's not much better to be honest (but obviously I NEVER wear dresses). Anyway, we ended up 'borrowing' one of Hervey's very stiff suit jackets, which Vicki wore over a long velvet Victorian dress, and she actually looked quite square. A bit like Mary Poppins would probably look if she ever joined THE CURE or something. There wasn't much we could do about the shoe situation, but we polished up Vick's docs using spit.

We cadge some cash from Hervey before we leave (the cunt couldn't say 'NON' could he? Vicks saw how much cash he had on him after the police thing, and anyway, he owes us for us saying we'll leave so soon). All right, so we get a bit lost and have to ask a few people where the fuck to go, but eventually we end up at this American Church place. Although God knows why it's called that, because it looks like it has fuck all to do with America. Anyway, this miserable looking woman (who turns out to be FRENCH and NOT American) eventually points us towards the notice board. And hurrah! There are TONS of jobs on offer. We're the only people looking. Vicks wants to write down a whole bunch of numbers and stuff, but as I can't be arsed with all that malarkey I tell her to pick three or so that look kosher and we'll pull the notices off the board. Lots of them were advertising for work in exchange for ACCOMMODATION, which was what we wanted. The one Vicks liked the best said '10 hours of babysitting in exchange for a private room.'

So blah blah blah, to cut a long story short, Vicks phones up, and two of the three can see her for an interview in the afternoon. By this stage, we're running out of cash (well we had to buy essentials didn't we?: fags, matches, slices of pizza etc) and it takes us ages to get to the first place. It's at a big old white stone apartment block (I noticed today that nearly ALL the buildings in FROG LAND are the same FUCKING COLOUR!!!). Anyway, I wait outside while Vicks goes in. She's dead nervous, but I can see she's trying to be brave. She comes out almost straight away shaking her head. The job's a dead loss as the room was actually IN the apartment (which would mean I couldn't sneak in there without being busted), and Vicks said the woman was like a carbon copy of Potato Head's scary mother.

We sit down for a bit for a fag break, because Vicks is still a bit nervous, and then start heading to the next interview, which is like a hundred metro stops away. Vicks and I are getting dead good at finding our way around though. The place is in this area called 'Saint German' or something, which sounds dead posh. Luckily the people on the phone had given Vicks spot on directions (which was a good sign). This time Vicks was ages, and when she came out she wasn't by herself. This oldish fat lady wearing glasses and crap hair was with her. Vicks gave me a look that meant 'pretend you don't know me',

but I followed her at a distance. They went into another block of flats down the road (not as posh, but with the same James Bond coded door key thing as in Hervey's building).

When they came out, Vicks waved goodbye to the woman and started walking in the opposite direction to draw attention away from me in case I'd been noticed. I caught up with her and saw she was wearing this dead excited grin on her face.

"So?" I say, and Vicks pauses and then says, "They're fucking desperate!" The best news ever!! All she has to do is look after this kid for like two hours a day, and we get our own PRIVATE room away from the BOSSES. Vicks says she's going to pick up the keys the following day and we can move in. They're not going to pay us or anything, but what the hell.

Anyway, Hervey lets us stay another night at his place on account of the fact that he knows we're definitely leaving and says he's throwing a wicked big party to say goodbye to us. And Vicks says, "We'll still be friends though, eh Hervey?" But both me and her are thinking the same thing, which is: LIKE FUCK!

EVERYONE'S invited (except for B the B of course, although part of me WISHED he was coming so I could smack him one again). Me and Vicks get a bit drunk and when Genevieve arrives we take her aside and tell her that Hervey has really got the hots for her but is too scared to do anything about it. But she's like, "I already have a boyfriend, and he's coming here just now!" POOR OLD PERVEY – you should have seen his face when her shag turned up -- he's this dead rich guy with a yellow sweater draped over his shoulders. He looks like a bloke you'd see in an advert or something. Square face, a bit like Rob Lowe, but with dark caterpillar eyebrows that meet in the middle of his forehead. Anyway, turns out that he's not a frog but is ITALIAN!!! Me and Vicks felt a bit sorry for the old perve, as he looked dead sad but tried not to show it. Luckily Genevieve and her boyfriend (who's got a PORCHE) didn't stay long. Later on, Potato Head arrived with a bottle of champagne (funny, INNIT, Gladys how the good booze always comes out when you're saying GOODBYE to someone.) And we all got pissed and Dracula tried it on with Vicks like he knew it was his last chance and she snogged him a bit but that was all. Even Vicks has got better taste than that. We were very careful not to let HERVEY or any of the other FROGS know where OUR NEW HOME is though (for obvious reasons).

Oh, and on the way out the next morning I kicked that mad bastard neighbour shilling's door HARD for good luck. So Vicks goes and fetches the keys the next day and I wait around the corner with our bags. They're all bulgy and difficult to carry as we didn't have time to pack properly on account of both having stinking hangovers. And I didn't manage to nick as much cash from Hervey as I'd like which is a bit of a bummer. It was all a bit of an anti climax actually as when we left, Hervey, Potato Head and Dracula were out buying coffee for their hangovers and we sort of snuck away – but at least we didn't have to KISS them goodbye.

#### GOOD THINGS ABOUT THE NEW ROOM:

- 1) It has a REAL BED (we'll have to share, but so what? I'm not complaining).
- 2) It's MILES AWAY from Hervey or BOBBY.
- 3) We don't have to EVER listen to Hervey farting in his sleep again.
- 4) The sink in the room is ALMOST clean with only a FEW STAINS.
- 5) It ALSO has a dressing table and a MIRROR, which makes Vicks very happy.
- 6) There's an electric frying pan in the corner if we ever manage to get any fucking food to cook in it, that is. But I'm THINKING POSITIVE!!
- 7) IT DOESN'T SMELL OF HERVEY, HIS HASH OR HIS DIRTY CLOTHES AND IT'S ALL OURS!!!!

#### BAD THINGS

- 1) Surprise surprise it's on the very top floor.
- 2) It's only a one room jobby with a sink in it but no toilet (although, at least the COMMUNAL one down the corridor is a NORMAL one thank fuckery.)
- 3) Yet again there's no shower ANYWHERE (all I can say is that there must be fucking thousands of stinking FROGS in this country. GROSS.)

As you can see, Gladys, there are four more GOOD things than BAD, which I couldn't say about Hervey's dump AT ALL. We spent the whole of the first afternoon setting out all our stuff and making the room look PERSONAL, which was totally different from our HERVEY (or Emma-the-Bitch) experiences where we didn't even ever properly UNPACK!! Hurrah -- SOME PRIVACY AT LAST.

Oh shit. I forgot to put one VERY IMPORTANT thing on the BAD THINGS list.

The building has this caretaker woman (Vicks says she's called a CONCIERGE) who is supposed to keep tabs on who lives in the building etc, (LIKE A SPY only not as much fun or as dangerous). Vicks has named her 'Mrs Danvers', which Vicks says is the name of this total bitch in a book called 'Rebecca'. Anyway, as we were lugging our stuff up the staircase, Mrs Danvers glides out of her dark cubicle thing which is tucked away like an upright coffin next to the front door, and looks at me with DEAD suspicious eyes. I could tell straight away that she HATED me, mainly because I'm basically a SQUATTER. She knows that only Vicks is really allowed to use the room and IMMEDIATELY SUSPECTS that I'm a TRESPASSER. Vicks keeps panicking that she'll lose her job because of Mrs Danvers's BEADY EYES and then we'd be back to square 1. I'm not worried, though. Mrs Danvers has a moustache that's almost as thick and LUSH as Tom Selleck's and she only wears black clothes and headscarves which don't do anything to detract from her horrid ugly wrinkled sour puss face. She's no match for me. Ha ha!!

Better sign off now, Gladys as Vicks will be back from work and I want to do a quick tablet recce before she gets back.

PS – you won't BELIEVE the name of the kid Vicks is looking after. When she first told me I thought she'd said: "The kid is called NAUSEA!!!", but it's actually Nausicar or something. SERIOUSLY. Vicks said she almost DIED when she heard this. But apparently the kid's named after this Greek Mythology person (you know, like Hercules but a woman) as its parents are professors of antiquity or something.

How fucked up is that??

I mean, my folks wouldn't win 'Parents of the Year' or anything, but this is fucking cruel, innit?

## **VICKI: The Job Experience**

“Sage! Holy shit! What the fuck’s the time?”

There’s a brief grunting noise from beneath her sleeping bag, but that’s it.

Damn, damn, damn, I was only supposed to be having a brief ‘hangover helper’ nap before getting ready for work. I yank my legs out from where Sage has been using them as a pillow. She makes a sound like water gurgling out of a drain, but doesn’t get up.

Hands shaking, I scabble around the slippery fabric of my sleeping bag for the watch Sage nicked from Hervé. Then I remember – I tucked it into my boot before I passed out this morning so I wouldn’t lose it.

Fuck! Ten minutes to get changed *and* walk up the hill to Nausicaa’s flat!

I throw myself out of the bed and realize too late that my right leg is pins-and-needles dead (thanks to Sage’s fat head), and it won’t take my weight. There’s a sharp jarring pain as I keel over awkwardly, and for a second I’m sure I’ve broken my ankle. I clench my teeth to stop myself crying out and carefully try to put my weight on it. It hurts like buggery, but I think I can manage to hobble on it.

Okay, next mission. I slept in my clothes last night – could I possibly get away without changing? I do the armpit test (bad) then notice that my dress is spotted with vomit specks (very bad).

I absolutely stink. I’m beginning to panic because it takes at least ten minutes to walk up the hill. Sage is fast asleep again and for a second I envy her so much I could hit her. It’s not fair! She can sleep all morning if she likes, whereas I have to walk half a mile up the hill on an ankle that feels like it’s been dipped in fire. But first things first: I must do something about the wafts of alcohol and puke emanating from my clothes and skin. I can’t be late *and* reek like I’ve been out all night on a bender. Especially if I manage to come up with a reasonable excuse for my tardiness. As I stumble over to the sink and hopelessly try to lather up our one cake of soap that feels like a stone, I try to think of a believable lie.

I grab the first dress that comes to hand – I don’t bother to change my underwear or leggings -- and pull it over my head. It smells of old socks and stale deodorant, but it’s

better than the BO and vomit option. Then I remember something. I root around in the stuff Sage nicked from the weird guy last night and unearth a can of Old Spice. Better to smell like a bloke than an old sick alky, surely?

\*

“*Bonjour! Ca va?*” Nausicaa mother says without smiling as she lets me in to the apartment. I’ve never seen her smile at anyone (not even her daughter), so I know it’s nothing personal. She’s what my Nan would call a ‘hard-faced cow’. I check my watch. I’m only fifteen minutes late. The walk up the hill was bloody murder, but I’ve made quite good time, all things considered.

“*Oui. Tres bien, merci!*” I lie as cheerfully as I can manage. But it’s fairly obvious I’m not feeling fine. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the hallway mirror. A pasty-faced tramp girl with tatty dreadlocks stares back. Nausicaa mother looks at me dubiously.

“You are sure?” she says. “You do not look very well?”

“Just a touch of flu.” I pretend to cough, but I can see that she’s not convinced. For the life of me I can’t remember her first name, and I’ve left it too long to ask her what it is. I’ve been working here for two weeks as it is.

“Sorry I’m late, by the way,” I babble on. “Just couldn’t get out of bed – you know how it is when you’re feeling under the weather!”

She narrows her eyes and looks meaningfully at my dress. Typical, I’ve put it on inside out. I pull my cardigan tighter to hide the telltale outside seams and ‘dry clean only’ label. We’ve reached an impasse. I hover in the narrow hallway, wondering how to sneak past her without getting too close (I’m sure I need to keep a good three-foot radius to pass the alcohol/sweat/fag smell-test). Luckily Nausicaa saves the day. With impeccable timing she hares down the corridor and jumps up into my arms. Her mother is forced to retreat into the kitchen to avoid being hit by chubby flying legs as I whirl Nausicaa around like I always do when we see each other for the first time. My hangover shifts into fourth gear and for a scary second I think my ankle will snap.

“Vicki!” Nausicaa laughs. “*Vite! vite!*”

“*Parle Anglais!*” her mother snaps at her. One of my jobs is to improve Nausicaa’s English, which is a bit harsh in my opinion, as she’s only turned two or so.

I put Nausicaa down and allow her to drag me into the massive sitting room. Thankfully the mother stays in the kitchen.

“And today, we go to the park?” I say as cheerfully as I can muster.

“*Oui!* The park!” Nausicaa squeals with excitement, as if we don’t go there four times a week. I plonk myself down on the couch, and my ankle breathes a sigh of relief. It’s a real strain having to pretend to be able to walk normally. I imagine it swelling and turning black in my boot. Oh fuck it. It can’t be that bad, can it?

I send Nausicaa off to her room to fetch her anorak, and enjoy a few precious minutes of peace. The first time I walked into the apartment I felt like I was entering Dr Who’s Tardis. The modest front door and entrance hall imply that the flat will be about the same size as a British council house. However, the narrow corridor leading from the hall opens into a bewilderingly large number of spacious rooms. There are book-lined nooks everywhere, and several lounges pointlessly filled with battered leather couches that I’m sure no one ever sits on (how many sofas does a person need?) And although it’s as massive as Potato Head’s apartment, it’s nowhere near as clean and shiny. In fact, everything looks slightly grubby, although I’m positive Nausicaa’s folks have tons of cash. The carpets are a scummy beige colour and are dotted with mysterious swooping stains, and my few furtive searches around the apartment haven’t yet unearthed a television anywhere. Even the thousands of books that coat the walls and lurk in piles waiting to be tripped over look battered and dull. It’s as if Nausicaa’s folks have never heard of Stephen King or Philip K Dick. And while Nausicaa is blond and bubbly, and ripples and sparkles with two-year-old energy, her parents are tired and baggy – just like the tatty stuffed cat on *Bagpuss*. Nausicaa father is the sort of guy who wears corduroy beige trousers and carries a battered leather briefcase, and the mother must have an endless supply of 1970’s polo-necked jumpers. They’re nice enough, I suppose, but I’m glad they’re not my fucking parents.

“Come Nausicaa, let’s go!” I’m starting to feel sick again; the flat always smells of damp washing and old milk. I need some fresh air and I want to get out of here before I have another run-in with the mother.

As usual, everything for our little excursion has already been obsessively organised. The pushchair is waiting by the hall, and I've no doubt Nausicaa's snack is packed with precision and is waiting on the kitchen counter. The mother peers at me suspiciously through her bottle-bottom glasses as I strap Nausicaa into the chair and wheel her out of the apartment.

I'm already knackered and I haven't even started the day's chores.

\*

By the time we arrive at the park, my ankle's so sore I'm forced to shuffle along like Quasimodo, leaning my weight on the pushchair. At least the pain has taken the focus away from my hangover. As usual, the other nannies are clustered around the Jungle Gym benches like the cockney vultures in *Jungle Book*. I'm not in the mood to run the nanny gauntlet. Today I imagine that I'm Luke Skywalker and they're the bullying alien patrons of the *Star Wars* Mos Eisley Cantina. It's one of my better fantasies. Exactly like the aliens, they all stop chattering about crap as soon as I arrive and look at me as if they can't understand what the fuck I'm doing daring to gate-crash their world. I walk past them as if they don't exist.

On my first day here, a couple of the Canadian ones tried to be friendly, but the appearance of Sage the next day soon put paid to that. I think they could just about handle me, but Sage's skulking bald-headed presence totally threw them. I'm relieved that they keep their distance though. They're not my sort of people. They all wear variations on the same outfits: sensible woolly two-pieces or high-waisted Mom jeans. Some even wear little wispy scarves around their necks like they're trying to be Audrey Hepburn. Today one of them is *actually* wearing an Alice band in her boring brown bob.

I gratefully sink down into a shady bench as far away from the gaggle of nannies as possible. I free Nausicaa from her pushchair prison and she makes a bee-line for the sand-pit. The other kids scatter when she approaches, and give her a wide berth. I wave at her conspiratorially. Like me, she doesn't seem to give a shit that she's an outcast in nanny park world.

My stomach moans, and I battle with the usual desire to rip open Nausicaa's lunchbox and gobble down all the usual nutritional treats: two tiny yogurts, an apple, and a few slices of delicious processed cheese. I usually have to content myself with cadging spoonfuls of yogurt from Nausicaa as if I'm playing a game with her. Never mind. I have to go grocery shopping for the family today. Since we blew the last of Hervé's cash on fags and a six pack of crème caramels, I've been supporting us with the loose change from the Nausicaa family daily shop and what I can smuggle out of the fridge.

The nannies have reconvened over by the slide, and are studiously ignoring me. An old French man appears at the outskirts of the park. He looks like he's taking the piss out of being French: he's wearing a black beret and totally looks the part, right down to his little black moustache and the brown ciggy drooping out of his mouth. I smile at him as he passes but the nannies all stop talking and stare at him accusingly until he gets the message and wanders off. My stomach grumbles again. The food Sage and I managed to con out of the guy last night would normally have kept me going, but I had to stupidly puke it up, didn't I?

To stop myself from dozing off, I try and gauge whether last night's adventure was worth suffering today's hangover. It's a difficult call.

After work yesterday, Sage and I had wandered down to Notre Dame to do some 'work'. We still had a half-baked idea about selling some sketches – and God knows we needed to make some cash somehow.

We found an empty bench opposite the cathedral by the banks of the river, made ourselves comfortable, and had just started to scribble, when Sage nudged me.

"Tosser alert, Vicks."

I looked over. A man on the bench next to ours was staring at us and smiling. I'd noticed him when we'd first arrived. He'd tried to catch my eye earlier when I'd bummed a couple of fags off some British tourists. I knew it would only be a matter of seconds before he approached us. He was the usual calibre of the guys that tended to try and chat us up: big Potato Head moonish face, little piggy eyes and squashy stomach. All the sexy French men who look like movie stars with slip-on shoes and scarves flung nonchalantly around their necks never flirt with me or Sage. I suppose it's because they're too busy hanging out in trendy coffee bars with girls who look and dress like Genevieve.

True enough, the piggy-eyed guy wandered over with the excuse of trying to cadge a light. I immediately liberated two of his Gitanes, and he took this as an invitation to plonk himself next to me. There was the usual “What are you doing? I see you are artists” conversation as Sage blasted out her usual ‘fuck off’ vibes and I tried my best to explain that we were *literally* starving artists. It wasn’t easy, as his English was minimal, and my O level French hasn’t really improved, even though we’ve been in exile here for ages. I was hoping he’d offer to buy us some takeout, but instead, after ten minutes of intelligible babble I figured out that he was inviting us back to his place for a meal. Without consulting Sage I agreed.

“Vicks,” she hissed. “Are you off your fucking head?”

A near-identical replay of the conversation we’d had when we’d met Bobby followed. Boring beyond belief. And although I knew she’d been right about Bobby all along, I was desperate to eat something that wasn’t stale baguette or smuggled health-freak Nausicaa family groceries.

“Hang on, Sage,” I said, trying out a new strategy. “What if there’s a shower at his place? I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if we used it.” I knew Sage would probably sell her soul for a proper wash.

She was wavering. “Yeah. But no Bobby situations, okay? We’ll go there, have a shower, eat something then scarper immediately. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said, letting the guy know the good news.

We followed him back to his place. It wasn’t a palace like Potato Head’s or a one-room garret like ours, but it wasn’t too bad. It had a dining room furnished in dark brown wood, one boxy bedroom, a tiny kitchen packed full of grimy spices, and a largish bathroom that smelled vaguely of aftershave and urine.

We’d barely walked through the door when Sage became all business and immediately asked him if she could use his shower.

It took me a while to figure out that he was telling us it was out of order.

“Typical.” she said. “No wonder the ozone layer’s fucked, the amount of deodorant you frogs must use instead of washing.” She knew he wouldn’t understand her, but I reckon he got the gist. I think it was then that he finally twigged that he wasn’t heading for a torrid night of shagging or threesomes and that we were probably going to

be using him more than he'd planned to use us. I could almost see his body drooping in disappointment.

Anyway, shower or not, this didn't stop Sage locking herself in the bathroom for ages while the guy painfully struggled to flirt with me. When Sage eventually appeared she stank like the shampoo section of Boots the Chemist. While we waited for the guy to make us some salad and smelly cheese sandwiches (he obviously wasn't much of a cook), Sage dismissively flicked through his record collection.

"Toto? Chicago? Bon Jovi? You've got be fucking kidding, we're in soft rock hell."

She unearthed *Sticky Fingers* by the Stones and put it on, which immediately reminded me of the horrible old bastard in Hervé's place. But apart from these minor fuck-ups the night was quite a good laugh. Eventually the guy gave up trying to get into my pants and, sensibly realizing he wasn't going to prize us out of there before the booze had dried up, got into the swing of it. We'd flattened two bottles of wine when Sage noticed a sticky bottle of peppermint liqueur hidden behind a pile of National Geographics. I can't remember much else after this. One minute I was head-banging to Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, and the next Sage and I were running full pelt past the posh, closed cafes of St Germain, toilet rolls and nicked shampoo spilling out of Sage's jacket. For the life of me I can't remember the guy's name. But it's not as if we can ever go back there, though, is it?

We'd passed out at around four – after I'd been copiously and horribly sick under the oak tree outside our building. I'd woken at seven desperate to pee, but had to use the Toilet of Death #2 without flushing because it makes a sound like a train passing through the apartment when you pull the chain. I hadn't want to risk pissing off the other inhabitants of the floor more than we already had – I was pretty sure our earlier drunken entrance wasn't the quietest. Mind you, our neighbour situation is a weird state of affairs. As in Hervé's flat, we haven't encountered a single fellow occupant. I'm beginning to think Paris is full of vampires who never emerge into daylight. Or maybe they're all agoraphobic like my Great-Aunt Vera who hasn't set foot outside her Kent bungalow since before I was born. But when do they go out and buy their groceries?

\*

I take a furtive sip out of Nausicaa's juice bottle. It doesn't erase the putrid taste in my mouth, but I'm so thirsty I'd drink Birmingham canal water if it was on offer. Although I scrubbed my teeth and tongue this morning I'm positive I can still taste faint traces of the peppermint stuff in my mouth. I stick my tongue out as far as I can to see if it's green. One of the nannies sees me doing this and nudges a clone next to her. Both giggle girlishly, their hands covering their mouths. I shoot them a dead eye.

I check Hervé's watch -- time to go. I grab Nausicaa's attention and lure her over to me with the temptation of her lunchbox, steeling myself for our exit.

Most of the time Nausicaa's a happy little kid, always eager for hugs and 'airplane' rides, but when it's time to leave the park she becomes a carbon copy of the possessed girl from *The Exorcist*. Every day I have to set my face in a stony expression and carry her bodily out of there. This isn't easy as she somehow makes her body go as rigid as an ironing board, screaming like a banshee.

The other nannies smugly gather together as I ready myself to go. They have the air of a nasty theatre audience that can't wait for the actor to fuck up his lines. I'm pretty sure that the spectacle of me and Nausicaa leaving the park could be the highlight of their day. They never offer to help. Mind you, Sage is a dead loss when it comes to kids as well. She treats Nausicaa and the other kids in the park with suspicion -- as if they're alien beings that can't be trusted.

But today I have a plan. Distracting Nausicaa with her lunchbox and juice bottle, I strap her into the pushchair, and by the time she's realized what's happened, I've wheeled her past the disappointed nanny brigade and out of the park. Despite this triumph, I'm totally finished and my hangover (which had been cruising along for a while in second gear), picks up a notch. Crap on toast. I still have to get to the chemist (jumbo bag of Pampers and bum cream), the *boulangerie* (two baguettes), and the *butcherie* (salami and roast beef) before I dump my cargo off at her flat. Fuck.

\*

When I let myself back into our room after hobbling up the stairs like a broken android, Sage is still fast asleep, her dark head barely visible beneath the roll of her sleeping bag. Again I feel a surge of irritation. The least she could have done was fucking well have got her lazy arse out of bed and met me at the park. I don't bother keeping the noise down as I slam my way around the room, but I'd have more luck waking the dead. I sit down heavily on my end of the bed, and, bracing myself for a horrible sight, take off my boot. Not fair! My ankle looks exactly the same. I was hoping for a big black bruise or a massive swelling. I hate it when things that feel like agony look pathetic. All that suffering for nothing.

I'm dying to lie down and give way to sleep, but there's something else I have to take care of first.

It's Sage's birthday tomorrow. I would never have known this if she hadn't let it slip last night when we were pissed. I've no idea how she keeps track of the date. I'd be hard pressed to say what month it is. I was hoping to slick some cash out of the Nausicaa grocery fund, but the bastards had cunningly given me almost the exact change. My last resort was to attempt to nick a bottle of vodka from the miserly-stocked liquor cabinet (and then fill it with water and replace it), but the mother had shadowed me like a clingon when I'd returned to the flat. All I could manage food-wise was two yogurts that I slicked out of the fridge while I was rinsing out Nausicaa's juice bottle. Although the temptation to scarf them down immediately is enormous, I push them under the bed. Bugger. I have to get Sage some sort of gift even if she doesn't deserve one for being an inconsiderate bitch-face. But, what do you get the girl who has nothing? At home, Sage was always making stuff: painting jackets, customising waistcoats, sewing the funny little colourful pixie hats she likes to wear.

I glance around the room for inspiration. Could I wrap up one of the things Sage nicked from the guy last night and pass it off as something I've 'bought' or nicked? Doubtful: she'd remember in minute detail what she'd slicked off him last night. She's good like that. I look over to where my sketch pad lies open and crumpled underneath my vomity dress. I could always do a drawing for her.

Then, suddenly, I have a better idea.

## **'The Apartments of Death': a birthday story for Sage**

**By Vicki Evans.**

*The two girls woke up in pitch-black darkness. All was as quiet as an abandoned cemetery. Marjoram, a short, but strong looking attractive girl with brunette hair, lit a cigarette briefly and passed one to her friend, Tallulah, who was taller and blonder, but not necessarily more attractive despite these obvious assets.*

*"It's very quiet, isn't it," said Marjoram (Marge for short), abruptly.*

*"Yes, what could be going on? And why is it so dark?" her friend replied, quickly. The girls tried the light switch in the little room, but it was as dead as a doornail.*

*"Don't worry," said Marge, who was often called the strong one of the two friends. "It's probably just a fuse."*

*Although they were English, both girls had run away to France. They were now living in a big block of flats somewhere in Paris that belonged to a French guy called Harvey who they'd met while out buying pain au chocolat one day. Both were running away from cruel parents and the frequent misunderstandings that arose all the time because they were complex and no one understood them at all.*

*"That's strange," said Marge, a note of foreboding in her voice. "Harvey isn't here."*

*"That is strange," echoed Tallulah. "What shall we do?" she fretted, worriedly.*

*"We should go and look to see if we can find a fuse box in one of the other apartments," countered Marge, who was always queerly practical in these types of situations.*

*There were lots of other flats in the big old grey marble nineteenth century six story building in which the girls and Harvey lived, but the doors were always locked, although sometimes the two friends thought they could hear rumbling sounds from within.*

*"We'd better get dressed first," said Tallulah. It was true; they should get dressed. Both were still in their pyjamas, and there was no telling who or what they'd bump into.*

*Tallulah put on a beautiful green taffeta dress that was from the nineteen-fifties and an orange angora scarf and some designer boots that didn't match but looked fine anyway.*

*Marge wore a pair of pink dungarees and a fetching but peculiar straw hat.*

*They gave each other the thumbs up and entered into the dark and down the stairs to the first floor. But then they stopped in amazement.*

*The door to the first apartment had been jimmied open.*

*"What should we do?" asked Tallulah, her lip trembling querulously.*

*"We'd better go in. This darkness is getting me down," Marge replied decisively.*

*Carefully and not a bit gingerly Marge gently pushed open the door to the first apartment, which opened smoothly without a sound. The two girls crept in through the doorway. All was as dark as the chocolate on a Terry's Chocolate Orange, but that was where the similarity ended. This was trouble. Both girls could sense it as if they had invisible built-in radar.*

*"Can you smell that?" Marge said, worriedly, which was not like her.*

*"Yeah," Her friend replied. "It smells very, very familiar. Like when you go into a butcher's shop and the meat's a bit old and has gone off a bit."*

*Luckily, while Marge was feeling her way around the apartment she reached out and touched something hard, which turned out to be a twenty-four carrot solid silver antique*

carved candle holder. Quickly and decisively she lit the candle. Both girls let out a piercing scream that would have scared the people in the apartment to death if it wasn't for the sad fact that they were already dead and scattered about like body part confetti. "Fucking hell!" exclaimed Tallulah which was strange for her as she didn't normally swear having been nicely brought up. She ran a trembling hand through her long gleaming blond hair.

"You got that right," Marge retorted, wittily, neatly avoiding stepping on a child's severed head. "Something's happened here. Something bad."

Tallulah burst into tears.

"We have to get out of here," she sobbed.

Carefully carrying the candle, Marge and Tallulah raced out of the room, jumping over body parts like Daley Thompson over hurdles.

They raced down the stairs to the next floor. The door on the next floor was also eerily swinging open and creaking on its hinges exactly like doors do in the horror movies the girls often enjoyed watching.

"What should we do?" said Tallulah again, more worriedly this time. She was shaking with fear like a jelly fish in the jaws of a shark.

"We had better go and look," Marge expostulated grimly.

"No!" screamed her friend exuberantly. "Haven't you ever seen 'Halloween', that movie with the guy in the mask? We can't go in there and look. Let's just get out of here and call the cops or something."

"Just one look," Marge pleaded coyly. "What if someone's alive in there? There might be a reward if we save them!"

"OK," Tallulah said. But her voice sounded completely reluctant.

"Don't be afraid," Marge said reassuringly. "I know aikido – the Japanese art of killing. You'll be safe with me."

But Tallulah wasn't so sure. She knew that Marge had only had three aikido lessons, and she suspected that whoever had chopped the people in the flat up like they were pieces of lamb for stew must be very strong indeed. But, she also knew that her friend, though short and squat, was also very strong and quick to anger, so she followed her into the flat.

Both girls looked with abject horror on the floor of the expensively decorated apartment. There was a body lying there in amongst the scattered antiques. It was twitching and jumping like a crap break-dancer.

Suddenly it stopped.

Marge knelt down and felt for a pulse. She closed the corpse's eyes.

"Is he deceased?" Tallulah said, in a distressed manner.

"He is now," said Marge with finality. "You were right, let's run! Whoever did this could still be here!"

The two girls ran down the rest of the flights of stairs screaming at the top of their voices. But when they got to the bottom they found that the front door was nailed shut and they couldn't get outside to safety!!!

They decided to run back upstairs to the top floor where they lived and lock themselves in.

It was scary walking up the stairs but they tried to be brave and not freak out or anything.

*But there was a problem. Tallulah needed to wee quite desperately, as she had drunk a large amount of coffee earlier.*

*“Be quick, though!” Marge admonished.*

*Tallulah opened the Toilet of Death’s door and found out that that was indeed an apt name for the lavatory. For, his head stuck down the pan and his legs high in the air was their neighbour, a cruel old man who had been thoughtlessly rude to the pair on a number of occasions.*

*“It looks as if someone’s tried to flush him away!” squealed Tallulah.*

*“Good riddance,” cackled Marge. “Quick, let’s lock ourselves in!”*

*They dived into the flat and shut the door.*

*“Everyone’s dead!” Tallulah cried. “You know what this means, don’t you?”*

*“They’ll need a lot of body bags?”*

*“No! it must be Harvey who’s doing this! Think about it – the lights going off, everyone dead, Harvey missing!”*

*“Of course!” cried Marge. “I always thought he was a bit weird.”*

*But then Tallulah made a fatal mistake. She reached over to open the wardrobe and jumped back as a body fell out.*

*It was Harvey! As dead and as bloody as Jamie Lee Curtis’s friends in the aforementioned ‘Halloween’ movie!*

*“Oh no!” Tallulah cried. “But hang on a sec. If Harvey’s not the killer, who could it be...?”*

*But she didn’t get a chance to finish the question*

*“Har har!” cried Marge fiendishly, brandishing a knife she’d found somewhere. “Aikido isn’t the only art of death I know how to use!”*

The end

## SAGE

### Mrs Danvers Poem

*She lurks on the stair  
Trespassers beware  
She has lots of hair  
On her top lip.*

Maybe I should be a poet or a writer or something instead of being a sculptor or my latest idea: joining the FBI. Vicks said that the Mrs Danvers poem sounds a bit like a Japanese poem thingy called a 'haiku', which sounds quite intellectual and INTELLIGENT.

Anyway...Happy birthday to me....

For two days ago, actually.

So, I know what you're wondering: What's happened since then? Well, the answer is ...

A LOT, actually Gladys!!

Okay, it's official. Me and Vicks (especially me) are now bonefide B&E experts and drug dealers.

And although I really want to get straight to the juicy bits, I'll start at the beginning...

So the last time I wrote to you Gladys, I was age seventeen. Now I'm officially an Adult!!! Yay! Which means absolutely NOTHING as I've been drinking in pubs since I was fourteen. And the French couldn't give a toss how old you are anyway. I mean they give their kids wine and shit from like age four or something. It's compulsory to be an alky if you're a FROG. Normally I hate birthdays. It's usually the folks and my GOOD sister Karen and her CRAP perve of a husband PETE all going out for a SHIT meal which always ends in me and PETE or me and dad fighting about something STUPID like Enoch Powell or something. This year is totally different. Vick's has nicked two of Nausicaa's yogurts (the ones that taste a little bit like sweetened snot), so we have a small, but touching birthday breakfast in bed. Then, with a flourish, she whips out my present. Which is a story she's written for me!! Well, obviously I'd have preferred a packet of Rothmans and a pint, but this was pretty cool. Fucking cool actually. By the

end of the story I was almost crying with laughter. (Vicks looked a bit pissed off, though. I'm not sure she meant it to be funny).

Vicks didn't need to work that day, so we decided to go for a BIRTHDAY walk to the Pompidou Centre so that Vicks could show me these sculptures she's always going on about. She was right, they were crap. The Pompidou Centre was cool though. And guess what??? We found out that anyone can go in and use the music library there FOR FREE. Vicks was dead pleased and we went down and listened to some LPs. And guess what I listened to? Ha ha, Pink Floyd of all things.

Then we explored for a bit.

It was torture wandering around the Latin Quarter. Everywhere you look there are these little open booths selling big shiny kebabs with these huge blown up photos of their food outside. It was like they were saying "Look at all this food that YOU CAN'T EAT OR BUY VICKI AND SAGE". And they have these people outside who try and lure customers into the restaurants. But they didn't try and lure us in. Oh no. It was like they had X-ray vision into our wallets and knew we didn't have any money to spend on their food which was probably SHIT anyway.

We ended up on a bench outside this Chinese take-away place. Although it wasn't a PROPER Chinese take-away as it was FRENCH and just looked like a shop that sold upside down OLD DRIED looking ducks.

To torture ourselves we made a list of what we'd like to eat if we EVER got our hands on any cash. This was quite fun and interesting, especially as most of the things we chose contained meat items, and we'd only stopped being vegetarians because of BOBBY THE BASTARD.

### **Vicks's food list:**

Marks and Spencers Chicken Tikka Masala.

Pancakes on Pancake Day.

Big family roast lunch (with Yorkshire pudding and no family arguments).

Treacle tart and double cream..

Baked sausages (so the skin goes all hard and chewy).

Jellied eels (yuk!!).

**Me:**

Egg on toast.

Fish and chips.

Take-out curry of ANY sort from ANY curry house (except for the one near the Wolverhampton train station, as they found traces of sperm in their chicken korma when it was tested by the health inspectors).

Kentucky thighs and drumsticks and a side order of coleslaw.

As we were TORTURING ourselves with the list of stuff we couldn't have, this guy and his girlfriend came out of the Chinese takeaway. He was a fat-arse and was shoving this massive dumpling thing into his mouth. His girlfriend was nibbling at hers on account of the fact that she was probably anorexic -- well she had arms like sticks and those horrid bandy bendy legs anorexics have (WHY??? Do they REALLY think it looks NICE???). Anyway, I REALLY hope me and Vicks don't end up looking like her. Unlike her we WANT to eat, we're just too POOR to do so.

I could tell that fat-arse and his rat-faced girlfriend weren't really enjoying their food and I nudged Vicks. She knew immediately what was up, and both of us STARED at them WILLING them to put their leftovers in the bin next to our bench. It worked -- they threw their dumpling things away and as soon they'd walked away a bit I dived into the bin and grabbed the food. But the guy turned around just as we were doing this and looked at us with this dead disgusted and SUPERIOR look on his fat face. I'm like, "What the fuck you looking at??" so he just shook his head and left. Even though me and Vicks were starving, I could see why they'd ditched the dumplings -- they were all cold and woolly tasting. NOT VERY PLEASANT GLADYS, but better than a kick up the arse.

So we decide to go back to the room. As usual tries to sneak in to avoid Mrs Danvers but no such luck. The bitch was there in her corner, sitting on a hard chair and knitting something with rough brown wool. She gave me her usual GLARE when I walked past. I said I hoped she was knitting a balaclava to hide her fucking UGLY face, and Vicks laughed. But I could tell Vicks was quite depressed that we hadn't had any food or booze for my birthday. I wasn't really that bothered to be honest -- it was far better than the naff birthdays I usually have.

But I knew a plan had to be made RE the food situation.

And guess what, Gladys, I made one. BY MYSELF

I waited till Vicks was fast asleep (this took ages as she always reads for like HOURS before she goes to sleep). Then, careful not to wake her, I snuck out of the apartment building and started walking.

Can you guess where I was going?

All right, I did get a bit lost, but not too badly as I'm dead good at directions and Paris is only about the size of Birmingham. It only took me about two hours or so (NOT really sure as forgot to take the stolen watch) to get to OPERA. Luckily the place was deserted, which was dead weird, because this is a city, isn't it. There are more people milling around Stourbridge town centre at 3 a.m. (hooligans and piss-heads and stuff) and Stourbridge is TINY compared to FROGLAND. Vicks had told me how quiet it was when she and Hervey did all that breaking into the Pompidou Centre gubbins, but I hadn't believed her to be honest. (NOTE: Does this mean FROGS ARE SMELLY and BORING???) Vicks says that Paris late at night is the perfect setting for a George R Romero movie – and I could totally picture a crowd of Parisian zombies shambolically staggering down past the Opera house.

So obviously you now know I was going to Hervey's place, Gladys...

For a panicky second, I couldn't get the door to Hervey's building to open, and then I realized I'd tapped in the wrong code! I'd used the code to our new dump!! Thank fuck, though, that FROGS can't be bothered to use keys. Maybe because they lose them all the time. (Maybe FROGS are forgetful AS WELL as smelly and boring???)

When I got inside the hash smell was as strong as ever. I could hear every step I made on the stairs as everything was dead quiet – what with the Irish pub being closed and the NON-EXISTENT neighbours probably doing whatever the fuck it is they do early in the morning, polishing their antiques or whatever. It was so fucking weird being back. I didn't dare turn on any of the lights. Even though Vicks and me had only left there a few weeks ago, it felt like forever, and I expected everything to have changed. You know, like maybe Hervey had left and run off with Genevieve or some such shite (although I doubted it, him being such a limp dick tosser and Genevieve having a very rich quite

sexy boyfriend). Plus, I had visions of Vick's fucking hilarious story all the time I was climbing up that creepy staircase. Body parts and the horrible old nutter with his head wedged in the toilet.

My heart was beating as fast as fuck as I reached Hervey's door, especially as I realized I hadn't thought of a cover story (which you always need in these types of SITUATIONS in the eventuality of being BUSTED).

But then, what WOULD I say if Hervey and probably Potato Head and Dracula woke up when I snuck in?: "I've missed you?" I think not. And it's not as if I could say we'd forgotten anything and I'd arrived to collect it. Quite the opposite in fact. We'd 'borrowed' quite a few things that could come in handy when we'd left (Hervey's knife, his lighter, the interview jacket, some clean socks, some rizla papers, etc). Anyway, I carefully slid Vicks's bank card in the door crack and unlocked the latch. It sounded like the noisiest thing in the world, but there was no going back at that point, Gladys. I stepped into the room and there they all were, snoring and farting and sleeping like corpses. Dracula was sprawled out on OUR BED. All three had their mouths open and Hervey was scratching his balls in his sleep.

And did I feel the tiniest bit guilty for what I was about to do, Gladys?

Did I FUCK.

It was dark in the room, but my eyes adjusted pretty quick, and I knew where everything was, remember. I'd probably spent more hours in the room than the stinking sink in the corner. The place was the usual dump. I grabbed Hervey's lump of hash off the floor next to his bed, but I couldn't see his wallet anywhere!!! Then, GUESS WHAT?! Potato Head sat up, opened his eyes and looked straight at me!! I almost had a heart attack. But then, he just grunted, turned over and fell back to sleep. He must've thought I was a fucking dream or something! Hilarious!!!! I was about to leave, but then I saw Hervey's satchel over by the door. I was going to take it but decided not to – he LOVES that satchel and it would be cruel. But I couldn't resist having a look inside it. Wish I hadn't, though: three porno mags with pics of HUGE fat lesbians doing vile stuff to each other, and four packets of condoms. IS EVERYONE IN FRANCE A PERVERT????

As I was sneaking out, the mad old shilling from next door poked his head out of his door. We looked at each other for a few seconds, and then I did something fucking

hilarious. I put my finger to my lips and did like a slicing motion across my throat – you know, meaning “if you say anything you’re dead”, but I did it in a very cool Bruce Lee type of fashion. His eyes almost popped out of his skull, and he shrank back into his room like some sort of horrible turtle slithering back into its shell.

By this stage I didn’t think there was any point in being quiet, so I ran down the stairs as fast as I could.

Anyway, I was just thinking about how there wouldn’t be any WITNESSES when I got outside because there was still no one around, when a van pulls up outside the Irish pub. This guy gets out and unloads a cardboard box full of fruit and veg and just leaves it outside the pub’s door. I hid in the doorway, but even if he did see me, he couldn’t have given less of a shit if you ask me. I thought ‘what the hell’ and picked the box up to take with me (although I ditched most of the `tatoes on account of the weight factor.)

On the way back there were a few more people about, and some of them were dead polite and nodded and said ‘*bonjour*’ when I passed them. They probably thought I was a fruit delivery person or something which is fucking hilarious!!

Hold on, need a break – my hand’s hurting.

Okay. Where was I?

Vicks was still asleep when I got in – she slept through the whole adventure!!! She was completely impressed when I’d told her what I’d done though, and was so excited she gave me a BIG HUG!! She NEVER does that and it kind of made the whole trip worth it. Anyway, we just fell on the fruit and ate it in about three seconds and then we even scoffed down the vegetables (even the saved potatoes) without cooking them (which was a bit of a thick thing to do). But there’s a nasty twist to this tale I’m afraid, Gladys. Normally I’d try to save your sensibilities, but I can’t this time. You see, both me and Vicks had been horribly constipated on account of mostly eating rice and crap at Hervey’s, and after we’d scarfed down all that fruit, things started to happen. Vicks was in the loo for like an hour, and when she came out she was dead white. It wasn’t pretty I can tell you. I hope we didn’t block it up. Luckily we still had some of the nicked toilet paper handy.

Anyway, after Vicks had finished her morning babysitting the brat, we walked down to the Latin Quarter to try and sell Hervey's black. I'd cut little chunks of it into tiny pieces that we were going to say were eighths and wrapped them in little swatches of silver foil (from the stolen yogurts) so that we'd look PROFESSIONAL. OBVIOUSLY both of us were shitting ourselves – we've NEVER been drug dealers believe it or not. AND we had absolutely no idea what you were supposed to do. I mean, you can't just walk up to anyone on the street and say, "hey you want to buy some drugs?" (even if we did know what that was in French). But BIG SURPRISE!! IT WAS A PIECE OF PISS!! Vicks spotted this load of posh yar yar English schoolboys sitting at this outside café and we wandered past them a couple of times. Then Vicks said "Oh fuck it", walked up to one of them and said, "Hey, you want to buy some black?" And the kid almost fell off his chair with eagerness. It was that easy after all. They were dead loaded. We sold them nearly half our stash, (as WELL as the three 'eighths' that were actually just empty pieces of wrapped up foil). We made 300 francs! Fucking wicked!!!

On the way home we stopped off at the little café and bought:

1 packet of fags (Lucky Strikes, Vicks's fave).  
1 packet of crème caramels (mostly for Vicks).  
1 loaf of bread (But NOT a baguette a sliced white loaf!!!).  
1 packet of baby bel cheeses.  
1 packet of strawberry jelly powder (this was free – I nicked it).  
Hurrah!  
RESULT!!!

## **VICKI: The Sid and Nancy Experience**

Where the hell's Sage?

I crane my neck to try and spot her distinctive shape in the crowds around the Pompidou Centre, but she's no where to be seen. The bench on which she normally waits for me after I've finished work is occupied by a couple of podgy tourists wrestling with a fold-out map. I'm not too worried, though. She's probably just popped to the loo or something.

I decide to head down to the centre and meet her outside the toilets on the ground floor. The Pompidou forecourt is teeming with tourists, and I have to bob and weave around the groups clustered in front of the crap clown and mime shows.

At first I don't recognise her.

She's standing on the outskirts of a crowd of people watching a badly made-up Pierrot creating phallic-shaped balloon animals. She's talking animatedly with two scruffy-looking guys, and seems to be laughing her head off at something one of them is saying. Weird. Sage never does this. She's so afraid of becoming involved with 'Bobby the Bastard clones' as she calls them that most people who approach us get the silent treatment.

She spots me before I can call out to her, and waves me over.

"Vicks! Come and meet two travelling musicians!"

That would explain it then. For some reason Sage has always had a soft spot for musicians. But it's still a major U-turn from her usual anti-social 'fuck off everyone' behaviour. I quickly check out the guys as I wander down the slope. They look like polar opposites. The shorter one has blond dreads and a massive stainless steel ring through his nose. The other guy is a full head taller, has close-cropped hair (like Paul Weller's) and is swathed in an outsize army parka, despite the fact that he must be bloody boiling. Two battered guitar cases lie at their feet. They're bouncing a bottle of red wine between themselves.

"All right?" I say, nodding to the two guys. They both immediately give me the once-over.

This normally annoys Sage, but she simply grabs the bottle from the tall one and passes it to me. I take a large swallow, trying not to gag. The wine is as foul and cheap as the gut rot Hervé used to feed us.

“Vicks, this is Scotty and Irish,” Sage is saying.

“No prizes for guessing where you two come from then,” I say.

“Yep,” Sage says before they can speak. “They really do come from Scotland and Ireland. *Seriously.*” She rolls her eyes. I’m glad to see she hasn’t changed everything about her personality.

“At least you can’t forget your roots!” I say to the guys.

The dreadlocked one grins at me. I try not to stare. His teeth look as if they’ve never seen a toothbrush. They’re coated with something that resembles gungy yellowish moss.

“Pleased to meet yer,” he says in a thick Irish accent, holding out a grubby hand and squeezing mine limply. His fingernails are lined with black ingrained dirt. The tall guy nods at me without changing his expression, and doesn’t offer to shake hands.

“I said we’d do some bottling for them,” Sage says.

“Ah,” I say. “Er... What the fuck is bottling?”

The Irish guy grins at me, and again I get another view of the world’s most disgusting teeth. “You know, collectin’ the money like, when we play,” he says.

“Okay. Sounds good.” I shrug and take another glug of the gag-inducing wine. “What kind of music you play then?” I ask, looking at Scotty to see if he’ll answer.

“Wait and see,” Irish winks at me. “I think yer gurner like it.”

I’m about to ask them what they’re doing in Paris, when a harsh yapping and yelping sound grabs my attention. It’s coming from the bench a few feet away from the one Sage and I normally think of as our own. Several of the scary French cops are approaching a group of tramps, and a little dog attached to its tramp owner by a raggedy piece of string is having what Nan calls a ‘conniption fit’ -- barking its head off and trying to strain at the makeshift lead so that it can snap at the cops’ ankles. The tramps are always hanging around the benches opposite the centre, sharing bottles of wine and lounging around. Sage and I generally give them a wide berth, but they’ve never approached us for fags or freebies, so we tend to just ignore them. But today, an older,

plump-looking tramp standing on the outskirts of the group catches my eye and waves a greeting at me. I find myself waving back.

“Know ‘em, do yer?” Irish says.

“Nah. Just seen them around.”

“Best be moving on,” Scotty nods towards the police. His voice is as gravelly and mournful as his expression.

“Aye, let’s find us a spot.” Irish says, picking up his guitar.

“Where to, Irish?” Scotty says.

“What about the Metro?” I suggest. “There are usually tons of buskers down there.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the fookin’ problem. There’s a rota.” Irish screws a soggy roll-up into the corner of his mouth.

“A what?”

“Like in the Underground. Yer get allocated a spot. If yer play in someone else’s pitch when you’re not supposed to, yer get the fookin’ shite knocked out of yer.”

“Fuck. Seriously?”

“Aye, they’ve practically got a fookin’ union for fookin’ buskers, ‘aven’t they, Scotty?”

“Aye. Same as on the Underground,” Scotty says, voice dripping with deep sadness. “You get chased out of there if yous haven’t got a booking.” He sounds exactly like a Scottish version of Eeyore the depressed donkey in *Winnie the Pooh*. God, I hope he isn’t the vocalist.

“Best we find a nice busy café around here, and you goirls can collect the money,” Irish says. The two of them stride off ahead. Sage shrugs and we follow behind.

“What the fuck’s going on, then Sage?” I whisper when the buskers are out of ear-shot. I’m secretly delighted not to be the one who’s in the wrong for once.

“Bummed a fag off them and got talking,” she says. “They seem all right.”

“Yeah. But did you see the Irish guy’s teeth?”

“Fuck, yeah. He won’t be doing any Colgate adverts, that’s for sure.” Sage and I snigger and catch up with them.

“Let’s try here, then,” Irish says. He’s settled on a café-lined side-street, parallel to the centre. They plonk their guitars down in front of a large ornamental pond with a burping fountain in the middle of it. The tourists sitting on the pond’s wall near to us immediately gather their stuff together and wander off.

“What do you want us to do, then?” I ask Irish.

Scotty pulls a moth-eaten black trilby out of his case and passes it to me.

“Use this,” he says. While we’re playing, like.”

“Eh?”

Sage rolls her eyes.

“Duh. Use it to collect the cash, thicko.”

“Fuck off, Sage.”

“Now, now, goirls,” Irish winks at us.

As they only have one ‘busker’s hat’, Sage pulls her pixie hat off her head. I’m always amazed at how naked she looks without her headgear. Her thick black hair has grown out a fair bit since we were at Hervé’s, and she no longer looks like an androgynous skinhead. I like her hair longer, but would never dare say so to her. She’s proud of what she calls her ‘lack of vanity issues.’

Sage and I hover around nervously while Scotty and Irish make a bit of a show of tuning up. The people sitting in the café opposite start to take an interest; craning their necks and peering over.

“Fuck, Sage,” I whisper. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Me neither,” she says, then hiccups. It looks as if she’s had more wine than just the odd few sips. She’s got the right idea – alcohol will probably make the whole asking-people-for-money thing easier. I grab the bottle of wine and take three large gulps, willing myself not to gag. A group of old German tourists glance at me in disgust as they pass. Fuck them. Who are they to judge me? At least I’ve got the decency not to wear fucking socks under sandals.

Scotty and Irish suddenly launch into a barely recognizable Velvet Underground and Niko number. I’m not much of a musician, but I’ve always thought a bag of hammers could sing better than Niko. But Scotty (who *is* the vocalist, after all) makes her sound like Debby Harry. His voice is completely lifeless and as far as I can tell, is barely in

tune. Every word sounds like doom personified. Sage looks at me and opens her eyes wide.

“Shall we scarper?” I whisper. “This is dire beyond belief!”

“Nah. Come on. I dare you to ask that fat fuck over there for cash.” She nods over to where a large touristy type man is approaching, his face buried in a gynomous ice-cream.

Thank God for the wine I’ve just plugged back.

The fat guy doesn’t even look up as I approach him; his ice-cream’s obviously holding all of his attention.

“*Monnaie pour la music monsieur!*” I trot out, smiling as sweetly as I can.

He looks at me as if I’m off my head; then, as if he’s not sure quite what’s expected of him, wordlessly fumbles in his pockets. He thrusts a fistful of coins into the hat and stalks off at top speed. He’s probably never walked so fast in his life.

I grin in triumph and hold the hat aloft. Irish catches my eye and winks. Sage shakes her head and snorts.

“Fair play, Vicks!” she says.

“Now it’s my turn,” I say to her, scanning the passers-by for a suitable victim for her.

\*

The whole bottling experience is embarrassing and exhilarating at the same time. Although Sage and I have no problem bumming fags off strangers, money is a whole different ballgame. Asking a stranger for cash (especially when you’re asking them for money for such utterly crap music) is almost like going out in public without any clothes on. And after the fat guy’s reluctant bunch of centimes, our luck seems to have dried up. The people I approach refuse to meet my eyes, shake their heads in irritation, or shrug, grin ruefully and wander past. Sage seems to be getting much the same response, and looks more self-conscious than I’ve ever seen her.

Then, just as I'm thinking our bottling luck has dried up, I have a run of three ten franc coins. This coincides with Scotty pausing before segueing into a painfully flat rendition of *Sweet Jane*. Maybe if they *stop* playing people will give us money.

I don't say this out loud.

The song's verses seem to go on and on endlessly. And, as Scotty's Lou Reed impersonation drones to its nasally end, a couple of scammy old tramps sitting nearby on the pond's wall clap and whoop.

"Giz another one, mate," one of the tramps slurs in a Manchester accent. English tramps: that explains the lack of musical taste. I silently will the buskers to call it a day. The owner of the rapidly-emptying café opposite isn't looking too charmed, and I haven't yet dared to approach anyone sitting outside it, although Irish keeps nodding over to them meaningfully.

Sage and I give up and sit on the wall as far away from the rowdy tramps as we can manage. No one else gives us any more cash, apart from a furtively hurrying tone-deaf passer-by who apologetically plops a bunch of centimes into the hat. Probably getting rid of loose change. Finally, Scotty and Irish run out of steam without bringing a heart-rendingly awful version of *Hotel California* to its rightful (or wrongful) conclusion. The café customers seem to palpably relax.

"Wotcha think, then, goirls?" Irish says, proudly, as he packs away his guitar. "Not bad, eh?"

"Great!" I lie. I nudge Sage. "What did *you* think, Sage?"

"Can I have one of your roll-ups?" she says to Scotty, avoiding the question.

\*

With our meagre earnings (fifty francs and some brown coins), the four of us make a beeline for the nearest corner café and buy a couple of baguettes, some cheese that stinks like my brother's damp trainers after he's played a hundred matches of soccer, and more crappy wine. I'm disappointed that noone suggests splurging on a packet of fags (at ten francs), but there's always Scotty's roll-ups.

The tramps and their furious little dog are no where to be seen as we flop down on our bench in front of the centre. I scan the area for any sign of the cops, but they've also disappeared. Sage makes a show of sharing out the bread and sloppy cheese equally.

"Where are you staying?" I ask Irish, my mouth full of the bread and cheese mixture. Too late I realize my mistake. Shit. I deliberately don't look over at Sage. I've already decided I don't fancy either of the the buskers, though. Irish because of his astonishingly bad mouth hygiene and Scotty because of his weird droning personality and creepy looks.

The buskers look at each other and shrug.

"Dunno," Irish says. "Can we crash at your place the night, like?"

I finally get up the gumption to see how Sage is taking this. She's doing her usual peering-off-into-the-distance face: that way, if anything goes wrong, she can blame me.

"Sure." I say, trying not to sound as reluctant as I'm feeling. "But just for the night. Even Sage isn't supposed to be staying with me."

"Ta!" Irish says, unscrewing the wine to seal the deal.

"Fuck knows how we're going to get these two past Mrs Danvers," Sage whispers irritably.

\*

We enter the building one at a time, me bringing up the rear. Mrs Danvers is standing outside her coffin-booth, arms crossed and face like a smacked bottom. I nod and smile at her. She doesn't smile back. I'm not sure she knows how.

"*Vous avez des visiteurs ?*" she snaps sarcastically, "*Encore?*"

"*Pardon?*" I say innocently, making my way up the stairs. "*Je ne comprends pas.*"

\*

The wine's nearly finished, and we've made serious inroads into the piece of Hervé's black Sage had kept for a 'rainy day'. The room is hazy with hash smoke and my

head feels fuggy and slow. Irish is stretched out on the floor, eyelids heavy. He looks as if he's about to drop off. Sage and I are sitting cross-legged on the bed. Scotty is crouching on his rucksack, dirty-jeaned legs folded up to his ears like a bony-legged spider. He keeps slipping off his perch, but this doesn't seem to worry him in the slightest.

Scotty tips back the dregs of the wine.

"Shall we get another bottle, like?" he says.

"Course," Sage slurs. She's almost completely smashed. "Scotty," she says, "you know who you remind me of?"

"Nah?" he says. For a second I think Sage is going to say something really insulting, like Golem from *Lord of the Rings* or Lurch from *The Addams Family* or something. To my mind he looks like the love-child of Herman Munster and Ichabod Crane. But Sage has someone else in mind.

"Sid Vicious," she says.

Scotty perks up. It's the most animated I've seen him all day. "Seriously?" he says. "Sid's all right, so he is."

"Yeah," Sage says. "With a bit of eye-liner and some lipstick you'd be a dead-ringer. What do you think, Vicks? Want to play dress-up?"

\*

The Arabic-looking guy wielding the vicious-looking flick knife has mad wide open eyes and looks like he means business. I freeze, my mouth open in mid-sentence and I can feel Scotty withering next to me. The Arabic man doesn't change his expression. This time the SUN headline is: *British Babe in Paris Bloodbath* (picture, page four). The guy shakes the knife in our faces again, and Scotty rears back, lifting his hands up in a 'whoa man' gesture. Then, without warning, a torrent of (almost) perfect French squeaks out of my mouth:

*"Non – desole, Monsieur! Ce n'est pas nécessaire! C'est seulement une folle! Nous sommes tranquille!"*

Even though the situation is as dodgy as fuck, I'm still amazed that I've managed to dredge up these words. Where did they come from? I didn't even know that I knew the

word for 'joke' in French. Our whipcord thin would-be assailant immediately backs off and his eyes lose their crazy edge. He gives us the once over and snorts in disgust. I don't blame him. Then he backs into, and is swallowed up by, the touristy crowd clogging up the Latin Quarter alleyway. As soon as I'm sure he's gone, I breathe again. My legs are shaking, and my heart's roaring in my ears. Scotty looks over at me and shrugs nervously.

"Fuck, that was close," he says dead-pan. Although his voice is his usual drone, I can tell he's rattled. He almost drops his pouch of tobacco as he shakily pulls it out of his pocket. "Shall we knock this on the head for a bit?"

"Yeah," I agree nonchalantly, as if being threatened by a knife-wielding psychopath happens to me every day.

I shake my head when he offers me the rizla packet and tobacco. I don't want him to see my hands shaking when I roll a cigarette.

Fuck. Sage's idea for me and Scotty to dress up like Sid Vicious and his junkie girlfriend Nancy Spungen while we went for a wine run had seemed like a brilliant idea half an hour ago. Now I feel like a complete moron. I'm wearing ripped fish-nets, a tiny pink mini-dress and Irish's leather motorcycle jacket, and I've got a big fake beauty spot gored on my cheek (which Sage said looked like a splatted fly). Scotty looks as ridiculous as I feel. The black eyeliner I'd carefully applied around his eyes is smeared all over his face, and his Sid Vicious trademark red lipstick makes the rash of acne scored over his too-white skin look vivid and painful. The spikes Sage and I had gelled into his short hair are now drooping pathetically, and are flecked with alarmingly large pieces of dandruff. I cringe at the thought that only minutes ago we'd been pacing through the crowd, 'don't fuck with us' expressions on our faces. It had worked until Scotty had bumped shoulders with the Arabic guy and tried to do a Sid Vicious on him.

"Fook awrf," Scotty had sneered a la Sid, but instead of giving him a wide berth, the Arab had whipped out a knife so fast it was a blur.

"Shit, man, I need a drink," Scotty says. "Shall we open the bottle like?"

I've almost forgotten the clinking plastic bag I'm holding. More red wine is the last thing I'm craving.

“Nah,” I say. “Let’s wait till we get back home.”

Scotty nods mournfully.

I’m desperate to get back to the room where Sage and Irish are waiting for us. I want to give Sage a bollocking for letting us go out looking like this. I mean, she knew we were completely pissed. Something like this was bound to happen. And she was supposed to come with us. Mind you, it’s probably a good thing she didn’t come along. She’d probably have challenged the knife guy to a fight.

“Shall we tell, `em, like? You know, about what happened?” Scotty asks, while trying and failing to scatter tobacco into a tatty roll-up paper. His hands are still trembling.

I shrug. “Yeah, why not?”

“It was close all right, eh?” He finally manages to cobble together a cigarette. I light it for him.

“I can’t wait to see Sage’s face.”

“Yeah. It was quite a good laugh, when you think about it, eh?” He straightens up as if he hadn’t been shitting in his pants a few minutes earlier.

I’m pretty sure that when we get around to telling the story to Sage and Irish, they’d get a hugely exaggerated version. And even though I’m looking forward to this, I’m still slightly rattled. Nutters scare the shit out of me at the best of times. At home, there were several who’d taken up office outside TopShop in the Wolverhampton Mander Centre. There was one complete head-case who marched up and down the centre dressed in cowboy gear. Even if he hadn’t dressed in his mad outfit, it was obvious he wasn’t holding a full deck. His eyes rolled around in his head like red veined marbles and he always had flecks of bubbly spit balled in the corners of his mouth. He carried around this massive ghetto-blaster blaring out country music, and you never knew when he’d appear over your shoulder and try and convince you to sing along with Dolly Parton while other shoppers sniggered smugly, glad they weren’t the ones being accosted.

I wonder if the guy who threatened us was some escaped psychopath, or just a guy having a bad day who hated punks and rudeness. Weird. I’d kind of assumed that Paris, unlike Wolverhampton, was a place where you didn’t need to watch your back.

\*

Returning to the room after our run-in with the knife-wielding maniac is a bit of an anti-climax. Sage and Irish are fast asleep, Sage on her back on the bed, mouth open; Irish on the floor rolled up in his tatty sleeping bag, dreadlocks poking out like the strings of a dirty blond mop head.

“Pussies,” Scotty growls, forgetting that mere minutes ago he’d been a bit of a pussy himself. I don’t say this though.

I climb over Irish to get to the sink, and start to wipe the garish make-up and beauty spot from my face with one of Sage’s discarded socks.

I’m about to suggest to Scotty that we wake the sleeping beauties, when there’s a banging at the door. It’s such an unusual sound that at first I’m not sure that it’s coming from outside our room. Shit! What if it’s Mrs Danvers, or even worse – Nausicaa’s parents? They’ve never been to the room, but it’s entirely possible that Mrs Danvers has grassed us up.

“Oh shit!” I hiss to Scotty. “What the fuck am I going to do?” He looks at me uncomprehendingly and goes as if to open the door.

“No!” I almost yell. “Leave it!”

There’s a pause, and the banging starts up again. This time it’s more insistent, and Sage sits up and wipes a hand over her face. Irish doesn’t move.

“Wha’ the fuck?” she says.

Whoever’s outside isn’t going to go away. They must be able to hear us moving around, so it’s impossible to pretend I’m out.

“Quick!” I grab the can of Old Spice and spray it liberally around the room, desperately trying to mask the stubborn hashy smell. “Hide!” I hiss at Scotty and Sage. They look at me blankly. Obviously there’s nowhere *to* hide.

I take a deep breath and decide I’ll just open the door a crack, so that whoever’s out there can’t see in. I motion Scotty and Sage to keep out of sight behind me.

I’m expecting to see Mrs Danvers’s miserable old face scowling at me as I peer out, but instead a man I’ve never seen before stares back at me.

“Er... Yeah?” I say. I’m not sure whether to be relieved or annoyed.

“*Bonjour*,” the man replies. He’s creepy looking: skeletally thin with parchment skin and sunken eyes.

“*Oui?*” I say, pointedly, not sure what to expect. “Can I help you?”

He clears his throat.

“Someone dropped this in the *toilette*,” he says in French-accented perfect English.

I look down. He’s holding a lump of hash in his hand.

I’m dumbfounded. Without thinking I turn around as if to ask Sage for help. How the hell did he know it was ours? Could he be a cop, testing us? The silence stretches, and I’ve just about made my mind up to deny it belongs to us, when I hear Sage behind me. She elbows me out of the way.

“Christ!” she yells, snatching the black out of the guy’s hand. “I thought that was gone for good. Thanks mate!”

“*De rien*.” The guy nods curtly and disappears down the corridor.

Sage shuts the door behind us, leans on it and rolls her eyes.

“Fuck,” she says. “That’ll teach me not to put things in their proper places.”

I don’t answer, but sit back on the bed, narrowly avoiding kicking the still inert Irish in the head. Sage looks at me questioningly.

“Blimey, Vicks,” she says. “You look like utter shite.”

I allow myself to fall backwards, and close my eyes.

## SAGE

### **People and characters who are MORE attractive than Mrs Danvers:**

Quasimodo (from NOTRE DAME).

Ian Dury (from IAN DURY AND THE BLOCKHEADS).

Shaggy (from SCOOBY DOO).

Shane snaggletooth what's-his-face (from THE POGUES).

VILE Brother-in-law PETE (can't believe I just wrote that).

Kath's husband Eric -- fat, greasy and smelly, but we still ate his FOOD (from KATH'S CAFÉ).

Irish's teeth (from IRISH'S HEAD).

My new friend Bob (from THE POMPIDOU POSSE).

### **People and characters who are LESS attractive than Mrs Danvers:**

Bobby the Bastard (from WHEREVER ARSEHOLES LIKE HIM SPRING FROM).

It's been difficult to write etc what with the buskers around all the time. It's not as though I've been lazy or anything, so take that angry look off your face, Gladys (ha ha).

Well, it's been a weird few days, but there's been some fabness all the same.

The best news of course is that: Mine and Vicks's days of being hungry are OVER!!!!

And it's all thanks to a tramp named Bob (HOW IRONIC HE HAS THE SAME FUCKING NAME AS THE BASTARD!!!).

Scary Scotty and Tatty Irish stayed with us for two nights. I was proud of Vicks, she didn't shag either of them, although I know the temptation must have been HUGE, Vicks being what she is. Anyway, after the kind (but FREAKISH) neighbour returned our black, Vicks threw a hissy fit and said that the buskers had to leave as they were "JEOPARDISING our position". They were nice about it though, and said they'd head off to the 'Riviera'. Fuck, I hope the people there don't have any taste in music otherwise Scotty and Irish will go seriously hungry.

Anyway, while Vicks went off to work the next day, I walked with them to the Pompidou to say goodbye. While we were there, I had to sneak off to the toilet in the centre, as we can't use the TOILET OF DEATH #2 at the moment. I'm not pointing fingers, but one of the buskers had fucking well blocked it up. They'd used newspaper instead of toilet paper

(well, I'd hidden the rest of our stash for mine and Vicks's personal use) but STILL.

Gross. I hope Mrs Danvers is handy with a toilet brush and a plunger, otherwise me and Vicks will be in deep shit (but seriously, Gladys, it's not actually funny, is it?).

So I get back from the toilet (where I'd also had a sneaky wash) and they're talking to this podgy old tramp guy. I recognised him immediately -- he'd waved 'hello' to Vicks the other day as if they were OLD FRIENDS.

And Scotty and Irish introduce us and I learn about Bob's creepy name. But I get a right shock when I hear his voice. I mean, he looks like a saggy stubbly slightly smelly tramp guy (you wouldn't look twice at him on the street), but the voice that comes out of him is dead posh. Even posher than Vicki's (she doesn't have so much of a Wolverhampton accent as I do on account of her going to a posh school in Birmingham and me having to make do in the stinking comprehensive).

Anyway, Irish and Scotty go to hug me 'goodbye', but luckily I manage to squirm away before they can do so, and then Irish says: "Ye take care of them goirls, eh, Bob?"

OH MY GOD!! What was Irish thinking?!! Anyway, off the buskers go leaving me and Bob standing there, STARING at each other.

I didn't trust Bob at first. I mean, how much of a coincidence is it that he's got the same name as Bobby the BASTARD!!!! And he has these strange bulgy watery blue eyes that look like they're about to pop straight out of his head. SERIOUSLY. If he ever gets a slap on the back of his head I reckon they'd plop out of their sockets like snooker balls. I'm about to bugger off as I'm feeling dead uncomfortable (it's like when you meet someone new and there's that weird pause when no one knows what to say) when Bob goes, "Where's your friend?" and I'm like, "Why do you want to know" DEAD suspicious.

And he's like, "Because you always seem to be together that's why."

I'm about to tell him to go fuck himself, when I catch him looking at the arse of a FROG boy who's walking past us. Ha. So I decide to give Bob another chance as he's probably not interested in GIRLS and won't try it on with Vicks.

So I ask him what he's doing BEING A TRAMP when he talks so posh, and he says he's decided to "opt out of society for a while", but doesn't say exactly why and I don't ask. I wasn't in the mood to ask PERSONAL questions.

Anyway, he has a pack of those vile French Gitanes cigarettes and we sit on the bench and he asks me all about me and Vicks. At first I don't want to say ANYTHING, but he's a really good listener, and suddenly I find myself telling him a bunch of stuff. It just POURS out Gladys -- about me and Vicks not having money and Mrs Danvers and the WHOLE story about Bobby the B. Bob nods and smokes and looks quite sympathetic. Then I ask him what he does for money and he says he's a BEGGAR (but he doesn't look all shameful about it or anything, which I quite respected actually) and shows me the cardboard sign he uses for begging. It's a piece of shite and I draw him a better one with a flower on it, although he does the writing as it's in French. But I couldn't really do a good JOB because he only had a tatty old biro. And he's like, "That's not bad, why don't you do chalk drawings for money?" And I'm like "yeah, duh, where?" And he says that in the summer loads of art students do chalk drawings all over Paris, and he takes me and shows me this spot near where me and Vicks did the bottling for Irish and Scotty. And then he says he'll show me around the area a bit as he's been here FOREVER and "knows it like the back of his (DIRTY) hand." But first he says he's going to get us some wine from out of his bag in the left luggage place of the centre. When he's gone, I seriously think about scarpering. I hate it when other people ASSUME you can just TRUST them, but for some reason I don't bugger off. Which, as you will see, Gladys, is a good thing in the end.

He comes back and we walk down this dead long creepy street that's lined with shady doorways, and he says that this is the RUE ST DENIS where the prozzies hang out. And I look down the street and sure enough there are loads of whores, and most of them are black and all of them are FAT. Then we cut down an alley and down another street towards this old church, and he says, "but you must know this one," And I'm like, "why?" And he says, "Don't you and your friend come here for food?"

Guess what, Gladys!! There's a FUCKING SOUP KITCHEN in Paris and I never even knew. And Bob's dead surprised when I tell him that for months (or weeks, or whatever) that me and Vicks have been starving like Ethiopians!! Anyway, he says that we can just come to this St Eustache place and sign up to get the soup kitchen shit.

Then he has to leave on account of getting to 'work' ha ha, but says he'll meet up with us later at the soup kitchen PROBABLY but he's not sure as he doesn't often eat there anymore.

I can't wait for Vicks to get back from work, and when she meets me we go straight to the church's office thingy to sign up for the FREE FOOD and the quite nice and friendly woman there says to us, "Can you cook?" And Vicks is like, "Of course we can cook." And the woman smiles and hands us a big bag full of packets of couscous and Vicks takes it and we walk out. But then I say, "What the fuck are we going to do with that then?" And Vicks is like, "Fuck, I'm so stupid."

The woman hadn't meant 'can you cook,' but have you got the FACILITIES to cook WITH. DUH!!! Vicks felt like a total SPAZZ!

So we go back inside and Vicks explains her fuck-up, and the woman gives us this form we have to fill in saying we're skint and hungry and can't afford to buy food and all that shite. We would have given our false names, which is what we used to do with the cops at home, but the woman needed to see our passports.

Anyway, so eventually it's time to go and wait outside the church to collect our food, but bloody hell!! It's like a tramp conference there. There's a huge snaking queue of all types of different sorts of tramps (but not many young ones, as Vicks noticed). But the worst thing was the SMELL of some of them!! Fuck, it was seriously bad. And there were a few that looked like lepers in those old bible movies, you know like the Ten Commandments and stuff, all draped in rags and you expected them to say 'alms for the poor' and have missing fingers and big gaping sores. I didn't want to get anywhere near them. They really did reek of old shit and a heavy body-like smell. Ugh. If I wasn't so hungry I reckon they'd have put me off my food. And as we were waiting in the line trying not to BE SICK this guy with a Mohican and one leg came hobbling up on his crutches and totally perved at Vicki. She didn't take much notice as it was her turn to get her food, but I didn't miss it.

Okay. This is what you get:

1 cup vegetable soup. Not bad.

1 tin butter beans in tomato sauce (gross).

1 baby bel cheese (out of date but YUM my favourite).

1 tin of John West tuna and curry sauce. Yeah I know. Obviously no one WISELY bought this shit from the supermarkets so they give it free to the tramps, because BEGGARS CAN'T BE CHOOSERS, eh?

Half a baguette.

1 orange.

HURRAY!!!

We didn't wait for Bob, but went as far away from the OTHERS as possible and sat down and SCOFFED the LOT. It was the coolest thing ever.

The only BAD news I have is that I still haven't figured out what to do if I run out of tablets. I've still got shit loads though. Thank God I had the FORESIGHT to bring even the ones that were OUT OF DATE and lied to Karen that I'd lost a whole lot so that she'd go and refill my PRESCRIPTION. I mean, when we left HOME I wasn't sure how long we'd be away, was I? I can't remember what it was like before vile Doctor PERVE Pilkington put me on them. Vicks didn't know the OLD ME. I can't tell her – I just can't. I couldn't bear it if she treated me like some kind of FREAK like everyone else did.

### **Poem for Bob.**

*Some say he's quite sappy  
His eyes are all poppy  
They bulge from his head  
Like a corpse that is dead  
He's not a big spender  
I think he's a bender  
His name could be 'slob'  
But it's not. 'Cos it's 'Bob'.*

I don't think I'll show this one to Vicks.

## **VICKI: The Banana Hold-up Experience**

“This is a banana hold-up. Give us yer money or a bottle or whiskey or I’ll shoot yer.”

The guy standing splay-legged in front of us is holding a banana in each hand at his hips, like a fruit wielding stick-up artist. He looks deadly serious.

For once Sage has lost control of her facial expressions. Her mouth drops open and she gapes at me, speechless. Both of us start giggling nervously.

“Did yer hear me lassies?” he growls.

“Er, yeah,” I say carefully. I’m not sure how to respond to this guy. What if he’s an unhinged nutter like that mad scary Arab guy or something? Those bananas could be dangerous in the wrong hands. “Sorry, mate,” I shrug as if I mean it. “We’re fresh out of cash and alcohol.”

He doesn’t respond or drop his ‘guns’. His hollow cheeks yawn in deeply -- just like my Nan’s face when she takes out her teeth. His skin is the thick calloused leather that I’ve begun to recognize as typical of street people, especially the old ones. I reckon it’s because they’re outside so much of the time, but their eyes also seem to sink lower and lower into their faces as if the whole structure is subsiding from over-exposure to booze and sunlight. He reminds me of the old alkys you sometimes see drinking the day away in naff Wolverhampton town centre pubs.

Out of the corner of my eye I notice Bob approaching. I breathe a sigh of relief. I hope he knows how to deal with this obvious nutcase. Sage and I had been waiting for Bob next to the crap sculpture pond when the banana stick-up artist had sneaked up behind us. We’re normally on high nutter alert, especially around this area, but he’d taken us completely by surprise.

“Hello, girls,” Bob says in his posh voice. “I see you’ve met Alex?”

“You *know* this guy?” Sage says unbelievably. I’m also a tad shocked. Although Bob is unashamedly unapologetic about his tramp status, he’s struck me as remarkably normal. Plus, he speaks like one of my folks’ stockbroker friends. I’m dying to know the story behind his exile here, but I’m used to leaving this sort of prying behaviour up to

Sage. Strangely, unless there's something she hasn't told me, she hasn't bothered yet. It's probably because she's convinced he's a closet pouf, which in her eyes makes him 'safe' and unlikely to do a Bobby on us. And maybe she doesn't think it's fair to be too nose-y. Without Bob we'd still be surviving on stolen Nausicaa yogurts.

"Alex is an institution around here. Aren't you Alex?" Bob is saying.

"Aye," Alex nods proudly.

"Now, let me introduce you properly," Bob says, as if he's at a cocktail party instead of amongst a bunch of scruffy, and let's face it, rather smelly people. "Alex, this is Sage and Vicki."

Alex grins. His remaining teeth are little brown chiclets. His eyes are bright blue stones that gleam wetly from their dark holes. I wouldn't say it's an evil face, though. He nods at us.

"Is a pleasure," he drawls in an accent that's broader than Scotty's. "*A clochard de luxe* at your service."

"A what?" Sage scrunches up her face.

"*A clochard de luxe*," Bob says. "A luxury tramp."

"I'll not be havin' ye callin' me a tramp now, Bob," Alex winks at us. He reminds me of those rugged characters that always play the ex-con baddies on *Taggart*. "Now young lassies, will ye join me for a wee walk about the toon?" he offers us a crooked arm each. Sage looks horrified. I shrug: it doesn't look like we've got much of a choice. Trying not to flinch at the rough feel of his dust-caked donkey jacket, I hook my arm through his. Scowling, Sage does the same. Neither of us wants to offend Bob by telling his friend to fuck off. Still, I can't help but feel a pang of annoyance as Bob sits himself down on the pond's wall and waves us cheerfully on our way as if he's doing us a favour.

The three of us hobble towards the smattering of tourist shops in front of the centre's entrance. It's not an easy feat. Alex walks with a bow-legged gait as if he's spent far too long in the saddle or has that rickets disease we learned about in school. Waves of alcohol and ancient sweat radiate off his body. The tam `o shanter perched sideways on his head is so filthy the dirt has made its own tartan pattern in the material. His trousers flap a good few inches above his battered red doc martens.

Mind you, it's not as if Sage or I look any great shakes at the moment, either. I can't remember what it was like having newly washed clothes. My underwear is painfully scratchy and uncomfortable after hasty washes in the sink with hand soap. It almost seems to creak when I move, as if I'm wearing cardboard pants. My dresses have failed the smell test so often I just rotate them in order of least stinky. I noticed Nausicaa's mother scrunching her nose up the other day when I'd mistakenly allowed her to get within smelling distance. It's doing Sage's head in. She loathes being dirty, and she's had to wear the same grey sweatshirt for the last three days.

We cut a swathe through the tourist traffic as people naturally give the three of us a wide berth. I'm pretty sure that the passing tourists and lunchtime Frog crowd think we're some kind of bizarre sideshow, or perhaps they assume Sage and I are taking our mad uncle for an outing. We're the tramp version of the *Wizard of Oz* characters, with Alex as a scruffy scabby Dorothy leading us down the Yellow Brick Pompidou Road.

But from the way Alex's eyes are predatorily scanning the passers-by, I'm getting the impression that a 'walk about the toon' isn't quite what it's cracked up to be. We've just turned down the street parallel to the other side of the Pompidou Centre, when Alex stops dead in front of the queue of people waiting outside the arty farty cinema. Quick as a flash, he drops our arms, and pulling the bananas out from the waistband of his scrofulous trousers he aims the fruit guns at a middle-aged well-heeled couple, who are trying their best to make themselves less noticeable. The other members of the queue titter nervously with relief.

"This is a banana hold-up, giz yer money or a bottle of whiskey or I'll shoot yer."

Unbelievable! The couple start laughing and the smartly suited man pulls out a fifty franc note and passes it to Alex.

Sage looks at me and mouths 'Oh my God!'

Alex nods curtly to the couple, as if it is they who should be thanking him for the privilege of being accosted, and not the other way around; then crooks his arms again, signalling that we're off.

"Bloody hell, Alex, nice one," I say, suddenly no longer feeling quite so self-conscious.

"Aye," Alex sniffs. "Bloody frogs. Fooking idiots all."

I catch sight of Sage's face. She's grinning. It looks like she's met a kindred spirit.

\*

We've walked a full circle and are back outside the sculpture pond with Bob. On our short walk Alex held-up two more people. I can't figure out how he susses which ones to pick on. They're all completely different. The second guy was an African man draped in one of those dress-like robes, the third victim a middle-aged French matron who reminded me of Mrs Danvers.

"Roight. Lassies," Alex says, "Time for a wee break. Let's go off and eat something, what do you say?"

He's made over a hundred francs in less than ten minutes.

\*

Sage, Bob, Alex and I are sitting in Formica hell eating couscous. The restaurant is a do-it-yourself affair, similar to motorway service centres. You slide your tray around a long metal rail, helping yourself to bowls of couscous and grease-peppered meat, while above you garish fantasy pictures let you know what the food is supposed to look like. I compare the sad mass on my plate with its glossy photograph. Instead of the promised plump juicy meat, the curl of sausage next to my bright yellow couscous looks like an anorexic dog turd.

Sage's brother-in-law is a cookery book photographer and she's telling Bob and Alex how he uses mashed potato in place of ice-cream when they're photographing it because otherwise it melts under the camera lights. I've heard this before.

"Is that roight, lassie?" Alex says.

"Yeah. Can you imagine what would happen if someone ate that by accident, though? Think about it, it's a hot day and all you want is a cool mouthful of ice-cream topped with cherries..." Sage looks off into the distance. She hates her brother-in-law. Her sister's okay, though.

“Eat up, lassie!” Alex grins at me, spitting little pieces of food all over the table. I’ve never seen anyone eat quite like Alex. He shovels far too much food into his mouth and then gummily chews it up, open-mouthed. The gooey excess seeps out from the corner of his mouth like spit from a rabid dog.

He takes a long draught of his beer and belches nosily.

“Hits the spot!” he says and then loses himself in a coughing fit. The remaining pieces of couscous in his mouth are ejected like shrapnel all over the table.

Sage is also picking at her food. This would never have happened a few days ago. We would have jumped at the chance for a free meal. But now, since food was no longer an issue, it’s no longer the centre of our existence. I don’t feel like mine. Couscous still reminds me of the first night I slept over at Jules’s. I shudder. Sage raises an eyebrow and looks at me inquisitively. I shake my head in an ‘it’s nothing’ gesture. I still haven’t told her all the gory details about my two nights with Jules. Curiously, Sage hasn’t reacted at all to Alex’s disgusting table manners. Normally she’s only too quick to pop out a sarky comment or pull a face whenever anyone does anything slightly annoying. In fact, she now seems quite at home in the company of Alex, who reeks like a sweaty brewery, and Bob, who though quite a nice guy, is still a middle-aged beggar with weird bulging eyes. I can’t understand why she’s happy to be hanging around with these losers but gave Bobby and Hervé such a hard time. Perhaps it’s because she ‘found’ them, and not me.

“So, Alex,” I say, taking a sip of my 7-Up. “What are you doing in Paris?”

Alex taps the side of his nose. “Ask no questions and I’ll tell ye no lies lassie.”

“Sorry,” I say apologetically. “Didn’t mean to be nosey.” Maybe there’s some tramp code about never asking about people’s previous lives.

“Nah!” Alex flaps his arms around like an epileptic. “Dan’t be ridiculous. Me and Bob here had to get away like. Right, Bob?”

Bob squirms in his seat. I’d assumed they’d met here, in Paris. I can’t imagine for the life of me what sort of connection they must have had before trampdom. Alex is almost a parody of a drunk hobo, whereas Bob looks like he washed up on the streets by accident. Although he always looks in dire need of a shave, I can tell by his posh accent and the cut of the crumpled suit jacket he wears that he probably had some sort of profession.

Again I'm surprised Sage doesn't call him out on this. She's normally quite quick to pick up on evasive behaviour. God knows I can't ever get away with it, anyway. She merely snorts and says: "Sounds like our story."

"Oh, aye?" Alex says, but it isn't a question. He doesn't seem to care what the fuck we're doing here. He suddenly lets out a huge exaggerated sneeze. I realise that he's not a well man. I'm beginning to think that his eyes look rheumy and watery because he's in mid flu-stream, and not because he's been at the whiskey. Although it's probably a combination of both.

"How did you two meet, then?" I ask. I can't help myself. Sage scowls at me.

"Ah now, lassie, that's the question," Alex says, making a sound like a foghorn into a huge tartan handkerchief he's pulled from the pocket of his donkey jacket. "That's the question, so it is."

Tucking his handkerchief back into his trouser pocket, he looks off into the distance. Without any warning he croons, "Walk on, wallllk oon—"

"You what?" I say.

"— with ho-ooope in yer heart!" his voice rises with every word. I look over at Sage in horror. She just shrugs at me. Alex stands up, his voice getting louder and louder. "And you'll neiveeeeer walk alo-!" He coughs, sneezes, and carries on singing as if the interruption hadn't happened mid-syllable.

I look round. The other patrons in the restaurant are staring and grinning.

Alex gets up and heads for the exit, all the time blaring nasally: "Waaaalk oon, walk oooo—ah ah oon, with hooooope in yer heart—"

Bob, Sage and I mutely follow him out.

He throws open the glass doors, and stands, arms out-stretched in the pedestrian alleyway, as he finishes the song's finale at the top of his voice.

"And you'll neiveeeeer walk aaaaalooone..."

Passers-by who've stopped at this spectacle, move on. Alex turns around and whips off his tam o' shanter. His greying hair is greasily plastered to his scalp in rat tails. He bows to us theatrically.

"Roight now, lassies, Bob. I'll bid yer good day."

And he's off.

We watch as he struts into the crowd, pausing only to accost a businessman wearing a brisk French suit. The man reaches immediately into his jacket and removes his wallet.

“Amazing,” says Sage.

“Yep,” says Bob, proudly. “That’s Alex for you. Now, girls, I have a favour to ask of you.”

\*

*Oh my God.*

The bus is completely silent except for a stomach-turning ‘crunch, crunch, crunch’ noise. It’s the sound of a totally pissed Scottish man with false teeth gnashing his way through a recently dead whole crab. Bits of reddish pink shell fly everywhere, and the usual rubbery, old-shoe bus smell is swamped beneath the stink of fish. I can feel that my face is bright red with mortification, and I don’t know where to look. I try not to flinch as a hairy crab claw bounces off the tip of my boot. Sage has sneaked herself into a window seat a few seats away from us. She’s staring out of the window as if her life depends on it, but I can tell she’s battling to pretend nothing out of the ordinary is going on. Although it’s rush hour, eight double seats in front of us are empty. Alex is sitting on the middle of the back seat opposite the aisle, blithely crunching, spitting, slobbering and sucking. A cluster of French workaday people are hunched together like refugees as far away from the three of us as they can manage. A couple of them are tutting and shaking their heads, but most are just staring, wide-eyed. Even though we haven’t far to go, the journey feels like it’s taking hours, and I desperately pray for it to be over or for someone to have the balls to throw us off.

His mouth full, Alex offers me a severed, dripping claw.

I shake my head.

“Yer sure, lassie?” Or at least this is what I think he’s said through the avalanche of crab meat that tumbles out of his mouth. Shell flecks coat his donkey jacket like dandruff and his gnarly hands are covered with slippery white fishy shreds. I silently curse whoever thought it was a good idea to give Alex the bag of crabs. It was obviously

someone who's never shared a meal with him. We'd barely sat down in the bus before he'd dived into the stinking plastic bag and begun gleefully ripping one of the things to pieces without the slightest flicker of embarrassment. I swallow hard and squeeze my eyes shut as Alex whips out his top plate to remove a piece of shell stuck between the teeth and his gums.

In between slurping crunching sounds, Alex coughs something huge and solid-sounding into his sleeve. This is why he's coming home with us. He's got some sort of noisy chest infection. Bob took us aside earlier and asked if Alex could stay with us "the night". Alex needs to sleep indoors for a while to give him a chance to get better. He's been passed around various friends and acquaintances, and tonight it's our turn.

Of course, we couldn't say no. If it wasn't for Bob, we'd never have found out about St. Eustache and the food. I suppose we owe him one. But I'm not sure my little room can stand any more guests. I still haven't managed to eradicate the hash stench that still taints the room's atmosphere from the buskers' sleepover. That, and a blocked toilet, are all our last guests left behind. I'm finding it impossible to imagine Mrs Danvers's face when she catches sight of my latest *visiteur*. It was hard enough sneaking Scotty and Irish past her Nazi commandant stare, and they were relatively normal. Christ knows what she's going to think when I try and smuggle a loud, pissed, fish-coated Scottish beggar into my room.

\*

I rummage in my boot and pull out the watch. I can't believe how late (or how early) it is. Five a.m., and Sage and I have had absolutely no sleep.

By some bizarrely fortunate miracle Mrs Danvers wasn't at her post when we ushered Alex up the stairs, and the minute he entered the room he flopped down onto our bed and dropped off, leaving Sage and me to sleep on the floor. Eventually we'd given up trying to get any shut-eye. Alex was no less noisy or inconsiderate in his sleep. We've spent the last few hours listening to a chorus of trombone farts, shuddering snores, incoherent mumbling and rickety scary coughs that sounded as if they'd emerged from a place deeper than the bottom of his lungs.

Half-an-hour ago Alex jerked awake and staggered out of the room without a word. Sage and I are now hunched in our sleeping bags, desperately trying to block out the gut-wrenchingly awful noises emanating from the communal Toilet of Death #2. The sounds must be sending shock-waves throughout the entire building.

“Fookin’ ‘ell!” his voice reverberates clearly down the corridor.

I wince. It’s followed by the groaning splash of what sounds like an enormous amount of vomit. We listen with bated breath for the train whoosh of the toilet flushing. It doesn’t come. Oh God. Sage and I will have to draw lots for who goes in there to assess the damage. I don’t think I’ll be able to stomach it. I have a vile mental image of finding one of Alex’s obviously knackered lungs draped over the toilet seat.

Mercifully there’s a few seconds of silence. The building feels quieter than usual, even at this time of the morning. It’s as if its occupants are collectively holding their breath, waiting to hear what the next audible horror will be. It can’t get any worse, can it? Another lung shattering coughing fit is followed by “Guaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!”

It doesn’t even sound human.

I fully expect to hear the angry clump of Mrs Danvers’s comfortable shoes heading up the stairs at any moment.

Sage sighs angrily and scowls at me as if it’s my fault we haven’t had any sleep. She throws off her sleeping bag and stalks over to the sink in the corner of the room where she sticks her head under the tap.

“Christ!” she says under her breath. “What a fucking tosser.” Even though Sage in a foul mood is nothing to be sniffed at, I’m relieved. For a while there I’d thought a body-snatcher had taken over her normally ‘take no shit’ personality. I’m glad to see things are back to normal. This I can handle.

She turns to me, face like thunder. “Why the fuck did you let him sleep on our bed? It fucking stinks!” I hold my tongue. The last thing we need now is a blazing row, although I suppose it could provide our neighbours with a diversion from the gruesome liquid noises floating down the corridor. Anyway, she’s right about the stench at least. Even though Alex has left the room, his particular ripe body odour smell hasn’t. The place reeks like a hot day in a fishmonger’s. At least it’s buried the stench of the hash.

Sage almost trips over Alex's tatty ripped rucksack as she makes her way back to her sleeping bag. She pauses. I know she won't be able to resist. With a sneaky half-smile on her face she bends down, undoes the belt that holds the bag together, and starts rooting around in it. I pretend not to see what she's doing, but I notice her pocketing something she's slicked out of an old cigar tin wrapped in one of Alex's shirts. Then the toilet door slams and she jumps guiltily. She hastily repacks the bag as Alex's heavy footsteps echo down the hall towards our room. But he's not content to shatter the silence using only one method. He's also singing a raucous Scottish football song I've never heard of:

"And we'll really shake them up, when we win the World Cup, 'cos Scotland is the greatest football team!"

He throws the door open as he belts out the last line. Sage glares at him with disgust. He doesn't seem to notice.

"Och, goirls," he says, "I'd best be gettin' back, you know. Thanks for letting me kip here the night."

He collects his bag and is just about out the door when he turns back to us.

"Och. I almost fergot. I wanted to give yous something, to say ta like."

Sage perks up. We both know how much cash Alex is capable of making. He sticks his hand in his donkey jacket pocket and pulls out a bulky plastic bag. He chucks it over to Sage, who catches it neatly, realises what it is, and flings it away from her immediately as if it's red hot. It's the crab bag, slimy and stinking with day old fish juices.

"Ta again, girls," he winks and nods to where the bag's now lying under the sink, its contents spilled over the floor like the aftermath of a crustacean massacre. "Enjoy, it, eh?"

And he's gone.

Neither of us says anything as he sings, staggers and coughs his way down the stairs. We're both holding our breath. Christ. I hope Mrs Danvers isn't an early riser.

I'm about to give Sage the 'A-Okay' sign, when we hear the tell-tale mumble of raised voices.

At first I think it's our neighbours coming to lynch us for the desecration of their toilet, but then I realise it's not from our floor at all. I creep over to the door and open it a crack.

I can hear a French accent pitched louder than a normal speaking voice, but I can't decipher any actual words or tell for sure if it's Mrs Danvers's, but then there's a clear Scottish, "Fook awrf!" followed by an ear-splitting bang as the front door is slammed.

Oh shit.

"Think Mrs Danvers will come up here?" I whisper to Sage, as if the concierge has superhero hearing.

She shrugs, back to her old self. "What if she does? She can't prove he was staying in our room can she?"

But I'm thinking, yes she can... unless she's lost her sense of smell that is. I strain my ears for any sign that Mrs Danvers is heading our way, but the building is almost as silent as it was while Alex was busy in the Toilet of Death #2.

Finally we both breathe a sigh of relief. Neither of us are tempted to climb onto the bed. It still shows the imprint of Alex's body, right down to two dirty scuff marks on the sheet where his filthy booted feet rested.

Even though I'm totally wiped, I daren't crash out in case I don't manage to wake up in time to get ready for work. I sit up and decide to read *The Shining* for the fourth time until it's time to get ready.

But Sage has other ideas. She bends down and rummages under the bed. She looks up at me and grins.

"Hey, Vicks, how do you feel about going for a whole new look?"

"What do you mean?"

She's waving something in my face. It's a cutthroat razor she's nicked from Alex's bag.

"Wait and see," she smiles.

\*

I can't stop staring at a patch of dried egg on Nausicaa's dad's brown jumper. Nausicaa's parents can't take their eyes off my new hairstyle. Sage went ape-shit with the razor. She shaved off all the hair at the side of my head right down to the scalp. I now have a perfect Mohican. I don't think Nausicaa's parents are too charmed with my new look. Their daughter (my ally), took one look at me and immediately demanded the same drastic action done to her own blond curls. The mother had silenced her whiney pleading with a naziesque "*arret!*"

But my new hairstyle has nothing to do with why I'm sitting on an uncomfortable chair in front of them, instead of pushing Nausicaa to the park. When I knocked on the door (on time for once, ironically), it had been opened by the bland corduroyed father instead of the hard-faced-cow mother. I knew immediately something was up. He didn't return my cheery "*Bonjour, ca va?*" for a start, and it was only the second time I'd seen him since the day of my interview. He was normally off boring university students to death while I took his daughter for her daily outing. With barely a word he ushered me through to the living room and sat me down on a hard-backed chair (obviously put there for the purpose, I'm not stupid).

"Vicki," Nausicaa's father begins. "You have had a month's trial, which is what we discussed before, *ne c'est pas?*"

"*Oui,*" I nod. Here it comes...

"But we have decided not to keep you on. You will have a week to vacate the room. Leave the keys with Madame Le Clerc."

Eh? Who the fuck's Madame Le Clerc? I'm about to ask him who he means, but just in time I realise: Mrs Danvers. Her Proper Name fits her so well I haven't even considered she might have a real one. Should I ask them why I'm being fired? Nah. I'm pretty sure it's got to do with two messy, smelly Scotsmen with bad toilet hygiene and a small scowling cropped-haired sidekick.

Instead I say "*D'accord!*" but it pops out far more cheerfully than I'd intended. The hard-faced cow mother frowns.

"May I say goodbye to Nausicaa?" I say, trying to sound contrite.

"*Oui,*" the father shrugs. He's barely shown a flicker of emotion.

"Does she know what's happening?"

“*Oui*,” The father says again. “*Bien sur*.”

I get down on my knees in front of Nausicaa, who’s still staring up at my patchy head, entranced.

“Sorry, Nausicaa. I’m going to have to go now. It was very nice to have met you, and thanks for being such a good girl for me.”

“But we go to the park?” she says, hopefully. I turn to look at the parents. They’re still looking impassive.

“No. I’m sorry Nausicaa, but another nanny will be taking you. I have to leave.”

At first I think she hasn’t understood, but then juicy tears start welling up in her eyes. She tightly clenches her fists and plants her feet apart.

I know what’s coming next.

“*Noooooon!*” she shrieks, taking in great shuddering breaths. “*Noooooon, Vicki!*”

I’m not sure what to do, but as the parents are still sitting stiffly on the couch and are making no attempt to comfort their daughter, I quickly pick her up and give her a hug. She wraps her arms and legs around me and clings on like a baby chimp.

“*Nooon!*” she screams again, and I can feel her hot snotty face on my neck.

Sighing irritably, the mother gets up and wrestles Nausicaa’s ironing-board body away from me. Nausicaa grips tightly to one of my dreadlocks, but the mother grabs her hand, roughly tugs it out of my hair and stalks off out of the room with her writhing and screaming cargo.

There’s a lump in my throat. I’d only really seen Nausicaa as part of my job – as a means to an end. But I hadn’t really noticed that when she wasn’t doing her Linda Blair Exorcist imitation we’d been pretty good friends. She was okay. Tears prick my eyes as I listen to her howls and screams becoming more and more muffled as the mother shuts her in her room.

“*Au revoir*, Nausicaa,” I call as I follow the father to the door.

He ushers me out as if he’s a bouncer escorting an undesirable off the premises. He doesn’t say goodbye, merely snaps that he expects the room to be clean when I leave. Then he shakes his head as if I’ve sorely disappointed him and shuts the door in my face. Bastard. I gulp down a swallow of salty tears and head out of the building.

But the minute I'm out into the sunlight, a huge lightness takes over, and my tears are completely forgotten. It's as if everything vaguely shite about my life has suddenly floated away inside a helium balloon. I feel a smile break over my face. I can't remember the last time I felt this relieved or this free. I skip along the pavement. I can't wait to get back to the room and tell Sage. And we've still got a week left in the room, as well! That's plenty of time to make another plan. But in the meantime I'll be able to spend as much time as I like at the Pompidou and Les Halles without ever having to tromp my way to the park or fetch the bastards their groceries. Even though I've had no sleep I'm practically flying down the road to our building. That annoying Katrina and the Waves song flashes into my head without warning, and I barely feel the journey.

It's only when I pass one of the foul Canadian nannies briskly crossing the road to the park and register her shocked expression that I realise I'm singing out loud.

"I'm walking on sunshine, wooo-ooo!" I sing to her stiff, disgusted back.

Alex would be proud.

## SAGE

### Farewell, Mrs Danvers

*Farewell to our toilet,  
Our sink and our bed,  
Farewell, Mrs Danvers  
I wish you were dead.*

*Farewell to our cupboard  
Our mirror as well,  
Farewell, Mrs Danvers  
May you rot down in hell.*

Sorry I haven't written for a while, AGAIN Gladys. Tons and tons has happened, and as we don't have our own room anymore, it's dead hard to find a place to write this where I won't be disturbed. This is the first time I've been alone since we had to leave our room after Vicks got fired. As Vicks didn't go to work for the last week, we spent nearly all our time together. And as you know, Gladys, YOU are one of my secrets.

Anyway, I'm writing this in the biggest FUCK OFF church you've ever seen. I love it in here. I'm not turning into a god-botherer or anything, but BLOODY HELL it's great. I've seen it from the outside like a hundred million times, but it's the first time I've been inside it. As you've probably guessed it's called Notre Dame like in the hunchback, Quasimodo, and it's dead quiet and SOLEMN even though tons of tourists just come and go ALL the TIME. The lights are all creepy and low, and all you can hear are the shuffling of feet and whispering. Like someone turned the sound down on the world. I'm sitting in the middle of the rows and rows of uncomfortable chairs. The tourists stick to chairs near the aisle, if they bother to stay long enough to sit down, which most of them don't. The best thing is: IT'S FREE. If anyone who looks CHURCHY wanders over and looks at me, I just bow my head and pretend to look PRAYERFUL and SOMBRE and they go away. Ha ha.

Vicks hasn't bothered to find another job. Can't say I blame her though. I mean, now we can eat whenever we like there doesn't seem much point, eh? I'm fucking sick of tinned

butter beans in tomato sauce and the same old shite from St Eustache, but there's not much I can do about that, worst luck.

So, the last week in our own room was very quiet. Me and Vicks think that everyone in the building probably got a petition up to kick us out, like they do with hard-bastard families in council estates.

Anyway, we weren't really panicking or anything about leaving as Bob had said he'd help us out, as long as we didn't mind sleeping "Al Fresco". Typical, innit, Gladys, that me and Vicks make friends with the ponciest tramp in Frog Land.

Well, the worst thing about leaving our room was that we had to dump a load of our shite. It was very traumatic even though we knew we couldn't keep it on account of its WEIGHT and the fact that it would SLOW US DOWN as we no longer had a place to store our kit.

One BAD THING about this was that we had a massive fight about what should stay and what should be sacrificed. It was weird because we haven't had a fight about ANYTHING at all since we left Hervey's, which was an all time record, 'cos take us back to crappy old Stourbridge and I bet we'd still be fighting like BASTARDS everyday.

Anyway, this is what we decided to dump and leave behind in the room:

1 large ceramic skull Vicks had made at college (60% Sulk Factor VICKS).

All of Vick's books (90% Sulk Factor VICKS).

All of our 2000AD comics except for the first issue. NO WAY was that going to be left. (70 % Sulk Factor VICKS and SAGE).

3 leather jackets (2% SF – we hadn't worn them as they were second hand and smelled of old man's skin).

7 Pixie hats (160% SF SAGE under duress).

1 hairdryer (0% SF never used and TRAMPS don't NEED electricity).

1 Ladyshaver (2% SF used once).

17 cassette tapes (100% SF and HUGE FIGHTS. FAREWELL CAMEMBERG ELECTRIC MY OLD FRIEND).

BIG pile of assorted stinky clothes (0% sulk factor – big relief).

Ha ha!! Nausicaa's crusty old parents are probably going to think that we're Satanists or something when they SEE the skull and SMELL the room.

So in the end all we had was one rucksack each and our sleeping bags. But they were still as heavy as FUCK. We said goodbye to our room, and it was dead weird shutting the door behind us that last time. It made me feel a bit SAD, actually, Gladys.

On the way down Vicks dropped off our key to Mrs Danvers. The bitch didn't say goodbye or anything OF COURSE and just took the key with a creepy smirky expression on her cat-arse face. When Vicks was heading out the door I turned around and spat at Mrs Danvers's feet and bumbled some crap like I was putting a gypsy hex on her. She just gave me this secret nasty smile, so I knew it was her who grassed us up.

We were staying that night with the TRAMPS, but we had no fucking idea WHERE. So we met BOB at the usual Pompidou place after me and Vicks had picked up our supplies so he could show us where we were going to kip.

It was very exciting. But like a sleepover. Thing is, Gladys, me and Vicks had done a fair bit of sleeping rough. There was the old faithful Abandoned Church at home in Strourbridge (that sometimes had tramp relics lying around it), and once we slept out in a construction site after we missed the last bus home after the Ramones concert in Birmingham. So it wasn't as SCARY as it would be for most people.

So, as it's getting dark we follow Bob down to the river. We walk for like ages under these long dark bridges and there were these vile grunting noises coming from the back of one of them. We couldn't see what was going on, and I didn't want to look to be honest. The noises sounded DEAD disgusting. "What the fuck's that?" Vicks says to Bob, and he's like, "Oh, that's where the poufs meet up." HMMMM typical that he would know that, eh, Gladys? But I didn't say anything and I haven't let on that I know he's a woofter.

Vicks looked dead scared, but not because of the poufs, obviously, it just looked like the sort of place where muggers and serial killers hang out waiting for victims. Like those underpasses you take from the Bull Ring in Birmingham to get to the market. DEAD unsafe.

And talking of UNSAFE it turns out that BOB and ALEX are ex cons. Surprise, surprise, eh, Gladys? NOT. I found some if this out by eavesdropping, and then I asked BOB straight to his face if it was true. Turns out Bob and Alex MET in Wormwood Scrubs,

which would be dead exciting and INTERESTING except for the fact that we were going to be sleeping two feet away from them. But I don't think they were in for like GBH or anything. Bob won't say what he was in for. Anyway, Bob says they skipped out on their probation and ended up here. He says there are LOADS of Brits over here. He says they're like the cons that run away to the Costa del Sol, except they don't have any money or homes or anything. And Alex hasn't even bothered to learn any French. But what I want to fucking know is how come we still have to kiss them 'hello' in the French way every time we meet them even though they're ENGLISH???? Cheeky bastards. Alex does his begging with bananas thing and Bob just begs for his cash. I can't get my head around that though. Begging? Fuck. At least me and Vicks haven't stooped that low. Anyway, so we head to this other bridge that had this grassy slope next to it. There were three other tramps there as well. They were:

RICHARD: French, blond, always wears TOO tight blue trousers and an anorak. He has floppy blond hair and a big moustache. He fancies Vicks A LOT worst luck.

ALEX: who you know, scammy old Scottish coughing bastard etc.

NORBERT: he's very old and has one of those bumpy faces. Luckily we don't have to kiss him though as he's not normally part of the TRAMP posse. He has this huge bump on his neck like a second head that Vicks says is called a GOITRE. GROSSSSSS.

There was a bottle of wine going around and me and Vicks had some. I had to keep wiping the top of it without anyone seeing so that I didn't get any TRAMP germs. And we sat around for a bit just talking about shite.

Then these two really scruffy, dirty old tramps came up to us and Bob's like "Sorry, mate, this is our place," and they didn't want to go, but Richard is like, "Fuck off" but in French, so eventually they went.

And Bob said we should use our bags as pillows so that no one could nick them in the middle of the night. And Vicks goes, "Is this safe to be doing this?" and everyone laughed and Alex is like "We're the people most Parisians are afraid of, lassie," so Vicks seemed to look OKAY after that.

Then everyone just got into their sleeping bags and crashed out even though it could only have been about nine or something. I made sure no one else was too close to me and

Vicks. It was quite fun at first, like when we used to sleep in the Abandoned Church. Soon the others started snoring dead loudly. It was the strangest feeling, we were outside in a city, sleeping underneath a fucking bridge for fuck's sake! The river's dead loud at night, Gladys. Really weird and surreal. And the odd thing was, even though Alex kept making his coughy snorting sounds in his sleep, they didn't sound too bad outside. As if they fitted in. Can't explain it better than that. And although we were right by the river it wasn't that cold, which really surprised me. I could hear that Vicks was sleeping and the next thing I knew it was morning. I woke up and my eyes were dead gritty and my head felt all dirty. It was like in the middle of the night someone had come along and sprinkled dirt all over us. EMBARRASSING though, 'cos when I woke up my arms were wrapped around Vicks. I left them there for a while (I couldn't move because of pins and needles) and anyway it couldn't have woken her up as she never said anything about it.

When everyone had woken up and stowed away their shit, we all went to the MacShite in the Latin Quarter and Bob bought us all coffee with these voucher things that one of his 'punters' gave him when he was begging.

Then, Richard, Norbert and Alex buggered off to do whatever it was they did in the morning, and Bob took us to the Pompidou where he said we could stash our bags in the left luggage place so that we didn't have to carry them everywhere.

There are LOADS of things you need to know if you want to be a good tramp, Gladys. I think I might write an SAS survival book about it or something.

TRICKS so far are:

Leave luggage at the Pompidou although it's closed on Thursdays!!! WHY???

Always get to the food kitchen first before all the soup is gone and before the queue starts.

Bum fags early from the people on their way to work – they are too hassled to say no. (Yesterday Vicks got a whole pack of neatly rolled joints from this dead stiff-looking guy!!!! BONUS).

Never buy a Metro ticket, just jump over the turnstiles, although you have to be careful of cops. (Slight problem as haven't yet figured out how to sneak through the sliding doors in the Metro down at Les Halles. They automatically swing shut behind you when you put in your ticket and walk through, and are too high to jump over. I know there's a way of doing it, though, as Bob always uses that station when he goes off begging and that.) Use the toilets at the Pompidou EARLY before people come in and complain that we're brushing our teeth in there. BIG FUCKING DEAL. You'd think the public would be glad to see others looking after their hygiene, wouldn't you?

### **Poem about GAY SEX**

*There's a noise in the night,  
I think it's a fight,  
But it's only the gays  
Having their way  
Under the bridge.*

I'm getting better, aren't I, Gladys?

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Clochard (Tramp) Experience

How many policemen does it take to search a tramp?

There are six cops clustered around me and Richard. Two are checking out our passports, a policewoman is efficiently patting me down, and a male cop is doing the same to Richard. It's the third time I've been stopped and searched by the cops now. It's a routine all *clochards* have to go through. They don't give us any undue hassle, and we don't bitch about it too much. It's like we have an understanding with them. They do their job, and we do ours.

Thank God I remembered to stash the knife we nicked from Hervé in my rucksack, and that the fingernail-sized last piece of black is safely snuggled in the matted mass of hair at the back of my head. Even though I know the chances of it being discovered are practically zero, I still breathe a sigh of relief when the meaty policewoman finishes the job. I don't miss that she wipes her hands on her tree-trunk thighs when she's done. When the cops approached us, for a stomach-dropping second I thought she was the same woman who'd disappeared with my passport in the police station after the Pompidou Break-in Experience, but this one's far nicer and hasn't got a trace of a moustache at all.

The cops finish with me and Richard, hand us our documents and amble off. They're probably heading to the Pompidou bench where Sage is waiting for me. Shit. She'll be in an even fouler mood if she's searched without me around. She hates the cop routine with a passion. "At least buy me a drink first," she'd grumbled to the first policewoman who'd had the job of patting her down.

But I'm bugged if I'm going to worry about Sage right now. Richard and I make our way into the *Quartier de l'Horloge* and sit down on the wide concrete steps opposite the garish gold clock. I edge a little bit closer to him until our legs are almost touching. Even though it's practically summer, it's quite chilly here. Sage and I discovered it a couple of days ago. It's a hop, skip and a jump from the Pompidou, but it feels like a different world. We like it because its concrete and uneven paving stones remind us of the arcade near Waitrose in the Stourbridge Town Centre. It's a great place to smoke and take time-out from the other members of what Sage calls the Pompidou Posse. Apart

from the clock on the side of one of the buildings (which Sage thinks is kitsch shite) it's so dull it doesn't 'feel' like part of Paris at all. And it's nearly always deserted.

Richard flaps his hand in front of his face.

"Phew," he says. "I smell something *mal, ne c'est pas?*"

He's right. There's a smell like a blocked drain wafting around from somewhere. I really hope it's not coming from me. I didn't have time for even a cursory wash in the Pompidou toilets this morning before I was due to meet him for our 'walk'. I quickly light one of the fags I cadged off passers-by this morning and offer the pack to Richard. Christ, I hope the smoke masks the smell. If I don't shower soon I'm scared I'll spontaneously combust. We've been sleeping outside next to our bridge for over a week now, and I haven't changed my clothes in at least three days. The tiny cut on the middle finger of my right hand is stiffly painful and gooey with yellow pus. It's the first time I've ever had anything go septic. I ball my hand into a fist. Every pore is visible between my fingers; dirt has wormed and squirmed its way into the miniscule creases. My hands seem to stay clean for only a few seconds after I've washed them. My hair is heavy with grease and my scalp is continually gritty as if I've been rolling around on a beach. And horror of horrors, my teeth are starting to feel furry. What if they end up looking like Irish's mossy gnashers? Apart from the Pompidou Centre, you have to pay to use the public loos over by the crap sculpture pond, and as per usual, Sage and I are completely broke.

Richard and I smoke in silence. We learned early on that it's generally too much work trying to have a conversation. I've tried asking him how old he is, but he never seems to understand, even though it's one of the few questions I know I've got right. He must be at least in his twenties though. I take a peek at him without him noticing. His yellow hair flops silkily down over his eyes and I can't see any lines on his face. I've never gone out with a guy with a moustache before. My Nan says that only men with something to hide wear hair on their faces, but Hervé didn't try and screw us over too badly and he had that horrid goatee thing.

Last night while Sage was arguing with Bob about Margaret Thatcher or some stupid political thing, Richard and I sneaked away for a joint down by the river. He'd held my hand as soon as we'd left the others, but didn't try and snog me or anything even

though I'd thought the whole rambling next to the river thing was quite romantic. Weird. What was the point of sneaking away from the others if he wasn't going to try and get off with me? We'd also had quite a good laugh that afternoon together in Les Halles, but I still can't figure out if he likes me in that way. He's a bit of a mystery. He's only slept outside with us for two nights, and I've no idea where he goes on the others. Maybe I can ask Bob to do some snooping for me.

"*On y va?*" he says as we stomp out our fag butts.

"*Oui,*" I say, although I'm a bit disappointed we're leaving so soon. We climb down the steps and make our way to the front of the Pompidou. The usual suspects (Bob, Alex and Norbert) are all gathered around the bench, but today I can make out a few new faces. I spot Sage immediately. She's crouched on the cobblestones to the right of the bench, and is trying to stroke a little dog. I can't be certain, but it looks like the one that went mental at the police when we were with Scotty and Irish. Sage isn't having much luck making friends with it. Every time her hand comes anywhere close the dog tries to snap at it, and it's yipping and barking like it's really angry at her.

"Ralphie, shhhh!" An unfamiliar voice floats out of the cluster of *clochards*.

Something's going on. There's no early morning bottle of wine doing the rounds and the new arrivals are in deep conversation with Bob, whose face looks deadly serious. Without acknowledging me he waves Richard over to him and they immediately start rattling away in French.

I amble over to Sage.

"Hey, Sage, what's happening?"

"Dunno," she snaps. My heart sinks. She's still in the aftermath of the major sulk brought on by the fact that I'd left her to dump the bags in the Pompidou while I went off with Richard. I was hoping she'd be over it by the time I got back, but no hope of that. I decide to give her a few minutes to cool off and edge closer to where Richard and Bob are deep in conversation. I can't quite get the gist of what they're saying, but I hear Alex's name mentioned.

I wait for Bob to draw breath before I interrupt.

"What's going on, Bob?" I say.

His eyes dart madly all over the place, and he keeps rasping a hand over his unshaven cheeks and pulling down on his chin as if he's trying to stretch it. Blimey. I've never seen him like this before.

"Alex has been taken," he says, immediately turning back to Richard.

"You what?"

Sage looks up and wanders over.

"The Blues got him," Bob says.

What the fuck's he on about? Sage and I exchange confused glances. What the hell are 'the Blues'? Is Alex seriously depressed or something? An image of the scammy old Scotsman being carried away by Lightnin' Hawkins and B B King pops into my head. I don't ask Bob what he means though, in case I lose street cred. It's obviously some tramp code word.

"What the fuck do you mean, Bob?" Sage pipes in, voice carrying over Bob and Richard's conversation. "What do you mean 'the Blues got him'?"

Bob drags his attention away from Richard again. Both look at Sage in exasperation, but she obviously doesn't give a shit.

"Well?" she snaps.

Bob sighs. "The Blues are this special band of police who go around collecting tramps in their vans. It's high tourist season and they don't want their town looking messy." He shakes his head wearily.

Oh shit. How come we didn't know about this before?

"How do you know what these 'Blues' look like?" I say. For some reason I start thinking about the horrid creepy man who lures children into his gypsy wagon in *Chitty Bang Bang*.

"They dress in bright blue uniforms and overalls. You can't miss them."

"So they're not like the normal cops who search us every day?" My voice sounds small and scared. So much for street cred.

Bob chuckles. "No. You don't have to worry about *them*. But if the Blues arrive, you have to leg it, and fast."

“But how do they know if you’re a tramp or not? I mean you could just be a tourist, couldn’t you?” Sage says belligerently, as if the existence of the tramp police is entirely Bob’s fault.

Bob rubs his hands over his stubble again. His chin is red from too much yanking.

“I suppose it’s the dirt factor,” he says. “Plus, I think they keep an eye out for those of us who hang around for too long. Anyway, if you don’t hang around or beg in the posh areas you should be fine.” He gives me a reassuring smile.

“Posh areas?” Sage says.

“You know, St Germain, Opera, places like that.”

Sage snorts. “Not much fucking chance of that.”

I suddenly remember Alex. “What are they going to do with him, with Alex?”

Bob shrugs. “Depends. Sometimes they just take your shoes and dump you on the outskirts of Paris.”

“And the other times?” Sage asks.

“They lock you up, delouse you and shave your head.”

“Fuck,” Sage breathes, but I don’t know why she’s complaining. She’s always whinging on about her hair growing too long.

“It’s not all bad though, girls,” Bob says. “They always feed you a plate of couscous if they keep you over the night.”

“Great,” I say. I’m not sure what would be the worse punishment.

“But what if you don’t have any lice?” Sage asks.

Bob sighs. He’s obviously getting sick of our questions.

“You will when they let you out. The *clochard* cells are crawling with pestilence.”

Sage shudders. It’s her worst nightmare. Bob’s warned us that it’s extremely difficult to get rid of head and body lice when “you live outside of normal society.” Both Sage and I’ve had nits at school, so we’re not that bothered about them (although I haven’t got a clue how I’d get them out of my dreadlocks) but neither of us had even known such a gross thing as body lice existed. According to Bob they’re just like nits except they feed off your skin and breed in your clothes. He says they’re almost see-through and are dead difficult to spot. Sage finds the thought of this terrifying. On more

than one occasion I've seen her frantically checking the inside seams of her sweat-shirts for their little transparent bodies. I hope she's not going to get paranoid about this.

"So will Alex be all right?" I say.

Bob's face clouds over again. "We're on our way out to look for him, in case they've dumped him and he's stuck. It's not good though girls. You know how sick he is."

"Shall we come with?" I ask. "Maybe we could help." Although I'm buggered if I know what it is we could actually do.

"No girls," Bob says. "It's best you stay here. I'll meet you at St Eustache later."

"Okay," Sage says quickly, obviously relieved. She turns to me. "Anyway, we've got work to do, Vicks."

She's right. Today we're going to try out our pavement drawing skills.

Bob and Richard immediately head off. Although Bob turns and gives us a thumbs-up sign, Richard just stalks off without a backward glance. My stomach drops. Was it the smell? Maybe he's just too distracted and worried about Alex to think about me.

Something's snuffling around my boot. It's the little dog Sage was trying to stroke earlier. It's by itself and its string lead trails on the ground. I bend down to stroke it and it immediately snaps at my hand making me jump. I try and nudge it away with my boot. What's with these vicious little French dogs who hate me? This one's got the same snappy temperament as Jules's vile dog.

"You like? *Mon chien* – the dog?" I can't see who's spoken as the sun's too bright and the speaker's in silhouette.

"Er... *Oui*," I lie. "Very nice. What's his name?" Then I remember – Ralphie. I shield my eyes against the glare.

"*Pardon?*" the guy says. His English is obviously crap.

A cloud shifts across the sun and I'm able to check him out. I try and keep my expression steady. There's not a single patch of skin on his face that's not pitted and scarred with acne. His eyes are wide slits in his face like snips in brown paper. His hair hangs down his back in ragged dreads, but I can see they're not like mine -- the result of hours of dedicated work with beeswax. His hair is obviously matted because he's never washed it. He reaches out with a filthy hand and tugs a hank of my hair.

“Bob Marley, yeah!” He points to his own head. I swear there’s something crawling in there. His jeans are caked with grime and there’s a heavy studded belt slung around his hips.

“Ralphie, *viens!*” he calls to the dog, which is now trying to attack Sage’s laces. Another tramp I’ve never seen before ambles over to us. He looks like an older version of the scruffy dreadlocked guy; same dark weather-beaten skin and sun-creased eyes. But instead of dreads he’s wearing what looks like a filthy tea-cosy on his head.

“*Bonjour,*” Tea-cosy says to us. “What is your names?”

“Sage and Vicki,” I say.

“Ah. My name is Danny and this is Stefan.”

The dreadlocked guy nods and smiles. In startling contrast to the rest of him, his teeth are beautifully white and perfectly straight.

Next to me I can sense Sage fidgeting. She moves subtly away from the two tramps, no doubt in case they try and kiss us ‘hello’. I quickly bend down to pat the little dog again to avoid any opportunity of this and it snaps at my hand again. I pretend not to be bothered.

The older guy’s saying something.

“Stefan, he is a... *gitan*.... a gypsy. Me, I was a *restauranteur*. A *cookeur*.”

“A chef?” I say.

“*Oui. C’est vrai.*”

I don’t want to ask what happened to his restaurant, it can’t be good considering how he’s turned out.

“What happened to your restaurant, then?” Sage asks.

“*Non* money,” he shrugs. “*Et ma femme*, my husband, *non*, my wife, she is gone.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. I am. He seems like a nice guy. Although I’m a bit taken aback at how forthcoming he is about his life story without even being asked. Getting information about Bob and Alex’s background is like wringing blood from a stone.

“He’s your son?” Sage asks, nodding to Stefan.

“Stefan?” he says this to the dreadlocked guy in French. They both burst out laughing. “*Non, pas de tout! Il est seulement mon ami.*”

“Nah, they’re just friends,” I translate for Sage.

“Hmmm. That’s what they all say,” she says under her breath.

Stefan gathers up Ralphie’s lead.

“*Bon. Nous sommes* – we must be leaving you now,” Danny says, adjusting his tea-cosy hat. “We have the work to do.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say. With a wave they head off in the direction of the Rambuteau Metro stop.

Sage looks at me askance.

“Fuck, Vicks,” she says. “We’re like creepy old perve magnets or something.”

I don’t say anything. Apart from the acne, there’s something about the younger guy I quite like.

\*

“It’s shite, isn’t it?” Sage sighs.

“Yep,” I say. “Utter, utter, utter shite.”

I cock my head to one side and make my eyes go all blurry in a vain attempt to make our chalk pavement drawing look better. It doesn’t help.

We’ve made seven francs. The coins sit in Sage’s hat which is placed next to the drawing. Pity coins. If this was England some wit would have said, “’Ere you go love, go get yerself some art lessons.”

“And we haven’t even made enough for a fucking packet of fags.” Sage angrily scuffs her boot over the drawing, smearing it into an even worse mess.

“I know. Total cock up.” I’m really gutted. We’d planned on using the money we made today on washing our clothes and going for a shower. But there’s no hope of that now.

Last night, before the light had finally died, Sage had made a rough sketch of what was to have been our masterpiece. It was a complex mass of interlocking spirals that looked totally cool and Escher-like. But translated into a chalk drawing it looks like the work of a blind man with too much time on his hands.

“We should’ve done what Bob said and done a copy of the Mona Lisa or some such shite.” Sage sighs and wipes her hand over her head.

She looks like a skin-headed clown. Her face is almost entirely blue and pink. Our hands are so caked with chalk we look like we're wearing colourful gloves. And our art supplies are now nearly non-existent. There are only tiny crumbs of chalk left in the massive box. Bugger. I'm not sure what the chances are of us scoring another one.

Sage reads my mind. "Think there's any chance of getting Richard the git to get us another box, Vicks?"

"Dunno," I say. For once I don't bother to ask Sage not to call him a 'git'.

After his dismissive behaviour this morning, the whole Richard thing is doing my head in. It's practically all I thought about while Sage and I were on our knees making bad art this afternoon. Maybe he's got a split personality or something? Yesterday evening he seemed to be completely into me and the afternoon we spent together had been quite a good laugh. After breakfast yesterday Bob asked him if he'd take us 'shopping' for art supplies and he appeared to be dead chuffed with the idea. Especially when Sage said she wasn't going to come with us and would hang out in the Pompidou Centre music library instead.

Richard and I rambled companionably around Les Halles for a bit before heading into the bowels of this creepy little shopping centre that I'd never known existed before. It was dark and echoey and its walls were covered with slightly grubby white tiles. The French were obviously as crap at doing shopping malls as they were at doing pubs. Without hesitating, Richard led me straight into a shop that had no indication on the outside that it was an art supply store. He stood next to a magazine rack and gestured for me to look around to see what Sage and I needed. There was a confusing mass of shelves stuffed full of all sorts of paint tubes and brushes and it took me ages to find a box of chalk. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with it, so I left it where it was and pointed it out to Richard. I didn't know if he was planning on buying it for me or what. He said something to the woman behind the counter and then he'd abruptly taken my arm and ushered me out of the shop. I followed him meekly out of the arcade and into the sunlight, totally confused as to what was going on. Actually I was a bit pissed off. I'd been counting on getting hold of something Sage and I could use to make some cash. Then, as we made our way back towards the Pompidou Centre, he whirled around to face me and whipped the box of chalk out from the inside of his jacket.

“How the fuck you do that?” I spluttered, deeply in awe. I hadn’t seen him go anywhere near the shelf where the box was displayed. He’d even waved ‘*au revoir*’ to the woman serving behind the counter as if we’d just been innocently browsing in the shop.

Richard just shrugged modestly. “*Magique?*” he said.

Even Sage looked impressed when I told her what had happened, although she still calls Richard a ‘floppy haired Frog git’ at every opportunity.

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It’s supper time. We made it just in time to wash our hands and faces in the Pompidou loos and collect our bags from the left luggage counter. I slog my rucksack over my shoulder and follow Sage up the centre’s sloping forecourt. I’m beginning to really loathe my bag. I thought I was being hip and cool buying a rucksack from the army surplus store, but I’m bugged if I can figure out how the hell squaddies manage to carry these bags on their back for more than ten minutes without throwing them down in despair and kicking the shit out of them. The leather straps cut like razor blades into my shoulders and it never keeps its shape. It was fine when we had a place to dump our stuff on a regular basis, but now we have to carry our bags with us most of the time it’s becoming almost unbearable. I think of it as a monkey on my back, even though I know the saying means you’re an alky or something. And my sleeping bag never stays rolled in a neat little tube like Sage’s. It always manages to free itself from the bundle I tie to the base of the rucksack and ends up trailing along the ground behind me like a padded polyester bride’s train. It’s becoming frayed and utterly filthy. Sage smugly has no trouble with her rucksack. It’s a modern nylon one with thoughtfully padded shoulders.

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I’m in a seriously grumpy mood as we join the queue of soup kitchen tramps outside St Eustache. My back’s aching and the cut on my hand’s stinging from where I scrubbed away the chalk dust. A couple of the tramps gathered in groups around the church grunt and nod at us in recognition as we arrive. They all seem to keep to their

'types'. Bottom of the barrel are the raggedy old stinking guys who have gummy toothless mouths and dress in rags (they seem to be mostly French); then there are the middle class '*clochard de luxe*' tramps like Alex and Norbert, who have found themselves washed up in hobo land for whatever reason; and then there are the ones like us and Bob, the aristocrats who still have their own teeth and who could rejoin the human race if they wanted.

Sage and I haven't spoken since we collected our bags. Both of us are smarting from our spectacular failure in the pavement painting stakes. As we move closer to the front of the queue I pull my rucksack off my shoulder, throw it on the steps and kick it viciously. Sage looks over at me and raises an eyebrow.

"Fucking thing," I mutter.

Someone taps my shoulder. At first I think it's one of the tramps behind me about to complain that my bag's in the way. I'm just about to open my mouth to tell whoever it is to fuck off, but the words die in my throat as I'm confronted with a vaguely familiar and widely grinning face. It's the ginger-haired, one-legged guy with the Mohican who always leers at Sage and me whenever we see him around Les Halles.

He's squashed himself into the queue just behind us. The raggedy tramps he's shoved out the way don't look even slightly annoyed. This would never happen at home. On the few occasions I'd been in the queue for pick'n mix at Woolworths with my Nan, even the slightest indication that anyone was thinking of pushing her way to the front had the surrounding old ladies seething and tutting for all they were worth.

"All right, girls?" the guy says in a Welsh Tom Jones accent.

"Er, yeah, thanks," I say. "You?"

"I'm Taffy," he says.

Sage takes one look at him and her face immediately shuts down.

"I'm Vicki and this is Sage," I say.

"I know who you are," he says meaningfully, then, almost as an afterthought, he nods to a lanky guy hovering uncomfortably to the side of him. "This here is Hippy."

Hippy glares at a space above our shoulders and doesn't say a word. He looks almost as pissed off as Sage. God knows where he got his nickname, though. He doesn't look anything like a hippy. In fact, apart from the tatty trilby perched on his head and his

mangy Hitler moustache he's a dead ringer for Delboy's brother Rodney in *Only Fools and Horses*. But what's with these other unimaginative nick-names? Everyone seems to have one. Scotty, Irish and Taffy: All the British Isles represented. Maybe Sage and I should change our names to 'English' and 'Brummie' or something to fit in.

"Seen yer around," Taffy winks lasciviously at me. He doesn't try to be subtle about this at all. "You hang out with Bob's crowd, don't yer?"

"Yeah," I say.

"I think you're gorgeous," he says straight out, his eyes shamelessly travelling up and down my body. Blood rushes to my cheeks and I pull my cardigan tighter around my front.

"Thanks," I mumble. Sage yawns ostentatiously.

It's impossible for me to return his compliment.

Whoever cut Taffy's orange hair into a Mohican must have been totally pissed. It's badly asymmetrical and leans drunkenly to one side. He also has a patchy goatee that would be like Hervé's except it's unkempt and ragged. If Hervé was a fawn, this guy's a red-headed, one-legged version of Satan. To make matters worse, small red sores bloom around his mouth. His almost non-existent ginger eyebrows top the only good feature that I can see: piercing bright blue eyes.

"You feel like coming with us after?" he says. "We've got some blow."

"Where to?" I say.

He shrugs. "You tell me, beautiful."

Taffy's tongue is practically hanging out of his mouth. I glance over at Sage to see how she's taking this blatant flirting. Surprise, surprise; she's ignoring him and is concentrating on the back of the *clochard* in front of us.

"We've got to wait for Bob," I say, but it sounds pathetic, like a small child making an excuse as to why it can't get into a stranger's car. I wonder why Sage hasn't told him to fuck off yet. Maybe she's tempted by the offer of a spliff? But even though the way he's leering at me is doing my head in, part of me is quite intrigued. It's been ages since Sage and I have spent any time with anyone our own age. Everyone we hang round with these days seems to be older than our parents.

“I’ll take yer back to Bob after we’ve had some fun,” Taffy says. Still Sage remains tight-lipped. “Don’t say much, do yer?” Taffy taps her shoulder to get her attention.

“What happened to your leg?” she asks in a snippy tone of voice.

“Car accident,” he says, almost proudly. “Boosted a car, rolled it, got me leg trapped under. Didn’t even get done for taking and driving away. Magistrate said I’d suffered enough.” Without being asked, he moves the stump of his right leg upwards and pulls open the folded over trouser leg that covers it. I don’t want to look, but can’t seem to tear my eyes away. A vicious-looking scab zigzags across the lumpy end of his thigh where his knee once was. The wound looks raw and only semi-healed over. It stands out starkly red against the ragged mess of pink scar tissue that seals the stump. I try my best not to look sick. Surprisingly, Sage looks quite impressed and leans down to peer at it. She’s normally quite squeamish.

“Hasn’t it healed properly?” she asks, forgetting for a second to be rude.

Taffy shrugs. “Keep bashing it,” he says matter-of-factly.

Sage opens her mouth to ask something else, but then I catch sight of Bob’s portly figure jogging up to us and I nudge her.

“All right?” Bob gasps as he joins us. He’s looking harassed and his face is bright red as if he’s been running for some time.

“All right, Bob?” Taffy says.

“Yeah,” Bob says, throwing Taffy a slightly confused glance as if he’s trying to place him. He turns to us.

“Alex is in the hospital!” he takes in a shuddering breath.

“Shit,” I say. “That sounds bad.”

“Pneumonia.” He shakes his head wearily. “Apparently he collapsed when they put him in the cell.”

“Christ!” Poor old Alex. I think back to the night he stayed with us. I can’t imagine anyone being sicker than that.

“Listen girls, I’ve got to back there, check he’s got everything he needs. I’ll meet you by the bridge later.” His eyes flicker towards Taffy and Hippy. “You be okay?”

“Sure,” I say. “Give our love to Alex.”

With a nod and another glance at Taffy and Hippy, Bob hurries off.

“We’ll look after them, Bob!” Taffy calls.

“Cheers!” Bob shouts without turning around.

“We don’t need looking after,” Sage growls through clenched teeth.

“Steady on there, tiger,” Taffy says, winking.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do,” Sage snaps.

Taffy bursts out laughing.

“Calm *down*, sister,” he says. Sage narrows her eyes and looks at a point over Taffy’s shoulder as if he’s beneath her concern.

Despite the Sage-Taffy fireworks, I’m beginning to feel slightly reassured. If Taffy was dodgy then Bob would have warned us, surely?

Taffy and Hippy wait while we collect our soup and food. They don’t get any for themselves. They follow us over to our normal spot on the wide stone steps opposite the church.

“Not hungry?” I say to Taffy.

“Not for food,” he leers.

Sage shakes her head in disgust. “She’s got a fucking boyfriend,” she snaps. I look at her in surprise.

“Oh yeah?” Taffy says, but he doesn’t look as if he gives a toss.

“So why don’t you leave us the fuck alone?” Sage says.

“Just trying to be friendly,” Taffy winks at me. I can’t help it, I smile back.

“So go and try somewhere else,” Sage says, scowling at me.

“Jesus, yer mate’s quite protective, isn’t she?” Taffy says. “We’re only offering some blow and a few laughs, nothing else, honest.” Taffy hitches his crutches under his arms and spreads his hands in an ‘I’m innocent’ gesture. He wobbles unsteadily on one army booted foot.

Sage snorts, but doesn’t say anything else.

It’s weird trying to eat while someone is staring at you. I become immensely self-conscious and almost forget to give Sage my Baby Bel cheese. She’s already passed me her tin of butter beans. I’m not sure I can manage two cans tonight. There are a couple of benefits of sleeping outdoors, though. *Beans, beans they’re good for your heart...*

“You don’t eat here?” I say to Taffy. I’m curious to see if it’s possible to have a normal conversation with him.

“Nah. Never eat that shite.” Taffy looks at our food with distaste. Without waiting for an invite he chucks his crutches onto the floor and with a sinuous but creepy hopping movement plonks himself down next to me. Hippy immediately sits down next to Taffy, but gets up again straight away as if the stone step has burned his bum. He hasn’t stopped fidgeting since we’ve sat down. He’s got ants in his pants as Nan would say. In contrast to Taffy’s ruddy complexion, his skin is so pale that the spots on his face stand out as if they’re coated in fluorescent paint.

“Taffy,” he says.

“What?” Taffy snaps, dragging his eyes away from me. Hippy seems to shrink.

“It’ll be closed soon.” This comes out in a whine. For the first time I notice that Hippy has a thick *Eastenders* accent.

“Fook. I told you I wanted to check out this woman, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but-”

“*Fook*, Hippy.”

Sage and I exchange glances. There’s obviously no confusion about who wears the trousers in the Taffy/Hippy relationship. Taffy turns to us and sighs as if he’s got the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“You wanna come with us to the chemist to get Hippy here his medicine? Then we’ll go somewhere after. It won’t take long.”

“You sick, Hippy?” I say, trying to sound concerned.

Hippy snorts and looks at me as if I’m mad.

“Yeah right,” he says. “Look sick, do I?”

I want to say, well yeah, you look fucking terrible *actually*. He’s clenching and opening his fists and his cratered face is slimy with sweat.

Sage says: “No. We don’t want to go with you to get your fucking medicine.”

“Ah, c’mon,” Taffy says to her in a wheedling voice that’s a complete contrast to the way he snapped at Hippy. “I was only mucking around with your friend. What else yer going to do?”

It's true. It'll probably be hours before we meet up with Bob and the others. I shrug.

"What do you think, Sage?" I say.

"What's wrong with him?" Sage says to Taffy, through a mouthful of Baby Bel and baguette.

"Nothing. Needs his codeine fix is all."

"His what?"

"Codeine. Yer know, what they put in cough medicine. Bit of a buzz it gives yer." Despite herself Sage looks interested.

Hippy scowls and starts picking at a yellow-headed spot on his chin that's the size of a large bluebottle. I'm suddenly no longer hungry.

"Got any fags, then?" Sage says, dumping the remains of her baguette and soup cup on the floor. We've smoked the twenty we collected this morning from passers-by.

"Here you go, love," Taffy says, ignoring Sage's black look at the 'love'.

She snatches his pack of JPS without even a nod of thanks and passes me one.

"So we're off then?" Taffy says.

Before we can react, he grabs my rucksack and effortlessly slings it over his shoulder on top of his smaller, more convenient bag.

Now we've got no choice but to follow him. He clatters off down the road parallel to the front of the church like a heavily laden three-legged spider, his folded over trouser leg swinging with every lurch of the crutches. Hippy trots after him eagerly. Sage and I have to scramble to gather our stuff together and catch him up. I'm amazed at the speed Taffy's travelling.

Sage nudges me as we leg it after them. "I don't like this, Vicks," she says.

"Come on, Sage," I say, already out of breath. "Bob would have said if they were dodgy."

But I don't like it either.

## SAGE

### Code names for tramps who are members of the POMPIDOU POSSE:

Richard: Git (Because he is one).

Bob: Poppy (from his eyes).

Stefan: Stig (From STIG OF THE DUMP, that series that was on telly about the caveman boy).

Danny: Benny (from the CROSSROADS programme: the nutter who always wore a crap woolly hat on his head. Danny wears almost the SAME one!!).

Taffy: Doris (I'm not sure why. It just seemed to 'fit'. Vicks wanted to call him Jake the Peg, but that's too obvious, innit, Gladys?).

Hippy: George (from the telly programme, 'Rainbow': the stuffed hippo who's as thick as shit and is always SAD and brings everyone down).

Norbert: Lumpy (because he is).

Alex: Smelly (because he is).

As you see, there are quite a few of us now, Gladys. Quite a little crew.

And we've found a new place to sleep!!! And a new way to make money!! (Although not MUCH money, to be fair).

The other day, Stefan and Danny who are now posse members showed us a very cool spot to kip: Right in front of LOVELY Notre Dame in the bushes!! The bushes are so thick and over-grown no one from the outside can see in, and Bob reckons the Blues won't suspect that tramps would be brave enough to sleep in such an OBVIOUS place. Even though Stefan NEVER seems to wash and Danny's always pissed as a fart, fair play to them. We're the first tramp posse to suss out this NEW PLACE and so it is OURS. It's also dead convenient as it's just across the bridge from St Michel and close to the Pompidou where we dump our bags.

ANYWAY, the money situation has improved slightly. Wait till you hear, Gladys, it's HILARIOUS!! Yesterday, Vicks and I were hanging around the St Michel fountain with vile Taffy, when this fat American woman comes up to me and Vicks and asks if she can take our photograph. I'm about to say, "No, fuck off," when Vicks suddenly says, "Sure, but it'll cost you ten francs." And the woman paid! Vicks looked dead surprised that she'd thought of saying that, and I was really proud of her for thinking so quickly. And

then ANOTHER bloke, who saw what was going on, asked us the same thing, and we made twenty francs for doing fuck all!!! Although I think it was mainly my doing as Vicks had asked me to use the rest of the gel that day to do her hair up in a Mohican, so she looked dead nice, and I'd just shaved my head again in the bogs at the Pompidou so BOTH of us looked quite cool.

We should have used the money for cleaning up a bit, but we decided to buy food instead. I'm sick of the soup kitchen shit and we needed a break.

Vicks says that if we could only get our act together and make some cash on a daily basis we'd have it made. Because what's weird is this: although Bob acts as if we're like his daughters or something he almost NEVER buys us anything or even offers to lend us any MONEY. Tramps are tight-arses obviously. And it's impossible for me to nick anything from them. They don't mind sharing their wine, though, which is a BONUS, although Vicks was worried that they'd think we were TAKERS, so she said we should share the rest of our black with them. And now it's all gone, worst luck. It was my INSURANCE if we ever needed cash in a hurry.

BOB says he can show us a couple of good begging spots where we're sure to make tons of cash, but FUCK it Gladys. I'm not sure I can stoop that low. Vicks says she'll give it a go, but I reckon if we keep hanging around the fountain at St Michel everyday for photo opportunities we'll be fine. Mind you, the other day me and Vicks decided to spy on Taffy. He's always going on about how much dosh he makes as a beggar, but neither of us believed him on account of the CRAP way he looks. After we'd all had our morning coffee at the St Michel Macshite we'd followed him through the Latin Quarter and down towards the main boulevard in St Germain (DEAD dangerous because of the BLUES). He propped himself against the wall outside a swish looking café as if he was just hanging out, and pulled out a cardboard sign. I couldn't read what it said from where we were hiding behind a bus stop shelter on the other side of the road, but it seemed to work like a charm!! Vicks said Taffy played his 'punters' like a violin. He appeared to be cracking jokes with them and chatting with several who treated him like an old mate. One of them even brought him a cup of coffee! Vicks says that Taffy's like the tax man for guilty consciences or something. UnFUCKINGbelievable.

Ha ha! And talking of Taffy, it FINALLY looks like the Welsh git has given up on trying to shag Vicks! But there was never any real chance for the ginger bastard. Vicks says she'll only get off with Taffy "when there's no longer a hole in my arse," which is one of her Nan's sayings.

I mean, even a dumb fuckhead like him can see she's still got the hots for VILE Richard. (Why oh WHY has Vicks got such bad taste in men? I can't get my fucking head around it. We have much more fun when we're on our own together without anyone else interfering, but she doesn't seem to realise this. And who'll have to pick up the pieces when Richard fucks her around again? Guess who, Gladys. Yep. ME of course). It's SO obvious that she only likes him because he's not always panting after her like most of the blokes she knows, but when I tell her this she just DENIES it.

So the other day Taffy says to me, "Yeah, well, Vicki's not that nice anyway, and I reckon she's got black blood in her." Ha! Bad thing is though, I think he's thinking about trying it on with me next. Foul Welshman. Duh. Why are blokes so thick? Like I'm really going to be interested in a one-legged, drug-addicted, GINGER Welsh fuckhead who spouts racist crap? AND he was showing me and Vicks his tattoos the other day and one of them is a Swastika. Vicks didn't say anything about it although she did go a bit white. He'd done most of them himself and they were SHITE, Gladys, like prison tats. And Hippy's not much better. He's like Taffy's servant or something, and is either moping around stoned out of his head or whining at Taffy to go with him to get the eight million bottles of medicine he chugs down every day. He's dead rude to me and Vicks but treats Taffy like he's a god or something. I reckon he's in love with Taffy and hates girls who interfere in their relationship, but Vicks says this is crap as statistically there probably wouldn't be more than one pouf in the posse, and Bob's DEFINITELY a bender.

What else can I tell you about our new fun-filled EXCITING TRAMP lifestyle? Oh yeah...

I HATE Richard but he did do something quite cool last week. One morning Bob says he's going to take us all 'Tramp Shopping' (which is NOT where you go off and BUY tramps or anything, Gladys ha ha). So me, Vicks, Bob, Richard, Alex and Norbert all take

the RER (which is MUCH posher and bigger than the Metro but quite similar) to this massive supermarket place somewhere outside the city. It was MUCH bigger than Waitrose or Sainsburys and it had like a thousand aisles that seemed to go on forever. Tramp Shopping is a piece of piss and a really good laugh. What you do is go up to the deli counters in the store and choose what slices of meat, cheese or whatever you want that you're supposed to pay for when you leave. BUT as you walk around PRETENDING to shop for other stuff, you eat the meat and drink whatever takes your fancy and no one bothers to stop you!! BIZARRE! Vicks and I completely stuffed ourselves with pastrami and this funny cheese with holes in it like you see on cartoons. Anyway, while me, Vicks and Bob were Tramp Shopping and wandering around making rude comments about all the arbitrary stuff in the other parts of the supermarket, we see Richard piling a trolley high with food and all kinds of other things. And we're all thinking, "What the fuck's he up to?" I mean, he's dead good at nicking stuff, but he couldn't have fitted all that stuff in his pockets however big they are. Anyway, so all of us follow him, dead confused, but instead of going to the checkout places he just walks out with the trolley – straight past a security guard! He didn't even rush or anything, just strolled out as if he was completely innocent!! As soon as we joined him outside he said we could have what we wanted out of the trolley, but all he took out was a thick metal pipe that looked like a crowbar or something. Typical though, Gladys, the stuff he'd shoved into the trolley was mostly crap. Tea-towels and kitchen equipment. WHY?!!! Although we did get some soap and a few cans of Coke. Better than nothing I suppose. BUT THEN, when we were walking through the parking lot back to the RER station Richard smashes the back windscreen of a car in with the crowbar and nicks a jacket and a handbag off the back seat!!!! Of course Vicks looked dead impressed and thought he was really brave to take such a chance, dozy cow. I mean, how clever do you have to be to smash a car window in? Duh. I was DEAD angry, as he could have got all of us in the shit. He was lucky the place was so quiet.

Oh GOD, with all the TRAMP excitement I almost forgot – you'll NEVER GUESS who we saw on the Metro the other day!!!

Me and Vicks were practising the trick you have to do to sneak through the slidy doors at Les Halles without paying. They're quite narrow and only open for a few seconds after you've slotted in your ticket at the one end. I'm fucked if I know what fat people do, though. Maybe they just get stuck? Mind you, there aren't that many fat arses in Paris. Anyway, I digress, as Bob's always saying. So to get through these slidy door things you have to wait for someone to go through first, stay really close to them and slip through yourself. So I'm following this guy through, but I don't time it quite right and end up bumping into his back. The guy turns round and guess who it is?? It's fucking Potato Head!!! At first I just wanted to scarper, and Vicks almost wet her knickers when she saw him!!

Anyway, Potato Head looks like he's really glad to see us (ha ha – hope he's forgotten about the great hash robbery!!) and kisses us 'hello' although you could tell he didn't REALLY want to as we must have been even stinkier than when we lived with Hervey. He's asking us all about how we are etc and we're going "great yeah blah blah" when one of the old leper tramps we know from the soup kitchen, and who's begging in the Metro corridor, waves and shouts '*Bonjour*' to us as if we're old friends!!!! Potato Head scarpers after that, so we didn't get a chance to pick his brain about Hervey and the rest.

### **WHY IT'S BETTER TO BE A TRAMP**

We have the power of FREEDOM.  
We NEVER pay for the underground.  
We never pay for food.  
We never pay for rent.  
We can do what we like all day, EVERY DAY.

### **WHY IT'S CRAP**

Tablets are running out (although this isn't really a TRAMP related problem, is it?). From now on I'm only going to take half a tab each day to stretch them out.  
Need money to go and have a shower.  
Nowhere to permanently keep our bags.  
Scary threat of the Blues and lice and couscous.  
Have to KISS other smelly tramps 'hello' all the time which is GROSS.

Okay, okay, I KNOW there are more BAD things in the list than GOOD things, but the good outweighs the bad on the whole. HONEST!!

## VICKI: The Begging Experience

Oh God.

I have absolutely no idea where to put my eyes. I finally decide to drop my head as if I'm praying or something and let them hover on a piece of old chewing-gum stuck to the pavement in front of where I'm sitting. I'm gripping my sign so hard my hands are starting to ache, and small circles of sweat are blossoming around my fingers and darkening the cardboard. Through my fringe I can make out the different kinds of shoes traipsing back and forth in front of me, and it's murder resisting the urge to look up at their owners. On the couple of occasions when I've accidentally caught someone's eye, they've looked straight through me as if I don't exist.

I'm gasping for a fag, but according to Bob one of the golden rules is never to smoke when you're 'on the job'. This is one of the few nuggets of wisdom he shared with us during our brief begging lesson this morning as we made our way here on the RER. After mine and Sage's disastrous attempt at street painting we've bitten the bullet and decided to give begging a go. After all, if Bob and Taffy the Welsh tosser can do it, so can we. As Sage said this morning as we were psyching each other up, we're much better looking than them *and* we've got all our limbs. We'd approached Bob yesterday afternoon and he'd promised to take us and show us a couple of good begging spots out in the Paris suburbs. Apparently the Blues don't bother picking up *clochards* who work outside the city, so at least we'd be safe.

But I didn't realise it would be so hard. Taffy had made it seem like a piece of piss. I keep trying to convince myself that it's much better than having to get a job. It's not as though begging's actual *work* is it? But truth be told it's a thousand times worse than when Sage and I collected money for the buskers. I'm feeling just like I do in those dreams where I realise I've forgotten to put on any trousers and I'm wandering around the Mander Centre naked from the waist down.

I'm constantly aware of every movement of my body as I fidget around to make myself more comfortable. Risking a quick peek upwards I accidentally catch a passing man's eye. He frowns at me as if I'm a piece of dog shit he's just avoided stepping in and

disappears through the hissing supermarket doors a few feet away from where I'm huddled. Bastard.

I concentrate on the pavement again and count the passing feet. A pair of scuffed stilettos approaches and hesitates. I hold my breath. There's the telltale 'clink' of a few coins dropping into the hat placed in front of my crossed legs. I mumble a barely audible '*merci*', and the stilettos clip-clop on their way. Result! I wait until there's a gap in the shoe traffic, lean forward and peer into the hat to count the coins.

Ten francs. It's nearly enough to pay for a shower. Making sure no one's looking, I take out the only silver coin in the bunch and sneak it into my pocket. That way the scattering of centimes in the hat looks all the more pathetic (another Bob tip). I need much more than this, though. Maybe I don't look hungry and desperate enough? I try my best to look meek and mournful, but can't hold it for long without my cheeks hurting. Hopefully Sage is having better luck.

And *Christ*, it's boring. Mind you, my nails could do with some attention. I have to keep them as short as possible otherwise the dirt creeps underneath them and it takes ages to willow it out with a matchstick.

\*

I'm busy gnawing on the nail of my little finger when a pair of tasselled loafers stops in front of me. Goody. I wait for the clink of coins. It doesn't come and the loafers don't move.

"Oh you poor thang!"

I can't help but look up at the sound of the voice. There's a youngish woman staring down at me. Her podgy face is framed in an unflattering bowl haircut and there's no mistaking the pitying expression on her face. She abandons her trolley and squats down on her haunches, inches in front of me. Oh shit. I wasn't expecting this. Willing her to move on, I stare fixedly at the rigid creases in her jeans. There's no way I'm going to look her in the eye.

"How terrible for you!" she says, in an American or Canadian accent. She sounds a bit like the Canadian nannies at the park where I used to take Nausicaa. Canadian

accents are rounder somehow. “*Je suis... er... desole,*” she says in stilted French. I’m a bit relieved. If her French is crap I can pretend to be a Frog and that way I can avoid having to chat to her. She reads the words on my begging notice slowly, like a kid learning to read. “*Aidez-moi, s’il vous plait. J’ai faim*— help me, please, I’m hungry. Oh! I bet you are!” At first I think she’s being sarcastic, but then she stands up and starts rummaging around in her over-laden trolley.

“Here, take these.” She places a pile of groceries next to me. Out of the corner of my eye I check them out. A punnet of those vile yogurts I used to feed Nausicaa (in some weird flavour I don’t recognise), a loaf of sandwich bread and two tins. My heart sinks when I see what they are. Typical: fucking butter beans in tomato sauce. As if I don’t get enough from the sodding soup kitchen.

“*Merci,*” I say. But what the hell am I going to do with these bloody things? No one will give me anything with a pile of groceries scattered around me. They’ll never think I’m starving if I’m sitting next to a kilo of yogurt.

“Is there anything else I can do to help?” the woman drawls slowly, as if she’s speaking to a mentally deficient child.

Yeah, give me some cash you daffy Canadian bitch.

“*Non, merci bien,*” I say, ladling on a heavy French accent and willing her away. She stares intently into my face. For a second I think she’s going to pat my head.

“How you must suffer.”

*Oh. My. Fucking. Christ.* She takes one of my hands between two of hers, and her eyes grow large and watery as they fill with tears. I resist the urge to snatch my hand back. Hasn’t she ever seen a beggar before? Don’t they have them in Canada or America or wherever? A few shoppers wander past and I can sense that they’re staring at us.

“*Comment appelez-vous?*” she asks. Oh crap. I have to think of a French name. I search my brain, but nothing comes. She asks me again, this time slower. Then I have it.

“Emmanuelle,” I say, silently thanking my brother who’d uncovered my dad’s secret porno stash.

“*Je m’appelle Stacey,*” she says. Who gives a shit? I think. Am I turning into Sage? No, Sage would have told her fuck off by now. I make an attempt to smile gratefully and pathetically at her. I know it’s the kind of expression do-gooders live for.

Stacey reminds me of the couple of hard-core bible bashers who occasionally helped my Nan with her jumble sales.

“I have to go now,” she says, slowly, as if she’s scared this news will upset me. “The family I work for will be expecting me.” Her face screws up as she concentrates on translating this into French for me. “Er...I hope life treats you better soon, I really do.”

I nod again meekly. “*Merci*,” I mumble in what I hope is a starving beggar voice.

With a last simpering look in my direction she slowly wheels her trolley away.

I wait for her to disappear around the corner before I jump up and dump the bread in the bin near to where I’ve been sitting. An old lady wearing a headscarf sees me doing this and tuts and shakes her head. I decide to keep the yogurts and tins. I roll up my sign, slip it inside my jacket and collect the hat and the change. I’ve had enough. Better check the time.

Blimey! I’ve only been here thirty minutes! It felt like about three hours. Best go check on Sage.

\*

It takes me a few seconds to get my bearings. We’re miles outside Paris in the suburb of Rueil Mal-Maison, which didn’t sound too promising to me (*mal* meaning ‘bad’ after all), and Bob didn’t seem too keen on hanging around here. He’d scarpered off back to the train station as soon as he’d shown Sage and me where to beg. Not that I blame him. The area’s as shitty as its name. The houses and apartments are plain concrete boxes and there are hardly any of those tall white Parisian apartments and cobbly little streets leading nowhere. And everyone wandering round here looks fatter and tattier than they do in the centre of Paris.

It’s a real pity that our photograph money has dried up. There’s no chance of my hair forming into a proper Mohican without a good supply of spray and gel, and we’ve run out. No one wants a photo of a scammy old tramp with floppy, dirty hair do they?

I recognise the green neon cross of a pharmacy at the end of the high street where Sage is begging, and head down there. Even though the street is as busy as any of the high streets at home, I have no trouble spotting her cross-legged figure sitting outside a

furniture store. She doesn't look up as I stop in front of her. She's obviously employing the same 'pretend I don't exist' strategy as I did. I peer down at her hat. A few centimes glimmer sadly back at me. My heart sinks. I was counting on Sage making up the shortfall.

"*Bonjour*, leetle girl," I say in a fake French accent, making my voice as deep as possible.

Sage jumps and looks up, a ready scowl on her face. Then she sees it's me and her angry expression is replaced with one of relief.

"Oh, it's you. Hi. Ouch!" She winces as she gets to her feet and stretches her back. "Sore arse."

"So? How did you do?"

"Fucking awful," she says. "Hardly any of the bastards stopped." She nudges the hat with her boot. It makes a faint clinking sound.

I bend down and collect the cash. Four francs. If we pool our money we have just enough to pay for one load of washing.

I shrug. "Better than nothing. I made about ten, so at least we can get our clothes done."

"Yeah. How long have I been sitting here?"

"About forty minutes."

"Fuck. It felt like days!"

"I know, how weird is that?"

"I'm sure this is a shit spot though. I reckon Bob keeps all the good places for himself."

"Nah," I say. "Bob wouldn't do that." Would he?

"Shall we knock this on the head?"

"Yeah," I agree. I'm glad I'm not the one suggesting we call it a day. "We can always come back tomorrow, can't we?"

"Yep." She bends down and collects her hat and the jumper she was sitting on.

"Good news, though, Sage," I say as she straightens up. "Look what some daffy bitch gave me instead of money."

I show her the vile flavoured yogurts and the cans of butter beans in tomato sauce.

“Thank God for that,” she says without missing a beat or changing her expression. “I was scared the soup kitchen was going to run out of them.”

\*

We wander down the high street towards the train station. Sage grabs my arm as I’m about to blithely walk in and hop over the turnstiles.

“Wait, Vicks!” she hisses.

There are about ten cops crawling around the front of the station and hanging out by the ticket booths and turnstiles.

“Bugger,” I say. “What the hell are we going to do now?”

Sage shrugs. “Wait for them to piss off, I guess. There’s no way we can pay for a fucking ticket or anything.”

“Shall we go back and do some more work for a bit?” I suggest, immediately regretting this. It’s the last thing I feel like doing.

“Up to you,” Sage says, but she doesn’t look too keen, either.

“You got any fags left?” I ask. Sage takes the battered Marlboro packet we use for our morning ‘collections’ out of her inside pocket. It’s empty. I could have sworn there were two in there when I left her to head to my pitch.

My eyes stray over towards the magazine stand a couple of metres from the train station. Sage follows my gaze. We don’t need to speak. We’re both thinking the same thing.

“Fuck it,” she says. “We’ll come back tomorrow. Maybe we’ll have better luck then. One day won’t make any difference to our clothes, eh?”

“That’s the spirit!” I say.

We buy a packet of Lucky Strikes from the stand and wander down the street until we find an empty bench.

I light my cigarette and inhale deeply and greedily. Gorgeous. With a full packet of fags in my pocket I suddenly feel like the richest person in the world. Tomorrow we’ll make loads of cash. Course we will.

\*

“This is a banana hold-up. Giz us yer money (cough) or a bottle of whiskey (cough) or I’ll shoot yer (cough).”

“Alex!” I say. He hobbles nearer to the Pompidou Posse bench where Sage and I are sitting and bends down for the usual kissy kissy hello. I try not to show how shocked I am at his appearance. If his face was gaunt before, now it’s practically cadaverous. His skin is egg-yolk yellow and the whites of his eyes are flecked with brown dots. It’s hot today, but he’s still wearing his donkey jacket. It hangs off him like a scarecrow’s coat. Even his bananas look worse for wear and rotten.

“Fuck, Alex,” Sage says. “Shouldn’t you be in bed or something?”

“Nah,” he flaps his hand at her. “Gotta catch up with the work, like.” He’s almost bent double as his body convulses with the force of another coughing fit.

“Take it easy, Alex,” I say.

“Takes more than this to take me doon,” he says, trying and failing to look cheery. “I’ll catch yer later, lassies. If yer see Bob, tell him I’ll meet him at Notre Dame, like.”

“Sure,” I say.

He stumbles into the stream of tourist traffic wandering past our bench and immediately tries to accost a couple with his usual banana hold-up spiel. But he can’t get his words out and he fumbles and drops his bananas. I jump up to help him but he waves me away. The couple looks at him with expressions of disgust and I want to run up and shake them. Alex tries to shrug off this defeat and collect his dignity. With a last glance and nod in our direction he ambles carefully away. Even when he’s swallowed up by the crowd I can still hear the painful sound of his coughing and hacking.

“Jesus,” Sage says. “He’s definitely on his last legs.”

“Poor old Alex,” I say. I feel a stab of guilt at letting him go off like that. “Maybe we should give him a hand?”

Sage shrugs and takes Hervé’s watch out of my pocket.

“He’ll be fine,” she says dismissively. “Fuck, Vicks. It’s not even lunchtime yet.”

I’m amazed. “Bloody hell.”

Mind you, even though the journey back to Paris takes a good half an hour, we hadn't had to hang around and wait for a train, and the cops had buggered off after only a three cigarette wait. I'm glad Bob's not around though. I don't feel like discussing our lack of begging success and explaining why we're back home so early.

"I'm off to listen to some sounds," Sage says nodding towards the Pompidou. "Coming?"

I'm about to say 'yes', when out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of a familiar blue anorak and floppy blond hair. Richard. My stomach does its usual flip at the sight of him.

"Nah," I say, trying to keep my voice light. "Think I'll hang out here for a bit."

Sage narrows her eyes suspiciously and stares pointedly in Richard's direction.

"See you here later then," she says snippily. "Have fun *hanging out*." Without another word she heads off.

"Hang on, Sage!" She turns around expectantly. "Will you shove these in my bag?" I pass her the tins of beans and the few remaining yogurts. She scowls but takes them without a word.

I lean on the back of the bench and try to look as nonchalant as possible. Richard is definitely heading in my direction. Then he pauses and starts talking to a couple of *clochards* who have appeared out of nowhere. I try and catch his eye, but no luck. Maybe he hasn't noticed me? I look over at him and grin. His eyes definitely flick in my direction but doesn't return my smile or even acknowledge that he's seen me. Total bastard. The smile freezes stupidly on my face.

I turn around to hide the fact that embarrassed colour has flooded my face. Bugger. What am I going to do now? Should I catch up with Sage? Nah. She'd only give me one of her 'told you so' faces and she's probably in a sulk. At least I have the cigarettes. I sit down on the bench and light one for something to do.

"Vicki!" someone calls my name in a French accent.

I spin around eagerly, thinking maybe Richard has finally changed his mind. But it's Stefan the dreadlocked scruff and Danny Tea-cosy. There's a tell-tale growling yap and Ralphie races up to gnaw on my boot. I try and check out Richard's reaction as Stefan kisses me 'hello', but I can't tell if he's noticed or not.

“*Bien*, Vicki. We are to walk. You like to come?” Danny says. I look over at Richard again. He’s still pretending not to have seen me. Fuck him.

“Yeah. I would, actually,” I say.

Stefan bows to me and offers me his arm, and Danny does the same. As I walk away, tramp on each arm, I can’t resist looking back at Richard. Ha! He’s staring. I’m sure he’s looking miffed. Good. Serves him right.

\*

“Sage!”

Maybe she hasn’t seen me? I wave my arms above my head, but she doesn’t acknowledge me at all. She’s standing near the Pompidou doors, and appears to be deep in conversation with Taffy. Hippy is standing off to one side, smoking and looking as sulky as ever. I’m relieved to see my rucksack at her feet next to her own bag. I was worried I’d be too late to fetch it. I race down the deserted forecourt towards where the three of them are sheltering from the rain. It’s tipping down and I can feel dribbles of water tickling down my face.

“You won’t *believe* what I’ve been doing!” I call excitedly when I’m in earshot. “Hey Sage!” I say, “Listen to thi--”

“Fuck, Vicks,” she snaps. “I was dead worried about you – don’t you know what’s gone on?”

“Eh?”

“Alex is fucked up again, so Bob had a whip-round and got him a room in a hotel. Fuck, I couldn’t find you anywhere and Richard git-face said you’d gone off with a couple of strange men!”

She must be really livid if she’s willing to start a fight in front of Taffy and Hippy. But what’s with Richard? Trouble-making bastard. He knows full well that Stefan and Danny are members of the posse. He’s even been there when they’ve slept with us in the Notre Dame gardens.

“You don’t understand--” I start.

Taffy joins in. "Yeah. We looked everywhere for you. Sage was really freaked." He puts an arm protectively round her shoulders. Sage shrugs it off irritably. This doesn't seem to bother Taffy in the slightest. As usual Hippy is fidgeting and looking antsy, and he acts as though he's barely listening to what's going on.

"God. Sorry, guys," I say. "I didn't mean to worry you--"

"Well you fucking did," Sage snaps.

"So what's going on with Alex?" I say, trying to change the subject.

"I told you. He's sick as fuck. Bob has gone off with him, like I said, and we've got to find somewhere to kip out of the rain tonight," she says.

"I've got a place," Taffy says.

"Yeah, so I said we'd go with him and Hippy and stop the night with them."

"Oh. Okay." I'm confused. I thought Sage hated Taffy's guts? What's going on?

"But we've got a quick stop to make on the way, like," Taffy says. Hippy suddenly perks up.

"What, the chemist again?" I say trying to catch Sage's eye for a conspiratorial smirk. She studiously ignores me.

"Nah. Somewhere else. Come on, we'd best get on. We can't be late," Taffy says.

He doesn't offer to carry my bag, and without another word the three of them start jogging up the forecourt.

I follow on behind, trying to heft my bag over my shoulder. The leather straps are slippery with moisture and it's murder trying to get a grip on them.

"Sage! Wait up!" I can tell she's pretending not to have heard me. I'm dying to tell her my news, but it doesn't look like she's going to snap out of her sulk anytime soon.

I've nearly caught up with them as we head down into the warmth of the Rambuteau Metro station, but I fall behind again as I struggle to leap over the turnstiles with the bulky weight of my rucksack skewing my balance. For a second I think I've lost them and have no idea in which direction to head, but then I hear Taffy's over-loud Welsh voice blaring from the corridor on the right. I jog down the steps and grab hold of Sage's arm. She shrugs me off, but slows down so that I can fall into step with her.

“Sage! What the hell’s going on? I thought you hated Taffy’s guts?” I hiss as quietly as I can.

Sage shrugs. “Whatever,” she says.

“Look. I’m sorry about going off like that, really.”

She doesn’t speak or even glance at me. Shit. How long is she going to milk this for?

“So we’re really going to sleep with Taffy and Hippy tonight?” I say, trying again.

“It’s fucking pouring out there,” she says, still not even looking in my direction. “The gardens will be a dead loss and Taffy said to Bob he’d help us out. Happy?” she snaps. “If you’d been around then maybe we could have sorted something else out. Instead you were off doing your own thing as per fucking usual and it was up to me, all right?”

I hold my tongue and hang back again. Sage joins Taffy and Hippy on the platform. Feeling like a total outsider, I stand a few feet away from the little group. For a second I wish I’d stayed with Danny and Stefan. They’d offered to find me a place to sleep out of the rain, but I can’t even imagine the shit I’d be in if I’d stayed out even longer with them.

The train whooshes up with a blast of dirty air and we scramble on. It smells like wet dog and old feet and it’s heaving with damp commuters. As I squeeze in my bag bashes into the face of one of the seated passengers. I ignore the looks and gasps of irritation and push my way to the aisle, lurching to grab hold of one of the hand railings. I’ve ended up next to Taffy.

“All right, Taffy?” I say.

“Yeah,” he says, without a trace of his former leery behaviour.

“So where we off to first?” I ask, trying to smile at him.

“Gare de Nord,” he says. “Got someone we gotta see.”

“Right.” I say, absurdly pleased that at least someone’s talking to me, even if it is Taffy.

\*

My legs are absolutely killing me as I follow Hippy, Taffy and Sage through the cavernous train station. The strain of balancing my rucksack on my shoulders without falling over every time the Metro rocked and shook has left me completely drained. My stomach rumbles, and I'm glad of the yogurts and beans in my bag. It's way too late to head to the soup kitchen now.

"Come and meet Dakota," Taffy says to Sage, nodding over to where a dark-haired guy is sitting smoking languidly on a bench in front of the left-luggage lockers. The guy looks up at the sound of Taffy's click-clacking crutches and takes his time stubbing his cigarette on the floor. There's a growling sound as we get closer and a massive black Alsatian slithers out from underneath the bench. I hang back. I don't trust French dogs. They all seem to be in a foul mood, and this one looks as if it could do some real damage.

"All right?" Taffy says to the guy. I can tell Taffy's also wary of the dog. But it doesn't seem to bother Hippy in the slightest. For the first time since we've met him he appears to be in a good mood and isn't fidgeting as much as normal.

"You're late," The guy snaps, pulling out a pack of Gitanes and popping one into the corner of his mouth. He lights it without looking, flicking his eyes in mine and Sage's direction. "Who're they?"

"Ah. Sorry about that, Dakota. Got stuck on the Metro," Taffy says. "This is Sage and Vicki. Newbies."

"Roight," Dakota says. "How d'you do, lassies?" I can't believe my ears. Sage nudges me and rolls her eyes.

"Are there any Scotsmen left in bloody Scotland?" she hisses in my ear. At least she's talking to me again.

"Er, we're fine thanks," I say to the guy. "Nice dog."

He turns back to Taffy as if I haven't spoken. As he and Taffy have a brief whispered conversation, I check him out. His black hair is the same length and floppy style as Richard's and he'd be quite sexy except for the fact that his eyes are too close together. He doesn't look much like the usual calibre of tramp. His black jeans and boots are spotless.

“Shall we, gents?” Dakota says to Taffy and Hippy as if Sage and I don’t exist. He stands up and stretches. “Let’s walk.”

Without looking to see if any of us are following him, Dakota picks up his dog’s lead and starts walking briskly through the station.

Sage and I hang back as far as possible as Taffy and Hippy follow him through the exit doors and out into the rainy haze outside the station.

“What do you think’s going on?” I say.

“Fuck knows,” Sage says. “That guy gives me the total creeps. And what’s with his stupid fucking name? Dakota, my arse,” she snorts.

I giggle nervously and we hurry to catch up with them.

We wait, huddled under the concrete overhang, while Hippy and Taffy mumble conspiratorially to Dakota. Taffy’s eyes keep flickering nervously from Dakota to the dog. I’ve never seen him like this before. This is a new Taffy. He seems to be deferring to Dakota like a farm worker simpering to his landlord. Sage is also watching with interest, although I can tell she’s trying to assume a bored world-weary edge.

“Want anything, lassies?” Dakota calls over to us.

“Eh?” I say.

“Got some Strawberries in. Or Supermen if yer prefer. Good stuff. Very spicey. Give yer my personal guarantee of quality.”

“You what?” I say. Dakota looks amused.

Sage nudges me sharply. “Duh,” she says under her breath. “Acid of course.” She nods to Dakota. “How much?” she says, deadpan.

“Fifty francs a pop,” Dakota says. “Strawberries are double-dipped but I’ll give yer them for the same price.”

I look around nervously. Dakota hasn’t bothered to keep his voice down. There are quite a few people hurrying into the station but thankfully no one seems to be paying us any attention.

“Cool,” Sage says without hesitating. “How do we get hold of you?”

“Always here, in me office, nine to five,” Dakota winks. “Ask Taffy.”

Taffy bursts out laughing as if Dakota’s said something funny.

Suddenly Dakota's all business again. "Is that it then gents?" he nods to Hippy, who hasn't said a word throughout the whole business.

"Yeah. Ta, Dakota," Taffy says.

"Sure I canna tempt you, lassies?" Dakota says to us as he starts heading back into the station. His dog growls at us again.

"We'll think about it," Sage says, refusing to be intimidated by the dealer or the dog.

Dakota nods patronisingly. "Yer do that." And he disappears through the sliding doors.

"Let's go, Taffy," Hippy says eagerly.

Taffy scowls at him as if to remind him who's boss, but without a word starts following him back into the station and towards the Metro.

Sage and I lag behind again. As soon as I'm sure Hippy and Taffy are out of earshot I grab her arm. "You're not serious about the acid are you?"

"Sure, why not?" she says. Then she stops and looks at me, eyes narrowing. "Anyway, I thought you liked taking trips?"

Oh shit, had I lied to her when we first met at college and said I had? I can't remember.

"Yeah," I try to rally. "But mushies make me sick as a dog." This was true. The one time my brother and I had picked magic mushrooms from the field at the back of my parents' house I'd puked all over the dining room carpet. I don't mind a wee bit of blow, but I don't like that out of control feeling.

"Acid is nothing like `rooms, Vicks," Sage says patronisingly. "As soon as we've made enough dosh we'll get some and you'll find out. It's the coolest thing ever."

"Great," I say. But I'm relieved. At the rate we're going we'll never have enough cash to waste on drugs. Although... I put my hand in my pocket and wrap it around the three ten franc coins protectively. I'm relieved that I didn't get the chance to let Sage in on my afternoon's activities, after all. If she can't be arsed to ask me what I've been up to all afternoon, then tough. It will be my secret.

\*

“Are you fucking serious?” Sage says, looking around her in disgust.

We’re in an underground car park across the road from the St Michel fountain. The too-bright strip lighting hurts my eyes after the stormy gloominess of outside, and it reeks of urine and petrol.

“Is this it? A car park?” Sage says. “I thought we were going to a squat or something.”

“Least it’s dry,” Taffy says to her. She rolls her eyes.

“So where do we sleep?” I ask.

“Inbetween the cars,” Taffy says as if I’m thick. Now that I’m no longer the object of his affection I’ve been relegated to Hippy status. He nods over to a thick stack of cardboard that’s piled up against the wall. “There’s your mattresses, girls.”

“Where’s Hippy gone?” I ask. When we’d arrived at St Michel he’d mumbled something in Taffy’s ear and wandered off, looking completely oblivious to the weather. Not that I care. The more Taffy treats him like shit, the ruder Hippy is to Sage and me. But talk of the devil. Just as Taffy’s about to open his mouth to answer me, I catch sight of Hippy’s stumbling figure gingerly making its way down the tarmac slope that connects this floor to the next level. He’s weaving all over the place like a sleep-walker or a staggering zombie. Then, with a jolt, I realise he’s not alone. There’s a smallish girl I’ve never seen before walking a few steps behind him. Her arms are tightly crossed across her stomach as if she’s cold. She immediately reminds me of one of those Japanese anime characters -- straight bobbed hair and huge liquid black eyes.

Sage is looking a bit put out. She hates surprises.

As the girl gets closer I notice that there’s a huge glistening sore on her cheek that doesn’t look as if it has any hope of healing any time soon. It stands out starkly against her otherwise flawless white skin. She’s also wearing more eye-liner than Jules’s Japanese woman friend. For some reason this makes me feel self-conscious. I haven’t bothered with make-up except for a touch of lipstick for ages.

“*Bonjour!*” Taffy says to the girl cheerily. “*Ca va?*”

“*Oui*,” she says without smiling, allowing Taffy to kiss her ‘hello’. Suddenly her shoulder ripples and bulges and a giant black and white rat pokes its head out from underneath her jacket. Sage takes a step back.

“Gross,” Sage mumbles.

“Nice rat,” I say.

The girl looks up at me impassively, and then glances at Sage as if she’s just realised that we’re here. But no one can do impassive better than Sage.

Neither Taffy nor Hippy makes a move to introduce us to the new arrival. The rat climbs sinuously up onto the top of the girl’s head and she plucks it off and brings it towards her face as if she’s going to kiss it. Sage looks as if she’s going to be sick.

“Right,” Taffy says, looking meaningfully at Sage. “Shall we make ourselves comfortable?”

Suddenly something pops into my head.

“What do we do if someone comes to fetch their car when we’re sleeping?” I say. “We could be run over or squashed or something.” I can’t imagine ever being able to sleep in the multi-storey car park in the Wolverhampton Mander Centre; traffic comes and goes there almost continuously.

“Don’t worry about it,” Taffy grins. “This is the long-term parking floor. Most of ‘em only use their cars on the weekends.”

“Oh.”

“Have to be up bright and early though,” he says.

“Why?”

“Blues,” he winks at us.

Oh great.

Hippy sinks down on his haunches next to a silver saloon-type car. His head lolls to one side giving him the appearance of a mannequin with a broken neck. His pupils are dense black Jelly Tots, and an uncharacteristic beautiful smile dances around his lips. He’s definitely on more than just his usual codeine medicine.

Taffy sits down next to the spaced-out Hippy and, after a brief hesitation, Sage and I do the same. It’s very cramped in the narrow space between the cars, and Sage flinches as Taffy’s stump snuggles in next to her leg. He pulls out a large chunk of black

and passes it to her to roll up. She takes the rizlas and dope wordlessly, as if this is a routine they've been practising for ages. Odd. Sage had been bitching about Taffy's creepy behaviour towards her only this morning, and now she's suddenly acting as if he's her new best friend.

There's a shuffling noise behind me. It's the rat girl. She's so quiet I've forgotten she's there. She jumps up onto the bonnet of the silver car and lies back against the windscreen.

\*

It's warm down here, but it's not comfortable. There's no room for any more than two of us to squish inbetween the cars, so Taffy doesn't get a look in. Just before we'd collected our cardboard mattresses he'd said to Sage, "Let me know if yer need keeping warm, like." I'd waited for her, 'fuck off, asshole' retort, but she'd just shot him a 'you can't be serious' look, which is almost the equivalent of encouragement from Sage.

I'm already homesick for the comparatively comfortable Notre Dame gardens. The car-park's strip lighting shines incessantly and I still can't get used to the stench of piss, diesel and rubber. I snuggle deeper into my sleeping bag. Sage and I are wedged in head to toe. I hope this isn't freaking her out too much, I know how she feels about being too close to people.

"Night, Sage," I say.

"Yeah," she says. She still hasn't asked about my afternoon, or even who it was I'd buggered off with.

The money sits in my pocket like a dirty secret. I can always add it to the cash I make tomorrow when we're begging. She'll never know, and then we can use it legitimately for a shower. It's a bummer I have to keep it to myself, though. I'm dying to tell Sage all about it. The afternoon had been a real eye-opener. And hanging out with Danny and Stefan had been a good laugh. There was only one awkward moment when Stefan had tried to take my hand as the three of us were wandering down the Rue St Denis. I'd tried to explain about Richard, and although both had looked at me in confusion, Stefan had seemed to accept that I wasn't interested in him quite good-

naturedly. But even if Richard stops being such a weird bastard, I can't see myself ever snogging Stefan. He's just too dirty, and I have to have some standards, don't I? I've agreed to meet with them again tomorrow afternoon. If the morning's begging is a dead loss at least I'll have another alternative income to keep us going. I'll tell Sage about it tomorrow, I decide.

Probably.

\*

"Wake the fuck up!"

"What?" I mumble. My shoulder's being roughly shaken. I open my eyes and flinch. Taffy's scrofulous face is hovering a few inches from mine. His eyes look as if he's edged them with blood-red eyeliner.

Sage sits up and wipes her hand over her sleep-puffed face.

"What's going on, Taffy?" she slurs irritably.

"Get up!" he hisses, spattering my face with spit. "The Blues are on their way!"

Oh fuck! We don't need to be told twice. Sage and I wriggle out of our sleeping bags and scramble to find our boots. I shove mine on my feet and heft my bag onto my shoulder. My hands are shaking and I taste the irony tang of adrenaline. Sage and I run out from between the cars.

"Bloody hell," Sage says. "I really don't need this."

We race over to where Taffy, Hippy and Rat Girl are also getting their stuff together.

"What now?" I whisper to Taffy.

"We get the fuck out of Dodge," he whispers back. "Be as quiet as you fucking can, all right, girls?"

Sage and I nod obediently. Sage's eyes are wide with fear and her hands are also shaking.

The five of us creep towards the slope that leads up to the next parking level. I desperately try to shove my sleeping bag into my already over-full bag. It won't fit. I'm just going to have to carry it as is.

“How do you know they’re here?” I whisper to Taffy.

“Hippy went out for a slash this morning. Caught sight of their van just outside the fountain.”

“Isn’t there another way out?” I say. “There must be an emergency pedestrian exit or something.”

Taffy narrows his eyes. I can’t believe he hasn’t thought of this already.

“Yeah,” he says grudgingly. “Think there’s one on the next floor. Let’s go.”

We leg it up the slope and into an identical parking area. Rows of cars stretch off into the shadows, but at the far end I can see sunlight glimmering teasingly through the exit ramp.

“I don’t see any cops,” Sage snaps under her breath.

“They’ll be here any second,” Taffy whispers. “They always check the parking garages first thing. Fooking Hippy was supposed to get us up earlier!”

Taffy glares at Hippy’s back, which flinches as if Taffy had physically hit it.

“Over there!” I say, pointing to a green neon ‘*sortie*’ sign above a grey metal door, a few metres away from where we’re hovering.

“Oh fook,” Taffy says. He nods towards the far end of the parking lot. Several sets of legs are walking purposely down the slope. “Come on!” he hisses. “Fooking leg it!”

The five of us run as quietly as possible towards the narrow swing door. Hippy reaches it first -- he’s metres ahead of us and Rat Girl is close behind him. Taffy and I bring up the rear.

Then I feel a sharp tug on my sleeping bag that’s trailing behind me across the concrete.

“Fooking hell!” Taffy almost shouts. There’s a clattering sound and something whacks me on the back of my leg. I almost go flying, but somehow manage to stay upright. I whirl around. Taffy’s lying sprawled on the ground, face contorted in an ugly snarl of pain. His crutches are out of his reach -- it was obviously one of them that had smacked into my leg. Oh fuck! Should I leave him?

Sage is almost at the exit door.

“Sage!” I hiss. She turns around and gasps in shock. Hippy and Rat Girl hesitate for a couple of seconds, then disappear into the stairwell. Sage dumps her bag by the door and scoots over to me.

“Go!” I hiss at her. “There’s no point in both of us being caught! I’ll help him!”

Taffy’s still crawling on the ground, trying to reach his crutches. One of them looks to have skittered underneath a car. Oh God. Blood is dribbling down from his stump and spattering onto the concrete.

Sage opens her mouth as if to protest.

“Go Sage! Go tell Bob! He’ll know what to do!”

She hesitates then grabs my sleeping bag. Without a glance back she runs towards the metal door.

I’m too scared to even glance in the direction of the exit ramp. It’s impossible they couldn’t have heard us. Lying on my front I grab the elusive crutch and pass it to Taffy. With a monumental effort he pulls himself upright. He nods to me to take his bag. His face has lost its normal ruddy look and his eyes look crazy with panic and pain. Pound-coin-sized spots of blood are plopping down from his lacerated stump.

“Come on!” he hisses to me.

“What the fuck are we going to do?” I whisper. What the hell *can* we do? Bugger! They must have seen us.

“Hide!”

I grab his bag and my rucksack and help him crawl behind a station wagon at the end of the row.

I hold my breath. My heart feels like it’s going to explode out of my chest. Taffy glances up at me, eyes still wide and glazed-looking, and puts his finger to his lips. God, I wish I was pissed. I was nowhere near this scared when Hervé and I’d been nabbed at the Pompidou. I hear voices coming from what sounds like right in front of where we’re cowering. Stern, male, police-like voices. I try to make my body as small as possible. I squeeze my eyes shut and cross the fingers on both hands, letting my breath hiss out slowly through my teeth. Taffy taps me on my shoulder. As quietly as he can, he lifts his bag over his shoulder and motions for me to do the same. The voices are fainter now; it sounds as if they’ve retreated down to the level where we were sleeping.

Taffy positions his crutches under his armpits and slings his bag around his neck. God knows how he thinks he's going to have time to pull himself up and head down the stairwell before the cops catch up with us.

"Ready?" he whispers.

I nod.

He points towards the front of the carpark. Eh? What's he on about?

"Shouldn't we leg it down the stairs after Hippy and Sage?" I whisper.

"Nah. I'll never make it. I'm crap at stairs. After five, you ready?"

Am I? I've never tried to run with the bloody rucksack on my back before.

Doesn't look like I've got much choice. I suppose I could always ditch it if the going gets too tough.

"...Three, two, one, go!"

Taffy pulls himself up, wobbles dangerously, and then he's off. I ignore the thump of the rucksack on my back and race after him. I've forgotten how fast he can move, and it takes all the strength in my legs to keep up with him. I'm certain I can hear feet pounding after us, but I don't dare look back. We fly through the never-ending rows of cars and hare up the slope. There's a scary second when it looks like Taffy's going to lose his balance, then he rights himself and we're out into sunlight.

"Don't fooking stop!" Taffy yells at me.

I'm too out of breath to answer back, and my eyes are finding it hard to adjust to the blast of natural light.

We zigzag past a couple of early morning delivery men and, without even looking, dash across the boulevard. I hear the screech of brakes and a cacophony of loud angry French, but I focus all my attention on Taffy's back.

When we reach the other side of the road I risk a look back. The Blues' van is parked at an angle close to the curb near the St Michel fountain. A few policemen are gathered there, gesticulating in our direction. It's the first time I've seen a Blues police person in the flesh. Is it my imagination or do they look bigger and fitter than the normal police?

Taffy also turns around and pauses.

"Christ, Taffy!" I breathe. "That was close!"

“Yeah,” he says without taking his eyes from the cops clustered around the van. “Watch this,” he says to me. Before I can stop him he yells, “Hey! Motherfuckers!” and gives them the finger. Bad move. They look as if they’re readying themselves to chase after us. We don’t stop to check.

“Fook!” he says, “Come on!” We hare down the narrow cobbled street in front of us. I’m not looking where I’m going and slam into a man heading towards us. Both of us are spun around by the force of the impact, but I manage to extricate myself like a dancer ditching her partner, and force my legs to carry on. Taffy’s way ahead of me now, but I catch sight of him disappearing round a corner.

“Come on!” I hiss to myself, and, gritting my teeth, I thrust myself into a last burst of speed. Taffy grabs my arm as I reach him and pulls me into a narrow alcove outside a restaurant. We crouch down behind some large green bins that reek of old fish and rot. All I can hear is the blood pumping in my ears. I don’t want to move, but within a few seconds, Taffy’s pulling me to my feet.

“Taffy?” I say. I can’t keep the wobble out of my voice. “You sure it’s cool?”

He doesn’t answer and I hang back as he hobbles to the end of the alleyway.

He turns around and gives me the thumbs up signal. Oh thank fuck! I sink to my haunches and take in a large gulp of air.

“Fook, that was close,” Taffy giggles.

It’s infectious. Suddenly we’re both laughing hysterically. I’m only able to stop when the stitch in my side starts hurting almost unbearably.

Taffy grins at me widely and pops a cigarette into my heavily breathing mouth.

“Jeezus!” he hisses. “Will you look at my fucking leg?”

I look down. The bottom of his trouser leg is black with blood. He gingerly rolls the sodden fabric over the wound. The scab at the end of his stump is almost ripped right off and is only hanging on by a thread-like piece of crusty flesh. I’m too relieved to feel sick at the sight of it. I grab a pair of tights out of my bag and use them to staunch the blood flow. At least it looks as if it’s clogging up a bit.

“I’m going to fooking kill Hippy,” Taffy growls. “This is all his fooking fault. I told the bastard to wake us up before the fooking pigs search the car parks.”

I breathe an inner sigh of relief. At least he's not blaming me. It'd been my sleeping bag he'd slipped on, after all.

"Let's get a move on," Taffy says, grabbing the tights out of my hand and chucking them in the bin next to us. "I've gotta teach Hippy a lesson and I need to find my girl."

It's a second before I realise he means Sage.

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

### Poem for Alex (know-it-all Vicks says that this is an ODE)

*He blocked up our bog  
He loathed all things Frog  
He liked to sing songs  
And always he ponged  
But he was our friend  
And that is the end.*

(Can't think of a rhyme for bananas, so had to leave that out, sorry).

Oh dear. RIP Alex or Smelly, as he was known in Tramp Code language.

Vicks was dead upset. She's never known anyone who's died before. I have. I found my granddad in his flat when I was ten. He'd died in his sleep. He looked all grey but didn't SMELL or anything.

Anyway, the whole Alex dying thing wasn't gross or anything (thank God), and none of us even knew he'd pegged it until Bob tried to wake him up in the morning and Alex didn't get up. And me and Vicks had left for the coffee run by then, so we didn't see any of the juicy gory stuff. He went in his sleep (like granddad) which Bob said was "how he would have wanted it." And if you ask me that's quite a nice way to go. Much better than drowning in your own phlegm or something FOUL like that. Vicks was STILL really upset though, even when I explained this to her. I wasn't that sad. I mean, Alex was part of the posse but he wasn't like our best friend or anything.

I asked Bob if his body was going to be sent back to Scotland, but Bob says not. No one can afford it, and anyway, he's got no family there, Bob says, except a wife who hasn't spoken to him for like twenty years and a child he never sees who lives in New Zealand or somewhere crap like that.

Poor old Bob though. But I think PART of him was sneakily relieved. I reckon Alex cramped his style a bit. Like friends do sometimes (i.e. Emma-the-bitch for example; and probably Taffy and Hippy).

I was really glad that me and Vicks had scarpered by the time they discovered he was a stiff `cos Bob had to move his body out of the gardens so that the NORMAL cops or ambulance people wouldn't know we all slept there and tell the Blues to put our spot on the TRAMP CHECK LIST. Bob and Norbert moved him out of the bushes before the tourists started arriving and apparently propped him up on a bench in the park on the other side of to the cathedral, so it looked like he'd kicked the bucket while he was watching the river or something. GROSS. No wonder Bob was so freaked out. I hope Alex didn't have RIGOR MORTIS or something like that when they shifted him. I didn't ask. Seemed a bit INSENSITIVE, even though I was DYING to know.

Just after it happened Vicks was like, "I'll never be able to sleep in the gardens again," but she's fine now. Mainly because that night we all had a WAKE for Alex in the gardens and we all got pissed and passed out there. Loads of different types of tramps came (even the scummy ones) and everyone told an Alex story. Me and Vicks told everyone about the crabs on the bus and instead of it being SAD everyone laughed, although I did see Bob crying a bit.

Mind you, I could see Vick's point in a way. I mean, imagine if Alex's spirit is still in the bushes and he becomes like the ghost of Notre Dame tramp city? You know, like: "This is a banana hold-up woouooooooo. Giz us your money or a bottle of whiskey or I'll haunt yer, woouooooooo." (Sorry, Gladys, that wasn't very nice.)

That's the only TRAGIC piece of news I have.

The rest is VERY POSITIVE I think.

Let's see...

Oh shit, yeah!!

REMEMBER how I said that I'd never be a beggar? Ha ha! YEAH RIGHT!

BEGGING is our new JOB. It's dead easy but it totally fucking sucks. I can sense that people think I'm some waster or loser or something and it's horrible if they don't give you money for ages. Vicks is far better at it than I am (even though she hates it as much as I do) and she hasn't figured out that I don't stay at my begging post for long. Ha ha. I

sneak off and hide round the corner and when she comes to fetch me I just sit back down again!

She's making quite a lot. Enough for us to buy acid from vile drug dealer Dakota and his crap Alsatian EVERY DAY which is our NEW FUN!!! Vicks didn't want to try it at first, but now she's totally into it. We can only afford half a tab each, but so what? It's almost becoming like a ROUTINE with us. Vicks begs until she gets enough cash for us to buy food, fags and a tab and then we head off to the Gare de Nord and it's PARTY TIME!!! I LOVE taking acid with Vicks. The whole time we're tripping it's like we're on the same wave-length, and it's like this long giggling frenzy where we hardly have to say a word to each other because we already know what the other person's thinking. And we have a good laugh trying it out in all different places: inside, outside, on the escalators in the Pompidou, during the day, at nighttime. Etc etc etc. One time we sat knee to knee and just stared into each other's eyes and we had to keep saying what the other person was thinking and GUESS WHAT we were nearly always right!! It's almost like the old days before BASTARDS started interfering with our friendship. Yesterday we dared each other to trip inside those funny space-agey public bog cubicles they have on the pavement. It's a dead weird feeling when you go in there, Gladys. The walls like try and close in on you and we take it in turns to see who can stand it the longest. Vicks always wins.

But nighttime tripping is MY favourite. Paris is DEAD wicked at night. I love it when the lights next to the river go all blurry and gooey. I can sit and watch them for HOURS. Vicks says we should walk down to the Eiffel Tower tomorrow and see what it looks like on acid. But neither of us like going on the Metro when we're tripping. Vicks says she feels like she's been swallowed by a huge snake and the whooshing noise of the train coming into the station sounds too loud and scary, so we'll have to make sure we get there before the acid kicks in properly.

Sometimes Taffy and smack-head Hippy come with us when we head off to Dakota. Taffy's SUCH A TOSSHEAD. He keeps trying to mess with MINE and VICK'S friendship because he thinks this will give him a better chance to get into MY PANTS. WANKER!!!!. He's always going on about how Vicks has got something going with

Stefan and Danny Tea-cosy. FUCK!! But what he doesn't know is that when it comes to SPYING on people I am the champion. He must think I'm REALLY thick. I know FULL WELL what Vicks gets up to when she disappears with Stefan and Danny. Although FUCK KNOWS why she won't tell me about it. I've decided not to sulk about it though, although it's hard. Mostly because, like I say, me and Vicks are hanging out a lot on our own taking acid and that, and vile Richard is COMPLETELY out of the picture.

Anyway, the extra cash she makes comes in handy and she always buys me a Baby Bel and a packet of fags when she gets back from hanging out with them, and says stupid things like, "Oh look! I found some extra cash at the bottom of my pocket!!!" DUH! Plus, the one time I spied on her I'd felt quite proud of what she was up to.

IRONIC to think that I'd only followed her that day because I thought she was sneaking off with Richard git-face, so it was a BIG RELIEF when I saw what she was actually doing. I hid behind this magazine stand so I could SPY on her while she met up with Stefan and Danny, then shadowed them to a café in Les Halles. At first I was dead confused, because Stefan and Danny were carrying these big long sticks and old Coke bottles filled with clear liquid, and I couldn't figure out what the FUCK they were going to do with them. Then, Danny faces the café and starts blabbing this big spiel, which OBVIOUSLY I couldn't understand as it was in FROG. Then, Stefan takes like a big gulp out of the Coke bottle, lights the end of the stick and blows into the flame at the end so that it looks like fire is blasting out of his mouth!!! Meanwhile Vicks is trotting up and down in front of them with a hat, trying to collect money for them!! Bit of a con, obviously. I mean how hard can it be to spit petrol or paraffin or whatever it is onto a stick and call that fire-eating?!

I'm REALLY not that bothered if she wants to go and help them out, honest, Gladys. There's no way she'd have anything to do with Stefan, Stig of the Dump. He's like the DIRTIEST person ALIVE. And Danny's not bad as far as FROGS go. He's like French version of Bob, although he does look at Vicks in an old man pervey way sometimes which creeps me out a bit. And he's always pissed. But who isn't??

So FUCK Taffy for trying to INTERFERE in the friendship. As if I wouldn't know EXACTLY what Vicks was up to??? What sort of a friend does he think I am? AND he

beat the crap out of Hippy after the Blues Experience which shows what an utter utter cunt he is anyway.

Shit, though. Both Vicks and I are still paranoid about being picked up by the BLUES. I've got this vile mental picture of us going into these cells and coming out again three stone lighter and with bald heads like those concentration camp women in the photos at school. But Bob says they don't arrest tramps who have dogs. Apparently it's too much trouble and the cops can't be bothered dealing with a scammy tramp AND a dog at the same time. Explains why so many tramps have dogs, though. Vicks says she's going to ask Stefan if he'll 'rent' bad tempered little bastard Ralphie out to us so that we can work inside Paris without having to head out into the crappy old suburbs. We're always getting thrown off the RER, and sometimes if we're unlucky the ticket guy will chuck us off at EVERY stop so it can take bloody hours to get home. It would be DEAD good if we didn't have to do that anymore.

Ow! Sore hand. Not used to WRITING so much these days. What ELSE can I tell you???

Oh yeah...Even though we're dead rich and stuff now and can buy a packet of fags EACH every day, we've got a new EMERGENCY place to bum fags if we decide to spend the cash on other things (i.e. more acid). Guess where, Gladys? -- the Rue St Denis where the whores work! It's so cool, we wander down there in the mornings and bum them from the prozzies. They're dead friendly now they've got to know us a bit, although most of them (except the trannie at the end of the street) can't speak English. They call Vicki '*Mignon*' or something, which means 'cute'! Vicks says Stefan introduced her to a few of them on the day she disappeared with him and Danny.

But what I can't figure out is this: are we lower or higher than the prostitutes? I mean, if we're bumming fags from whores, what does that make us?

WHO CARES!!!!

So, as you can see nothing CRAP to report, Gladys. Oh, shit -- apart from Alex dying, of course (Whoops! Forgot for a sec, how BAD of me is that!?)

## VICKI: The Somerset Maugham Experience

If I eat another mouthful of the Royale burger in front of me I'm going to puke. The smell of it floods my nostrils and I struggle not to gag. The MacDonald's 'special sauce' has congealed into a rubbery skin over the bun, and the ice-cold patties taste like I've already eaten them. I don't even want to touch it with my hands. All I can think about is that scene in *Soylent Green* when Charlton Heston discovers that everyone's been eating recycled human bodies. I take a sip of melted chemical milkshake instead and stuff a few wooden-tasting chips into my mouth. The woman sitting opposite me narrows her eyes suspiciously as I bravely pick up a tiny piece of lettuce and add it to the sawdust mixture in my mouth. My eyes tear up with the effort of swallowing it down.

"You are not hungry?" she asks.

"Of course I am," I lie. "I just like to eat slowly."

She glances impatiently at her watch. We've been in here for twenty minutes. I don't tell her that it's the third MacShite meal I've eaten in less than an hour and that there's no way I can cram more food down unless she takes me to get my fucking stomach pumped. Why doesn't she just bugger off? My heart sank when she'd approached me and Ralphie outside. I knew immediately that she was one of those do-gooders who wouldn't give me cash in case I spent it on drugs (which, let's face it, is exactly what I would have done).

I dip another drooping chip in a smidgen of mayonnaise and take a tiny bite. It's the last time I'll ever bloody well beg outside a MacShite. I've practically eaten my way through the menu this morning. Although I've made a fairly good haul cash-wise, passers-by keep insisting on taking my 'me and my dog are hungry' sign literally. Ralphie and I had barely sat down this morning before the first do-gooder plonked a cheeseburger meal down beside us without a word, and we'd shared it quickly before too many punters noticed. Then, half-an-hour later, a pervy-looking guy handed me a couple of burgers and an apple pie and had hung around trying to make conversation while I pretended to be grateful. He'd only bugged off when he tried to stroke Ralphie and nearly lost one of his fingers.

But this do-gooder is far more persistent and fanatical. She'd insisted on accompanying me into the restaurant (obviously to check that I'd actually eat what she'd bought) and we've barely exchanged a word since. I don't think we have too much in common. It's impossible to miss the over-sized cross peeking from underneath her blouse, and she's dressed in off-duty nun clothes: drab beige skirt and lace up shoes.

It's not as if I was even hungry in the first place. The acid Sage and I shared last night is still making my stomach clench. In fact, I haven't felt like eating since we started our acid experiments. I've been surviving on synthetic tasting crème-caramels and Sage is still sticking to her diet of Baby Bel cheese and the occasional kebab from the Latin Quarter.

The woman sighs impatiently and looks meaningfully down at my tray. I glance out of the window to check on Ralphie. Since I tied him to the railings opposite he hasn't stopped barking and snarling at passers-by who attempt to pet him. At least there's little chance of him being nicked. I don't know how I'd explain that to Stefan. In exchange for bottling for his and Danny's fire-eating show, Stefan lends Ralphie to me every so often. It's made all the difference in the world to me and Sage. Not only do the French love dogs and so are more inclined to part with their dosh, it means we can beg in Paris which is far more lucrative than the scummy old suburbs. Sage and I have even considered getting our own puppy in order to 'expand our business' as Sage calls it.

But sod this for a game of soldiers, as Nan would say. I have to get out of here.

*"J'ai besoin d'aller à la toilette,"* I say, getting up and nodding behind me to the loos.

The woman narrows her eyes at me again and tuts. She probably thinks I'm going off to shoot up or something.

I push my way through the swing doors into the ladies. There's a mirror just behind the door, and as usual it's always a shock catching sight of my reflection. It's one of the things I still can't get used to about living rough. I didn't realise how often I checked my appearance when I was at home (or even at Hervé's or in our flat), so whenever I see myself these days it's almost like being confronted by a stranger. I don't look too bad, all things considered, although my pupils are massively black and dilated and my eyes are gritty from lack of sleep. I wonder if the nun-like woman can tell? Sage

and I have tried to be good and leave a couple of days in between trips, but for the last week we've gone on a bit of a binge. I lean in closer to check my face close-up. My skin and lips still feel a tad scorched and stiff from yesterday's fire-eating experiment, but they look completely normal. The only thing out of place is a plop of mayonnaise that sits at the corner of my mouth like one of Hippy's vile zits.

Mind you, Sage hadn't mentioned anything about me looking different when I'd met up with her yesterday afternoon, but it's still good to be reassured. I still haven't told her about my extra-curricular activities with Danny and Stefan, although she must suspect something's up. I keep coming up with excuses for why I have to disappear for a while, but as she spends most afternoons at the music library it hasn't been that hard to get away with it. And the 'shows' Danny and Stefan put on never take long. Fuck, if anyone had told me I'd ever be a fire-eater I'd have told them they were crazy. Danny says they always make more money when I'm with them. He's come up with a bullshit spiel for the punters about how we're all one big happy circus family. Stefan and I are supposed to be his kids who are desperately trying to keep the family together. It works like a treat, although I'm pretty sure that beneath the grime Stefan's half black, and apart from our dreadlocks we couldn't look more different. The punters seem to love the sob story though.

Yesterday, Danny convinced me to have a go, as he said it would be a real draw if the whole 'family' could get in on the act. I shouldn't have done it really. I could smell the alcohol on his breath; he was obviously more pissed than usual. Stefan hadn't looked too keen, but had played along. I was terrified. But it's not as though I was being asked to master rocket science, was I? I mean, how hard could gobbing a mouthful of flammable liquid into the air actually *be*? Way bloody harder than I'd expected, as it turned out. The white spirit tasted awful, and I'd had to hold it in my mouth for ages while Danny went through his spiel and Stefan put on his little show. The trick is to blow the liquid out of your mouth as hard as possible, but the temptation to swallow is huge. I was totally paranoid that I'd accidentally breathe in, and that my lungs and throat would sizzle and burn to a crisp like over-done bacon. I held the fire stick as far away from my face as possible and after counting to ten spat the liquid out at it as if I was projectile vomiting. The flame felt far too close although I could see it was much smaller than the flourishes

of fire Danny and Stefan usually manage. I obviously looked like I was shitting myself and as soon as it was done I dropped the stick and grabbed a glass of Coke off someone's table and glugged it down. It was dead embarrassing. I'd had to wash my face and hands for ages in the Pompidou loos to get rid of the smell of white spirit and charcoal, and I must have drunk three litres of Orangina to get rid of the taste. Danny thought it was hilarious, but Stefan babbled something in French that I'm pretty sure meant 'stick to what you know.'

\*

I leave the bathroom as quietly as I can, pushing the door gently so that its hinges don't squeal. The nun woman's still sitting at our table when I emerge, but sod her. I'm out of here. Head down, I race towards the glass doors and push my way out into the fresh air. As I untie Ralphie's lead I glance up at the window. She's staring at me, and even through the glass I can make out her disapproving and disappointed expression. I'm tempted to give her the finger, but settle for a rueful 'what did you expect' smile and a shrug instead. She was trying to help, I suppose. Although why do people like that always have to be so fucking God-bothery and judgemental? Like Sage says, it's *our* business what we do with the cash people give us. We've come up with this theory that beggars are necessary because they make people feel better about themselves when they donate money.

I head round the corner to where Sage's waiting for me. She's on Blues look-out duty most of the time these days, and leaves the begging up to me on the whole. I've offered to let her use Ralphie so she can have a turn, but he still hasn't taken to her and Stefan and I are practically the only two people he doesn't try and maul: Stefan because he's his owner; me because I always have a supply of chocolate on hand.

"Fuck, Vicks," she says irritably as soon as she catches sight of me. "You took your bleeding time."

"Yeah, I know. Bloody ex-nun or something made me go into Macshite with her. I'm so full I could burst all over the pavement."

Sage grimaces.

“So? How’d we do?”

“About sixty I think,” I say, jangling the heavy weight of coins in my pockets.  
“Maybe more.”

“Nice one,” Sage says. “Home, James?”

As we walk towards the Metro, Sage pauses to bum a fag off a passing suave-looking businessman. We can afford to buy our own cigs now, but sometimes we regress back to the old ways for fun. Occasionally we even go to the soup kitchen, but it’s mostly only to catch up on the tramp gossip. I can’t remember the last time I ate a can of butter beans.

We stroll past the tourists queuing for tickets and hop over the turnstiles. I let go of Ralphie’s lead and he runs between our legs; he knows the routine by now. We’re in luck. A train whooshes to meet us as soon as we reach the platform. As the doors hiss closed I spy a band of cops heading down the stairs. Excellent timing. I breathe a sigh of relief and Sage and I make ourselves comfortable on a double seat, putting our feet up on the bench opposite. Ralphie leaps up onto my lap and nuzzles at my pocket for a piece of chocolate. A couple of *clochards* we know by sight get on at the next stop and nod ‘hello’ to us. One of them immediately starts accosting passengers for cash, all the while spouting a hard-done-by spiel. We’ve never dared work the Metro. It’s a sure-fire way of getting Blued. You never know when a posse of police will show up, so it’s the begging equivalent of playing Russian Roulette. Sage lights a cigarette, ignoring our fellow passengers’ scowls. Sage calls anyone who’s not a *clochard* a ‘civilian’ and says they’re beneath our concern. She’s got a point. They’re all off to work and their boring lives, whereas we can do whatever we like all day, *everyday* if we choose.

The panhandling *clochards* jump off at the next stop, and without a word Sage passes one of them her half-smoked cigarette, before the doors close behind them.

\*

“What shall we do this afternoon then?” Sage asks as the train pulls into St Michel.

I shrug, using the excuse of collecting Ralphie's lead and ushering him onto the platform not to answer her. I haven't told her that I've promised to meet Stefan this afternoon. When I picked Ralphie up from him this morning he'd asked me to meet him outside Notre Dame. He wouldn't say why, just that he had a 'surprise' for me. God knows what he's planning. Since we've been working together he seems to have taken the 'circus family' bullshit literally, and acts as if I'm his little sister or something. Sage still calls him 'Stig' but seems to treat him with more respect than Richard. I'll have to use the usual excuse of needing to return Ralphie and hope she won't want to come with me. I don't want Sage to spoil whatever Stefan's got planned with one of her sulks.

As we leave the Metro we head straight for the fountain so that Ralphie can drink. Sage lights us both a fag and we sit down for a breather on the low stone wall. A group of older French *clochards* nod 'hello' to us and Sage chucks them a couple of cigarettes.

"All right, girls?"

Sage mouths 'fuck' to me as she hears the familiar voice. It's Taffy. He always seems to be hanging around these days. He swings himself towards us, a huge grin practically slicing his face in half. Rat Girl and Hippy slope along a few metres behind him. Sage rolls her eyes and slips our box of fags in her pocket so that she won't have to offer them around. Taffy nods a cursory 'hello' to me and then immediately turns his attention to Sage.

"What's going on?" he says.

"Nothing much. Usual," Sage says without looking him the eye.

I nod and smile at Rat Girl and Hippy. We still don't know Rat Girl's real name, and I've hardly said a word to her except for the usual stoned mumblings when we share a joint. Thinking about it, it's the first time I've seen her in daylight. I always associate her with night-time dope smoking escapades as if she's a drugged-up vampire or something. As usual I have to will myself not to stare at the never-healing sore on her cheek. Why doesn't she do something about it? It still hasn't even scabbed over yet. Maybe she picks it. Gross. Hippy's looking as maudlin as ever. There are dark circles etched under his eyes. He doesn't look as if he's slept for a week.

"How's your leg, Taffy?" I say.

"Not bad," he says without taking his eyes off Sage. "Wanna see?"

“No thanks,” I say, quickly. I’ve had my fill of dealing with Taffy’s stomach-churning war wounds. There are still traces of his blood on the green khaki of my rucksack from our run in with the Blues at the car park.

“What you up to?” Taffy says to Sage.

“Dunno,” she says looking meaningfully at me.

“We’re on our way to Dakota,” Taffy says. “Wanna come?”

Sage’s eyes light up.

“I’d better get Ralphie back to Stefan,” I say quickly. “Sage, why don’t you go with them?”

She scowls and glances at me suspiciously. I drop my head and pretend to untangle Ralphie’s lead.

“Yeah, Sage,” Taffy says eagerly. “We’ll have a laugh.”

“Whatever,” Sage snorts.

How much abuse can one man take? He still hasn’t given up hope, which is kind of bizarre seeing as he’d given up on me after a relatively short couple of days. Sage has been giving him the cold shoulder for weeks, but it just seems to egg him on. He’s tried to corner me on a couple of occasions to ask for advice. All I ever tell him is: “Don’t call her ‘love’.”

Suddenly, Ralphie catches sight of Rat Girl’s rat, which has squirmed its way out of her jacket and is nestled on her shoulder, nibbling at her hair. He starts barking and yipping and jumping up at her legs and I have to yank him away.

“Here,” I say to Sage, thrusting a bunch of five franc coins into her hand. “Go get yourself a tab, and I’ll catch up with you later. I’d better get him out of here.”

“Thanks mom,” Sage snaps, but she takes the money.

“I’ll meet you later!” I call after Sage as she and the others head down the steps to the Metro. She doesn’t look back.

I’m flooded with guilty relief.

“Right, Ralphie,” I say. “Let’s walk.”

I’m beginning to feel quite excited at the prospect of Stefan’s surprise. I hope it’s nothing to eat, though. The burgers sit heavily and uncomfortably in my stomach.

We head towards the bridge and I stop at a kiosk for Lucky Strikes and Ralphie bribe chocolate. I check the watch. Still early. Should I grab a coffee or just head to the bench in front of the cathedral?

I'm dithering at the crossing when I feel someone tapping my shoulder.

"*Bonjour!*"

I whirl around and come face to face with Richard.

"*Tu veux café?*" he asks.

I look at him in disbelief.

As little as a week ago I would have jumped at the chance to spend time with him, even if it *was* just going for coffee. But now I'm not even sure why I fancied him in the first place. My Nan was right about men with moustaches being weirdoes. As both of us are stalwart members of the Pompidou Posse it's impossible not to bump into him occasionally. I always try and be polite, even though Sage keeps egging me on to tell him where to stick it. Anyway, it's not as if we were ever boyfriend and girlfriend, was it? I've snogged him a couple of times, but that's about it. And that wasn't that great to be honest. Like Sage keeps saying, he's probably just a sicko who enjoys fucking with my mind for some reason of his own. Well, tough.

"*Non merci,*" I say. "I have to meet Stefan."

Richard's face falls as I bid him a cheery '*au revoir*'. I quickly turn back to the crossing before he can see the enormous grin spreading across my face.

\*

I plonk myself down on an empty bench and Ralphie immediately jumps into my lap and snuggles down with his head on my arm. I stroke his head. I'm becoming quite fond of him. Although I'd never dare tell her this, he reminds me of Sage, although I'm not sure exactly why. It's probably the little out-of-proportion legs and snappy personality combination.

As I watch the tourists streaming in and out of the cathedral I can feel my eyes growing heavy. Sage and I hardly slept at all last night. That's the other thing about the acid. It's impossible to get any kip until it's worn off.

\*

I snap awake. Behind me I can hear the sound of running feet. I grab Ralphie's lead and tense my body, ready to leg it. The Blues are always patrolling this area, and although I have my dog insurance, I'm still on high alert. But it's only Danny and Bob. What are they doing here? I search the smattering of tourists around me for any sign of Stefan. Shit, I hope nothing's happened.

"What's going on?" I say as they reach my bench.

"Wait and see!" Bob says, and although he's out of breath, he's looking cheerful for a change. He's been a right miserable bastard since Alex's death.

"Wait and see what?"

Danny's also looking really excited. Even though he's a couple of feet from me, I can still smell the waves of cheap wine rolling off him. He turns around and nods to where Stefan's legging it towards us. It looks as if he's carrying something heavy. As he gets closer I see what it is – a cardboard box.

"What the hell?"

Ralphie starts barking and yipping excitedly as Stefan comes straight over to where I'm sitting. He plonks the box down at my feet. For a second I can only stare at it.

"Fucking hell!" I say. The box is full to the brim of books. "Where the hell did you get these from?" I ask Bob.

He nods behind me in the direction of the Latin Quarter and St Michel. "Outside the English book shop."

"What, you bought them?"

Bob looks at me as if I'm crazy. "Course not. Stefan nicked a box from outside and just walked off with it."

Aha! Of course. Tramp Shopping.

Danny and Stefan are looking at me expectantly. I jump up and throw my arms around Stefan. Ralphie yelps as he's dumped unceremoniously on the ground.

"*Merci!*" I say.

Stefan hugs me back, and before I can do anything about it, he's pressed his mouth to mine and I can feel his tongue snaking into my mouth. I have just enough time to think: thank *God* Sage isn't here, before I kiss him back. His arms are incredibly strong and he squeezes my waist and lifts me off my feet. For a second, I forget all about his crap skin and dirty jeans.

When I manage to disentangle myself, Bob and Danny are grinning broadly at us like proud parents.

"How did you know I was desperate for books?" I say to Bob.

He shrugs. "Sage mentioned it. I was going to ask Richard to do it, but then Stefan offered."

I hug Bob and Danny as well before getting to my knees and rummaging through the box. I can hardly wait to see what's in there.

\*

I roll over on my back and stretch contentedly. It's been one of the best afternoons I can remember. Full of 'money shot life moments'. Stefan, Ralphie and I'd walked down past the cathedral to a small deserted park behind Notre Dame, and made ourselves comfortable on the grass. Ralphie curled himself into my side and Stefan stroked my back or dozed as I devoured the book of Somerset Maugham short stories I'd unearthed from the box. As the afternoon wore on, Stefan had kissed me briefly, gestured for me to watch Ralphie, and disappeared. I'd barely noticed his absence. He returned with both our bags, a couple of kebabs from one of the Latin Quarter takeouts, and a can of dog food for Ralphie.

The worst part of the afternoon had been deciding which of the books to keep. I could hardly keep the whole lot; they'd be way too heavy to carry. The box had obviously contained the shop's bargain selection: most of the novels were dog-eared and battered and many of them were utterly dire. Not that I could've cared less. I'd been so desperate for words I would've read a Mills and Boon if it'd been available. I'd settled on four: the Maugham short stories; a non-fiction book about serial killers for Sage; an S. E. Hinton novel -- *That Was Then, This Is Now*; and a bizarre book of stories about haunted

cats. The rest – mostly westerns and 1930's crime pulp fiction -- I'd left regretfully in the box. I made a mental note to return the box outside the shop before it opened tomorrow morning, although they probably didn't even know it had gone.

\*

I read until the light fades and I can no longer see the words on the page. For the last half-an-hour or so I've been vaguely aware that Stefan's been staring at me intently.

"*Finis?*" he says to me as I reluctantly close the book of short stories. He pulls me to my feet.

"*Viens,*" he says, leading me towards the Notre Dame gardens. I don't resist. He deserves it.

\*

"What the hell? You hear that, Stefan?" I sit bolt upright, nearly braining my head on a branch above where we've been lying snuggled in Stefan's sleeping bag.

"*Pardon?*"

There's a rustling in the bushes as if someone's fighting their way towards us. Ralphie immediately starts barking at the top of his lungs.

"Shit!" I hiss, frantically grabbing my clothes that are scattered all around us and shoving my dress over my head. "Stefan, *vite!*" Christ, I hope it's not the cops. I don't want to be shoved in the back of a police van half-naked.

"Vicki! Vicki! Where the fuck are you? Are yer in here?"

I hesitate. It's Taffy. I'd recognise that voice anywhere. What the hell does he want?

His ginger head pokes through the foliage just as I'm trying to button my dress and yank on my leggings.

"What the fuck?" I say. "Taffy? What are you playing at?"

Stefan looks at me in confusion. He's also hurriedly getting dressed.

“It’s Sage!” Taffy yells. “She’s totally freaking out! You gotta come before the cops nab her or something!” He sounds as if he’s on the verge of hysteria.

Stefan jumps up and pulls me to my feet.

“What do you mean freaking out? Have you pissed her off or something?” I say.

“No! look, just hurry will yer? I’ve been bleeding looking for yer everywhere!”

“*Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?*” Stefan asks.

“*C’est ma amie, Sage,*” I try my best to translate as I pull on my docs. “*C’est une...*” Oh fuck, I can’t think of the words. “Er...emergency?”

Stefan gets the drift and motions me to follow Taffy, signalling that he’ll bring my bag along with his. The bushes whip and scratch my arms as I fly out after Taffy. I don’t even bother to tie my laces.

What the hell could have happened? Has she picked a fight with the wrong person? My heart’s thudding in my chest as I leg it past the cathedral, race across the road and head through the streets to the side of the Pompidou. I have to stop and catch my breath for a second and there’s a stitch burning into my side.

“Come on!” Taffy hesitates as I lag behind. He doesn’t look in the slightest bit out of breath. Must be all the practice he’s had escaping from the Blues.

“So where the fuck is she?” I gasp.

“Over there! Look!”

He gestures towards the crap sculpture pond. I can make out Sage’s bent-headed figure sitting with her back to us on the far side of the metal wall that surrounds the pond. The streetlights from the opposite church don’t provide much light there, but it’s unmistakably her. Someone is sitting next to her, and Hippy is hovering in front of the pair.

There’s a thump of feet behind us, and Stefan comes jogging up, barely breathing hard at all, considering he’s dragging Ralphie and is carrying both our bags.

“Sage?” I call. She doesn’t look up, but as I get closer I recognise Rat Girl’s sleek bobbed hair.

At first glance Sage looks okay, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t this. I bend down in front of her. There’s a bunch of

sticks and leaves on her lap and she's pushing them around and seems to be counting them. She's mumbling under her breath.

"Sage?" I say again. She doesn't look up. I sit next to her and gently shake her arm. "Sage? It's me, Vicks."

"Vicki?" She looks up at me. Fuck. Breath hisses out through my teeth. There's a look of sheer panic on her face and even in the dull light I can see that her pupils are wildly dilated and weirdly black. Her skin looks far too pale and has the unreal waxy pallor of a Madame Tussaud's figure. She looks as if someone's been sneakily siphoning the blood from her body. My heart leaps in my chest and I struggle not to look as freaked out as I feel.

"Sage, what's going on?"

"Vicki!" She grabs my hand hard enough to hurt. Her palm feels clammy and cold. "You have to help me. Where are the tablets, Vicks? Count the tablets. Quickly, quick, count the tablets, count them how many are there I--"

"It's okay, Sage," I say, aware that my voice is trembling. "It's okay."

"Have you got them I can't fucking find them where are they?"

I look up at Taffy. "What's she talking about, Taffy?"

He shrugs. For the first time I notice that he's also looking fairly wasted. He's barely able to hold my gaze for more than two seconds, as if he can't focus properly, and he's wavering slightly on his crutches.

"She's just been saying this over and over. She does not want to stop it. It's been happening for an hour or more now," Rat Girl says to me in perfect English. Some part of my brain is amazed. I've only had stilted conversations in French with her before.

"What's she taken?" I snap at Taffy.

He shrugs again.

"Taffy!"

"It is acid," Rat Girl says. She pats Sage's hand and says to her: "It is okay. You will be fine."

Sage looks at her in stark terror. "Vicki!" she whispers. "I think I'm losing it, Vicks. What's happening to me? I'm going ma--"

"Shhhh, Sage," I say. "You'll be fine. It'll wear off soon, I promise."

“Will it?” she says to me. “But what about my tablets? Where are they Vicks? Where are they?”

“What tablets, Sage?” I say to her gently.

She shakes her head and starts picking at the leaves and twigs again.

“She’s had more than just acid,” I snap at Taffy. “What’s this about tablets?”

“How the fuck would I know?” he says defensively. “Far as I know acid’s all she’s taken.”

“Hippy?” I yell, trying to get his attention. “You know anything about this?”

“Don’t ask me,” he slurs. Dead loss. I turn back to Taffy.

“Look at the fucking state of her!” I hiss. “She’s never been like this before. We take the bloody stuff all the fucking time! She must have had something else.”

“*Non*. He is right,” Rat Girl says. “I am sure that is all she’s taken. She is just having a bad trip.” I’m relieved to see that she doesn’t seem to have her rat with her. God knows what Sage would do if she caught sight of it in this state. She says that the sight of its bald pink tail totally freaks her out. It would probably be enough to send her completely over the edge, if she isn’t there already. I push this thought out of my mind.

Stefan, who’s been hovering a few metres away from us, says something in French to Rat Girl. She babbles at him for a bit, obviously telling him what’s going on. Ralphie starts barking at her and with a supportive nod at me, Stefan leads him away.

“But she’s usually fine!” I say in protest.

“Perhaps she has had more than normal,” Rat Girl says.

“How many did she take, Taffy?” I snap. I’m pretty sure I’d only given her enough cash for one hit.

“Two, three, maybe?” he whines.

“But where’d she get the cash for that?” I say. Taffy’s eyes jump guiltily away from mine.

“Is she going to be okay?” I say to Rat Girl, the only one who looks like she’s got a grasp on the situation.

She shrugs.

“*Je ne c’est pas*,” she says ruefully.

## SAGE

HOLY SHIT, Gladys!!! So much has happened I can't believe it!!

Where to start?

Vicks is DEAD upset because Stefan (AKA Stig of the Dump) has been arrested for breaking and entering and has been locked up. We only knew about it when Vicks disappeared off to do her sneaky fire-eating thing and neither Danny nor Stefan were anywhere to be seen. Danny came and found her later to tell her and she was TOTALLY freaked out. She FINALLY told me about how she'd been doing their bottling for them (and I had to look dead UPSET and confused about the whole thing as if I didn't know!!!), but I can't get my head around why Stefan being in the slammer should freak her out so much. She SWEARS nothing was going on with him, but I could tell by Danny's FACE that she was lying. STILL. Does it matter now, Gladys, seeing as he's out of the picture?

Fuck. I hope she didn't fucking well sleep with him though. GROSS.

Anyway, although this is good news in a way as I get Vicks all to myself again, it's also BAD news. Because guess who has to look after Ralphie the miserable snappy bastard dog? YEAH. US. I was like, "How come Danny doesn't look after him?" but apparently Vicks is the only one the little bastard doesn't try and bite all the time and Danny doesn't want to be bothered with him or something LAZY like that. Christ, I hope they let Stefan out soon. Ralphie HATES me and it's a REAL pain in the arse. It's like having a kid around all the time. We have to keep remembering to feed him and buy fucking dog food and fetch water etc etc. And he's like a shitting machine or something. Vicks had to dump all her new books so that she could fit his fucking bowl in her bag, which at least shows she's quite dedicated, I suppose. But mind you, maybe he'll be like her BOYFRIEND substitute or something so that she won't start falling for Richard's crap again.

Mind you, we're making shit loads of cash with Ralphie around all the time. FROGS love dogs for some reason, although God knows why.

The other MAJOR thing is this: Never never never never never never again, Gladys, will I ever take acid!!! That stuff is EVIL. Thank God Vicks was with me when I zonked out on it. I have NEVER felt so CRAP in my life. EVEN worse than when I flipped out at home and the PARENTS made me go and see BASTARD Dr Pilkington. Christ, it was like the whole world was against me, and at one stage I thought I was going MAD and that it would never end. Even though it happened AGES ago, Vicks keeps looking at me as if I'm a fucking invalid or something. She hardly ever leaves my side these days, and we've been CLEAN since then (apart from getting pissed and a few spliffs OBVIOUSLY).

But there have been other repercussions (is that how you spell it????) to this...

Apparently when I was babbling on while I was freaking out, I said something about my tablets and this got Taffy the bastard thinking. He's such a fucking scammy ARSE! So a couple of days later he corners me and he's like, "What this about tablets and stuff? Are you sick or something?" and I'm like, "None of your fucking business." Then he says, "Cos if you are, maybe I can help. All you need is a MAN IN YOUR LIFE!!!" HYSTERICAL. So I say, "I suppose you mean YOU," and he shrugs and says, "Why not?" and I'm like, "You must be fucking kidding!" Then his eyes go all small and crinkly and EVIL and he says, "What do you see in her?" and I'm like, "Who, what you on about?" and he says, "Vicki, of course." I'm about to tell him to go FUCK himself when he says, all sneaky, "Cos she's such a slag, isn't she? sleeping with Richard and Stefan at the same time." And I'm like, "She never slept with either of them, you're just pissed off with her `cos she doesn't fancy YOU," and he looks at me as if to say, YEAH RIGHT. Then he says, "Are you gay?" and obviously now I'm getting REALLY angry, and I practically shout, "Just because I've got short hair doesn't mean I'm gay. Just because you're a Welsh BASTARD doesn't mean that you can sing or eat leeks or whatever it is Welsh people get up to," and we're just about to have this huge fucking row, when Bob comes up to us and Taffy mumbles some excuse about having to find Hippy and hops off. What an ARSEHOLE.

Since then, we don't have anything to do with him, although he still keeps giving me FUNNY looks whenever we bump into him.

Otherwise, apart from the Stefan, Taffy and DOG EXCITEMENT, me and Vicks are doing really well. She did something HILARIOUS the other day. When you get thrown off the RER or Metro (which happens a LOT as you know, Gladys) all the ticket inspectors can do (because they know they won't get any cash off us) is write down the name and address of the 'contact in case of emergency' person you've got written in the back of your passport, so that they can send the BILL to them. So what Vicks has done is scratch out her Nan's address and write Myra Hindley, c/o Holloway Prison!!! Now every time we get done for being on the Metro or RER without tickets the bill will get sent to her!!! Ha ha. That'll serve her right for killing kids and going to jail and having loads of girlfriends INSIDE when she should be punished in a far WORSE manner. (Vicks knows all about her as it was in a book on serial killers Stefan nicked for her.)

Taking a quarter of a tablet each day now Gladys, but I'm feeling fine. Maybe I'm CURED? It would be TYPICAL that there was nothing wrong with me in the first place. I'm not worried though. I'm not, honest. I reckon I only flipped out before because of the pressures SOCIETY put on me, which is what Bob's always going on about all the time. Although I don't agree with him about Margaret Thatcher. He thinks she's some kind of god or something. Weird that he's a tramp but is a CRAP Conservative, innit? He even VOTED for her in his OLD LIFE!!!!!! Weird, because otherwise he not like a RIGHT WING bastard like vile brother-in-law PETE. People can be DEAD fucked up, can't they, Gladys????

Talking of fucked up:

After supper yesterday, me and Vicks tried to write limericks (her idea) about all the posse members:

### **Taffy limerick**

*There once was a Welsh git named Taffy,  
Who's hair was all red and quite crappy,  
He fell on his head  
As he's minus one leg  
And this made all the rest of us happy.*

### **Hippy limerick**

*There once was a tosser named Hippy  
Who thought he was clever and witty,  
But he's actually thick  
And he pongs quite a bit,  
And he thinks that the Welsh git is pretty.*

Then we got bored.

But it's TYPICAL of Vicks to try and nick my poem idea.

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Axe Experience

“Yer all going to fooking die you bastards! Gaaaaaahh!”

I can clearly hear the breath whoosh out of Bob as Taffy slams his crutch down onto his curled-up figure. I’m pretty sure that the lightweight sleeping bag Bob’s cowering in isn’t providing much protection, and I wince and squeeze my eyes shut.

Next to me Sage is desperately trying to wriggle out of her sleeping bag as fast as possible. I’m trying to do the same but my limbs feel numb and wooden and don’t want to work properly, and I’m trying to hold onto Ralphie’s collar with one hand which makes the manoeuvre almost impossible. He’s whining and wriggling and trying to make a beeline towards Taffy. I clamp my hand over his muzzle to shut him up. On the other side of the clearing, the rest of the posse appear to be frozen in shock. They’re still all snuggled in their sleeping bags like giant shiny slugs, their bleary-eyed faces registering terrified incomprehension at this violent and completely unexpected wake-up call. I’ve no doubt that Sage and I are wearing the same masks of confused horror. We were all woken by Taffy’s warlike yell a few seconds ago. God knows where he appeared from. I’m sure he hadn’t been dossing in the gardens last night. As I try to push the slippery fabric off my legs I catch sight of Norbert and Richard trying to ease themselves out of their own bags without attracting attention to themselves.

“Taffy!” Sage screams at him. “What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing!”

He whirls around to face her.

“Holy crap,” she breathes.

Taffy’s eyes are completely blank, and don’t seem to register even a glint of recognition as they flick from Sage to me.

“Hippy!” Sage calls.

There’s no answer. I glance around for any trace of him. He’s generally never far away from Taffy. Suddenly, everything seems to become eerily quiet. Even Ralphie has stopped struggling and trying to nip at my hand. The early morning light is still hazy and the bushes are deeply shadowed, but it’s not hard to see exactly what’s unfolding.

“Hippy!” Sage screams, shattering the silence. “Where the fuck are you! Taffy’s going fucking mental here!”

“Hippy,” Taffy spits out. “Hippy, Hippy, Hippy, Hippy, Hippy, Hippy, Hippy. *Fuck Hippy!*”

Oh shit. His dead-looking eyes fixed on us, Taffy’s hopping our way, lifting his crutch as high as he can over his head. There’s no way he can balance like that, surely? True enough, he seems to wobble, but then rights himself.

“Vicks! Cover your head!” Sage shouts. She’s just about managed to extricate herself from her sleeping bag, but it’s obvious she hasn’t got time to jump to her feet before Taffy lashes out.

I grab Ralphie’s wriggling body as tightly as possible and curl myself into a ball. Ralphie writhes and squirms and nips at my arms.

“Bob! Do something!” I shout above Ralphie’s whines and yelps.

“Taffy!” he calls half-heartedly, but it’s too late.

The end of the crutch smacks into my back. The sleeping bag cushions the force of it, but it’s vicious enough to make me to grunt and flinch. Without thinking I reach behind me, and before I can grab hold of his collar, Ralphie wriggles out.

“Ralphie!” I shout. “Sage! Get him!”

I scramble to my hands and knees, ignoring the dull ache in my back. Ralphie’s trying to snap at Taffy’s laces and it’s only a matter of time before he’ll get whacked by the crutch weapon that Taffy’s wildly swinging all over the place.

Then, with no explanation, Taffy chucks the crutch on to the ground and hurls himself past me and into the bushes, his one booted foot narrowly missing slamming into my stomach. Sage grabs Ralphie by the scruff of the neck as he tries to chase after Taffy.

“Quick!” she practically drags me to my feet, and as I catch my breath she thrusts Ralphie into my arms. “He’s gone! Let’s leg it out of here!”

“What do you mean, gone?”

I look to my right, catching a tantalising glimpse of the orange lights of St Michel through the tree branches. They look safe and comforting and faraway, and I desperately want to be there. There’s a rustling sound in front of me and I catch sight of Richard disappearing into the gloom. Norbert and Bob are also readying themselves for a quick getaway.

“Yer all fooking dead!” Taffy shouts. It sounds like he’s inches behind me, but that’s impossible, isn’t it? My heart leaps into my mouth and I whirl around.

“What the fu--?” Sage’s eyes look like they’re about to pop out of her head. Taffy’s thrashing his way back out from the bushes he threw himself into, and, instead of his crutch, he’s waving an axe back and forth in front of him. He’s perilously close to Sage and she has to jump back not to be in its path. Oh Christ! Where the hell did he get that? Then I remember – the shed at the edge of the gardens. Some bastard must have forgotten to lock it!

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” Bob yells, practically throwing himself forward through the bushes without a glance back. Norbert is crawling on his hands and knees as if he doesn’t have the strength to stand up. Taffy’s eyes flick from Sage to Norbert. It’s obvious who his next target will be.

Ignoring Sage and I entirely as if we don’t exist, he makes as if he’s going to hop towards where Norbert’s now cowering on the ground, hands over his head. Taffy’s wielding the axe above his head in the style of Conan the Barbarian, which would be funny except for the fact that he looks completely insane and I can’t get it into my head that this is actually happening.

Then, Hippy crashes through the bushes behind us. Like us, his eyes are wide and glassy from the morning’s rude awakening and the sheer horror of the situation.

“Taffy!” he yells.

Taffy stops his approach to Norbert and turns his blank stare back to us.

“What’s he been taking?” I yell at Hippy.

“Christ knows, we got a whole bunch of tabs from Dakota and he’s obviously taken a whole bunch of fucked-up ones. A few minutes ago he started freaking out!” It’s the most I’ve ever heard Hippy say. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” Hippy whines, catching sight of the axe that’s swinging around like an out-of-control pendulum. “This is not happening!”

“Yes it fucking is!” Sage says. As Taffy hops towards us, Sage drops to the ground and lashes out with her right leg. It connects with his knee and he overbalances and falls backwards. The axe falls somewhere behind him.

“Gaaaahhhh!” Taffy yells. “Yer all fooking dead!” He scrabbles behind him for his weapon.

“Bob! Norbert! Richard!” I shout. “Help us out here!”

There’s no answer. Even Hippy is backing away, and is twitching as if he’s about to leg it.

“You fucking cowards!” Sage screams into the bushes.

Taffy’s desperately trying to heft himself up, and with a lurch I realise he’s managed to grab hold of the axe again. I’m not sure I’ll have time to push myself out of the bushes with the struggling Ralphie before Taffy manages to get to his foot. He’s blocking the easiest exit route.

“Taffy, Taffy! It’s me, Vicki!” I yell at him. “Taffy, Taffy! Stop it, stop it!” The words burble out of my mouth and I don’t think about what I’m saying. “Taffy, Taffy, it’s us, you know us!” He stares at me with that same blank hatred. “Taffy, Taffy, we love you! We *love* you, Taffy!”

Then, almost like a light switching on, something approaching recognition seems to ignite in his eyes. He drops the axe, looks blearily over at Sage, and almost matter-of-factly turns over and throws up.

Sage looks over at me open-mouthed.

“Nice one, Chuck,” she murmurs, as Taffy retches and writhes in front of us. “Let’s fuck off before he goes mental again.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger of that, Sage,” I say. Taffy groans, flops onto his back and passes out, mouth open.

“Think he’s okay?” I say. I put Ralphie down on the ground, but hold tightly onto his lead in case he makes a run for Taffy’s prone figure.

Sage walks over to him and peers down. She kicks him roughly in his side. He makes a grunting sound. “Yeah,” she says.

“What if he ODs or something, though?”

Sage shrugs. “Good riddance to bad Welsh rubbish if you ask me, Vicks.” She sighs at my horrified expression. “He’ll be fine. Look, we’ll push him over onto his side so that he doesn’t choke if he pukes or something, but he looks to be breathing okay.”

Using her foot, Sage rolls Taffy over, grimacing as his head flops into the pile of puke with a squelch.

“I’ll get Hippy to keep an eye on him when we catch up with the cowardly bastard,” Sage says.

We push our way out of the bushes into the Notre Dame forecourt and head to a bench for a well-earned early morning fag.

We don’t say anything for a few minutes. Even Sage looks like she’s enjoying the relative peace. The traffic’s practically non-existent, and the grass around us is still slick with dew. I can clearly make out the panicked footsteps of the axe attack escapees across the lawn in front of our bushes. They look like the imprints of a group of running invisible men.

“Don’t get me wrong or anything, Vicks,” Sage says. “You handled Taffy nicely, like. But what’s with all that ‘we love you’ shite?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” I say. I don’t.

“Who’d have thought that would stop him in his tracks? I always thought a right good kicking would be the only way to sort that bastard out.”

I shrug and stub out my cigarette. I put the butt in my pocket. Everything looks so pristine around us I don’t want to litter it up.

“Right,” Sage says briskly, chucking her fag on the ground where it dies in the dew with a hiss. “Let’s catch up with the rest of the posse. They are so fucking dead. Bunch of pussies.”

“Think he’s all right?” I motion to the bushes behind us. “Maybe we should hang on a bit.”

“Who cares? Asshole. That’s what you get if you fuck around with drugs and don’t know what you’re doing,” she says without the slightest trace of irony.

“Do you mind if I catch you up later?” I say.

“Eh? What you going to do?”

“Feel like a walk. We’re hardly ever up this early.”

It’s true. Although we’re all early risers to avoid the seven a.m. Blues round, I haven’t experience the dawn hush of the city since Hervé and I left the Pompidou police station about a million years ago.

Sage looks at me quizzically.

“Sure he didn’t hit you in the head?”

“Nah. I’m fine, honest. I’ll meet you at the Pompidou in a bit. But will you take my bag? I’ve got to get Ralphie his breakfast.”

I rummage in my rucksack and take out the smaller bag in which I carry Ralphie’s bowl, water bottle and can opener. I’ve dumped most of the books Stefan nicked for me to make room for Ralphie’s stuff, so it’s not too heavy to lug around.

“We working today?” Sage asks.

I check my pockets. Fifty francs. “Nah. Let’s have today off,” I say. I nod back to the bushes. “After that I think we deserve a break, don’t you?”

“Cool. Catch you later.” She hefts my rucksack on top of hers and we head off in different directions.

Ralphie’s as eager as I am to set off, and his lead cuts into my hand as he pulls me along. The Indian shop at St Michel won’t be open at this time of the morning, so we need to kill some time before I fetch his breakfast. We trot across the bridge. The little green street-sweeping machines are still out, and I have to yank Ralphie back to my heels to prevent him from snapping at the brushes that polish the side of the pavement.

I’m feeling great. The adrenaline seems to have leaked away, and my hands are only slightly shaky now. The pain in my back has almost completely evaporated. I light a cigarette and breathe in the smoke mingled with the early morning smell of wet concrete. Where to now? Should I head down to St Germain? Even though it borders our Pompidou/St Michel/Notre Dame territory, we’ve tended to avoid it on the whole, as if it’s some landmine-filled No Man’s Land. We’ve never forgotten Bob’s Blues warning about the posh areas of the city, but after the Taffy Axe Experience I’m feeling pretty invincible. It’s almost as if the whole city belongs to me.

The posh cafés are still closed, and I take my time peering into the windows of the boutiques I pass. I haven’t been window-shopping for ages. That sort of thing is part of another kind of life. To think my favourite pastime was swanning round Birmingham market for vintage dresses! And the number of times I pissed Sage off by insisting on spending our beer money on outfits from Miss Selfridge. I don’t lust after anything I see displayed in the windows: I mean, what would I do with it? I’d only have to carry it

around. I want less stuff, not more. As if to underline this, Ralphie squats down and shits right outside a posh boutique's front door.

“Come on, Ralphie,” I say. “Breakfast for you.”

We turn around and wander back towards more familiar territory. The supermarket must be open by now, surely.

Oh fuck.

It can't be.

At first I think I'm hallucinating, but Sage and I haven't had any acid since her bad trip experience and we only smoked half a joint yesterday.

I walk closer to the poster-covered wall situated inbetween a shoe store and a pokey restaurant. The poster's stuck in amongst the other notices; one of its corners flopping down and partially obscuring the thick black print across the top of it. I go to rip it off the wall, and it comes off surprisingly easily.

My hands start shaking again as I read it:

'Have you seen these girls? Missing since February. Victoria Evans and Sharon Watling.'

It's me. There's no doubt it's me. But what's this about a Sharon? I remember asking Sage a thousand times if that was her real name and she'd sworn on her parents' lives that it was. Although my brain's reeling, part of me thinks: What else has she lied about? And why lie to me? It's definitely her, though, although she looks about twelve and her hair's long. I'd recognise those huge dark eyes anywhere. I'm beginning to feel sick and butterflies jump and dance in my stomach.

But how could my folks choose such a crap picture of me? I was sure I'd destroyed that photo ages ago. But maybe this is a good thing. Only someone who knew us really well would recognise the two black and white girls in the photographs as us. Wouldn't they? Better check. Like a sleepwalker I head back towards a shop window. I peer at my reflection and hold up the photograph for a comparison. Unrecognisable. The grainy photograph shows a smiling teenager with long permed hair and chubby cheeks. My reflection reveals a thin-faced tramp girl with long dreadlocks and pierced nose. Thank Christ for that.

With a jolt I think of something else. Sage has told the same pack of lies to Bob and the rest of the posse as she did to Hervé. She's always blabbing on about us being sad little orphans and stuff. It would look really odd if everyone found out that someone cared enough about us to want to find us.

I have to get back and tell Sage. She'll freak out. I shove the poster in my pocket.

Ralphie whines and I tear myself away from my reflection.

"Okay!" I snap at him. "I'll feed you just now."

Oh shit. Does this mean the parents were here looking for us? What if they're still here? But the poster doesn't look like it's just been put up. I search the wall for any signs of a duplicate, but this looks to be the only one. And there can't be any around Les Halles or the Pompidou. We'd have seen them, surely?

\*

I'm almost overwhelmed by a sense of urgency as I leg it nearer to the Pompidou bench. There's a fair crowd of early morning *clochards* hanging about, and I spot Sage on the outskirts.

"Sage!" I wave as I jog towards her.

She looks up at me, and even from here I can see the serious expression on her face. Maybe she's busy giving Bob and the rest a good bollocking for being such cowards during the Taffy axe thing. She strides up to meet me and grabs my arm as I approach the bench.

"Don't, Vicks," she says, her voice grim.

"Eh? What?" I say, completely confused.

Sage nods to where Danny is sitting on the bench, head in his hands. He's surrounded by a group of *clochards*, all of whom look totally freaked out.

"What the--?"

Danny looks up at me and I barely stop myself from screaming out loud. At first I can't get my head around what I'm seeing. It looks as if he's wearing some sort of sick Halloween mask or something. White liquid blisters bubble around his mouth and lips

and ragged pieces of skin droop off his cheeks from where other blisters have burst. His eyes look livid and frantic with pain.

“How did this happen?” I whisper.

Bob appears behind me, takes one look at Danny and immediately drops to his knees in front of him.

“What happened?” he says to me.

“Oh, God. I don’t know. I only just got here. I was about to ask Danny myself.”

“*Que tu est-il arrivé?*” Bob says to Danny.

At first it doesn’t look as if Danny’s going to manage to get the words out. His lips are so swollen and blistered I can barely tell where they end and begin.

“*Le feu,*” he croaks. I have to strain to hear him. “Beeg mistake.” He tries to smile at me, but only manages a wincing grimace.

Oh shit. What if he inhaled the fire? But then he’d be dead, wouldn’t he? Christ. I was supposed to be helping him yesterday, but I hadn’t felt like it and Sage and I had left Ralphie with Norbert and had snuck away and listened to music instead at the Pompidou Centre. Would it have made any difference if I’d been there? I hadn’t even noticed that he hadn’t slept with us in the bushes last night. Has he been out all night in this state?

“Christ – we’d better get him to a doctor, and fast,” Bob is saying.

“I know a chemist,” I pipe in helpfully, thinking of Hippy’s codeine supplier.

“He needs more than a fucking chemist, look at him!” Bob snaps. I’ve never heard Bob swear before. “Sorry, love,” he says quickly. “It’s just with Alex and all – you know.”

“Yeah,” I drop my head so that no one can see the tears pricking my eyes.

“*Non,*” Danny says. “I will be okay.”

“Danny,” I say, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. “Bob’s right. You need to get that seen to.”

“Christ,” Sage whispers. “That must burn like fire.” Then she realises what she’s said and claps a hand over her mouth.

“I will take him,” Norbert says. He’s always in and out of hospital getting that goitre thing on his neck seen to.

“*Viens,* Danny,” he says. “*Viens avec moi.*”

“Do you need us to do anything?” I say to Danny.

“*Non*,” he says. He takes my hand and squeezes it. I feel a tear wobbling down my cheek and wipe it away.

Bob and I help him to his feet, and we watch as he and Norbert walk carefully and slowly to the Metro.

“Don’t worry, love,” Bob says to me. “He’ll be fine. It looks worse than it is.”

“Shit,” I say. “What a morning. First Taffy, now this. How can everything get so fucked up so quickly?”

“One of those things,” Bob says, shrugging.

Sage scowls at him.

“You didn’t need to snap at Vicki like that though, did you, Bob?”

“Leave it, Sage,” I say.

She clamps her mouth shut, but doesn’t change her pissed-off expression. She must be seriously annoyed she didn’t get the chance to give the cowards a bollocking about deserting us with Taffy this morning. Typically, I can see no sign of Richard. He’ll probably keep a low profile for a bit. If I was him I wouldn’t be able to look us in the face again.

“Come on, Vicki, let’s get out of here,” Sage says pointedly.

Shit! With all the Danny horror, I’ve completely forgotten about the poster!

“Yeah. I need to talk to you,” I hiss urgently. I grab her arm and yank her towards the *Quartier De l’Horlodge*. Ralphie whines at me again. “Come, Ralphie. You’ll get your food in a minute.”

“What’s going on, Vicks?” Sage says, but she can tell that something serious is up.

\*

As soon as we sit down I shovel Ralphie’s food into his bowl and light a cigarette for both of us. Without a word I hand her the poster.

“Holy shit!” she says. She drags deeply on her cigarette but it goes down the wrong way and she ends up coughing violently. “Are there any more? We have to find them. What if someone sees?”

“I’m not sure. There must be,” I say. “But I wouldn’t worry. Look at the photos.”

“Shit, yeah!” She looks as if she’s beginning to calm down. “You’d never say that was me, hey, would you Vicks? I mean, just look at my fucking hair!”

“Haven’t they got a more recent photo of you?” I say.

She shrugs.

Guess not. “Cos you look about twelve or something,” I say.

“Bloody hell,” she says. What a fucking bollocking mess!”

I take a deep breath. “Sage?”

“Yeah?” she says distractedly, without taking her eyes from her photograph.

“How come the name on the poster is Sharon?”

Her eyes widen. Maybe in the shock of seeing the photographs she hadn’t even read the notice at the top properly. I look away while she collects herself.

“My stupid parents,” she says so quietly that I have to strain to hear her. “Always fucking things up.”

I decide not to push it.

“I think we should phone home, let them know we’re okay,” I say instead.

She squints at me through her cigarette smoke. I can sense she’s relieved I’m not going to harp on about the name issue.

“You serious?” she says.

“As a heart attack.”

She nods and sighs. “You might be right. We’d better figure out where we stand. Come on.”

We head back to the Pompidou and walk down towards the bank of phones in front of the tourist tat shops. “If Emma-the-Bitch has been spouting crap to them she’s fucking dead meat,” she snarls as I pass her some change.

I can feel my heart shuddering in my chest as I dial the number.

\*

“Hello?” The voice sounds furry, confused. Shit, I’ve forgotten it’s still really early. I’ve probably woken them up.

“Mom?” I say tentatively.

There’s a pause, and I can hear a gasp in the background.

“Vicki? Is that you? Where are you? We thought we’d lost you!” She sounds tearful, out of control.

“I’m fine, Mom. Seriously.”

“But we thought the worst – we thought --!”

The dial tone buzzes in my ear as the connection’s lost. I listen to it for a few seconds. When I place the receiver back in its cradle it’s slick with sweat. Bloody hell. Should I phone them back? I wasn’t expecting that sort of reaction. I’d barely spoken to my folks in the last year. I’d kind of convinced myself they couldn’t have cared less where I was. I fumble in my pocket for the box of cigarettes. Several tumble onto the floor as I shakily try and take one out with trembling fingers.

Trying not to eavesdrop on her conversation, I wait for Sage to finish talking to her sister. She looks as shaken as I feel when she finally joins me.

“Well?” I say.

“Fuck. They’re in a right old state.”

“Did they come over here?”

She looks at me in confusion. “Eh? Didn’t you ask your parents?”

“Nah. Got cut off.”

“Oh. Giz a fag.” I pass her one and watch her impatiently as she lights up. “Jesus, Vicks. Friend of your folks put up the posters when he came over here for business. All of them are totally freaking out.”

“Did Karen say anything about the cops?”

“Nah. Just gave me a right old bollocking about not being more responsible and letting everyone know where we were. Apparently Emma-the-Bitch told your folks a whole load of shite.”

“Oh God, yeah. That Hervé spy thing!”

We look at each other for a second and then burst into giggles. It doesn’t last long.

Numbly lost in our own thoughts we make our way back to the Pompidou bench.

“At least we know now that they’re not here,” Sage says.

“Is that all you can say?” I’m beginning to feel a nagging guilt. Christ. I really hadn’t expected that sort of reaction from my mom. The only time she’d shown any sort of emotion towards me in the last year was when she was yelling at me to do something about my hair.

“Shit. I feel like getting totally wasted,” Sage says.

I’m not sure exactly how I’m feeling right now, but getting slammed sounds like a plan.

\*

“You’re not going to puke again are you Sage?”

“Nah,” she shakes her head decisively, but she still looks green around the gills. Both of us have barely moved a muscle from the bench since she’d been sick. Red wine and the sun. Bad combination. She’d thrown up outside the Pompidou Centre on our way to retrieve our bags. One show the tourists hadn’t been expecting, that’s for sure.

I’m beginning to sober up; and now the pissed feeling is wearing off slightly a headache is beginning to batter at my temples. But at least the pain’s helping to take my mind off the phone conversation and the guilt about Danny.

My stomach rumbles.

“Should we go to the soup kitchen?”

Sage looks at me as if I’m mad.

“You what?”

“Well, we haven’t got enough dosh to buy any food.”

“God. How the hell you can think about food now is beyond me, Vicks. Giz a fag.”

“Run out.”

“Fuck. Bob!” she calls. “Got any fags?” he throws his packet over to us and we light up.

“*Bonjour!*” says a voice next to us. It’s Rat Girl. I haven’t seen her since Sage’s bad trip experience. Sage looks up at her suspiciously.

“All right?” I say. Then I catch sight of Hippy, who’s hovering uncertainly a few metres behind Rat Girl. I don’t blame him. Sage doesn’t look too charmed to see him.

“Hippy!” I wave him over. “How’s Taffy?”

He grunts. “Not good. Still sleeping it off. Moved him down to the car park, so I hope he gets it together before the Blues arrive.”

“Serves him right,” Sage mutters. “Thanks for all your help this morning, by the way, Hippy.” She shoots him a black look.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” He looks down at the ground.

Sage looks disappointed. She was obviously spoiling for a fight. “Yeah. Whatever,” she says.

“You want to come to a party with us?” Rat Girl says. I look up at her in surprise. As usual I’ve completely forgotten she’s around.

“Where’s this party?” I say.

“It is at the squat of my friend,” she says.

“Yeah. It’ll be cool. You gotta see this place, it’s wicked,” Hippy says.

Sage and I stare at each other in bewilderment.

This is bizarre. Rat Girl, who’s barely said a word to us since we met her, is treating us like we’re friends, and we’re actually having almost a normal conversation with Hippy. In fact, he seems to be a totally different person without the red peril around. He looks almost cheerful and relaxed and even his skin seems to be less spotty and pasty. For a second I wonder if Sage and I are different when we’re not together. I don’t think I’ll discuss this with her any time soon, though.

“I can’t,” I say, nodding to Ralphie.

“You can bring him,” Rat Girl says.

“Bob’ll look after him,” Sage says. “He owes us for this morning after all.” She’s made sure she’s said this loud enough to carry over to where Bob is chatting to a couple of buskers. “Bob?” she calls over to him, unnecessarily loudly. “Will you watch Ralphie while we head off for the night?”

“Yeah,” he smiles weakly at me. “You girls go and enjoy yourselves.”

“You know how to feed him and everything?” I say. “I’ll have to fetch his bowl and -”

“Sure,” Bob says. “Off you go.”

“Great,” I say. “Squat party it is then.”

“Christ Vicks,” Sage says as I sort out Ralphie’s gear, “Every bloody day here is like something out of a movie.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“No, I mean it. It really is. Think about it, this morning we were attacked by an axe-wielding Welshman with one fucking leg; there are posters of ourselves dotted around Paris like everyone thinks we’ve disappeared into thin air or something; Danny’s almost burned his face off; and now a girl who goes out with a giant rat has invited us to a party. I mean, how more fucking freaky can things get?”

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

### REASONS WHY THIS WEEK HAS BEEN CRAP

My best friend is a smack-head.

I have to look after a snappy little dog who HATES MY GUTS.

A one-legged Welshman who tried to kill me with an AXE last week wants to be my boyfriend.

I'm rubbish at begging and the soup kitchen is CLOSED!!!!

I have practically NO fucking tablets left. BUT THAT IS THE LEAST OF MY PROBLEMS.

It's been a week FROM HELL Gladys.

Bloody hell, I don't even know where to fucking START...

OKAY, so after the whole phoning the parents thing, Vicks was totally freaked out. I could tell it had totally done her head in and that, but that's NO EXCUSE FOR WHAT SHE DID!!! Hang on, I'm getting 'ahead of myself' as Bob would say.

I suppose everything started going TOTALLY shit at this fucking squat party. I'd like to say I had a funny feeling about it BEFORE we even left the Pompidou that day. I mean, I've never really trusted Rat Girl, she's just too fucking WEIRD and never speaks, except to her Rat. And why oh why did we trust Hippy? WHAT WERE WE FUCKING THINKING???

Anyway, so after Rat Girl invites us to the PARTY OF NEAR DEATH we have to go on the good old RER to get to this squat, which is MILES outside Paris. And all the way there Vicks is like, "We can't stay away too long because of Ralphie, blah, blah, blah," which turns out to be dead IRONIC, of course.

The journey takes for fucking ever, and just when I'm thinking we're never going to get there, Rat Girl nods to us to get off and we follow her and Hippy through this scummy area for ages until we reach a kind of industrial estate. It looks just like the sort of run-down bunch of SHITE buildings you see from the windows of the Wolverhampton to Tipton train, Gladys. All around us were these big pieces of dead machinery, and Vicks said the whole place looked like a set from *Blade Runner*.

So me and Vicks look at each other, DEAD disappointed, and we're about to give Hippy a bollocking, when Rat Girl points to this big old warehouse at the end of this block of rubbly shite, and says that's where we're headed. It didn't look very promising to say the LEAST Gladys. As we got closer I could see that all the walls were covered with crap tagging graffiti and that the windows were all broken. Even from like miles away we could hear the rubbish house music pumping out. You know, boom, boom, boom, 'Pump up the Volume' shite which I know Vicks secretly likes.

So we walk up to this huge metal door stuck in the side of the wall and Rat Girl bangs on it a few times. No one comes for ages and I'm about to say, "Nice one, thanks for wasting our FUCKING time," when this guy opens the door. Fuck!! Dead ringer for Hervey or what!! i.e. Very tall with a crappy goatee beard, which should have been another BAD OMEN, shouldn't it, Gladys?

Then the guy opens his mouth and says, "Howdy, dudes," or something equally shittily American, and beckons us in.

So we walk up loads of stairs which are dead dark and creepy, and then follow Hervey USA through this curtain that's hanging across the doorway. We go into this massive room that's really dark and only lit with candlelight, and it's practically empty except for a few old couches and mattresses scattered all over the floor. There are a bunch of people hanging about smoking dope and drinking and shite, and it's then, Gladys, that the BAD feeling I had just DISAPPEARS which again is DEAD IRONIC.

OK, I admit I was a bit impressed. ALL the walls in this massive room were painted with freaky psychedelic swirls like on the cover of *Camembert Electric*, and canvases were stacked up all over the place. I started thinking that maybe I could nick some paint and art supplies etc so that me and Vicks can have another crack at making money from what we're GOOD at for a change.

So Hervey USA starts explaining that all the dope heads scattered around the room are fellow art students and that the whole INSIDE of the building is one massive ART WORK!! Which sounds dead pretentious and like a load of bollocks, but at first me and Vicks were quite impressed. And then he starts introducing us to all these so-called Arty Farty people and the WEIRDEST THING HAPPENED!!! They all started looking at us with RESPECT as if we were like celebrities or something. And this one dead-stoned guy

comes up to us and says over and over again, “Like, you guys live on the edge MAN,” and even Hippy was being treated with RESPECT, which must have been a totally NEW experience for him.

There’s TONS of booze and stuff hanging around and Vicks and I make a bee-line for the vods, even though I’ve still got a sore head from puking up the wine earlier. And Vicks starts talking to this arty farty American girl who looks dead impressed with the way Vicks is dressed (even though she didn’t look any different than she NORMALLY does) and Hervey USA says to me that I should go and have a look at the EXHIBITS.

OK, Gladys. This part is freaky. By this stage I was a little bit pissed and I’d had a few drags on the spliffs that were doing the rounds, so I’m not sure how much of this is ACCURATE. So Hervey USA tells me to go back down the stairwell and take a look at what they’ve done on each floor of the place. TOTAL MIND FUCK. One room was totally empty except for a bath in the middle of the room, which was dead creepy because it was very nearly dark by now and the lighting in the place was shite. And in the bath there was this naked mannequin with red fabric spread all under its body like it was bathing in blood. WEIRD. On another floor, sand and cement had been spilled across the ENTIRE massive length and breadth of the floor in the shape of eyes and spirals. GOD knows how they moved all that sand up there, though. It must have taken WEEKS.

Then, JACKPOT!!! At the bottom there was a studio filled with art materials.

OBVIOUSLY these ‘students’ had like SHIT loads of money. They had TUBES and TUBES of oil paint and all kinds of different sized canvases. I searched for HOURS but I couldn’t find any chalk worst luck, but I collected a bag of oils and brushes and stashed it to pick up on our way out.

Then everything turned to SHIT.

I walk back into the MAIN room and I notice straight off that everyone’s now sitting in a circle and no one’s speaking, and some misguided ARSEHOLE has put the *Sisters of Mercy* on full blast. It’s then that I realise that I can’t see Vicks anywhere. At first I guess I thought, ‘she must’ve gone for a piss or something,’ but after a while I realised that even Vicks doesn’t take THAT long when she’s in the bathroom. Then, I spy a figure

lying down on a mattress in a dark corner of the room and I can make out that it's got dreadlocks and is wearing big heavy boots like Vicks's. Everything suddenly went weird and surreal then, Gladys, as if it was all happening in slow motion. I walk past the creepy circle of spaced-out students and as I pass them I can see Rat Girl trying to put a needle in the arm of this dead-scared looking girl – the one who was talking to Vicks earlier. The girl's going, "It will be okay, right? I'll be fine, won't I?" over and over again, and suddenly I know what's happened. So I leg it over to the mattress and Vicks is just lying there, eyes open. At first I think she's dead, but when I shake her she looks up at me, totally zonked, and slurs, "Hey, Sage." I pull her up and yell something like, "We're getting the FUCK out of here!" but when she stands up she's like SICK everywhere, and she keeps trying to lie back down on the mattress.

I'm suddenly REALLY angry now. Partly because I'm REALLY scared Vicks is like OD-ing or something, and partly, Gladys, because I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE'D TAKE IT WITHOUT ME DOING IT AS WELL!!! I know, CRAP thing to say, but true.

So I go up to Rat Girl to ask her what the FUCK's going on, but she's also totally off her face and I can't get a word of sense out of her. Then she says to me, "You want?" And she holds up the little packet of smack. And time suddenly stopped. I looked around this circle and everyone looked dead spacey and almost happy (although a couple of them DID look quite pukey to be honest). Would I have done it, Gladys? Yeah, I suppose. MAYBE. Even just to GET BACK at Vicks, (but I'm not sure about the whole needle thing). But then one of the Americans over in the far corner starts shrieking: "He's OD-ing he's OD-ing I can't wake him, I can't wake him!" and then everything went totally MENTAL.

Hippy seems to snap out of his coma and he says to me, dead serious, "Get the fuck out of here now," and I start panicking.

I race over to Vicks and yank her to her feet and she gets sick again, but I don't take no for an answer. It's a bloody nightmare getting her down the stairs and into the fresh air and the walk back to the RER station takes FOREVER as Vicks keeps having to stop to be sick even though she can't POSSIBLY have anything else in her stomach.

And what was even more SURREAL is that it was only like ten p.m. when we arrived back HOME. It wasn't even that LATE!!

Vicks was sick the whole next day and I gave her the biggest bollocking in the whole HISTORY of bollockings. SHIT, Gladys. Both of us have talked about trying it, I mean, who hasn't? But I always thought it would be me that would take the plunge, not fucking Vicks, OR we'd do it together.

Anyway, Vicks has been feeling like shite for the whole week and can barely get up in the morning. She spends the WHOLE day in the park next to the English book store with Danny. They sit on the same bench, all day, everyday like two old people -- Danny with his face like melted wax, Vicki barely able to string a sentence together.

So, it's up to me to make all the cash. But I'm FUCKED if Vicks is getting her hands on any of the money in case she wants to BUY MORE SMACK, and I've told Hippy to keep Rat Girl OUT OF MY SIGHT if she doesn't want to get her head kicked in. And I'm bugged if Taffy doesn't keep trying to be REALLY HELPFUL and he keeps bringing me Baby Bels and offering to dog-sit Ralphie for me. Total TOSSER. He's SO one of those people who LOVES it when other people have nasty experiences. He seems to think we've all FORGOTTEN about the Axe Experience, but of course we HAVEN'T and I'm THIS CLOSE to telling him to fuck away off.

Of course the worst part is the endless dog-sitting. Me and Ralphie HATE each other, but I can't beg safely without him, and he isn't going to get fed without me at the moment, so we have to put up with each other. TOUGH. At least he's not as SMELLY as vile brother-in-law Pete's slobby Labrador. Maybe it's true that pets become like their owners (or vice-versa).

No poem today, Gladys as I'm TOO FUCKING TIRED being the BREAD WINNER all the time.

## **VICKI: The German Tear Gas Experience**

Gross. I look down at my feet and watch as the pool of dirty water swirls away down the drain. Finally the water sloughing off my body runs clear. It feels like weeks since I last showered, and my skin is raw and tingly from the scrubbing I gave it with our last cake of hard soap. The only part of my body that's now not free from ingrained dirt is my hair. We've run out of shampoo. Still, I've done my best with the soap, and my scalp is less itchy than before.

I have to will myself to get out from under the delicious warm water. I've only paid for fifteen minutes and there's no money left for another round. My towel smells musty and mildewed so I rub it over my body as fast as I can. The shower's done wonders. How come water can make you feel so much better? I wish I had a flip-top head like in *The Man With Two Brains* and then I could give the inside of my head a good scrub as well and wash away the cobwebs, as my Nan would say.

I don't put my clothes on right away. There's a full-length mirror in the communal changing area in the shower block and I'm pretty sure I'm the only person in here. I stick my head around the door, and true enough, it's deserted. Taking a deep breath I walk out and stand in front of the mirror. Bloody hell. My arms are burned a deep nut-brown up to my shoulders. Apart from my head and neck, the rest of me seems to be fish-belly white in comparison, even though people are always going on about my 'olive skin'. It looks like I'm wearing really long opera gloves or something. I look down at the inside of my right arm and breathe a sigh of relief. The pinprick and bruise where the needle went in is almost gone. Thank God that didn't turn septic or anything. It's weird though. I was sure I'd lost a ton of weight, but my bum looks as plump as ever (worst luck) and my tummy still shows signs of its usual slight pot-belly. The last time I caught sight of myself naked was in Jules's flat, and I'm sure since then I've actually put on weight. How can that be? I've barely eaten anything except a few crème caramels for the last two weeks. They've been the only thing my stomach could take without going into a mad spasm of diarrhoea and puking.

I'd better get dressed and brush my teeth. They've also been neglected. I cup my hand over my mouth and breathe into it. Rank. The Mrs Danvers style woman who sits behind the counter in front of the shower place is mumbling to someone, so I leap back into the cubicle and begin to pull on my clothes. Now I'm clean, they smell sweaty and smoky, almost like cured meat or something. I'm sure it's the same stench that emanates in waves off the scummy *clochards* who queue up outside the soup kitchen. The same smell that used to make Sage and I feel like puking. There's no cash left for a trip to the laundrymat.

But as I walk out into the sunlight, ignoring the look of disgust from the Mrs Danvers clone, I start to feel almost human again. It's like I've been a zombie for the last couple of weeks. I take my time getting back to Sage. She's been a nightmare to deal with since the 'smack experience' as she calls it. I'm sick to death of having to constantly reassure her that I'm not an addict or anything. I only tried it once after all. Well, maybe twice or so. I have a blurry recollection of Hippy or Rat Girl saying I had to have another hit so that my body could get accustomed to it or something, but did I? I can only remember the first time that Rat Girl stuck the needle in. I couldn't look and I remember pretending that it was just like having an immunisation shot – like the nurse used to do at school -- but it hadn't helped. I'd watched in horror as my blood mixed with the brownish liquid in the syringe, but still didn't yank my arm away from Rat Girl's vice-like grip. It'd hit me straight away, which I hadn't been expecting. It was nothing like acid which takes ages to have any effect. I'd had to lie down immediately; the minute I stood up I kept puking, although that was a strange experience in itself. It was like I didn't actually *mind* being sick. The rest is a bit of a blur. Or maybe I don't actually want to think about it. But the after-effects. Christ. I thought smack was supposed to make you feel good, not like death warmed up. And for this long?

The fresh air on my damp hair is doing wonders. My almost constant headache seems to have retreated to a low standable throbbing at the back of my neck. I wander over to where Sage and Ralphie are waiting for me next to the St Michel fountain. She nods approvingly at me as I amble up.

“Wow, Vicks. Much better. You don't smell like shite any more.”

“Thanks, Sage.”

Ralphie jumps up at me and I stroke him.

“Did you give him his breakfast?” I say, then immediately regret it.

She glares at me. “For your information Vicki, while you’ve been a recovering smack-head I’ve been carrying the can, so yeah, the little bastard has been fed, okay?”

She’s been saying variations on the same theme for the last week. I’m sick to death of being called a smack-head. So unfair. She was the one who got us into the whole acid thing in the first place, and I reckon she’d have been tempted to try it only she’s shit-scared of needles. And it’s like she’s totally forgotten her bad trip experience. I mean, I had to look after her when she was freaking out then, didn’t I? But I haven’t said this to her. I haven’t got the energy for a full-on fight at the moment. Today’s the first day I feel like I’m able to work. It’s not going to be easy building up the coffers again. Fair play to Sage for trying to bring in some money, but for some reason I always seem to do much better.

“Okay, okay, only asking,” I mumble.

I bum us a couple of fags from an American studenty type, and Sage’s mood seems to improve slightly.

A familiar portly figure is emerging from the Metro.

“Bob!” I call.

He wanders over. He’s looking worse for wear again. His suit jacket is rumpled and creased and I swear his perennial stubble looks greyer than usual. I haven’t seen him smile for ages, and I’m pretty sure that he’s half-cut most of the time these days. I don’t know if it’s because he’s still mourning Alex or if something else is bothering him. Just what I need. I’m not sure if I’m up to dealing with a depressed pouf and a prickly Sage at the same time.

“What’s up?” I say.

“Bloody Germans,” Bob moans.

“Eh?” says Sage.

He points behind him.

“Bloody hell,” Sage breathes.

A group of five massively tall men are exiting the Metro. It’s quite a sight. They all look remarkably similar, with huge overgrown beards and studded leather motorcycle

jackets like they're the Hells Angels of *clochard* land. Sticking close to their legs are three of the biggest dogs I've ever seen – they're almost as intimidating as their owners and would make Dakota's massive Alsatian look like a Scottie dog in comparison. The dogs are all panting and drooling in the heat. I feel a bit sorry for them. Their thick black coats must be murderously hot. The group of dogs and men look like giant creatures out of a fairy tale or something. We're not the only ones taken aback at the sight of them. Passers-by are giving them a wide berth; some even stepping off the pavement and into the road to stay as far away as possible.

They wander to the opposite side of the fountain to where we're gathered and allow their dogs to drink. Ralphie is beside himself. He strains at the leash and is barking and whining as if his life depends on it. The Germans glance over at us briefly.

Sage tugs the lead sharply. "Ralphie shhhhh!" she snaps. He immediately shuts up. I look at Sage in amazement. He's never done that with me.

"Christ, Bob!" Sage hisses. "Who the hell are they?"

"German tramps. They normally only arrive here later for the winter. God knows what they're doing here this early in the season."

"And what's with those massive bloody dog accessories?" Sage says.

Bob shrugs. "Who knows? Maybe protection?"

"Maybe they're their girlfriends or something," I say.

We burst out laughing and even Bob joins in. The Germans look over at us again, this time suspiciously.

"Christ. They give me the creeps," Sage says. "Why don't they stick to their own fucking country?"

Neither Bob nor Sage sees the irony in this.

"Cops are stricter in Germany where *clochards* are concerned I suppose," Bob says.

My stomach rumbles. For the first time in ages I'm actually feeling hungry.

"I suppose I'd better go and do some work," I sigh.

"Watch your back," Bob says.

"Eh? I've got Ralphie, I'll be fine."

"I'm not taking about the Blues, Vicki," Bob says.

“Then who?”

He nods behind him. “It’s them you’ve got to watch. Bloody krauts.”

“Eh?”

“They come here and nick our begging spots. And they don’t bother to say ‘please’.”

“You mean they’re violent?”

“You want to mess with that?” he nods to a leather-clad German who must be at least six-foot five. His boots alone look like they weigh as much as me and Sage put together.

“There aren’t that many of them.”

“You haven’t seen the half of it,” Bob says. “This is the first lot. They’ll be a whole load of them arriving soon. Fuckers.”

Sage and I exchange glances. Bob hardly ever swears.

“Okay, guys,” I say. “I’m really off now.” Sage goes as if to leave with me. “It’s cool, Sage,” I say. “It’s my turn. You go and listen to some music or something. You need a break. Just lend me your sign. I can’t find mine anywhere.”

“You sure?” she says, frowning. But I know she’s dying to continue her Pink Floyd feast. Although she’s always going on how much she hates them, she can quote practically every line from the *Dark Side of the Moon*.

I wave goodbye to Bob and Sage and head towards the Metro entrance parallel to the fountain. I can’t decide where would be best to go. The MacShite pitch is always the most lucrative, and as the vague hunger pangs have suddenly been swamped by a surge of what feels like starvation, I’d be quite happy for punters to ply me with burgers today. I try and give the Germans as wide a berth as possible, but Ralphie strains on his leash and tries to take a running leap at one of their massive dogs. It takes all my strength to yank him back. One of the bearded giants stares at me as I pass, but I can’t read his expression. I give him one of my practised innocent smiles that normally works on even the most miserable punter. He doesn’t return it. I can hear their booming laughter following me as I head down the stairs, and heat rushes to my cheeks.

“Bastards,” I hiss. Ralphie looks up at me and whines. “Come on.” I tug him on, but he doesn’t seem to want to go any further. I practically have to drag him down the next few steps. “What’s the matter, Ralphie?”

Behind me I can hear the heavy clump of several sets of feet. I look back. Oh shit, it’s the Germans! Are they following me? Their massive bodies are practically blocking out the light at the Metro’s entrance. Ralphie turns around and starts growling. “Fuck it!” I pick him up and grip his struggling body in my arms. It’s not easy navigating the stairs with his added wriggling weight and I stumble down two at a time, not daring to look back. I’m desperate to reach the ticket foyer before they catch up with me. I don’t want them to see in which direction I’m heading. Bob’s warning words ring in my ears.

I’m nearly there when there’s the echoing sound of yelling and angry shouting ahead of me. It sounds as if it’s coming from the platform below. Now what? My arms are aching with the strain of subduing Ralphie’s wriggling body, and I’m still feeling a bit weak from the last couple of weeks’ almost constant nausea, but I can’t afford to stop for a breather.

Oh shit.

There’s a shock of angry looking faces running full pelt up the stairs towards me and for a few stupefied seconds all I can do is stare stupidly at them. Then, through the crowd I make out the tell-tale bright blue of the Blues’ uniforms. Panic surges through my body and ties my stomach in knots as I suss out the situation. The Blues have obviously got wind of the Germans’ arrival and I’m about to be fucking well caught in the middle! I don’t even think about the potential danger of running into the midst of the giants that were following me a few seconds earlier. I turn around and race back up the stairs.

“Run!” I scream at their approaching bodies. “Police!”

They pause for a second, but obviously don’t need to be told twice. I risk a brief look behind me. The crowd is nearly at my heels, and I still have a flight to go before I’m safely back outside. I’ll never make it with Ralphie in my arms. I chuck him on the floor and pull him up the stairs.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Ralphie's frantically barking and trying to snap at the running feet that overtake me as I drag hopelessly on his lead, and I grab hold of the railing at the side of the stairwell to steady myself. I feel myself being shoved and pushed roughly from behind as body after body knocks into me and surges past, and my face is scored across the rough fabric of someone's back. It feels like the one time I went surfing in Cornwall and was dumped by a wave. An elbow hits me smartly on my ear and I lash out without thinking. All I can hear is panicked swearing and shouting and the angry barks and yelps of God knows how many dogs.

I'm nearly at the top of the stairs, which has formed into a bottleneck of bodies, when I feel something cool and wet spattering the side of my face. The screams and yells are turned up a notch and I'm practically lifted off my feet as the bodies behind me push behind with a force that propels me out into the sunlight. Then the pain hits. Oh fuck, the skin around my eyes is burning like fire and I can't seem to open my eyes! I no longer care about the Blues or the Germans as I'm knocked back and forth by bodies that are only a vague blur in front of me.

What the hell's happening? The skin on the entire side of my face feels as if it's being attacked by the poisonous stings of hundreds of bees. I open my mouth to scream but nothing comes out. I can feel myself stumbling blindly. Then I feel a tug on my hand. The lead! Oh thank God. For a second I'd completely forgotten about Ralphie. But my eyes! Get to the fountain! Get to water! I have to wash whatever's on my face away and fast.

But where is it? How can I not see it?

Please God, don't let me go blind!

"Sage!" I scream at the top of my voice. "Bob! Help me! I can't see! Sage!"

Then I feel the top of my arm being grabbed in a painful grip. I struggle to free myself, but the force of it is way stronger than I am. I rub frantically at my eyes with my free hand, but it only makes matter worse. Everything looks blurry and confused and I can't tell for sure who's got hold of me. Fear overtakes the pain for a second – what if it's the Blues?

"Fuck off!" I yell. "I've got a dog!"

"Run!" an accented gruff voice that I don't recognise shouts in my ear.

“Let go of me!” I yell, but my voice seems to be swallowed up by the cacophony of shouts and chaos erupting all around me.

“Come on!” it’s the same voice, but the urgency is turned up a notch. “You have to run!”

I’m suddenly furious, and I lash out blindly with my leg, trying to kick out at whoever’s holding me so forcibly. My lashing foot doesn’t connect. “I can’t fucking see!” I yell. “How can I run anywhere? I have to wash my face--” I try and move towards what I think must be the direction of the fountain.

“*Nein!* That is the worst thing that you can do! Come on!”

I’m almost yanked off my feet as my arm is pulled roughly, and I can feel bodies giving way either side of me. I struggle to regain my balance.

“Ralphie!” I scream. For a second I think I’ve lost him, then I feel another tug on my left hand – the lead’s wrapped so tightly around it I can hardly feel it.

I’m dragged blindly along. I try again to open my eyes wide, but the pain makes me gasp. What’s happening to me?

“Who are you?” I yell at the guy dragging me behind him.

“Quickly!”

“I’m trying my fucking best!” I snap. I don’t try to open my eyes again. It seems to help if they’re squeezed shut. Fuck. My life is in the hands of a complete stranger who sounds suspiciously like he’s got a German accent. I bash into something solid and furry and almost go flying, but the grip on my arm doesn’t falter for a second.

“In here!” I suddenly realise I can no longer hear the angry yelling sound of the Germans and the police. “Sit down,” the voice barks.

“Where?” I feel myself being pushed roughly backwards and something hard presses against the back of my knees. A bench! I sit down with relief and rub my eyes as hard as I can.

“Do not do that,” the voice snaps again.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Keep still.”

Suddenly there's a blast of something cold spraying onto my face. For a second I'm sure it's the same stuff that hit me earlier. I scream and start batting at the air in front of me.

"Get the fuck off me!"

"Calm down! This will help." The cold liquid runs down my cheeks and into my mouth. The taste is weirdly familiar and for a second I can't place it. My face is completely wet. I wipe my hand across my cheeks. They're saturated. Oh God, am I bleeding?

"Is it blood?" I say, panicking. Suddenly, my throat seems to close up, and my breath seems to hitch and stop in my throat.

"*Shiza!* Sit still," the voice orders. Without a doubt it's a German accent. Oh crap. Am I out of the frying pan and into the fire? I feel something wet hitting my face again.

"Stop it!" I try to get up off the bench but the hand pushes me back down again. Ralphie's growling and barking and I'm sure he must be going for whoever's messing with me.

"Take your fucking hands off her!" I recognise the voice at once.

"Sage?" I say, but it comes out as a whisper.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snaps.

"It is orange juice. It is the only ting that vill neutralize the tear gas."

Orange juice? Is that what I tasted? But what's this about tear gas?

"Tear gas?" Sage says, shocked. "Is that what happened?"

"Well, pepper spray or mace is perhaps more likely. Fucking cops. Every year it is the same ting."

"But orange juice?" I say, trying to squirm away while I feel another stinging blast of liquid on my face.

"Keep still!"

"He's right, Vicki." It's Bob's voice. Thank God. "You don't want to put water on it."

"Try to open up your eyes now," the German voice says.

I slowly lift my eyelids. It hurts like buggery, but eventually I can make out blurry shapes. I almost sob with relief. I can see! The more I blink the quicker my vision seems

to right itself. In front of me a huge bearded face stares back. It's one of the Germans we saw earlier. The one who didn't return my smile.

"What the hell's going on?" I say. "I thought you guys were supposed to be--"  
Luckily Bob jumps in before I say anything else.

"What happened?" he snaps.

The giant shrugs. As my vision gradually clears, I notice that he also looks as if he's had a blast of the pepper spray. His eyes are swollen and the skin around them looks red and inflamed. Bugger. Is that what I look like?

"Zey must `ave been following the others from the Metro. We were going down when this girl here varned us about the police."

"Hmmm. So Vicks saved your arses?" Sage says.

"*Ja*. That is so."

"But that's not right, is it Bob? Vicks had Ralphie with her. I thought the Blues didn't mess with people who have dogs?" Sage says accusingly.

"No. They'll mess with you, they just won't take you away. Look, we'd better get out of here now, girls," Bob says. "It's far too close to St Michel. The Blues will be patrolling and looking for stragglers."

I suddenly realise I haven't heard Ralphie for the last few minutes. I must have let go of the lead.

"Where's Ralphie?"

Sage points over to the edge of the park. Ralphie is perched on the back of one of the massive black dogs, and is desperately trying to hump it.

"Shit, Vicks," Sage says as she stalks over to the pair and roughly rips Ralphie away from his obese girlfriend. "I can tell he's your dog."

I don't even smile.

"Come on, love," Bob says to me, giving me his hand. I hope my legs can hold me up. "Let's get you out of here." He turns to the German. "*Danke*," he says, pausing to shake his hand. The German guy towers over Bob, and his hand is swallowed up almost entirely.

"It is me that is to be grateful."

"Thanks," I say. "You know, for saving me and for the orange and that."

He shrugs. "You are welcome. I am Gerhard. You are Vicki, is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I hope to see you around, Vicki."

Sage rolls her eyes and looks at me as if to say, 'don't go there, Vicks.'

Ralphie whines as Sage drags him roughly out of the park. The large black dog simply looks at him, tongue lolling out of its mouth.

"Come on, Ralphie," Sage says. "She's just not right for you. Not that that's ever stopped your owner."

"Hey! I heard that!"

"You were supposed to."

As we cross over the road towards Notre Dame, I turn to Bob.

"How long does it sting for, Bob? The tear gas?"

"You should be all right in a bit. That guy did the right thing, there. If you put water on it straight after the spray, you can take your skin off."

Sage whistles through her teeth.

"Yeah, Bob," she says. "What's up with that, anyway? I thought the Germans were all mad bastard Nazis or something? That guy seemed kosher to me."

Bob shrugs. "It's the exception that makes the rule. I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw them."

\*

It's a huge relief to be back on the Pompidou bench. Sage brought me a bottle of water so that I could bath the sticky juice off my face. "Before you start to attract flies, eh Vicks?" she said.

My eyes are still stinging, but the pain has lessened somewhat.

"So what did it feel like, Vicks?" Sage asks.

"You what?"

"The tear gas or whatever it was."

"You know like when you're washing your hair and shampoo gets in your eyes?"

"Yeah."

“Like that times a million.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. You can say that again. How do I look though, Sage?” I’ve been afraid to ask this before. “My eyes feel a bit puffy – do they look bad?”

“Nah. They’re just a bit red and swollen is all. A bit like Dracula’s used to get after he smoked too much black.”

“Nice.”

“It’s not that bad, Vicks. It looks better already.”

“Good. I’d hate to end up with a scarred face like Danny or something.”

There’s a cough from behind me. Fuck, I hope Danny hasn’t overheard. But it isn’t him. He’s on the other side of the bench with Norbert. Both are as pissed as farts and it’d taken me ages to try and explain what had happened to me. In the end Bob had translated for me.

Sage lights me a cigarette.

“Feeling better, Chuck?”

I take a drag of my fag. I should be feeling better, I know. But then, out of nowhere, my hands start shaking like a spastic and I can feel a huge pressure building up in my chest.

“Vicks? Vicks? What’s wrong?” Sage says, kindly for her.

It’s the trigger I need.

Tears seem to explode out of my eyes, washing away the last of the citrus stink on my cheeks and exacerbating the burning sensation of the tender skin around them.

“Vicks? What the hell?”

“I can’t take this any more,” I sob. My thoughts are jumbled, confused, I try and control the sobbing, but it doesn’t want to stop.

I look up at Sage and whisper, “I want to go home!”

“Oh shit,” she says. “Come on,” she grabs my hand and leads me away from the others.

“But Ralphie!” I sob.

Sage nods to Bob and he picks up Ralphie’s lead.

“I’ve gotta sort her out Bob, you be okay with Ralphie for now?”

“Sure. Is she--?”

“I’ll sort it,” Sage says with finality. “I know exactly what she needs.”

\*

Something’s pressing into the side of my face. Ouch. It’s bloody sore. I lift my head and remove the massive twig that’s been digging into my cheek. I let my head drop back down. God. It feels fuzzy and full of static. Have I been asleep for long? I don’t even remember dropping off.

“Sage?” I call.

“*Bonsoir*,” an unfamiliar voice says from somewhere behind me.

What the--? I sit up too quickly and have to blink away stars that blur before my eyes. Christ, my skull feels like it’s caught in a vice. Did someone speak to me? Did I imagine it? My stomach lurches and saliva gushes into my mouth, but somehow I manage to fight off the nausea.

“Sage?” I call again. This time there’s no answer.

Where am I? It’s dark here in amongst the bushes, but they don’t look like the familiar Notre Dame ones. I know practically every twig there off by heart. There’s a wall in front of me – obviously one that flanks the river -- and I can make out the faint yellow glimmer of lights in the distance. For a second I can’t figure out which bank I’m on. Are the lights coming from St Michel? Impossible to tell. I try and stand up to get a better look, but another flood of nausea hits. I put my head on my knees and wait for it to pass.

“*Ca va?*” The voice comes again. I jump.

“Who’s there?” I call. My voice sounds shaky. “Richard? Is that you?”

I turn my head. A dark figure rustles his way towards me and squats down next to me. It’s too dark to see his face clearly, but I can immediately tell that it’s not Richard. Is it another *clochard*? I can’t place the voice at all.

“Where’s Sage?” I say.

“Eh?”

“My friend, er, *ma amie*. *Ou est elle?*”

The figure shrugs and moves closer, inches from me. I turn to check him out. He has one of those large French noses and short hair. I've never seen him before. And he doesn't look or smell like a *clochard*. Faint traces of cologne waft off his clothes. Even though it's shadowy here, I can tell he's wearing a smartish anorak over what looks to be a suit.

"Who are you?" I say. Swirls of unease start vying for precedence over the sweeping waves of nausea. I try and shift away from him.

"You are okay?" he says, softly.

He starts stroking my arm. My head's pounding and I can hear every heartbeat clearly in my ears.

Please stop that. I think I've said it, but no words come out.

"I have to go--" I try and push myself up with my hands, but my balance isn't quite right.

"*Non, non,*" he says, placing a surprisingly strong hand on my shoulder and pushing me back down. "You are not ready to get up, just yet."

Oh God, oh God, oh God his voice sounds just like Jules's when he was trying to get me to do stuff with that creepy Japanese woman. Everything suddenly seems to slow down. One minute I'm sitting up, the next he's pushed me onto my back. "*Non!*" I try and say, but again it only comes out in a whisper. I can feel him panting in my ear and suddenly adrenaline kicks in as my detached brain seems to register what's actually happening. I squirm as hard as I can to get his weight off me, but I can't move. My arms feel heavy as I try to push his head away from mine, but he grabs them effortlessly with one of his and holds them above my head. I feel him tugging at my leggings with his other hand.

Nooooo! The word gets stuck in my throat.

"Shhhh," he says. "Shhhhh."

This isn't happening to me, is it? Not really. Oh God, no.

His legs force mine apart roughly and I feel his fingers scrabbling around underneath my knickers trying to force their way inside me. It hurts and I can feel breath escape out of my mouth.

"Shhhh!" he hisses in my ear.

Then he forces his tongue in my mouth and I clearly taste halitosis and some garlicky thing. Something seems to shift in my stomach and before I can do anything about it a surge of vomit explodes out of my mouth so fast I can't even turn my head away.

Suddenly his weight is gone and I roll over onto my side as an endless stream of puke spews out of my mouth. I gag and cough. I can move again. But I can't seem to focus properly – where is he? My eyes are streaming with tears and I desperately rub at them.

“*Merde!*” I hear him shout, then there's the sound of a heavy rustling in the bushes.

Blood roars in my ears and I scramble to my feet. I ignore the snarling clutches of twigs that are scratching my arms and tangling in my hair.

Get to the lights! Get there! Using the wall as a guide I stay as close to it as I can. I don't dare look back. What if he's behind me?

\*

Smells: Diesel, rubber, vomit, urine. Oh Christ. I lean over and retch, but nothing but a weak dribble comes up. I gasp for air. I open my streaming eyes. How the fuck did I get here? It looks like I'm in the bloody underground car park. I'm crouched on my haunches in between two cars, my back leaning against a car tyre, wheel nuts pressing into the small of my back. I try and move. My back and thighs protest as I get shakily to my feet. My neck's stiff and I can barely turn my head to look around. Then, my legs seem to give way as I remember.

Fuck! The guy, the bushes (what bushes, though?): could I have imagined it? I run my fingers through my dreads. Leaves and twigs are tangled in there. No, it happened. I must have legged it down here when I was running away.

Oh God. My hands start shaking. Breathe. Cigarette. Quickly. I have to get out of here. What's the time? It can't possibly be morning, can it? I light a cigarette and the first blast of smoke makes me gag again. I check out my reflection in the car window. Apart from the twigs and leaves in my hair my face looks okay. No bruises, no black eyes. He

didn't hit me. My eyes look slightly red and swollen – probably still from the tear gas though, so that's okay. I don't want to investigate the rest of my body just yet, but I haven't got much choice: the stench of vomit is almost unbearable. It's splattered in a thick red mess all down the front of my dress. Get rid of it. I yank my dress over my head, not caring as the fabric rips under the strain. Thank God I'm wearing a T-shirt underneath. I use the unsoiled back of the dress to wipe away the splatters on my boots and leggings before chucking it away from me.

Oh Christ. Need more clothes. Clean clothes that he hasn't touched. Where's my bag? Has Sage got it? Where the fuck is she? And Ralphie? No. That I do remember. We left Ralphie with Bob. But was she with me when I ended up in the bushes next to the river? She can't have been. Not Sage. Wouldn't have put up with that kind of shit for a second.

Deep breath. I shut my eyes and try and get myself under control. I finish the cigarette and light another one immediately. That's better. Now, remember. Piece it together. Think.

Okay. So I freaked out at the Pompidou after the tear gas thing, and Sage said we needed to get pissed, although I remember thinking it was the last fucking thing I felt like doing. We left Ralphie with Bob and headed for our favourite corner shop in Les Halles. I said we didn't have any money, but Sage looked all coy and shifty and shamefacedly took out a fifty franc note that she'd said she was saving for emergencies. After all, she said, if this wasn't an emergency she didn't know what was. I waited outside the shop and Sage went in there in by herself. Then, I heard her yell, "Vicks run!" and she came haring out of the store, bag of bottles clinking and a wheel of Baby bel and punnet of crème caramels spilling out of her pockets. The Indian guy who runs the store chased us for a few hundred metres before giving up, and I remember laughing hysterically and thinking, fuck, why am I always *running*?

We'd started out in the *Quartier De l'Horlodge*, then made our way down to the banks of the river. This is where it gets blurry. Sage said something about the fact she thought I fancied that German guy who'd dragged me away from the Blues, and I'm pretty sure we had a huge fight. Did we finish the three bottles of wine? I can't

remember. Is she still speaking to me? I have no idea. Is she okay? Is she passed out somewhere looking for me?

Christ. I'd better find out.

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

### **EXPERIENCES WE'VE HAD SO FAR:**

The Bobby Experience.  
The Hervey Experience.  
The Emma Experience.  
The Sex Shop Pervert Experience.  
The Beating up Bobby Big Fight Experience.  
The Job Experience (also known as the Mrs Danvers experience).  
The Buskers Experience.  
The Alex Crab Experience.  
The Bridge Experience.  
The Pompidou Posse Experience.  
The Begging Experience.  
The Bad Trip Experience.  
The Taffy Axe Experience.  
The Phoning Home Experience.  
The Smack-Head Friend Experience.  
The Tear Gas and Other Big Fight Experience.  
The Vicks Wanting to go Home Experience.

Vicks wants to go home. I can tell. Especially after what happened yesterday. Like she says, how can everything go so shit so quickly? Fucking mental. Vicks can't handle our LIFESTYLE as well as I can. She's not like me. I should have known. I mean, she comes from this DEAD posh background and everything. Her house is like a mansion or something. NOTHING like mine. And of course she doesn't know my SECRET: about what Karen said on the phone after Vicks MADE me call her. Why oh why am I so THICK, Gladys? I should have MONITORED the situation more carefully and used my BRAIN more. And it's not as though I don't get homesick AS WELL, is it??? I miss lots of things, even EASTENDERS and crap like that. But you never hear me complaining, do you? Horrible Hippy says there's a priest guy in Paris who buys ferry tickets for runaways who want to go back home to England. I haven't told Vicki this though. I'm keeping this information to myself in case of EMERGENCIES.

I don't want to make a fanfare about this or anything, Gladys, but I haven't had any tablets for ages now.

I feel fine.

Ha! So much for Dr fucking Pilkington. Shows you how much he knows!!!!

So if I can do it and try and be HAPPY here WITHOUT tablets, so can Vicks!!!

Vicks won't tell me EXACTLY what happened to her after we got pissed and had the BIG fight. I woke up on a bench by the river and she'd just DISAPPEARED. And when she came and found me later, she looked like UTTER UTTER shite. I've NEVER seen her look so bad, Gladys. She was COVERED in scratches and PUKE and her eyes looked even worse than just after she was tear-gassed. OBVIOUSLY I have my suspicions about what happened to her, but I keep trying not to think about it. The thought of anyone hurting Vicks like I was HURT makes me SHAKE with anger and I can't afford to lose it as it's up to me to get things back on track.

Vicks doesn't seem to realise HOW IMPORTANT it is that everything gets sorted. I mean, if we were like REALLY smart we could be making shite loads of cash everyday, and then we could save up and get a place or something where we could stash our stuff and have a wash everyday and things. I mean she's always going on about not wanting to have to sleep outside during the winter and we don't have to if we don't want to.

I mean, SO MUCH has happened to us since we've been here we can't just throw it away, can we?? And what about the posse? Bob, Norbert and Danny? We can't just leave them, can we? Yeah, all right. I suppose we could, but STILL.

I know how fucked up Vicks was after she spoke to the folks etc etc, but that led to her making a BIG error in JUDGEMENT and it's since then that things started to go DOWNHILL.

DRUGS are the fuck-up 'in this equation' (nicked this SAYING from BOB). If we can't think clearly then we're TOTALLY screwed.

Vicks and I will DEFINITELY never take drugs again. We must make a PACT to SEAL THIS RESOLUTION. Like when we made our Friendship and Solidarity Pact the first night we stayed out in the Abandoned Church. We even made little tiny cuts in our palms so that our blood could mingle together so that we'd be Blood Sisters.

It is vital that Vicks and I STAY CLEAN!!! And NOT get too pissed or anything or take any more drugs, even though it's dead tempting, especially when we've made lots of cash. We must TURN OVER A NEW LEAF.

**Why drugs are BAD:**

*They make your head ache  
Like a squashed chocolate cake  
They mess with your life  
Like a thug with a knife  
They'll screw up your head  
Like a clochard who's dead (RIP Alex)  
Yes, it is VERY sad  
But most drugs are dead bad.*

Maybe I could sell this poem to the Government for their 'Just say No' campaign??? Ha ha.

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Lice Experience

Unbelievable. I haven't done this badly since my first day 'on the job'. I peer into the hat and quickly add up the pathetic sum again. The smattering of centimes and the solitary five franc coin barely add up to ten francs. What the hell's going on? Ralphie and I've been sitting outside the supermarket for over an hour now. At our usual spot we've normally made enough for the day after twenty minutes.

Maybe the effects of last night's acid are still etched on my face or something and it's this that's putting the punters off. Christ, I hope I'm not turning into one of those druggy looking *clochards* like Hippy or Rat Girl. I run my hands over my face. It feels like clammy putty. I'm dying for a cigarette. I scramble in my pocket and pull out a roach with about an inch of spliff left on it. I light it and drag the smoke into my lungs, ignoring the disapproving look from an old man who trudges past me into the supermarket. Ralphie looks up at me and whines.

"Not you as well," I say to him. "It's just one hit."

Ralphie's also off his feed this morning. He's curled up next to me and barely raises his head whenever someone walks within snapping distance. He doesn't seem to like this area either. It's been ages since I've ventured to the suburbs. Even though I have my dog insurance, when I woke up this morning I'd had a bad feeling about today. Since the Tear-Gas Experience I'm getting paranoid. Yesterday the Blues seemed to be patrolling everywhere, even though it's getting colder and the tourist crowds around the Pompidou seem to be waning. It's probably because of the Germans. Without Sage as look-out I've been feeling antsy even out here. And to make matters worse we keep hearing horror stories about the Germans beating the shit out of local *clochards* so that they can nick their pitches. Looks like Bob was right all along. That Gerhard bloke seemed to be okay, but we haven't bumped into him again.

"Shit, Ralphie. Let's go."

I stub the joint out next to me and get to my feet. Ralphie stretches and does the same, wagging his tail half-heartedly as we set off. This was a bad idea. I'd left Sage sleeping in the park by herself. I'd checked she couldn't be seen by a casual passer-by,

but still. She'd never forgive me if the Blues rooted her out. I hadn't planned on staying out here for so long. I quicken my pace. We'd decided not to sleep with the posse in the Notre Dame gardens last night, partly because we needed a break from them, partly because Bob would give us a right bollocking if he knew we'd been taking acid again. He's always lecturing us about the 'evils of drugs', especially after what happened to Taffy. I do feel a bit guilty, actually. We'd only taken half each, but I shouldn't have let Sage have any at all after the Bad Trip Experience. We'd just been so bored of the usual getting pissed and stoned evenings. Not that it was a great success. We'd tried to do the whole daring each other to go in the claustrophobic toilet cubicles thing, but it had felt almost forced and was quite depressing after a while.

I'm really regretting that joint. The sun feels too bright and my eyes are watering. There's a smattering of cops on the other side of the boulevard as Ralphie and I make our way down the high street to the RER station. I keep my head down and try to look innocent. I'm sure I can feel their eyes on me. My head feels woolly, and the pavement seems to lurch beneath my feet, although I'm sure the acid must be out of my system now. I don't dare look back as I hurry past the ticket booth and hop over the turnstile. Ralphie's lead gets tangled in the metal bars, and it seems to take me ages to unravel it. My heart's hammering, and my hands are shaking. Shit, I should never have smoked the bloody thing. Stupid.

\*

The trip home seems to take forever. What if Sage wakes up and finds me gone? What if the Blues sniff her out and take her away before I get back? But at least we make it safely to Les Halles without being thrown off.

As I make my way up from the bowels of the RER station towards the Metro, a huge crowd seems to appear from nowhere. I'm jostled and pushed from behind and I can't get my bearings. Suddenly my breath seems to hitch and stop in my chest and saliva bubbles into my mouth. My palms feel sweaty and tingly and my fingers ache when I clench my fists. I concentrate on just putting one foot in front of the other. I let Ralphie take the lead and he pulls me down a long flight of stairs to a deserted Metro platform. I

need to sit down for a minute and catch my breath, but this doesn't seem to help. My head's pounding now and I can barely feel my hands. I have to wrap Ralphie's lead three times around my wrists so that I can keep a grip on it. The curving tiled walls with their garish advertisements feel like they're caving in on me, and I can't make out the writing on the Galleries Lafayette poster right in front of me. The words seem to shift and shimmer. A train whooshes into the station and without thinking I jump on. The rattling momentum of the train and the flickering lights as it passes through the tunnel makes my stomach lurch. I need fresh air.

I have to get out of here.

I fumble with the door handles as the train pulls into the next station and I blindly let Ralphie pull me across the gap onto the platform. I don't recognise it. It must be one of the few that Sage and I haven't explored. It's darker and dingier than most of the familiar stops, and there aren't even any *clochards* slumped in the plastic seats that line the walls, although a bottle of sherry lies smashed underneath a cracked bench. I let the other departing passengers walk up the stairs ahead of me. Ralphie strains at his leash, but I bend over slightly, hands on my knees and try to suck in a deep breath. My forehead feels clammy and cold. What the hell's happening to me? A bad reaction from the joint?

As the last passenger traipses up the stairs, I follow behind and turn left into an echoey corridor. There's a small knot of people gathered at the far end. As I approach, my stomach seems to lurch into my mouth. They're surrounding someone. Someone lying down, it looks like. Why the hell would someone lie down in the middle of a Metro corridor? A woman moves away from the bodies blocking whoever it is sprawled at their feet, and puts a handkerchief to her mouth. A man in a leather jacket also moves out of the way to comfort the woman, and the whole horrible picture is burned into my brain.

The guy on the floor is dressed in a business suit. His face is grey, his eyes rolled back in his head. He's twitching as if every so often an electric charge shoots through his body. Yellowish foams seeps out of the corners of his mouth, and the crotch area of his trousers is dark where he's obviously wet himself. A couple of people are crouched around the man and one of them wipes the foam away from his mouth and bends down as if to do CPR. I don't want to see this. I tighten my hold on Ralphie's lead and numbly pull him back the way we came.

As if I've summoned it a train arrives, and by some miracle I remember how to work the door handle. It clicks open and I lurch on board, pulling Ralphie on behind me. As the train judders away I stand by the door and peer up the stairs. I can't see any trace of the dead guy.

That's it. I swear I'll never take acid again. Just let me get through this (whatever it is).

But where the hell is this train going? I stare up at the map on the train's curved wall, and the coloured route markers seem to glimmer back at me in 3D. Shit. I have to pull myself together. I know the Metro routes off by heart, for Christ's sake, but for some reason I can't figure out how to get back to Notre Dame. The train slides to a halt at the next stop. I peer out of the cloudy window. I can't believe my luck. St Michel! I pick Ralphie up and carry him out of the train and up the stairs. There's no way I'm using the lift. The warmth and weight of his body makes me feel a bit better, and I take in a large shuddering breath, then another. Finally, oxygen seems to reach the bottom of my lungs.

\*

I feel like I've been gone for hours as Ralphie and I reach the little park. For a second I can't remember which part of the thick bushy undergrowth Sage and I'd bedded down in last night. Then, I catch a glimpse of the blue of Sage's sleeping bag through the foliage. Thank God. She must still be fast asleep. I sink onto a bench a few feet from where Sage is snuggled in the bushes. I shake my fingers. Finally the horrid tingling feeling has disappeared. The park is deserted. Should I wake Sage? In a sec. I cross my arms and snuggle down into my jacket. Ralphie jumps up onto my lap and almost immediately drops off. I decide to close my eyes for a few seconds. I don't want to fall asleep. I can't forget that Sage and I are still in prime Blues country.

\*

I lurch awake, gasping for breath. How long have I been asleep? And where's Ralphie?

“Ralphie!”

Thank God! He wriggles out from beneath the bench. I’d better get his bowl out from my rucksack next to where Sage appears to still be fast asleep, so he can have some food and water. Both of us skipped breakfast this morning.

There’s something tickling the side of my face. I try and brush it off, but it seems to be stubbornly clinging to my cheek as if it’s stuck there. I pick it off with my thumb and forefinger and it squirms in my fingers. It’s a tiny black insect. I look at it closer. Oh shit. My head’s been feeling itchy for the last few days, but I’d put this down to the usual gritty sandy-head feeling from sleeping outside. Suddenly the itchy feeling becomes unbearable and I scratch at the back of my neck for all I’m worth.

I scramble into the bushes and roughly shake Sage’s shoulder.

“Sage!”

“Wha-?” she looks up at me blearily.

“Get up!”

She doesn’t need to be told twice. She squirms out of her sleeping bag and rolls it up with typical Sage economy. I grab my bag, which looks half-packed and battered in comparison to hers. My sleeping bag’s definitely on its last legs and clothes peek out from split seams. I fish out Ralphie’s food bowl and water bottle.

Sage wriggles her way out through the bushes, her eyes blinking blearily like a mole’s.

“What’s going on?” she says. She looks down accusingly at where Ralphie’s lapping away at his water. “What you get me up for?”

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“What?” she says, irritably. “I was having a bloody lovely dream for a change.”

“We might have a bit of a problem.”

“Eh? Giz a fag.” I take out the two remaining cigarettes in the box and hand her one. She lights it with a shaky hand. “You could have least have brought me a coffee,” she snaps.

I take a deep breath. “I think I’ve got head lice.”

She screws up her eyes and peers at me through the smoke.

“Don’t joke, Vicks. It’s not funny.”

“Do I look like I’m joking? Here. Check my hair.”

I motion her over to the bench and sit down.

“You’re not serious.” Then she seems to take note of the expression on my face for the first time. “Oh shit. Okay, turn around. If they’re anywhere they’ll be at the back of your head.”

She clamps the cigarette between her teeth, leaving her hands free and I turn my back to her. I feel her gingerly picking up the dreadlocks that hang heavily down my back.

“Christ, Vicks. We’ve got to do something about these clumps at the back of your head. You’re beginning to look like Stig. Look, I can’t see anything. Hold on.” She stubs out her cigarette, and I can feel her tugging the matted mass apart.

“Ouch!”

“Don’t be such a baby. Can’t see anything... Must be your imagin—Oh shit. Oh, gross!”

She jumps off the bench and backs away from me, rubbing her hands on her trousers.

“Well?” I say, turning to face her.

“Fucking hell, Vicks! You’ve got some sort of eco system living in there! Jesus. This is bad. It’s not just those little white nits, either. You’ve got like these black things in there!”

Both of us start scratching furiously at our heads.

“But I don’t get it. We had a shower a few days ago, didn’t we?” I can’t remember. Oh God. I’ve completely lost track of time. When did we last shower? A week ago? Longer?

“They like clean hair though, Vicks. Weren’t you paying attention when the nit nurse came to your school?”

“Bloody bugging hell,” I say. “How the fuck am I going to get them out of this mess?” I take a handful of matted hair and tug it.

Suddenly all the colour drains out of Sage’s face. “Check mine.”

“Eh? Your hair’s so short I’m sure--”

“Check mine, Vicks!” her voice is shrill and unSage-like. Panicky.

“Okay, okay. Calm down.”

She sits back down on the bench, her back to me, and bends her head. A couple of tourists clutching guide books and maps are ambling through the park, and they peer at us in bewilderment as they wander past our bench. We must look like human chimpanzees grooming each other. I glare at them and they quicken their pace away from us, shaking their heads.

Even though it should be greasy from lack of washing, Sage’s hair feels thick and silky like the pelt of an animal. It’s only about two inches long, so it’s not difficult to search through it. I can’t see any signs of nits. There’s not even a dusting of dandruff.

“Nope. You’re clean,” I say.

“Thank fuck,” she breathes. “Hang on – have you checked for body lice?” she says.

We look at each other in horror.

“Just because I’ve got a few nits doesn’t mean we’ve got the other kind. Anyway, I haven’t been itching, have you?”

She doesn’t reply to this.

“You go first,” she says.

I turn over the top seam of my dress like Bob had shown us ages ago. Apart from a light scattering of fag ash and a smudge of chocolate from a hastily eaten *pain au chocolat*, it looks clean to me. I also check the straps of my one remaining and very grubby bra. Sage also peers over, making sure she keeps her head away from mine. Nothing. Thank Christ. Nits I can handle, but the other kind...ugh. I shudder.

“Looks fine to me.”

“Yeah,” she breathes. “You look kosher. My turn.”

“We were lost in France, with some nits and some lice in our pants,” I sing, half-heartedly.

“Very fucking funny, Vicks.”

Sage gingerly peels back the edge of her sweatshirt.

“I can’t see anything,” she sighs with relief and looks up at me and smiles. “Here, you have a look.”

Being careful not to let my head touch hers I look down at the seam.

“No...wait...Oh my fuck!”

There’s a little transparent insect that looks to be stuck in the thread at the edge of the sweatshirt. It’s unmistakable.

Sage looks up at me, her eyes filled with pure horror. She backs away from me, rips off her waistcoat as if it’s on fire and throws it as far away from her as she can. Then she yanks the sweatshirt roughly over her head, drops it onto the grass and kicks it away with her boot.

“Oh God, Oh God!” she mutters over and over again. She looks almost as crazy and unfocused as when she flipped out on the acid.

“Sage! Calm down!” I try and grab her arm, but she pushes me away roughly.

“Don’t touch me Vicks! Shit, shit, shit! Oh fuck!”

“It’ll be okay, Sage,” I say, helplessly. But there’s a nasty part of me that’s secretly glad I’m not the one with the little creepy crawlies living off my skin.

“No it won’t! It’s okay for you, but I’m...contaminated!” she shrugs her shoulders and shudders as if she’s trying to shake off her skin.

“Come on, sit down, take a deep breath,” I try and use the same tone of voice I used on Taffy when he went mental with the axe.

She hobbles over to the bench and sits down, head in her hands.

With a jolt, I realise it’s the first time I’ve ever seen Sage without her waistcoat or long-sleeved sweatshirt. She’s still dressed in her baggy trousers, but all she’s wearing on her top is a grubby old man’s vest. Her arms are blindingly white. As she scrapes her trembling hands through her hair, I spot something else, and I have to bite my tongue not to say anything. There are criss-crossing white scars all along the inside of her forearms. I can’t tear my eyes away. Some of the scars are thick and swollen like white bumpy earthworms, and I can trace them up to her elbows. Whatever caused them must have cut quite deep. I quickly check her wrists. Nothing. How could I not have known about the other scars, though?

She turns her head to me. I drop my eyes as fast as I can so that she can’t see me staring. She crosses her arms across her chest.

“Vicks,” she says, her voice sounding small and lost.

“Yeah?” I say, still reeling from the sight of the lacerations on her forearms.

“I never thought I’d ask this, but... can you lend me some clothes?”

I reach for my rucksack.

\*

Bob’s eyes look as if they’re finally going to pop out of his sockets as he takes in the spectacle of Sage wearing a dress.

“Sage, my goodness, don’t you look a picture! Give us a twirl, love!”

“Don’t go there, Bob,” Sage says dangerously.

She glares at him angrily and I stifle a snigger. She looks like a little girl playing dress-up. The nineteen-sixty’s mini dress she’d finally deigned to put on after pulling out and discarding every piece of my clothing comes almost to her knees. The leggings she’d pulled on underneath it bag at the knees and she insisted on wearing one of my spare leather jackets over the outfit. Oddly enough, her hiking boots seem to fit in with the whole incongruous outfit. It had taken her ages to get dressed. Every piece of clothing she’d put on had been meticulously checked and double checked for any traces of lice.

“How come I’ve got them but you haven’t?” Sage says to me, as if this has just occurred to her.

I shrug.

“Got what?” Bob says.

“What do you think?” Sage snaps. “Fucking lice, Bob.”

“Ah,” he says. “And here I was thinking you were going on a date or something.”

“It’s not fucking funny.”

Bob bends his head and I can tell he’s trying to hide a smirk.

“So I’m assuming it’s not head lice then?” Bob says.

“Well *yeah*. Vicks has got *them*,” she says as if this is only a minor matter, “but my clothes are full of... the other kind.”

“I see,” Bob says.

“So?” Sage says, crossing her arms and glaring at him.

“What?”

“How do we get rid of them?”

He shrugs. “The body lice problem is easily solved. Just boil wash your clothes and sleeping bags and take a hot shower. The trick is keeping them away.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sage snorts. “I’ll be keeping my distance from everyone from now on, that’s for sure.”

“But as for the head lice...” he looks at my dreads dubiously. “I think you might have to resort to drastic measures.”

My heart sinks. I knew it. There’s no way I’d be able to remove them from the tangled mess that falls half-way down my back.

“But remember, girls, if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.”

He walks off, chortling.

Sage looks at me and rolls her eyes. “What the fuck’s he on about?”

“Dunno,” I say. “He’s obviously pissed again.” But I’m trying to figure out where Sage could’ve got the lice from. I suspect my infestation’s the result of getting too close to Stefan, but Sage’s is a mystery.

“Can we afford a shower and stuff, Vicks?”

Crap. I’d forgotten I’d made fuck-all this morning. I shake my head.

“Bob!” Sage yells at the top of her voice in the direction of his retreating figure.

“Can you lend us some cash? We’ve got to get rid of these things!”

Bob heads back towards us.

“Well?” Sage says. “We’ll pay you back. It’s an emergency after all.”

“Sorry girls. Haven’t been working for the last couple of days.” He nods to the crowds of summer tourists streaming past our bench. “There’s your answer if you’re in a hurry.”

My heart sinks. Pan-handling: it’s the bottom of the barrel as far as begging goes. I hate actually *asking* people for money. It’s not like doing it with a sign. You really get the full force of the punters’ disgust when you approach them with your hand out and a ‘*s’il vous plait*’ whine.

“C’mon, Chuck,” Sage says. “Let’s get to it.”

\*

We head towards the chemist, pockets bulging with coins. Surprisingly, it was Sage who made most of the cash. Mind you, the desperation on her face was totally real, and practically everyone she'd approached had handed over some change. Within an hour we'd made enough for a shower each, a trip to the laundrymat, and some nit shampoo.

"Oh great, look who it is," Sage says as we walk past the arty farty cinema near the *Quartier de L'Horloge*. It's Taffy. Since the Axe Attack Experience, Taffy's been keeping a relatively low profile, and I haven't said more than a couple of words to him since then.

"All right?" I nod as we approach him.

"You stay away from me!" he shrieks, voice as high as a little girl's. He looks as if he's about to cross his fingers at us to ward off bad spirits or something. "I don't want your fucking nits and lice!"

"Thanks Bob," I mutter. Mind you, it might not have been him who'd revealed our current lice status. There'd been a fair few other *clochards* hanging around the bench when we'd accosted Bob, and Sage hadn't exactly been discreet.

For a split second Sage just stares at Taffy, as if she's taken aback. But it doesn't take her long to pull herself together.

"Fuck off then, you Welsh tosser!" she yells at him. A couple of smartly-dressed teenagers take one look at Sage and Taffy, stop in their tracks and backtrack, peerig over their shoulders. "I'd rather be crawling with fucking nits than have anything more to do with a piece of shit like you!"

"Piss off, lesbian!" Taffy spits back.

"Oh yeah?" Sage practically snarls, "Is that the best you can do? Lesbian? At least I'm not a fucking ginger-haired git who's a *stumpy* asshole!"

Taffy turns bright red, opens his mouth as if he's about to yell a retort, but obviously can't come up with one that's a match for Sage's venomous swipe.

"Bitch," he mutters as he clatters past us.

"Stumpy?" I whisper to her, and both of us burst out laughing.

"Christ Vicks," she says loudly, before Taffy has time to scoot out of earshot. "I would've got lice ages ago if I'd known it was that easy to get rid of the prick."

\*

Without the usual weight of the dreadlocks my head feels squeamishly light, as if it's about to float off my neck. I keep forgetting they're not there and every time I try to run my fingers through their non-existent length my stomach lurches in shock. I haven't had short hair since I was a child. I hate it. It makes my nose look as bloody monstrous as Barbra Streisand's.

Sage had suggested that I bleach the nits out of my hair instead of trying to explain in French that we needed nit shampoo. I'd agreed, and at the chemist we'd bought some peroxide and nail scissors (the proper hair-cutting ones were too expensive). Then, at the shower block, Sage had gingerly snipped off my dreads (making sure she didn't actually touch them) and I'd been left with a cap of raggedly tufts, almost as short as hers. We left the dreads where they lay—scattered sadly on the white tiles like giant hairy worms. Sage jumped in the shower while I attempted the next stage. The peroxide had stung like buggery and left my once black locks an orangey yellow mess that felt like dried sheep's wool.

I keep catching glimpses of my stranger-faced reflection in the glass doors of the washing machine. My head looks too small for my body. Like a rotten grapefruit on a stick. Thank God we're the only people in the laundrymat. Our clothes and sleeping bags toss and turn in a colourful mass and the frothy white water turns almost immediately to a muddy brown. Our stuff's on boil wash, so I don't hold out much hope for most of my dresses. A couple of them are the same age as my Nan, so most are too old and delicate to take that much of a pounding. Still, at least they'd be clean for once. Ralphie nudges at my leg.

"I'll just take him for a quick walk, okay? Back in a sec."

"Sure," Sage says without tearing her eyes away from the tumbling mass. She almost looks as if she's being hypnotised. As I leave I hear her mumble, "Die, little lice fuckers, die."

Head down, I walk through Les Halles and stop at a fountain so that Ralphie can drink. Fuck, I hope I don't see anyone we know. Would they recognise me, anyway? I sit down and pull out a cigarette. It's getting late and the tourists are thinning out somewhat. It's not time for the evening crowds to start dribbling in yet. Out of the corner

of my eye I spot a guy with a Mohican leaning against a bank of phone booths. I used to look like that. Fuck it. I get up and wander over to him. He doesn't give me a second glance. I check my pockets. There's still a few silver coins left.

Sage will never know.

I force the coins into the slot and dial the number.

At first I don't think it's going to be answered and then I hear my brother's voice.

"Yeah?"

"Kev, it's me, Vicki."

There's a pause.

"Fuuuuck, sis! You have no idea how much shit you're in!"

"Look. I need to talk to dad, just get him, will you?"

"Not here." I can hear 'The The' in the background.

"Hey! Is that my record?"

"No."

"You've been in my room!"

"Duh, you've been gone forever, sis, course I've been in your fucking room."

"Just get mom for me then, quick, I'm going to run out of money in a sec."

"Mom's not here either."

"Well, where are they?"

"Don't you know?"

"What?" I snap. "How would I know anything?"

"They're with Nan. They're staying up in London while she's in hospital."

My heart drops.

"What's wrong with her?" I say, but it comes out in a whisper.

"You what?"

"Why's she there?"

"She's had a stroke."

"Shit, is she okay?"

"Yeah – look, just hold on." The phone is plopped down with a clunk, then I hear:

"Don't smoke that in here, my folks'll freak! No, no... *you* fuck off!"

"Sorry, sis. Look, I've gotta go, Wal's lit a fucking J in the lounge."

“Kevin!” my voice is shrill. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Yeah, they think she’ll--”

The money runs out and the line peep peep peeps before it goes dead.

Oh fuck.

I lean my head against the metal bar of the phone booth. As if sensing my mood

Ralphie looks up at me and whines.

“Come on,” I say to him. “Let’s get you some food.”

University of Cape Town

**SAGE**

*Sitting on a park bench  
Have nits and head lice  
Nothing to eat that's nice  
Fuck it, AYE??*

University of Cape Town

## VICKI: The Death Experience

“Let’s go spy on Bobby!” Sage says, slugging back the dregs of our second bottle of wine.

“You what? Why?”

“No reason. Come on, we haven’t been back to Opera for ages.”

“Nah.”

“Oh, come on, Vicks. It’ll be cool. What else we going to do?”

“I dunno. Hang out at the Pompidou, listen to music?”

“Boring! Anyway we have to celebrate.”

“We are celebrating, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, but I feel like *doing* something.”

Sage unconsciously scratches her neck. The skin there is bright red and raw-looking. Since the lice experience she hasn’t been able to leave it alone, even though we’ve boil-washed our clothes and sleeping bags and I’m pretty sure both of us are clean.

Spying on Bobby is the last thing I feel like doing. Especially as the day had gone so well. This morning Ralphie and I had made our best cash haul ever. Two hundred francs in less than an hour. It was as if people had been queuing up to chuck their cash at us. It was just what we needed, especially after all the shit that had happened recently. I’ve even become used to my new hair. Yesterday Sage and I splurged on one of those posh L’Oreal packets of hair dye, and my head’s no longer the colour of rotten egg-yolk.

We haven’t mentioned going home again.

Sage has been in a terrific mood for days, and after I’d shown off my record-breaking haul of cash, she suggested we buy a couple of bottles of wine and fork out for a picnic by the river. But it looks as if the alcohol has gone to her head. She’s not slurring her words, but she’s been twitchy since she made inroads into the second bottle.

“Seriously though, Sage. Why do you want to go back to Opera?”

“Who cares, Vicks? Where’s your fucking sense of adventure? C’mon, we’re going.”

She picks up Ralphie's lead and I have no choice but to follow her. I don't want to risk breaking her good mood.

\*

I'm almost sick with trepidation as we emerge out of the Opera Metro station. The chicken baguette I had for lunch keeps threatening to come back up, and the bright sunlight is making my eyes ache. What if I bump into Jules? What if Sage starts some shit with Bobby?

Sage is craning her neck over the crowds and traffic to catch a glimpse of Bobby's bustling blue figure.

"What will you do if Bobby's there?" I say.

Sage shrugs. "Fuck knows. Just want to look him the eye, is all." She doesn't explain further.

But it doesn't look as though she's going to get her chance. As we wait to cross the intersection outside the Metro it's obvious that he's not there.

"Shit!" Sage said.

"Bummer," I lie, trying to keep the relief out of my voice, desperately hoping we'll just turn around and go home.

"Hey, I've got another idea!" Sage says. "How about we go and say 'hi' to Hervé?"

"No way!"

"Ah, come on, Vicks. It'll be a laugh. We can't come all this way and not go see the old perve!"

"We can't, remember? You nicked all his dope!"

"So? Potato Head didn't say anything when we saw him that time, did he? I reckon they all thought they'd lost it or something."

"I don't want to, Sage."

"Don't be such a pussy, Vicks. Look, we'll just go look at the building then. Come on, Vicks. I just want to check it out."

I sigh, but follow her across the boulevard. Christ, I'm really not in the mood for this.

\*

Hervé's road looks exactly as it did when we left it. Even the restaurant at the end of the street smells the same. I don't know what I was expecting. Not this, though. How can nothing have changed? How long is it since we'd stayed with him? Two months? Three? Six? The only difference is the exterior of the Irish pub. Rows of bright balloons are strung across the top of it. Maybe it's celebrating our return. As if.

We stand across the road from the battered green door, neither of us speaking for a few seconds.

"Shall we see if we can still get into the apartment?" Sage says.

"What for?"

"What do you think?"

Sage grabs my arm and drags me across the road. She pulls me into the alcove in front of the battered green door.

"Do you remember the code?" she screws up her face. "Shit.... What was it? 4768? Nah, that was the Mrs Danvers dump. You?"

"Can't remember," I lie. There's no way I'm going in there. We'd left Hervé, Potato Head and Dracula behind us as far as I'm concerned. I don't want to come face to face with any of them.

"Hey, shall we pop into the Irish pub for one?" Sage says.

"Can't." I look down at Ralphie.

Sage sighed. "Yeah. You're right. Oh well. Funny we never went in there, eh?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Shit. What *was* that code?"

Ralphie crouches down and shits just outside Hervé's door.

Sage bursts out laughing.

"Nice one Ralphie!" she says, bending down to pat him without thinking. For once he doesn't snarl at her.

“Cool!” she says. “*Finally* he likes me.”

“What you want to do now?”

She pulls a joint out of her pocket and waves it in my face.

“Where’d you get that?”

She taps the side of her nose. “Ask no questions, lassie,” she says in a perfect imitation of Alex, “and I’ll tell yer no lies. Come on. Let’s go back to the Opera steps and smoke this. For old time’s sake. See if we can spot any carpet legs.”

\*

Maybe this actually wasn’t such a bad idea. It feels good to be surrounded by the familiar Opera house sculptures again. We climb to the top of the steps and sit down. Ralphie jumps up onto my lap and nudges his face in the crook of my arm. The signal to stroke him.

Sage fires up the joint, takes a couple of hits and passes it to me.

“Fuuuuck. It’s weird being back here,” she says.

“Yeah, I know.” I pretend to take a drag and pass it back.

“The last time we sat here it was fucking freezing, remember?”

“Yeah.”

The knot of worry in my tummy seems to loosen a little. No Jules, no Bobby, no Hervé. Thank God. I can feel myself beginning to relax a little.

“What do you think they’re all up to, Sage?”

“Who?”

“You know, Hervé, Potato Head, Dracula? Think Hervé finally managed to get it together with Genevieve?”

“Doubt it,” she shrugs. “Hey! Remember when we convinced Hervé to pretend to be a spy? Totally freaked Emma out.”

“I wonder what Emma actually told the folks?” I think out loud.

“Oh *fuck* Emma,” Sage says. “She’s probably back at home at some second-rate polytechnic right now.”

“Yeah,” I say.

We don't speak again for a few seconds.

"Sage, do you ever wonder what we'd be doing now if we'd stayed at fart college?"

She looks at me blankly. She shrugs.

"No. Not really. Well, sometimes, I `spose. What's the point, though?"

"You don't, like, wonder where we'd be if we hadn't burned down the pottery shed?"

"What you on about, Vicks?"

She's right. I don't really want to think about it either. We'd have finished our foundation course by now, wouldn't we? I would have moved on to my illustration course and Sage would probably have become a sculptor. Too late to think about that now, though.

Sage is still starting straight ahead. She has a faraway dreamy expression, as if she's thinking really seriously about something.

"Sage, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Vicks!" she says cheerily. I still can't get over this 'new' Sage. She seems to be brimming over with positivity and fidgety cheerfulness. I take a deep breath.

"Promise you won't get mad?" I say. I have to ask. It's been festering at the back of my mind since the Lice Experience day.

"Course I won't. It's me! You can ask me anything. What's up?"

"You know when you took off your sweat-shirt during the lice thing?"

"Er...yeah?"

The words come tumbling out too quickly. "Your arms. Were you involved in a car accident or something? Those scars."

"Fuck, Vicks!"

"Sorry, you don't have to tell me, it's --"

"No. It's cool." She stares off into the distance again. "I did it myself."

"What? How come?"

"It's no big deal or anything. Look, there's a ton of stuff you don't know about me, Vicks."

"Has it got to do with the tablets?" I say.

Sage looks at me, eyes wide. "How did you--?"

"That time you had the bad trip. I didn't say anything--"

"Yeah. I wondered about that, actually. Thought maybe you thought I was just rambling about the acid and stuff."

"Well...I wasn't sure."

We sit again in silence for a while. Sage takes another drag on the joint. Damn. I wish I'd never said anything. Her good mood looks to have evaporated instantly. I rack my brain for something to say. The nagging Jules worry is no longer even a slight issue. Right now I wouldn't give a shit if he appeared right in front of me. It would provide a distraction if nothing else.

"Something... happened to me a while ago," she says matter-of-factly. "And it kind of fucked me up for a while."

Suddenly I don't want to hear any more.

"It's all right, Sage," I said. "You don't have to--"

"Nah. Fuck it, Vicks. Just listen, okay?"

I nod. It suddenly becomes difficult to swallow. The saliva in my mouth has dried up.

"The tablets just helped me through a bad patch. I've run out of them, now though, Vicks, and I'm fine, aren't I?"

"Yeah, course," I say.

"When I was twelve... Look, Vicks, I haven't told anyone about this, so don't freak out, okay?"

"Of course I won't."

I don't look at her, she doesn't look at me. Both of sit, staring straight ahead.

"I was walking my dog in the woods at Wombourne. You know where I mean?"

"Yeah. But hang on -- you had a dog? I thought you hated them?"

"Yeah. Well it didn't last long. House was too small to keep it, so we had to give it away. You know what the place is like."

I nod. I've only been to Sage's house once. It had taken me ages and some serious manipulation to get her to invite me there. She never spoke about her folks, even when we were pissed, and I'd been curious (*more* than curious, burning with curiosity, in fact)

to see where she lived. She'd been really reluctant, but had finally run out of excuses. I wish I hadn't pushed it. She lived with her parents, (two grey, elderly-looking people who barely said a word to me) in a tiny council house on the outskirts of Wombourne. It looked far too small for the three of them. Sage's room was about the size of one of the spare loos in my house, and backed onto her parents' room. The house was furnished like my Nan's flat – clashing carpet and wallpaper and dark old-fashioned square furniture. Old people décor.

I wait for her to continue, dread building up in my stomach.

“So me and Cassie – the dog – were walking in the woods, and I bumped into this guy, a friend of my sister Karen. He was much older than me, obviously. She'd just got married to vile Pete at that stage and this guy'd asked me to dance with him at their shite wedding. I hadn't wanted to. So this guy's like, “How are you?” etc, and at first I thought he was just being really friendly. And he goes, “Do you feel like walking with me for a bit?” And I thought, “Okay? Why the fuck not?” Although I didn't say ‘fuck’ then Vicks.”

She pauses to relight the tiny stub of the joint. The words come out in a matter-of-fact, detached voice. A dead voice.

“So we walk a bit deeper into the wood and he tries to hold my hand, but I'm trying not to let him grab it. But I'm feeling like, really weird now, you know? As if something's not quite right, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was. And I was like, “I have to get home now,” and I'm pulling Cassie away so we can scarper when he'd grabbed me and said something like, “You know you want to, I've seen you looking at me,” or something shite like that. And then he pushed me down onto the ground, onto the leaves and sticks and shit and then...”

Her voice wavers for the first time.

I take her hand and squeeze it.

“Fuck, Sage. I'm so sorry,” I whisper.

Sage snatches her hand away from mine and seems to shake herself. She takes out our cigarettes and lights one for both of us.

“Yeah. Whatever. Don't worry about it Vicks. I'm over it now.”

“And you were how old?” I hadn’t meant to speak again, but the question pops out as if by its own accord.

“Twelve.”

“Jesus.” I think of that photograph on the poster. Twelve-year-old Sage. Chubby cheeks and huge grin. Fuck. “What did your parents do?”

“Never told them.”

“What?”

“How could I? You know what they’re like.” I don’t, but I nod like I know exactly what she means.

“They’d never have believed me,” she continues. “They knew the guy and everything. My word against his.”

“Jesus. And your sister?”

“Nah. The guy was practically Pete’s best mate.”

“Shit. So you must’ve seen him around and stuff? You know...after.”

“Yeah. That was the worst. Bastard.”

“So that’s why you...hurt yourself?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “‘Spouse. Who knows? All that matters now is that things are fine now, aren’t they Vicks? I mean like we’re doing okay aren’t we?”

“Yeah.” I try and get my head around what she’s just told me.

“Vicks?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something else I have to tell you.”

Oh shit, what now?

“I--”

There’s a screaming screech of tyres, the crunch of metal on metal, and from somewhere there’s the sound of a woman keening in horror. I stand up, limbs leaden like I’m moving underwater or something, but some part of me already know what’s happened.

“Vicks!” Sage is yelling. “Don’t look! Don’t go down there. Vicks!”

“Ralphie!” I scream. “Oh God, oh God, oh fuck! Ralphie!”

I try to head down the steps towards the road in front of us, but Sage is gripping my arm and doing her best to hold me back. It takes all of my strength to pull myself away from her, but I only make it down two or three steps before my legs seem to buckle.

A moped lies skewed on its side, the confetti scatterings of broken glass streaming behind it on the tarmac. A small van with a cresselated side stands ticking like a time bomb and facing in the wrong direction. A man in a motorcycle helmet and a brightly coloured anorak is struggling to get to his feet. And there's Ralphie. Body flung across the curb, his lead still trailing from his neck. There's no blood, but he's not moving. Even from here I can see it's too late. His neck is skewed at an angle that's just...wrong. As if from miles away I can hear a small child crying.

"Come, Vicks," Sage says.

I turn away. I don't look back.

\*

Father Paul's eyes flick back and forth from me to Sage. He nods to himself as if satisfied about something then folds his hands in front of him.

"Now, girls," he smiles benignly. "Tell me why you're here."

"We need to get home," says Sage, lowering her eyelashes. "Back to England."

"I see."

Sage nudges me. This is my cue to burst into tears. It isn't hard, after what's happened.

"Come, come, Victoria, is it?" Father Paul says. "It can't be that bad, can it? Things will be all right, won't they?"

I shake my head and wipe away a stream of snot.

This is not an act. I squeeze my eyes shut to try and push the nasty pictures flooding into my head away. But the more I try the worse it gets.

Sage nudges me again.

"Don't overdo it, Chuck," she whispers as the priest gets up and reaches for a gargantuan box of tissues on his book shelf. He passes it to me and I blow my nose loudly.

“Now, can I ask, girls, how you knew to come to me?”

“A friend told us,” Sage says. “He said you help out people who’ve got themselves into shi- into a spot of bother.”

Father Paul nods again.

I glance at Sage and she rolls her eyes. This is a bit rich. I’m not sure if we can actually call Hippy a ‘friend’. Apparently it was he who’d suggested we approach Father Paul for help to get home.

I finally manage to control the wild hitching sobs that are racketing out of my chest. Sage squeezes my hand reassuringly, and I glance over at her and give her a feeble smile.

“Now, girls. The Church does try to help where we can,” Father Paul says. “But can I ask first, are you Catholic?”

Both of us look him in the eye and nod convincingly although Sage’s family is Church of England and I’m the result of a long line of lapsed Jews. It’s easier than I thought to lie to a priest.

“Right. And where is it that you live, exactly?”

“Notre Dame gardens,” Sage says without thinking.

The priest chuckles. “No, no, you misunderstand me. Where in *England*.”

“Oh, right. Birmingham,” Sage says. “Well, Wolverhampton actually.”

“And why did you leave there?”

Sage scowls at the question. I kick her under the table. The last thing we need now is for her to tell the priest not to be so fucking nose-y.

“We ran away from home but now we’ve seen the error of our ways,” Sage says, the words almost tumbling over each other.

“Ah. I see.” For a second I’m sure Father Paul can see right through us. His piercing blue eyes narrow slightly.

Sensing this, Sage smiles piously up at him.

“And you don’t have families that can help?” he asks.

Sage sighs. “Yeah. But they’re like really poor and stuff,” she says.

“Right. Now, I’ll need your passports to get all your details.”

We hand them over without a word.

“Wait here, girls,” he says, getting up and smoothing down his funny priest dress. “I’ll be with you anon.” He leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

“With you a nun?” Sage snorts. “Fucking freak. What’s he on about?”

I shrug and both of us lean back in our chairs with relief.

“Fuck,” Sage says. “Think he bought it? I thought we did a good enough job, eh?”

I shrug again. “Dunno.”

“Nice work with the crying and all, Vicks.”

“How the hell did Hippy hear about him?” I ask, trying to think about something else to erase the vile pictures that keep popping into my head.

“Fuck knows,” Sage says. “Apparently Father Paul is where everyone comes when they’re up shit creek and need a free ticket.”

“Oh shit,” I say.

“What?”

“He’s got our passports.”

“Yeah, duh, so?”

“In the back of mine, under contacts...”

We look at each other and burst out laughing.

“Oh shit!” Sage says. “He’ll freak when he sees that your next of kin is a child murderer! He’ll probably think you’re Myra Hindley’s secret kid or something!”

“Think he’ll look?”

“Doesn’t matter now.”

My laughter dries up instantly and tears threaten again. I take in a deep hitching breath.

“Chill, Vicks,” Sage says. “Think we can smoke in here?” At least she’s not poking around the office looking for things to nick. “Are you sure you want to do this? Go home, I mean.”

“Yeah,” I say. I’ve got no reason to stay now.

Sage shrugs.

Don’t think about it. Don’t. But I can’t help it.

\*

Father Paul is back within minutes.

“Right,” he says. “You can pick up your tickets tomorrow. You’ll be leaving on Friday. Three days from now.”

I stare at the calendar on the wall. It swims in front of my eyes. Christ, we’ve been away for fucking months. Where did the time go?

“Thanks, Father,” Sage is saying. She glances at me. It must be fairly obvious that I can’t get any words out.

It’s not just the horrible mental images of Ralphie’s death scene that are freaking me out. As I stood staring down at the accident, there was another part of me, a vile *twisted* part of me that was flooded with relief. Relief that the only thing that was keeping me here was gone. Was dead.

I hate myself for this.

University of Cape Town

## SAGE

No poem today, Gladys. I've lost it. Keep trying to write them but THEY DON'T WORK!!!

Notre Dame is much quieter than usual today, and one of the priest blokes nodded at me as he was passing by and said 'hello'. IRONIC!!! Normally they look at me as if I'm a piece of non-religious shit. Maybe he's like psychic or something and can tell I'm going away and won't be dirtying up his precious church for a while.

So we've decided to go back home, Gladys. We've decided to throw in the towel and accept the consequences. Vicks keeps saying that we'll just go back home for a bit, get cleaned up and sorted out, and then come back here with new sleeping bags and BETTER rucksacks etc. I know she wants to check up on her Nan, but fuck it. I don't believe her about coming back, Gladys. Look I know a lot of shit has gone down with Ralphie dying etc etc but she doesn't seem to realise that UNLIKE HER I don't have anything to fall back on. The fart college was my last chance, and I can't very well go back there, can I?

Christ. Who'd have thought I'd be spouting all this BULLSHIT? I mean, I've gone back and READ what I've written at other times and it sounds like I REALLY HATE the Frogs and Paris and shite. Like it was all Vicki who MADE me come here, and now I'm the one who wants to STAY!!! Good old irony. Never lets you down, eh?

I haven't told Vicks what Karen said during the Phone Call to the Parents Experience. I suppose I never thought it would COME TO THIS. Karen says the parents have 'washed their hands of me' or some such shite. That they don't want 'anything more to do with me.' That I've 'let them down too often and this is the last straw.' So, when we go back home I've got NO HOME TO GO TO. I'd only be able to stay with Karen and vile Pete for a few days before ALL of us went mental. Their flat is TINY and is too small even if they didn't have a stinky dog squashed in there as well. AND Karen's pregnant so they're

looking for somewhere else to stay. I'm screwed, Gladys. I can't stay with Vicks. The last time I visited her house her folks looked at me as if I was a slug on their posh fucking rose bushes or something. And I don't have any other FRIENDS!!! I'll be forced to stay in a CRAP council flat and get a job in a FACTORY or something and become one of the LIVING DEAD.

As much as I hated little Ralphie fuck-wit dog, having him around meant that we HAD to stay. I knew Vicks wouldn't leave him, as she's as soft as shite when it comes to animals. But him dying now is SO TYPICAL of my life. I'd just managed to talk her out of leaving when it happened. And as Vicks is always saying, it was so fucking freaky that the accident happened at the VERY spot 'where it all began', i.e. where me and Vicks met VILE Bobby.

FUCK KNOWS why I told her about the-you-know-what when I did. If I'd have kept my fucking TRAP SHUT maybe she wouldn't have let go of Ralphie's lead and he wouldn't have run across the road to get to another dog, or whatever he was after. Maybe he'd just had enough as well? Just when you think things are going OK they all turn to shite, Gladys. WHY?????

Should I just stay here? Maybe I fit in best with all the tramps.

YEAH. Maybe I won't go after all. I haven't decided properly yet.

I keep wondering what would have happened if me and Vicks hadn't met. If I hadn't seen her at Fart college that day. Such a freaky feeling, Gladys. It was like I knew all about her and could look right inside her even before we'd even said a single word to each other. I'll never forget it. She was walking up the stairs with this dead snotty-looking bitch and I'd thought, "What is someone like that doing with someone like her?" It was later on that day that we first got talking. It was easy, effortless, like she also KNEW how IMPORTANT it was we get to know each other. Vicki was playing Top Trumps with a couple of tossers from the sculpture class in the crappy canteen, and she asked me if I wanted to join in. Of course I did. From that moment on, no one else seemed to matter at all. It was like all those other tossers just fucking disappeared out of the room.

Then, everyday we'd meet on the bus and sit next to each other. We'd go to class for a bit and at lunchtime bunk off and buy a half-jack of whiskey and just get pissed. And the rest is HISTORY.

I would never have come here if it wasn't for Vicks, Gladys. I would still be doing stupid sculptures of exploding televisions and stuff. I don't know if that would be better.

Hippy's the only one who knows we're going. He owes us after what happened with Vicks at the squat. Think he can keep a secret??? Anyway, I think part of him's glad we're going. Even though Taffy keeps a wide berth from us and is no longer a member of the POSSE, I reckon Hippy's still happy we'll be out of the way. Taffy will be all HIS again, even though he bullies him and CRAMPS his style. Vicks doesn't want anyone else to know we're going. She wants to just disappear one day. WHY, though??? I think I'm going to tell Bob. It's not fair otherwise, is it, Gladys? Maybe Vicks is scared Bob will try and talk us out of it, but I don't think he will. In fact I know he won't. Because I know Bob's secret. I know why he was in prison and why he gets so sad and why he can't go back to England. I figured it out, Gladys. I asked him about it and he didn't deny it. Another FUCKED UP thing to add to the list of MIND-FUCK shit. Bob was arrested for being a nonce. I hope it wasn't little boys, Gladys. He wouldn't tell me that much. I hope he just got done for like messing with a rent boy or something. Shit. It's so typical, so IRONIC. Vicks and me are always calling everyone perverts but it looks like the only guy who we ACTUALLY TRUSTED really is one. I haven't told this to Vicks. If Bob is sorry for what he's done, does that make it ALL RIGHT?

I have to talk to Vicks and LET HER KNOW how important it is that she doesn't DUMP me although I know it will be tempting, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

I'd dump me if I could.

FUCK FUCK FUCK

## VICKI: The Sage Experience

We didn't think we were going to make it. The train ride through to Calais had been a seemingly endless nightmare. Father Paul had only bought us tickets for the ferry and for our train from Dover to Birmingham. We had to make our own way to the harbour, and we were thrown off at nearly every stop. Thank God we'd thought to catch the early train. But at least we're travelling light. I've given away all the stuff I thought I'd never need again, including my frayed sleeping bag, to one of the scammy toothless tramps at the Gare De Nord. And we won't go hungry before we catch the ferry. One of the stops we'd been dumped at was fairly near to one of those massive hypermarket places, and we'd decided to put in a few minutes of begging before we caught the next train. Practically everyone who'd walked past me had chucked a few coins in the hat and I'd made an amazing haul. The pocket of Scully Jack is still heavy and distended with a mass of silver francs.

When we reached Calais we still had a bit of time to kill, and Sage decided it would be best spent getting pissed, "To say 'cheers' to Frog Land, for now," she said.

\*

It's weird being in a pub again. It's almost like the old fart college days. And this one, although still French, is more like an English bar, thank God. Sage and I are huddled at a corner booth on comfy padded benches. The place is dark and smoky and we're the only customers in here. The ashtray in front of us is spilling over with butts and ash, even though we've only been here for half-an-hour or so.

"Let's have a whiskey," Sage says. Her voice doesn't sound too slurry, even though both of us have downed three beers each and we haven't eaten since yesterday.

"You sure?" I say. I check the watch. "The ferry leaves in about an hour. Shouldn't we head over there? We don't even know where it is."

"C'mon. We've loads of time. And how hard can it fucking be to find it? Just look for the big fuck-off boat," she sniggers.

“Don’t you think we’ve had enough?”

“Hello? Can the real Vicki please come back? Since when have you turned into Mother Grundy?” she nods over to the bar. “Make mine a double.”

Of course it’s me who has to go up to the bar and order the drinks, even though the barman speaks perfect English. I try and dismiss a surge of irritation. Even after all these months of living here it’s still up to me to do the dirty work: get the job, beg for the cash, buy the fucking drinks.

I’m glad we’d had a shower before we left Paris, and that the barman, although fairly taciturn, doesn’t look at me as if I’m a foul stinky *clochard*. I’m suddenly exhausted. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror. Little pin-headed Vicki. I don’t look anywhere near as knackered as I feel, though. I wonder what people will think of us when we get back. Will they think we’ve changed? Do we look different? Thinner? Older? Harder? Damaged?

I glance down at my feet and try and ignore the nasty lurch of panic I feel when I realise Ralphie isn’t there. I’ve been doing this ever since he died, and it’s doing my head in. I shake my head to try and clear it, and take a sip of whiskey as I head back to Sage.

“So,” Sage says, after downing her double in one go and taking a follow up sip of beer. “What happens next?”

“What do you mean?”

“When we get home, of course.”

“Shit, Sage,” I shrug. “I dunno.”

“We’ll be coming back here, eh?”

I want to say, what for? But I don’t. Sage has got it into her head that we’re only going back to England for a week or so. I’ve played along with it. Maybe it’s time for me to put the record straight.

“What would happen if we...didn’t come back here, Sage?” I say.

She looks at me suspiciously.

“What do you mean, Vicks?”

“Well...we could always get ourselves a job, maybe go back to college for a bit...” my voice trails away.

“You don’t understand, do you?” she snaps.

“What?”

“I haven’t got any fucking A levels like you have.”

“So?”

“I’ve got fuck all to fall back on, Vicks. And you think the college will have me back after what happened? Not fucking likely.”

“So try and get in to the Wolverhampton one or something.”

Sage looks at me as if I’m mad.

“I tried, Vicks. Stourbridge only just let me in and I was on probation there for most of the fucking time.”

“But why? Your art was fucking awesome.”

“Yeah, whatever. Try telling that to the stupid tossers who teach there.”

We drink in silence.

“Think we’ll have a criminal record?” I say.

“God knows,” she sighs. “Hopefully it’ll all have blown over by the time we get home. Who the fuck knows. The plan was, you check on your Nan, and then we come back here, more sorted this time and really try and start something up with the art. We can’t just leave Bob and... everyone, can we? He only thinks we’re going away for a couple of days.”

“Yeah...course.”

“Then, after we’ve come back here for a bit and earned a fair whack of cash, we could go travelling for a bit.”

I try not to let my face fall when she says ‘we’.

“Yeah, sure!” I say, but even to my ears it sounds like a lie. “Sounds like a plan!”

“Another drink?” Sage says.

“Sure,” I say. But I don’t really want one. Again she looks at me meaningfully and I get up and go to the bar.

\*

I can see that she’s getting quite pissed. Well, we both are.

Again she downs the whiskey in one go.

She looks me dead in the eye.

“Cheers,” she says.

“Cheers,” I say. “Shall we toast to-”

“I love you, Vicki.”

I can’t have heard her properly.

“I -- you what?”

“I love you.”

At first I think she’s taking the piss and I snort with laughter. “Nice one, Sage. I lurve you too,” I say in a fake French accent.

She smiles as if she’s just sucked something sharply acidic.

Suddenly the air between us seems to become extremely still.

“I mean it, Vicks,” she says quietly.

She picks up my hand that’s lying like a dead fish on the table. She starts stroking the palm of it.

“I *mean* it, Vicks,” she says again, in a tone of voice I’ve never heard before.

“Erm, I’m not sure I know what you’re saying,” I say.

“You know,” she says, letting my hand drop to the table. I don’t move it. I suddenly have the feeling that I’ve let her down terribly.

“Sage?” I say. “Is that what you wanted to tell me? That day? That Ralphie day?”

“Doesn’t matter now, Vicks,” she says, her voice dead.

I have absolutely no idea what to do or say now. I think again about the scars on her arms. How well do I actually know her? *Really* know her?

“Maybe we could go travelling when we get back,” I say. “I’ve always fancied going to Israel. Maybe we could go on a Kibbutz or something?” It sounds fake, even to me. Sage smiles again in that forced way.

“Yeah,” she says, looking off into the distance. I light a cigarette. My hands are shaking and my stomach feels like there’s a vortex squirming around in it.

“There’s something else,” she says. “Something I haven’t told you.”

Oh God. What now?

“You know Rat Girl?”

“Yeah. Course. What about her?” I’m relieved she’s changed the subject. Maybe things will be all right after all if I can steer the conversation back to something normal, something else.

“She has Aids.”

“Shit,” I say. “How come you know?” There’s something in her tone of voice that’s making me feel more than just uneasy.

She looks me dead in the eye. “Taffy told me.”

“Blimey. Poor old Rat Girl.”

“Don’t you get it?”

“Eh?”

The room suddenly seems to be spinning.

“Aids? You know you can get it from sharing needles, don’t you? You know it’s not just bum bandits that get it?”

“Oh fuck,” I breathe.

“Yeah,” Sage says. “Sorry to have to tell you that. Sorry to fuck up your life and all.” Her voice is still dead, but there are tears rolling down her cheeks.

Water floods into my mouth and my stomach lurches. I’m going to be sick. I jump up and race to the loos at the back of the smokey bar. I knock my knee painfully on a bar stool as I scramble through and push my way into the ladies’.

\*

When I get back to our table, Sage and her bag are gone.

I race outside and look up and down the street. I can’t see her anywhere. I walk back inside.

There’s a book on the table. It’s a sketch book. I pick it up. Pages flutter out from inside it and fall onto the damp carpet. I recognise them instantly. It’s the story I wrote for her birthday.

I flick through the rest of the pages in the book. It’s full of slanting angry writing. In some areas the biro looks to have gone through the page.

I put it in my bag.

\*

The waiting room for foot passengers at Calais stinks of old vomit and spilled beer, or maybe it doesn't and I'm just smelling the stink wafting off my sweaty skin.

It had taken me a lifetime to walk to the ferry station. I wandered down to the harbour like a sleepwalker, my bag hanging like a dead thing from my shoulder. For once it had barely bothered me.

What the fuck am I going to do? Shall I get on the ferry? I can't see her anywhere.

We've only got one ticket each. One chance to get home today.

I have to decide.

I take out the book and read the last entry again.

I make my decision.

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**SAGE**

Dear VICTORIA EVANS, what I just told you I told you from the heart.  
I know you're not planning on coming back here. I know it and you know it.  
Best you get yourself tested for HIV when you get back.  
Don't try and find me. You won't be able to.  
You are a coward and a stupid fucking selfish CABBAGE SLUT.  
I meant what I said and you never believed it.

Goodbye Gladys. Looks like you were my only fucking friend after all.

SHARON

**ENDS**

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Dedicated to Parsley Guest (1970 – 1995).

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