

GOLD ON THE CEILING

a novel

by Matei Rosca

To Anastasia, who was always true.

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Six of us sat around a small rectangular table in a well-lit but small room on the second floor of Ms Coinescu's house. The whole room was taken up by a dresser with a television set on it, a bookshelf full of books, loose papers stacked on the floor and the teacher's porcelain trinkets. The lavish, heavy green curtains blocked the window overseeing the pine-lined alley outside. The curtains took plenty of space for themselves, as did we at our table sitting on cushy chairs. We all sat there in silence with notebooks and exercise books, pretending we were trying to solve integral equations for the Bacalaureate exam we faced in a year's time and for that year's final theses – our penultimate year in highschool.

At least I, for one, was definitely pretending. My mind was wandered during these lessons because I was way behind with the subject matter, but I have been taking them anyway once a week, every week, at the maths teacher's house, in order for her to be a bit more lenient when time came for final grades and deciding who passed the class.

During these preparatory lessons, as we called them, the teacher was having tea in the living room, coming to us every 20 minutes or so to see how we got along and giving us more work. A regimental programme. It lasted for about two hours – or 100 minutes, as she liked to point out, the same length as a class at school – and it cost 40 lei, which was roughly the price of a meal in a half-decent decent restaurant, or a good drinking session in a bar. I made this necessary substitution of the lesson for the bar when I couldn't bear the tedium – about once a month, on average, and nobody seemed to mind. Ms Coinescu let me keep the money knowing I wouldn't tell my parents and my parents thought everything was fine as long as I got mediocre grades, which I did, thanks to the lessons, or rather thanks to the payment for the lessons – she was the same teacher we had in real class, at College Buhai Caricazino. It was a silent conspiracy between myself – the slacking, heavy drinking, lower-middle class arrogant parasite from the bad neighbourhood, and the up-and-coming, cash-amassing, house-building, aspirant bourgeois teacher, to rob my parents of their money. I gladly took the deal knowing it relieved me of ever studying highschool maths again. Taking the money put the teacher in a difficult moral bind: if I failed real class, Ms Coinescu the highschool teacher, by giving effect to my failure, would implicitly denounce the incompetence of Ms Coinescu the private teacher. A conflict of interest she could resolve only by rejecting me from private lessons, which she didn't because she liked the money, even at the cost of falsifying the official documents – my grades in the highschool catalogue – to reflect vastly more knowledge than I actually possessed.

There was no room for our elbows on that table so we had to write our notes sitting sort of sideways with half an arm on the table, the other arm in our laps and the notebook placed obliquely on the edge. The six of us were in the same class and we were all friends. We were barely eighteen at the time, two boys and four girls, and we boys relished the proximity that the confined space was affording us to the girls who would otherwise be appropriately wary of allowing us to touch them for any extension of time. At the lessons we were in permanent physical contact either with our elbows, or thighs, or feet, with the perfect excuse that there was no other way, like in a crowded bus. Ms Coinescu was a master of perks.

“Palan,” Ms Coinescu called. “What are you thinking of? You've barely begun your equation.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I'm quite unable to understand it. Don't really know where to go from here.”

“Rubbish! I've shown you this many times. You skip too many classes at school. You've hardly been in maths at all this week. If only you ever paid attention when you did attend. Here...”

And she started writing it for me. She would go on, in a few years, to open a real-life replica of a college classroom for her private lessons, in a house she would buy for almost nothing from the town's defunct diesel injection pump factory, where her husband worked.

Before I knew it, the lesson was finished and we walked into the wet evening air of early March. I took a long walk to the train station with Ileana whom I was trying hard to impress into becoming my girlfriend. I was in love with her and desperate to show it without making myself look like a fool. I feigned dignity and gentlemanliness as I walked her to her train and made small talk. Then I took a minibus home to my block of flats, in the poor area at the southern edge of our sleepy mountain town. Before entering the building I took a short tour of the streets to see if any of my friends were out and willing to let me smoke their cigarettes or their hashish for a few hours until I would be ready to go straight to sleep. I had no such luck. Oddly for that hour the streets were empty.

I went in to find my parents having a more heated argument than usual.

“Fuck you, you stupid bitch. I don't give a fuck about anything you have to say. You're a fucking crazy cunt and he is a vicious street gang criminal, soon to be jailed. Serves both of you well! I'm sick of both of you. I'll do something about it soon, too,” my father screamed at my mother.

Was I the criminal? That part was new. In his drunken stupor he seemed to have forgotten again that they were divorced already, and the only thing he could “do about” being sick of me and Ma was move out, which he was more than welcome to as far as I was concerned, except he couldn't afford it. That financial impotence made him even angrier when he remembered it. I wish

he had the balls to hit me or Ma hard, properly, even once so I could wipe the floor with him. As it stood, cowardly Dad never escalated it past hypotheticals and the occasional slap. Smalltime as a wife and son beater just as in all his other roles, the disgusting loser. Big mouth, nothing behind it.

“My whole life I've carried your drunken, whoring, gambling, idiot ass on my back and what do I have to show for it! I wish you just shut up already and let me finish the housework so I can go to sleep! My head hurts! One day I'll lose it and split your head open, you bastard!” she yelled in a shrill voice, in tears, as she pushed him away frantically and hit his chest with her fists not as punches, but the way you bang on a door.

“It's because of you he's taken up drugs! You're the one with all the bad habits! I should've dumped you and moved back to my mother's with him years ago and none of this would have happened!” she said.

“I wish you'd both fuck off, you crazy, frigid cunt. I'd be happy to be left alone but your own mother won't have you. She fucking hates your guts like everyone else, and I'm the only fool who has to tolerate your fits every day. Fuck off already,” this he said as he pushed her back with his left arm while having a swig of cheap vodka from the small plastic bottle he held in his right. Then he turned his back on her and headed for the bathroom. She sighed melodramatically and choked in tears.

So they were definitely arguing about me instead of money for a change. I sneaked into my room and stopped the door with a chair. For some reason they seem to think I was about to go to jail for drugs. I turned up the music. That'd make my presence felt, I thought. But what of this jail business? What a fucking day. They couldn't have found any hash in my room because I never keep any there. Twitchy barely ever gives me any to keep and when he does I take it to a hiding place in the basement of the block, so it could be anybody's. There must be a hundred people living in this lump of cement. That hasn't happened for weeks, though, me having any hash. It must've been someone in the neighbourhood running her mouth about me, like we didn't already have enough problems. The people around here like nothing more than seeing each other squirm, I thought. Still, jail? Soon? That's a gross exaggeration even by my parents' standards of hyperbole.

God knows. I picked up my bad translation of *Trainspotting* and started reading to the background noise of the argument and the loud house music. They should be cooling down soon, I reckoned, and dozed off with them still going. They were energetic that night. They ought to have had sex.

The next morning Ma woke me.

“George, we need to talk. Wake up. Come on, boy, wake up now. You have school. Come on.” She was shaking me while sipping a cup of coffee.

“Christ, Ma. What's the time? What do you want? I have my alarm set for school. Go on now, let me sleep. I'm tired.”

She was dressed and wearing makeup, which meant she hadn't slept well and got out of bed early with no clock. She had put foundation over the black eyes but you could still see it.

“No, you must wake up and talk to me. Your dad was drunk last night so I couldn't talk to you. I didn't want to bring you into our argument. Come on now, open your eyes and wake up.”

“What? Ma, I barely slept with your yelling. What are you talking about? I'm tired. What do you want? Make me some coffee at least, Ma, come on...”

“No coffee, you're too young. I'll make you a sandwich. I'll let you dress if you sit up. Has the police talked to you, George? Are you in any trouble? Don't lie to me.”

“What? Ma, no. What police? What the hell are you talking about?”

A thundering cough and a door slamming shut signalled Dad waking up and going to the bathroom to vomit the remainders of his liver. We paused for a second.

“Ma, I don't know what you're talking about, I swear. I've been going to school. Ask the maths teacher if you don't believe me. I'm getting good grades, Ma. Especially English...”

“Don't change subjects on me. I know Danny and Vlad got arrested for drugs, and many others you hang out with got questioned. I want to know if you sold drugs with them and if you're going to jail. I want to hear it from you rather than the neighbours or the paper. Don't do this to me now, haven't I been through enough?” She started crying.

“Ma, what? You're crazy. Nothing happened. Who told you this? There are no drugs and no police. Vlad is at home and so is Danny. I saw them this Sunday.”

“It's Tuesday now and they're in jail. And Alex and Andreaa are detained, maybe they'll get arrested too. Don't play stupid, I know you were taking drugs with them, maybe worse.”

“Ma, you are absolutely mad. I'm sorry but I just don't know what you're talking about. I have been in school yesterday all day and at the private lessons after, I swear to God. How come I came home if I got into trouble? Huh? Just don't worry about anything, okay? Leave me alone.”

“OK, you dress for school now, I'll go make you a sandwich. We'll continue this in the kitchen. There's still a half hour before you have to go.”

“Jesus, Ma, please forget it. Nothing happened. Whoever told you anything was lying. These stupid neighbours don't know anything, don't listen to them.”

“It's not the neighbours, George, it was someone from work who has a brother in the police. Your friends were arrested yesterday and don't pretend you don't know it. Mircea, the gamekeeper's brother is an officer and his colleagues arrested and interrogated half your goddamn good-for-nothing group. Don't act stupid and don't call me stupid. Come on already...” and she raised her

hands in exasperation.

Fuck, I said in my own head. She wouldn't be like this out of the blue so something must be up. And it was strange nobody was out last night. Can all of it be true though? No way it all happened without me knowing. What am I going to do if they take me in too, I thought as I dressed and the more I thought the more I felt like running.

I pulled out my Sagem phone and sent Costea a message: "What's up? All good? Coffee today first thing? G."

Before I finished putting my socks on an answer came: "Can't meet or talk on phone. I'm out of school for a while. Chilling at my grandad's. Be careful."

So it was true. Costea intensely disliked the countryside, he would never go unless the only other option was jail. My face fell in the sink like a layer of hot wax off a copper tin as I brushed my teeth. I went to the kitchen and Ma engaged me frontally:

"Your phone rang," she said. "By the looks of you it weren't good news. Tell me everything now and God help you if you hold anything back, George. And get your sandwich."

"I don't know what to say, Ma. All I know for sure is I wasn't doing anything and I wasn't spoken to by any police. I don't know what happened or what Vlad was doing but I'm damn sure I wasn't doing it with him. Now leave me alone. And thanks for the sandwich but no thanks. You know I don't like early breakfasts."

Dad appeared out of nowhere.

"Eat it now, you lying bastard, you'll miss your mom's food when they put you in prison where you belong. Not only you're a criminal, you're a stupid criminal and a liar, thinking I didn't know you were selling that brown shit next to our house. And now they're onto you, aren't they? Your mom told me everything. I won't save you, you wanker, in fact, I'll be happy to see you go. Go on, eat the sandwich, or don't, and fuck off. I need to talk to her," Dad said, still in his pyjamas, as he took a swig of a fresh plastic bottle of vodka.

I left the sandwich and went out. I didn't feel ready for first class, so I headed for the bar which was about ten minutes away on the same road as the school. I seldom went to first class those days, as it mostly happened to be maths.

After primary school I had wanted to study languages, society and literature in a nearby city at a bilingual academy with boarding, but my parents would have none of it.

"You'd turn into a bum and a drunk and you'll waste your life before it even begins if I let you out of my sight," my dad said.

"Who'll feed and clothe you there, boy? You can barely tie your own shoelaces, you're so clumsy," mother said.

Soft study subjects like those I fancied were also out of the question. So I stayed and took up computer science and maths at the small-town high school next door. In my first year I developed a taste for diazepam, beer, cognac and hash. In my second year I developed a habit of seducing, or becoming seduced by, the rich girls who lived in the big houses in the parts of town with the good views and who had well-to-do parents who drove foreign cars and gave them infinite amounts of pocket money to entertain themselves. This helped me to support the habits I gained in the first year and it all went swimmingly. It suited me fine, so long as my mom didn't suspect anything.

As I entered the bar, I realised all my friends who I usually skipped class with were now in prison or in police custody for interrogation. Those present, the moderately rich and deeply fearful young men in my school, who only skipped class to piss off their parents, averted their gaze from mine, wary that if I sat with them I would bring the police to their doors. These were the boys who bought the hash. They seemed to know what had happened on Monday, confirming my mother's accusations with the guilt look in their eyes, and so did not invite me to sit with them. I sat alone.

It didn't take much reflection to realise that the Moroccan hash operation that Twitchy had set up, which afforded us ghetto rats a satiated life for the first time, had been put to an end. It being the only hash operation in town – other drugs were unheard of – the police probably wasted no time tracing the stuff back to its origins in Twitchy's apartment in the block next to mine. One of the officers' daughters must have come home with red eyes and an unnatural giggle and that spelt our undoing. Well, their undoing, really, I happily pointed out to myself, since there I was, free to have my morning booster of a shot of vodka and a crushed diazepam in a cup of coffee in the bar with no bother from anyone at all. They served teenagers cigarettes and alcohol without problems in Romanian bars back then, but since we entered the European Union the politicians started making a fuss about this on television. It must have been one of my very close friends who caved under pressure and gave everything up except me, I calculated.

A year before, Twitchy went to work as a labourer in Spain. He quickly renounced the job in favour of sending hashish back home. A resource apparently widely available in Valencia was scarce enough to be considered exotic in Romania, and Twitchy made a lot of money very fast at the age of 29. The only problem was that he had a criminal record and the substance was illegal. Very illegal in Romania, as it happens, where drug-related offenses carry the stiffest penalties in Europe. On the bar's computer, an internet search revealed that mere possession of cannabis resin brought along three to fifteen years in prison. Trafficking it across borders for commercial purposes meant up to twenty years in Romanian jail. Forming a group in order to do this constituted organised crime and carried a separate punishment of up to ten years in prison.

I choked. I lit a cigarette, had a sip of my coffee, a sip of the vodka and I choked again.

Twitchy generously brought most of us into his luxurious lifestyle at no apparent cost to ourselves. All we had to do was join him when he picked up the parcels from the post office or the courier's, or pick them up ourselves sometimes, or just hold some stuff for him sometimes when he was gone. Only rarely we had to actually meet clients and pass them the hash he sold them, but even then he said it wasn't trafficking because he got the money, not us. Everyone in the town regarded him as a cold-blooded gangster and feared him deeply; most people went out of their way to avoid him, but that seemed silly to me, Vlad, Costea and the others. To us he was just Twitchy. We grew up with him and he looked after us. Nobody would bother us when we went out and everyone would let us inside nightspots through the back door if we dropped his name. The other hoodlums in other neighbourhoods would leave us alone and we always got good cinema tickets and restaurant tables to impress our girlfriends as a favour for him if we asked.

When he went to prison for five years for attempted murder at twenty it wasn't because he actually tried to kill the guy with a crowbar because he called his cousin a whore. The guy attacked Twitchy first and he was bigger so Twitchy just hit him once with the crowbar over the head and the guy fell on the pavement by the side of his car. It was true that Twitchy, drunk and high, had waited for the guy to come out of his block one morning, but all he wanted to do was make him apologize. The crowbar was just for protection. And the guy had it coming: he did call Laura, Twitchy's cousin, a whore. She was a prostitute, to be sure, but she was also Twitchy's cousin and so not a whore, at least in the lower Carpathian region of Romania where we, and her cousin Twitchy, lived.

Five years later when he came back he was still the same person, it seemed to us, only more ambitious and a bit more cold-blooded. Still glad to have us around him, still looking after us and despite the new tattoo of Hitler's bust on his back and the steely, blank stare he threw at people who mildly disagreed with him sometimes, he still hadn't lost his sense of humour. He was still the old Twitchy and since he came back from Spain and brought over the hash our lives improved markedly thanks to him.

We definitely weren't a gang like some people said. We didn't feel like anything else than a close group of childhood friends who had to take care of each other because nobody else would in this dog-eat-dog world. And now most of us were in jail for it.

In Romania the police hated drugs. Most importantly, the politicians hated drugs. Drink was the only acceptable drug around here. Still in the bar into second class, I pondered with growing clarity the painful reality of my world collapsing overnight. If the cops hadn't approached me yet this was more of a miraculously lucky break than a certainty that I was off the hook.

What if one of my friends told them I knew something or if their wiretaps lead them to me?

There always were wiretaps in these cases, you saw it in the news reports. The prosecutors made a big show of publishing embarrassing SMS messages, lines from phone conversations or online chats that had given the criminals away. My phone, as I discovered upon a mere cursory examination, contained some enlightening pieces of evidence from Twitchy: "It's still with you, right? How much of it is there left?" or "Getting some in tomorrow morning. Pickup as usual?" This went on and it got worse with Vlad and Danny. We joked: "The Romanian George Jung strikes again: 50 Gs sold in a week LOL" and "Make sure your mother doesn't find our shit – or if she does make sure she doesn't smoke it." We loved playing the part and we were obsessed by films such as Blow, with Johnny Depp, and by Goodfellas, Casino, Layer Cake, Lock Stock, Scarface, all of them. We deluded ourselves into identifying with those film characters and taking them as role models. People always say these films are cautionary tales but they are not so for kids from poor neighbourhoods. For us they looked aspirational. My own SMS replies were just as telling: "Smoked out. Can confirm high grade quality on new lot." or "Moved three today, easy money." This went on at some length. My phone's call log was full of Twitchy's, Danny's and Vlad's numbers. I sometimes had called Andreea too. The cheap Chinese phone I begged my mother to buy me on a contract in her name two years ago would put me in prison. I felt dizzy.

I lit a cigarette, ordered a rum which I necked and stepped out the back of the bar, inside the owner's yard. At that hour everyone was gone except his senile mother-in-law who was watching me from behind her window curtain. I wrote down a few phone numbers on a piece of paper and took out the SIM card from my phone and burnt it with my cigarette lighter. I watched it burn into ash and with it I hoped my sins would too. Down the street I took the phone apart forcibly with the pointy end of my nail clipper and threw different bits of in in different bins, except for the main circuit board which I threw in a gutter. I kept the battery, though, to sell online for the price of a cigarette packet. Lean times lied ahead I sensed.

I left for school, with a detour to the post office to use the pay phones. I called Costea, who worked at Twitchy's end with the boys from Spain. I didn't give my name.

"I hope you can recognise my voice. Can you?"

"Yes," he said "What do you want to know?"

"What happened..." I said.

"Not another word," he said. "Everything's monitored. The case runs deep and well-documented. It was a police operation that went on for months. Twitchy and Danny are done badly, on criminal conspiracy and trafficking. They'll get years for sure. From what I gather they were caught trying to sell 12 grams to an undercover police. That asshole with a piercing n his eyebrow if you remember him. The police say Danny had the shit and Twitchy and Andreea were with him.

Andreea gave up Alex and Alex is probably lying to them that the rest of us are involved, now as we speak. He had some in his house when they searched it. He already witnessed against Twitchy, I gather. Do nothing. Likely they will attempt to stage something on you before they bring you in. Watch out. I told my dad everything, he said he'd get me a lawyer if need be but for now I'm sheltering in the fucking country. It's awful out here. I'd appreciate it if you managed to come at the weekend to keep me company for a few hours. These peasants are driving me fucking mad. Anyway, that's it. Say nothing, mind. The Bucharest colleagues of Twitchy's Valencia colleagues are already snooping around for snitches. They sent word to Alex's folks that they'll chop him up with an axe when he gets released. His mother threw a nervous fit and she's now in the hospital. It's all fucked up."

"Fuck, man, my Ma knows too. She's livid, she's giving me a real hard time. I won't talk, I swear. We never signed up for this shit, did we?" I said, almost sobbing.

"The fuck you didn't, man. What did you think we were doing anyway, running ice cream? Tell your mom to shut the fucking hell up, don't let her go around yelling at people stirring up shit. Both of you -- don't be stupid and cut the moaning. Don't make me say your name on the phone, you hear? Keep your mouth shut and stay in school. And keep your head up, don't be a pussy. And please come see me if you can. There's a lot I can't say now."

"OK."

"Bye." He hung up.

Costea's dad was a successful business man and he took good care of him. They had two houses and an apartment, four cars and his mother would go shopping all over the world. He always had money, phones and clothes. He got in on the hash because it excited him and it made him look like a tough guy, which he was desperate to become. We knew each other since we were children, from English classes at school. He cozied up to me because I let him copy my homework and I helped him pass his tests. In a way Costea was a fraud both in school and in the streets, but it's always these ones who try hardest.

I went to school now. Millions of horrible thoughts flooded my brain, setting me on the verge of a breakdown. I felt it coming. I couldn't concentrate. Facing Ileana, who the head teacher sat me next to in class, I lost it, I think visibly. She looked beautiful and she smiled at me when I came in. "Where have you been? Come on, sit down quickly before the teacher comes," she said.

I turned around and left the room just as the chemistry teacher came in. I went out of the building and ran through the ravine at the far end of the football field, under the bridge, across the filthy stream and walked down by the river where the stream merged. I had a place nobody knew

about by the river where builders would come to illegally dump rubble, and I could be alone there. I had a big plastic bottle of beer in my backpack and I sat down on the river's concrete bank behind a willow tree with it. It was full of rubbish. I tried to drink but it just wouldn't flow right. I poured the beer in the river and threw the empty bottle away. I can never drink properly when I'm upset. Drowning your sorrows is a myth. There's no escape. As I sat, all the years and events that lead up to that moment replayed themselves in my imagination with an urgency I could hardly contain. I might have been in tears, I couldn't tell.

My grandparents on my father's side brought me up until school age on their makeshift farm on the hills a few miles south from the mountains we now lived among. They were gentle people, both of them worked for the same paper processing factory their whole lives and together they built everything they had out of nothing. They were always in love even at seventy and they never argued in front of people. They brought me up with love of books and of nature. They used to take me with them during the summer to make hay and gather plums and apples. I would help my grandmother with the cows and the pigs and chickens, and sometimes I would help my grandad weld and do his carpentry. He was a skilled iron worker and electrician and he dabbled with some ability in wood. People from the village, or rather the communes of villages in the area, would ask him to build wrought iron fences for them and weld their cars and their broken tools. He also built electrical systems for houses and heavy machinery and he had a sideline business out of this apart from the usual job at the factory. The old man was never empty handed and he was never loitering. He always tinkered with something and when he sat down at the television or to listen to the radio he mumbled stories to you as if to emphasise the gravity of what came out of the speakers. Only when football was on he was still and silent. He watched the game mesmerised, or listened carefully to the commentary on the radio with his eyes half shut.

My grandma made a room for me at the back of their house which she filled with books, toys and good food and in the winter she used to let me stay there at my own leisure for days on end without bothering me except to ask if I needed something. I liked being alone, away from my belligerent parents. I used to devour the books of Alexandre Dumas and Homer in that room, without a care in the world. The years I spent there were heaven for me, a fine start. Grandma made copious amounts of chicken soup, gingerbread and stew and she lined up five or six jars of chutneys on the table when she knew I was coming in. She always gave me money and the old man always warned me to spend it wisely. They inspired in me a curiosity about the world and a thirst to be part of it.

My vices started to develop after my parents took me back in when I had to go to school. In the first couple of years the teachers said I had sharp communication skills and precocious general

knowledge. They said I was observant and eloquent. In my third year they even read out an essay I wrote about how NATO bombed Kosovo. They made a big deal out of the essay, like it meant something. I started to dream of Harvard and Princeton, of conversations about literature in smoke-filled rooms and of blonde women in red dresses reading my writing back to me out of *The Atlantic Monthly* in sensual voices.

Somewhere since I lost this path. Father had a keen gambling habit that mixed badly with his alcoholism. Not having enough money to attend casinos, he played barbut and poker in garages run by local gangsters. I heard rumours he was also caught cheating and banned from licensed establishments. Being off his face most of the time when rolling the dice at barbut, he lost a lot of money very quickly and soon became indebted to lenders, who charged him ten percent interest a week, tacked onto the principal if unpaid. Which meant that for an initial 500 euro owed he got charged 50 euro a week, which then became 550 euro, on which he got charged 55 euro the next week and so on. It soon spun into the thousands and we started to get visits from fat men with leather jackets and big rings around their fat fingers and thick gold chains around necks which were thicker than their bald heads, harassing my mother for money, saying they'd break Pa's legs. This made mother's hysterics worse. She had thought she married a young engineer with a bright future, from a good family, and wasn't happy when she found out the truth. She spent the first twelve years of her marriage, corresponding roughly to the first ten of my life, trying to make Pa into the respectable man she thought he was, and constantly failed. It cost her her wits and her nerves. She divorced him when I was thirteen but she didn't have the heart to throw him out the second time after he returned in a few months, so they kept living together and kept arguing ever more viciously. Pa got worse and worse over the years and somehow kept finding new depths and crevices to stoop to. He kept drinking and gambling and eventually lost his job, and the three jobs after that. While unemployed most of the money came from Ma's job and the grandparents. He spent three years in unemployment, drinking with his mistress at home while I was at school and Ma at work. She was a booze-swollen brunette about the same age as him, which is to say about forty, whom I didn't know. I often found them together when I returned from school and Ma knew although I didn't say anything, he threatened to kill me if I did, and this made everything even more tense.

I started looking for excuses to spend more time outside the house and that's when I got a taste for the streets, I think. Hanging out with the older guys in my neighbourhood gave me confidence that I could survive by myself and I felt like I belonged with them. That was a few years ago and by now it all felt natural. The guys looked at me like a geek with a dark bend, not entirely accepting my talking, reading and music tastes. They didn't read at all and the fact that I read foreign books, used multisyllabic words and listened to instrumental music was a bit too eccentric

of me for them to fully tolerate. They gave me a hard time for it, calling me Cockeye, Blind Bat and Harry Potter and sending me out on beer runs more often than the others, but overall, through a mix of pity and self-interest they accepted my hovering around them, which was all I wanted, having no other place to go after I became ashamed of sleeping in the old room at my grandparents' after the divorce. They knew I was estranged but by then I think so were they. The uncertainty in my family made grandpa put some distance between us, and he was right to. I was still welcome to visit and they still gave me money, but it just wasn't the same. After a few hours of me staying there they became anxious and asked how I'd get home. The neighbourhood became my home after that and it was a happy home in its own right for a while, especially after Twitchy befriended me.

It was late now by the river, school was long out, and Ma was due to come back from work. I wanted to be home when she did, so I could talk to her first before they started arguing.

Ma was already home when I arrived. It was later than I thought.

"Where were you? I tried calling but your phone is shut," she said.

"Sorry, Ma, the phone's gone. I've lost it, I don't know where."

She looked at me in disbelief.

"That's unlike you. I hope you're not lying. You haven't sold it for drugs money have you?"

"No, mum, I swear. I've lost it. I had it this morning but now it's gone. That's why I'm late home, I've been looking for it on the football pitch at school. I spent some time there and it might have slipped out of my pocket," I lied candidly.

"OK. I don't know how we'll afford to get you a new phone but we'll talk about that later. You're probably better off without it anyway. I spoke to Danny's mum today. I met her at the shop and she said the police are listening to everyone's phones now. I didn't have the courage to ask about her son but she said he was in trouble and that the police were trying to stitch him up with something."

"Yes, Ma, he didn't do anything. I don't know what they want," I clinged.

"Come on, boy, don't play me like that. She was embarrassed to admit her son is a drug addict and a drug dealer, that's the truth. The police don't stitch young boys up with drugs. I hope to God you're clean. Now go do your homework."

"OK, Ma. Can I borrow your phone first?"

She passed it to me and I rang Florin, Danny's best friend.

"Hey man, do you know anything about Danny?"

"They're putting him in arrest pending trial next week. He's in it bad, man. Where were you when it happened?" He asked suspiciously.

"I was in school man, I didn't know anything about that. Did you speak to him?" I asked.

“I spoke to his brother. He said he's not snitching. He'll do the time if he has to but he's not taking anyone with him. That means you, too, George. He's protecting you. You should come with me next week to visit him.”

“Oh, yeah, man, for sure. Thanks. Thanks a lot. Tell his brother thanks and whatever he needs, yea?” I said clumsily.

“Why don't you talk to him? Do the right thing, George. Call his brother yourself.”

“Yea, I will man, Thanks. I have to go now. Bye bye.” I said, guiltily.

Fucking Florin, what a self-righteous prick. What does he know? Thank God Danny has my back though. Not that they could have anything on me anyway since I was not at their sting but it looks like I might not even be brought in for questioning after all.

The week passed in a tense limbo and nothing happened. I got off scot-free.

I kept to myself and went to school, quietly, meekly, trying to forget about everything. Pretend it didn't exist. I couldn't bring myself to visit Danny when Florin went. Florin called and I said to him I would go the following week because I had a doctor's appointment. Danny ended up doing two years in prison pending trial, then getting acquitted and then released -- because the drugs laws changed in the meanwhile under pressure from the European Union. Two years in maximum security with murderers and rapists for nothing. No criminal record. The state simply apologised for the inconvenience. Danny had to go back to high school where he left off – but by then everyone else would be long gone. I hadn't visited him once in these two years. Didn't have the strength to look him in the eye in that cage knowing it could have just as easily been me in there. Couldn't and that's it. When he got out and I saw him years later we didn't talk about it. We drank and laughed like nothing happened and when we parted he asked me to borrow some money. I gave him most of what I had on me, not everything though, and I never asked for it back.

Neither did he ever offer to return it.

II

After the arrests our town took a long pause from its quiet life to stand still in drooling contemplation at the narcotics drama unfurling in my neighbourhood. In two weeks it became the only news, having spread from market stall gossip to the front pages of the local papers and 'other news' reports in five o'clock news bulletins on national stations. Moral outrage took over my school – teachers took breaks from lessons to wade off on tangents about the horror of drugs and crime, to emphasize to us students, as if there were television cameras in the very room, how happy they were that the evil pushers got caught and how surprised they were that Danny, one of their very own students, fell prey to the scourge of addiction and joined the gang. None of the teachers said anything even remotely sympathetic to him, they all acted like he was a monster, a wolf in sheep's clothing who we should be thankful to have gotten rid of.

“I knew there was something wrong with that boy. He was never one of mine but I saw him in the hallways peeving at the girls in my class. He was probably on drugs all the time. A police told my husband he was selling that poison in the school, can you believe it? Thank God they finally caught him. I hope that you weren't taking the stuff too, George. It'd kill your mother,” Ms Coinescu said to me during one of our private lessons. “Oh no, ma'am, I would never.” I assured her. She was known as Ms Coinescu despite her marriage. I presume this was because everyone just assumed she was too frigid to have sex with her husband and so remained, for all intents and purposes, a miss.

Ileana comforted me after the lessons. We made a habit of slipping away in the park together, which is why I stopped skipping them. They would have been almost bearable, were it not for the lecturing that recently came on top of the incomprehensible hieroglyphs of the subject matter itself. Regardless of that, it was worth gritting my teeth and nodding along while the time passed and I'd be alone with Ileana again. She took my hand for a brief moment as we went inside the park at sunset.

“I know you were close with the boys who went away. This must be very hard on you, to hear Ms Coinescu talking about Danny like that. He wasn't that bad. I knew him a little bit and he seemed fine. You should visit him, he doesn't belong in jail. He needs his friends to stick by him now,” she said.

“You’re right. He’s a decent guy who just wanted a piece of the action. It’s not like weed kills anyone. It’s not even a drug, really. Just gets you a bit dizzy, like a strong cup of tea. I don’t know what the fuss is about.” I said, deflecting.

“Yes, right, Mr Expert. Like you would know what weed is. Don’t buff yourself up to me, please,” she giggled. “My cousins used to grow it and smoke it. It’s a terrible drug and it smells very bad. They would get so out of themselves they’d cough and slur their words and their eyes would go all red. It’s definitely not tea as you say. It makes you addicted,” she said, authoritatively.

We walked along and talked some more. We discussed music and film and our little, formerly boring town and how big and beautiful the world must be compared to it. I looked at her clear, brown eyes and at her auburn hair waving in the wind and didn’t say much apart from that for fear it’d be the wrong thing. After an hour or two she would take the train home and I the minibus to my parents’ flat. Sometimes she would let me kiss her goodbye on the lips, sometimes just on the cheek. But the kisses became a normal occurrence between us, when we were alone, and that I saw as the most important thing. The first time I kissed her she burst in laughter, embarrassing me red, but after that she even kissed me herself sometimes and she sometimes used her tongue too, if it was dark. In retrospect I think she laughed that one time because she liked it.

A few weekends later I hitchhiked to the village where Costea was hiding. Andreea managed not to incriminate herself and was locked up in a women’s prison for only thirty days. Alex gave everything up, including the threat the thugs had made to his mother and was now in protective custody with a special branch of police in Bucharest, while Twitchy and Danny were transferred to the same prison, a vile, tight security penitentiary in the middle of the plain 70 miles from our town, where the Communists used to take people who spoke against them.

Twitchy was sure to be convicted, and Danny was still waiting his turn. Alex was sure to give testimony against Twitchy in open court.

“That fucking ratbastard Alex should be run over by a car. I’ll fucking do it myself when this all blows over, only it’ll be much too late to do any good. The cunt has started using heroin, I hear. He injects it in his arms and toes right under the coppers’ noses and the dumb turkeys don’t notice a thing,” said Costea, leaning against the fence at the country house where he was hiding.

I said nothing.

“You know there are prisoners in jail for life who turn homo and put steel balls down their dicks, between the skin and the meat? They cut the ears off of live rats with blades and cut little slits

on their dicks and tuck and bandage the ears carefully in there. And after a while the ears just catch on, they grow on their dicks and they stay there, perking up when the bastards get hard,” he said.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I said. “That’s mad.”

“No, no. It’s true. Career rapists. Paedophiles. Murderers. Their dicks look like gnarled tree branches with wings. The rat ears perk up on them – two, three pairs on the dick – when they get hard. And they rape young prisoners like Danny with those things,” he said.

“No fucking way. You are a sick bastard, man. Get the fuck out of here,” I said. I felt nauseous and dizzy. I looked at Costea’s serene, livid face as he smirked back at me with satisfaction for having obtained the reaction he sought, knowing perfectly well that I would not fail to deliver it.

He had an intricate, tribal-like model goatee made out of the short stubble that grew on the lower part of his face. The obese, sadistic bastard. There needed to be as much distance between us as possible, it dawned on me.

“Nice goatee, by the way,” I said, diverging.

“Oh, thank, you,” he answered with genuine flattery, adding: “And listen -- in Danny's cell there's the sweetest old man. You'd never think he would hurt a fly, all he does is sleep and eat all day. He barely talks to anyone and when he does he only whispers, like. But he's there for life. He found his wife cheating with his best friend in his own house and his own bed when he came back from work. He took an axe and chopped their heads off, then he chopped off the heads of their two six year-old kids and his mother-in-law's head came off too. They were all living together in a big house. When the police came alerted by the neighbours who heard screams, they found him sitting with all the corpses all at the dinner table, and he was at the head of the table. He changed their heads between them, like, so everyone had someone else's head on when police came. The cops had to figure out which head belonged to which body.”

“Fuck you,” I said, revolted. “You are making this up you sick animal.”

“Am I? Why don’t you go down there and find out? Don’t you have the stomach for it?” he asked, arrogantly, while cleaning up his nails with a pocket knife. He was wearing a white and gold Nike track suit and brand new trainers. I looked him up and down so as to remember him. I pretended vaguely that I had forgotten to do something important, said an awkward goodbye and left without giving a clear excuse. When pressed to lie I always preferred to keep it vague.

“Go home, George. You were never one of us,” Costea said with contempt as I turned away. I said nothing and didn’t look back at him. I knew he knew I lied in order to leave earlier than promised but I didn’t care. I never wanted to see him and his fat, cruel face again and if lying helped me to achieve this simple goal then I was happy to be a liar.

But my neighbourhood there is no possible way of avoiding these life-draining idiots. They latch onto you like malignant lichens and before you know it you have grown old with these so-called friends, always keeping you down, always shattering everything you plan and hope for, and always, without failure, making you as miserable and mean as they are. And you do the same to the young ones, and so this curse gets passed on.

He was a good kid, poor darling, but I’m afraid he fell in with a bad crowd, the cop, or the warden, or the doctor or teacher or bereaved mother or social worker would inevitably say. Good kid? We’ll see.

I went back to the road and waved cars to get home. A timber lorry stopped and picked me up, to take me South through the mountains on a winding single carriageway. The lorry was laden with about ten tons of raw pine timber and the scent that followed it took me back in time. That smell of freshly cut pine, acidic and poignant, is unmistakable and unforgettable, like gasoline. I had loved it and come to loathe it like I loved and came to loathe these very mountains. These rich, pine-covered mountains. A diligent man could make a fortune working these mountains for timber. The smell took me back to my uncle and again to my boyhood at my granpa’s house. It was how stability, wealth and family unity smelt to me. When I was about thirteen or fourteen my uncle, who lived near my grandparents, started a small timber factory on the bank of a river just between the forest and the main road, this same road I was on now but a hundred miles further South. It was a perfect spot for a small timber factory with two cutters working simultaneously. My uncle was so successful at first that he had to hire men to work shifts around the clock. Orders were pouring in all the time and he made a lot of money out of that timber and those pines and those mountains.

He gave me my first job. I would wake up at five in the morning all fired up and I would go down to the plant with him and granpa, driving in their blue car. It was never entirely clear to me who that car belonged to and they would often argue who deserved it best, but they always shared it, the two of them. I’d feed the dogs, shovel sawdust and clean up the yard for the new logs that kept coming and coming. Big, loud trucks carrying two, three dozen newly felled pines came to our place and gave us the wood to make timber for people’s houses. I’d make tea for the men and I would oil and fuel up the chainsaws, and shovel the sawdust all the time. In the afternoons I would

make pallets, about twenty or thirty pallets every day with a hammer and nails, which went to a warehouse nearby. I'd get paid 20 lei a day, which was nothing to sneeze at back then, plus I got a two-hour break at lunchtime for a nap and a meal. It takes some getting used to, sleeping with coarse sawdust in your underwear and your shoes but eventually if you're tired enough you can sleep any which way. At the end the month, my granpa and uncle would pay me extra – just about doubling my whole salary between them – for being “a very hardworking boy”. I'd take my meals with the men and they'd tease me for being young and soft.

“When will you be big enough to lift a whole four-metre trunk on your own like Dan here does, eh?” My uncle would ask and ruffle my hair. “Good kid,” he'd say. “Have some more food.”

Dan was the hero of the nine-man operation. He was about 28 and he had large army tattoos on his arms and he wore a thick, brown leather belt around his waist, like weight-lifters. He would handle massive moving logs and use chainsaws or axes with an ease that was a marvel to behold. He was a virtuoso with the chainsaw, like some people are with the violin. Wood was to Dan what dough was to a master baker. He was a natural mountain man, drinking a litre of moonshine a day and never getting drunk, and lifting twenty or thirty 150-kilo logs clear off the ground one after the other and never getting tired. He had a moustache which he groomed on his breaks and his wife and daughter would always visit him at work on the way back from the little girl's school.

“Be careful, ladies, this is dangerous ground,” he'd say and you could see the two of them pert up knowing Dan was keeping watch.

Of course, nobody wore any helmets or protection gear and everyone had a small plastic glass of moonshine close to hand at all times. Filling these up as often as possible was my task. Safety measures like hard hats or being sober were unheard of in those parts, but nobody cared. I'd take my nap on a pile of timbers at the back of the yard by the river where I could hear the water pouring and then I'd work through the afternoon until nightfall. It was a glorious time, spending long summer days with my grandfather and uncle at their small timber plant and coming home to my granma's cooking exhausted and pleased with myself. Hard work at what we felt was the wealth of our family made us happy.

Four years later Romania joined the European Union and the West was hungry for our timber, so many of the orders went to export. No more export taxes. And the money made my uncle a little too ambitious.

“I built a second house and bought two cars thanks to those German buyers. So long as the price is good and the order reaches them on time they don't ask any questions,” he would say.

He would constantly make grand expansion plans out loud, driving his wife up the wall. He envisaged a future where he learned German to better deal with his buyers, and lead the largest, most profitable timber export business in the country. He'd buy his own lorries and hire his own lumber jacks, he would say. Unfortunately, a few years after these outbursts, he had to scale down because of increased competition and higher prices for the logs. The woodskeeper who he worked with got fired for misconduct and corruption and the new guy was a lot more thorough counting the logs that came to my uncle's yard. Instead of expanding, it became a struggle to keep up, but it still earned a decent living, albeit without the luxuries of foreign holidays and the perk of unlimited credit from the bank, which he enjoyed due to a 24-hour business that had orders going months ahead. The shop now kept normal hours and my uncle had to think twice before buying his son the latest tablet computer. Work eventually dried up, his wife left him, and so did Dan, who went to work for a rival who did manage to get cozy with the authorities. The shop closed.

The lorry left me on the ring road, so I took a shortcut to the city centre. Small as my town was, it had the advantage of being conducive to walking. You took public transport only in a rush and drove only on Sundays or in bad weather. In the city centre I stopped at a terrace for a pint of beer, a cigarette and a glass of cognac on the side. I picked up the local newspaper.

The front-page title, writ large, said: "Jailed local is head of international drug gang." I took a hearty swig and read on: "A trans-national police operation has broken up a drugs trafficking gang that operated in Romania, Spain and Morocco. Arrests were made in all three countries and police sources reveal exclusively to the Courier that ION BRAD aka 'Twitchy,' a man local to our district and recently imprisoned in this drugs case involving teenaged children, was the head of the mob. One of his henchmen whom we can't name for legal reasons, but who we can confirm is a local who migrated abroad, has been arrested by Moroccan police when he attempted to smuggle 50 kg of pure cannabis resin out of Tangiers and into Spain. He is now under arrest pending trial in Madrid, our sources have revealed. Next of kin have been informed by the Embassy. A third acolyte who is a teenaged student at the local collegium has been apprehended and placed in protective custody at an undisclosed location, with officers hoping he would turn state's evidence. Police refuse to disclose at this stage whether the recently-captured cannabis resin in Tangiers was destined for our streets, but in light of the case that shook our town, where children were being sold drugs by the same ION BRAD and his fellow criminals, the Courier feels safe in inferring that they were. The Mountain Courier will continue coverage as the case develops."

News to me. I finished the cognac and went straight for the beer. It felt cold and it calmed me down, pulverizing the thoughts I had about the article. So then Mihai must be the one in prison

in Tangiers. I was relatively close to him before he left for Spain. I suppose they aren't naming him because he also promised to help the investigation. He used to come to my flat for coffee when my parents were at work. He used to say that he liked the music I had. Once he borrowed a pair of tennis shoes from me which he never returned. The drink disappeared down my throat as if I had poured it in hot sand. I wanted more -- I was on the verge. I either went on a binge right there, drinking myself stupid on a schoolnight, or I went home that very moment. I checked my pockets and remembered I had some diazepam with me. I took two. They wouldn't go down but coerced with a glass of water from the bar.

I walked to the minibus and fifteen minutes later I was in my bedroom, surrounded by the old furniture my grandparents gave my parents when they married. I laid on my bed and played the whole Ready to Die album by The Notorious B.I.G. on my Philips stereo. It took me almost a year to convince my parents to buy that stereo when I was 16 and when they finally did they put it under the Christmas tree, as if I was a small child. We neighbourhood boys identified with these rappers, or claimed we did. Most of my friends couldn't understand a word of English but they bobbed their heads and focused on the music anyway. It made them look tough. We felt the same way the rappers said they did on their songs. Their music resonated. The message was in the beat, the rhythm and the tone. We were cut from the same cloth as Notorious B.I.G., we thought, and skin colour be damned. How shallow and stupid we were. None of us ever saw a real gun, let alone use one. Let alone shoot a person with it. It just wasn't possible in Romania back then, for us anyway. Some guys had air rifles and air guns – mockup Glock and Berrettas which they used to shoot feral dogs and cats in the neighbourhood when they got drunk, but the only time any of us saw a gun in reality was in a museum, or worn by police.

Into the fourth song – Machine Gun Funk – I started to feel doopey. Diazepam makes you feel flaky and loopy, calm and serene but falsely so because it muddles your brain, especially if combined with drink, and it makes your eyelids fall heavy. You sit there in sedation with your eyes closed for a few hours and when it wears off you feel for a while like you haven't slept in two days, which is a different kind of high in itself, a sort of bonus. Genuine calm – this I remembered from my childhood – filled you with energy and force. It made you ready to take on the world with a smile and inspired you to fear nothing and nobody. It didn't make you dozy. But it wasn't calm I was after. What I wanted was to stop thinking, fullstop.

I woke up in the night and felt anxious. I put on the TV on mute, wrote Ileana a message and then masturbated. She wrote one right back. She said she was fine, thanked me for thinking of her. How kind she was. She told me to look after myself and she wished me good luck in Bucharest. I

thanked her for reminding me I had to go to Bucharest. My train, in fact, was leaving in two hours. Mother left 100 lei on the table.

The British Council, a sort of cultural arm of the British government in foreign countries, together with Cambridge University, had an English course in Bucharest every other weekend and my mother signed me up. You studied English hard, the way they did it in England, and after a year and a gruelling six-hour exam you were given a lifetime degree from this prestigious organisation, acknowledging you had a good grasp on English. Lots of grammar, composition and speaking were required. They graded the papers in England, we were told, although I was doubtful about that. And it was expensive. I knew my mother struggled to make the payments and I was grateful she did, so I caught that train. It was the only thing I ever looked forward to, visiting the capital more than studying, but still. I wasn't altogether bad at it. I understood the inflexions, the sound of it. The look of the words written down. I used to translate random fragments of stuff I overheard into English in my head to see if they revealed a new meaning that way. Often you needed a full page in Romanian for two or three paragraphs in English. This language was good at metaphors and conveying emotions objectively. It was a big language – millions of words you could use – the possibility of saying something in thousands of ever so slightly different ways, and that can make it very precise if used correctly. It was the language of the intelligent and the businesslike. The ones who knew what life and the world really were, we were told. The ones who were their own masters. The empty train left the station in no particular hurry. I opened the books and studied like my life depended on it. Watching the bleak scenery of disused factories and neglected land flowing past me felt comfortable. Instead of a ticket I gave the conductor a ten lei bill, half of what it normally cost. The general consensus was that the state was an alien who abused us, so we abused it back when we could. This was acceptable and widespread. People didn't see the implications until a few years later when the country's railways fell apart financially and physically and had to be sold off to vulture funds. Final English and the Bac not long after. I had discovered English on Cartoon Network broadcasting without subtitles, when I was in kindergarten. American was easier than British to pronounce. In second grade I started winning local and regional competitions in basic English spelling and grammar. Then they gave me half free writing half grammar. It was good for my social life. Free transport, free lodging, free food on competition day. After coming back with a prize the girls in my school actually paid attention when I spoke; they thought I was no two-bit corner boy and gave me warm glances sometimes, and teachers would be a little more tolerant of my truancy. I would find it easier to pass chemistry and physics because I had just got a First Prize in English

Olympiads. The school got extra funds from the local authority every time some student got lucky in a competition. Win win.

I took in the hills, plains, passing towns and villages, then more derelict industry, tarmac and dirt roads, immense apartment blocks in dark grey and eventually I saw the big old train station in Bucharest with eyes that knew I shan't be making this journey too often yet. There was indeed such a thing as happy melancholy. This was my last British Council course in Bucharest before the exam. Ileana wished me luck. It was astonishing that she remembered details about my life nobody else did. At Gara de Nord, I called the family friend where I usually stayed, to tell him I was coming then got on the metro.

The owner of the apartment in Drumul Taberei where I would spend the night was my father's friend from the navy. He had a distracted daughter who took me out and showed me around when she had time and his wife would chain smoke and tell me about how she missed her life in the country.

“I really envy you, living there in the midst of nature,” I remembered her saying once.

Her husband didn't talk much himself. He was a constitutional law teacher at the Police Academy. When I asked him a while back if I should join the force he told me:

“Anything but this. I love your father and you too but not only I wouldn't help you get in the Academy, I would actively try to prevent you. Police in Romania is a horrible career choice. You get pushed around by everyone and the cases you do succeed to bring get bungled up beyond recognition by the corrupt judiciary. Most of the bad guys go free and in a few years you'll be disillusioned and start taking bribes. No, no. No way to live. Please forget about it. You're a smart kid, do something less depressing. I'm serious. Don't ask again.”

And there went my career in law enforcement. He might have been bluffing, but the simple fact that I gave up so easily showed I might have lacked the steely resolve needed for policework.

This time there was nobody home. They in a sixteen-storey concrete block like every other inhabitant of Bucharest. I found a note in the door. It read: “George: We are gone to a funeral in Bulgaria this weekend. Your mother called saying you might come on Saturday morning or Friday night. Please go to flat 97 and ask Ms Ionescu for the key. Use everything and good luck with the studies.”

I got the key and went in. I laid down on the sofa for a while then looked around for food and drink. I found nothing worth consuming so I went to a dirty fast food place downstairs. That too

was empty, apart from one man at the counter. Inside there I felt lonelier than upstairs and started to get anxious. I started thinking of Mariana, the only person I knew well enough to call out of the blue in Bucharest. She was a beautiful and libertine woman who used to live in my town until a year ago when she moved to her father's in Bucharest. We met when she was fourteen and I sixteen and we bonded over the divorces of our parents. She came to my house regularly after school, and sometimes when we couldn't have privacy because my father was unemployed and stayed home we would just go to the forest. It added to the excitement. Mariana often bought me cigarettes and I held her in my arms and listened to her talking about her life. Even with my regular crises of jealousy over her seeing other guys, guys I knew, we got on because I was sure I would never meet anyone quite like her. She knew this and tolerated my outbursts. We took each other's virginity. I suffered when she moved away. We spent hours talking on the internet but stopped it when I started seeing Ileana. I still lusted for Mariana and now I felt guilty for betraying Ileana's trust by going to see her. The beef shreds and fries got cold and the liquid fat turned solid yellow on my plate. I threw it in the bin, and, taking offence, the kebab man came up to me and said I had to leave if I wasn't eating anything. I defended myself saying I just had some kebab, but to no avail.

“You're not having anything now, are you? My shop isn't a park. You eat then you leave.”

I went back up to the empty flat. The night was still too young. Eventually the anxiety got the better of me and I picked up the phone. Mariana lived in a loft in the clean and tidy Tineretului neighbourhood with her father. She was 17 now but her father was never around and she always had boys over. I rang the buzzer and she let me up with a soft “come on” on the intercom. No emotion detectable in her voice. I went upstairs and she greeted me in a thin white kimono and high-heeled shoes. I could see she wore no bra under the kimono. She had ruby earrings in her ears, gold bracelets on her wrists and gold rings on her fingers, as well as a diamond in her nose. She had makeup on and her hair was done. She had long black hair but now it seemed shorter because it had curls. Her skin glowed with cream and perfume. She invited me to her room. How she strived to look older and more sexual made her a bit scary, like something had hardened in her.

There was a large bed with purple velvet covers in the middle, red curtains and a red Turkish lampshade. She played Indian and Turkish music on the big speakers connected to her iPod and she burnt candles and incense. Heavy curtains kept it dark. The television was on muted news. She smiled.

“Such a long time, George. I have missed you. How have you been? And who is this new girl I hear about, Ileana? I'm so happy to see you.”

“Well, you always knew what I was up to. Thank you. I am well, considering the circumstances. Things could have definitely been much worse. I am in the city for my English classes tomorrow and I found myself feeling a bit lonely, you know? Ileana is a great girl from my class. We have been seeing each other recently. I think she really might be the one for me. How have you been?”

“Don't worry about her now. She doesn't have to know about us. I understand why you came, and I am happy you did. I am fine, I am thinking to go to work in the private sector. I haven't been to school too much lately. It's not for me I don't think. I've been travelling some with friends of my dad. I will see. Life is a wonderful thing, full of surprises, isn't it?”

“I guess it is.” I said.

After that she poured me a stiff glass of vodka from a bottle she kept in a cupboard and we didn't say much else. After I drank the vodka I had enough courage to leave. I kissed her on the cheek and ran down the stairs. I spent the night in the empty apartment and went to my class at the Piata Romana in the morning.

Between posh government offices, universities, boutiques and more polished apartment buildings that used to belong to the Communist nomenclatura, sits a small but perfectly restored period villa from the turn of the previous century, when our capital was at its shortlived democratic glory. As if uprooted from Baker Street in London and transplanted to the back of the Academy of Economic Science by Beefeaters in full dress, the two-storey British Council building in Bucharest, which also houses the consulate, stands out in its neatness and cleanliness from the arrested decay that dominates the character of the rest of the city's important buildings – all covered from roof to pavement in a patina similar to the green-gray oxide that grows on old brass. The Council building is newly varnished, its fence painted and its windowsills adorned with flowers for which somebody obviously cares habitually. There are no cigarette butts or sunflower seed husks in its garden and no stray dogs made a home in its front yard. Just the security gate gives away the official function of the place, otherwise you'd think some considerate, well-mannered capitalist type lived there. I got in using my library card. I didn't know if the guard was Romanian or English because he never talked and his face didn't betray his extraction.

Inside, Margaret, the English teacher, who actually came from somewhere England, wearing her hair in a nest and a cardigan over a florid shirt, greeted me.

“Good morning, George. Glad you could make it. We are still waiting for a few others.”

She had a perfect accent. I envied her and felt embarrassed at my own gauche twang. A few students were there already but class hadn't fully assembled. These groups were small and felt like I imagined after-school tutoring would feel in a reputable private school.

We did oral communication first, I told her about a movie I saw and a book I read, then we did conversation – we spoke of current affairs and history – and then we did writing exercises out of a book. We spent the final hour of the lesson discussing homework – a three-page essay we prepared for each lesson. Abstract, conceptual topics were preferred, which always invited demagoguery and broad-sided displays of ignorance from us students, all invariably too callow to be able to philosophise successfully on subjects such as 'walls' or 'clouds'. I used these topics as an excuse to tell some story that involved violence and human depravity, but they were never commended for the content. Four hours passed and Margaret never got personal. She did her job, I did mine, and we were on our ways. To this day, after spending eight hours a month with her, albeit along with five or six other students, I can't guarantee Margaret was her real name, and I didn't know her age, marital status, education or any other personal detail, however general. I liked that; I thought it was good professional etiquette. We paid pretty serious money for this course, plus another lump sum for the exam, plus book-borrowing fees, so the least she could do was spare us the timewasting tactics lesser teachers applied. In next week's Cambridge test they would fly new examiners over from England, and she would be gone by then, she said, to avoid any perception of bias in the oral testing. This was our last meeting.

“I do hope you'll do well. I know you have it in you,” she said. I was touched.

I hitch-hiked back to save money. It was also a way to meet people that you otherwise would never meet. Or never want to meet, maybe. There was no shortage of bored drivers on the main road out of Bucharest, looking for a chat and some coffee money.

A man driving back to his family after a fishing trip stopped and picked me up. He was going straight to Brasov in his red Volkswagen Sharan carrier. He moaned about new regulations around fishing.

“I've been fishing my whole life and this is unheard of. Brussels wants us to count every fish we get and let go of the young ones. They want us to apply for permits under threat of prison and then, if we have an especially good day, pay extra for surplus fish. It's ridiculous and it makes the whole exercise pointless, for anyone trying to feed their family. The money I'm spending on bureaucracy, petrol and food to catch the fish, I'd be saving a lot if I just went to the market. What a farce, eh? Now I just do it for sport, you know? Get away from the wife for a while. It does me

good. I used to feed the whole block back in the day with my fish, though. People saved their appetites for my return when they knew I went fishing. That's gone now," he said.

"But if everyone took as much fish back home as they could catch there would be none left in the lake or the river, would there?" I ventured.

"Nonsense, kid. What do you know. Last time trout swam up these rivers forty years ago, before the industrialisation. What were you then, eh? Come on, give me a break, eh?"

"Sorry," I said.

"OK." He said, visibly upset. I had hit a nerve with him. For fear of being dumped on the side of the road somewhere I kept it silent the rest of the way. The expressway was dotted with roadkill, mostly stray dogs. I had a German shepherd once, at my grandma's. Bobby. He was just eight months when he got hit by a speeding lorry. Now that the roads were good everyone broke the speed limit.

Before the Union took us in, public services in the country were only there to help the rich steal more. You paid taxes and nothing came back. Roads were full of potholes, which of course the rulers never noticed in their Jeeps. Rubbish collection in cities was so rare you never knew it happened. There were permanently settled, foul smelling, 2, 3-metre high mounds of garbage on every other corner in peripheral neighbourhoods. Another dog I knew died once when I was a kid. A stray, Ham, we called it. It died there between the blocks and there it stayed, rotting, for months until it disintegrated. First it bloated, then the foul flesh broke up and the worms took over. Then the fur and meat were gone and all that was left were the bones. Eventually somebody took away the skeleton but for a long time it just stayed there stinking and spreading disease and nobody moved a finger. We had to take detours because of the smell, avoiding the whole area for fear of germs. People living there couldn't open their windows. They complained to the local council every day, but nobody did anything. They just let it stay there. Ham. Ham became the symbol of hate we had for our rulers. We chose them by voting lately after 50 years of totalitarian rule and we hated them when they ignored us and treated us like they treated Ham. The voting made the hate more potent, because it involved an element of complicity and betrayal.

Now we have benches in the park and running water and gas. We are building more motorways all the time and the streets in some places look better than they ever did. With the European Union ruling us now, we went back to not voting, and therefore not having a reason to feel complicit or betrayed. The simple truth we knew was that our own rulers were low lives and

that our country happened to always, without interruption, be under some form of foreign domination, since the Roman Empire. You never knew who ruled over you from Belgium and France, but you didn't know either who ruled you from Rome, or Istanbul, or Vienna, or Moscow. So what difference did it make? In reality it was either Russia or Turkey, or the West with the EU and the Americans, but at least these ones invested a lot in our country, not just took money out. We stood no chance on our own and we never did. How the Europeans decided to take us in was anyone's guess – of course our politicians tried to put themselves at the centre of it – “we negotiated it” – and labour unions did the same -- “it's the cheap qualified workforce they're after” – as did academics – “brain drain” – conspiracy theorists “new world order” and businessmen, “more competition from the multinationals” – but whatever the case, we behaved as though we were in to stay. We were sure of it. The reasons were probably all of the above, after all it couldn't have been pure charity, could it, but who cared?

From the patchy history I knew, this had to be the only good thing to have happened to Romania in the past 200 years, bar the toppling of communism which was a lot more of a mixed bag, since so many people died and the same communists who we toppled ended up running things after the revolution under a new name. The opportunities seemed to be endless, and everyone was now going abroad as if it was something normal.

The following Monday I skipped the first lesson and went straight to the bar for coffee. Silvan, a classmate of mine with whom I was friends, was there with a few others truants playing cards, smoking and drinking. Pulling up a chair, I sat at their table. Their cheer rubbed off on me. Before long I felt like it wasn't all as gloomy as it seemed, and we went back to school. Silvan was making plans to buy a car.

“If I pass my driving test this Wednesday, my mum promised she'd get me a used car to commute with,” he said.

Silvan lived nearby and the 'commute' he spoke of was a half-hour bus trip, but I refrained from voicing this observation.

“I will drive that bastard car to my cousin's in Cluj and I want to take you with me. Whaddaya say?” He burst.

Cluj was 200 miles away.

“I don't know yet. Don't know about the money. The roads upcountry are quite dangerous for a beginner like you. When are you planning this trip?” I asked.

“In a week’s time. Don't worry about money, we'll stay at my cousin's and petrol is on mother. You bring something to eat and drink. And bring some of your granpa's moonshine, eh?”

“Well, my Cambridge English test is this week, too. On Saturday. I get results next month but I guess just being rid of it is worth celebrating. We'll talk then. Thanks for asking me.”

“Sure thing, chief. We'll make a riot.” He liked to call people chief, and boss, or sometimes more unusual things like captain or bandit. Silvan did not view life as an overly serious affair.

The Baccalaureate was coming up in two weeks as well, I remembered, but again, I abstained from reminding Silvan of it.

“We can try. See you,” I said. And we both went to our desks.

Ileana was missing. I wrote her a text asking if she was alright and saying I was sorry I didn't visit over the weekend. She replied in ten minutes saying she was a bit ill but there was nothing to worry about. She would be back in class soon. She wished me luck again. I thanked her and wrote that I would like to come see her. She said she was not fit to see me because her mother had her in blankets, and the medicine made her a bad companion. I made a mental note to buy her some sort of memento from Bucharest. The Romanian language teacher entered. She was also our head teacher and a shrill-voiced, short and fat old woman with a sanguine personality. She would pepper her speech with exclamations – “ooh! Noooo!” - she would say unprompted in the middle of a lecture about Romantic poets. But at least she commanded attention.

“Hello there my dear boys and girls!” She yelled the second she came through the door. She sat down, then sat right back up again.

“What a beautiful day!” She said above her normal tone. Everything seemed loud coming from her.

“Anyone missing? Ooooooh! Ileanaaaa! What's with her?”

“I spoke to her a few minutes ago on the phone, Madam. She's a bit under the weather. She will be in on Monday,” a girl replied.

“Too bad! Good thing Mr Palan is here, though!” She fixated me.

“You don't see him too much around our institution! He likes other, more poorly-lit institutions a bit up the road! Hahaaa! Don't you, George?!”

I wanted to duck under my desk and stay there.

“I don't know, ma'am.” I replied sheepishly. The class burst in belly laughter.

“Well, today, before we get on with literature, I will use a few minutes to tell you about this offer our distinguished College received in the post, all the way from the Kingdom of Denmark, in Scandinavia, by the North Pole. Imagine that now, children. The Danes have places in a university of theirs for students from all countries in the European Union, provided the students have excellent English. All their classes are in English and the tuition will all be free of charge!” She paused and continued fixating me but I said nothing.

“George. You have excellent English. Tell me, have you thought about university?”

“Ma'am, I don't know. You're really putting me on the spot here. Is this how these things are done? Should one be solicited to apply to university or should the application be borne of one's free will?”

“My God, George! Don't get philosophical now! Why are you so shy! It's a genuine offer from one of the world's most developed countries. Now we are a European Union country too and these are our partners. Romania joined the Union last year. You should be proud I thought of you! Come on, see me after. I have all the papers. Don't you dream of leaving this room before having spoken with me.”

“Yes, Madam.” I said.

Denmark was a rich, small monarchy. I knew that much. They had 5 million or so people who produced twice more things every year than our country of 20 million. Then again, they never had dictatorships or the Ottoman, Tsarist, Austro-Hungarian, or Roman Empire persecuting them. Most importantly however, it was very, very far from here, which was their clearest advantage. I went to see the teacher after class.

“George, are you upset with me for pulling your leg earlier?” She asked.

“No ma'am, I sure aren't. Do I seem like I am?”

“You do, frankly, a little bit. Anyway, I know you'll forgive me. Here's the offer. I know this is genuine because it came in a very fancy envelope with all the stamps and letterheads, addresses and so on and Mrs Vesko, the English teacher to the other class, gave them a call and it all checked out. They genuinely seem interested in having Romanian students over, as part of their new programme of European diversity. All they want is good grades in the Baccalaureate and excellent

English. Now, you're the only one I can recommend for excellent English. It's up to you how you do in your Baccalaureate. Go it?"

"Yes ma'am. Thank you for this. I appreciate you looking after my interests. I will think about it very carefully."

"You do that, George. You can do us proud. Here are all the papers and application forms. You need to apply before the Baccalaureate, but their offer will be conditional on you getting above 80 percent of the score at that exam. It's all in these files. Think of it well and I hope you do it. You have potential, George, but this mountain air isn't good for your health. Do you understand what I'm hinting at? School is over and real life is starting. You don't want to end up like the other people we know, do you? This is a small town and word gets around. You have a good thing going with your English. Not many students I know are so good at it. Use it and make something of yourself."

I thought I was about to lose the power of continence.

"Yes ma'am. Thank you. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Here. Take these and read them well when you get home. Bye now."

"Bye, ma'am."

I knew Mrs Vesko and I trusted her enough to take for granted that if she said the university checked out, it probably did.

I went home and took advantage of the quiet to read the papers she gave me. They were for VIA University College, a newly-founded higher education outfit that seemed to have little to no standards in choosing who attended, apart from what the law imposed on it as a bare minimum. The choice of courses was equally puzzling. All of it was technical and managerial, and, as the lingo used in the descriptions and even in the course titles made clear, it was simply a nursery for corporate drones. A breeding ground for market research executives in various fields. I could see why natives would like to avoid a university that discouraged critical thinking and autonomous intellectual pursuit, instead indoctrinating people to perform specific tasks and obey their line supervisors, always in pursuit of cost effectiveness, financialization and growth of output. There were no humanities, or really scientific courses to speak of. Choices ranged from Marketing Management Honours Degree (two years), Value Chain Management (three years), Global Business Engineering (four and a half years) and Mechanical Engineering to Construction Technology and Automation Management.

On the sole basis of length of time spent away from home, I picked Global Business Engineering, although that name confused me, the 'business engineering' phrase made no sense and I hadn't the slightest what subjects I would study. I looked briefly on the internet but couldn't find the prospectus. Tuition was free, Denmark seemed a relatively liberal country, and that's all I needed. The following day I sent in my application.

I told the parents nothing, deciding that if they were in a bad mood or Dad came home drunk I would go out. I had my private English class anyway. Mother's mind was clearly somewhere else when she got in. We made small talk. She fed me in silence then she sat down on the sofa in the living room to watch TV. I sat with her for a while then went to my room, had a cigarette on the balcony and read a few pages from my copy of *Trainspotting*. Leith sounded not much different than my own neighbourhood, with their lowdows workers and domestic violence, but I couldn't understand what drove somebody to take all that heroin. I guess when someone wants to take away your livelihood the only way to prove you matter is to take as many drugs as you can. The only lifeline was state welfare. This didn't exist in Romania, and maybe that's why heroin never really caught on here. We simply couldn't afford it.

As I was smoking my Lucky Strikes on the balcony and reading my book dad came home and, in a sign he was generally sober he took off his shoes first and only then he went to the bathroom. But I resolved to not wait to see if he'll make noise or not. I packed my books and notebooks quickly, socks, thsirt, a shirt and my phone's charger in my backpack and I was ready. Why not make my excuses and go now? I felt in the mood to travel, so I told Ma that I was going out. The idea of going to Denmark to study for free was growing on me. I felt it in my gut. I would try to start a new life among the blondes.

It had been many years before that the foreign world started beckoning. In second or third grade an American girl from the Salvation Army was sent to teach us English. She came into the class and stood at the teacher's desk without even looking at us. Then she looked up and around, and as bad luck had it I was wearing abnormally large and thick glasses for my age, so I stood out and she said hello. I said hello back, turning red like a beetroot. I had never spoken to a foreigner. She asked me to stand up, in English. I did, therefore exhausting my understanding of the language. Then she asked me how old I was. In the most suave voice I could produce after a cough for tuning, I said,

"Yes, thank you." And I smiled, oozing charm. She laughed in my face, and at this cue so did everyone else.

When Ma heard of this, from me and other parents, she immediately called her friends and they recommended she send me to private lessons at Mrs Vesko's. Mrs Vesko was a voluptuous woman who had aged very well. She had big, rich lips, thick thighs, flaming red hair, was a chain smoker and her voice was low and a bit rugged, like slow jazz. Madam Vesko, with her Greek name and Latin allure, enjoyed teasing me and the other boys and we lived to please her. After my first lesson I was ravaged and decided to put all the time and energy I had into learning the language she wanted me to speak. She lived in a stately home up a hill, in the same house where the King's mistress used to live, according to lore. The King used to have a summer residence in our town before the communists threw him out years ago.

Madam Vesko sometimes had me in the same group as a bunch of insufferable rich kids, whose parents supplemented their lessons by lavishing gifts on the teachers, and sending them to Oxford summer school in England. She smoked during lessons and she seemed to wink at me. After a few months, my tongue really came loose, and the writing didn't go too bad either. We'd spend hours in her living room talking in English about films and books, history, music and travel. We'd talk London, Bath, Edinburgh, New York, and pay her and go home. Long after I stopped needing it I still went to her lessons, just because of her personal appeal. I kept winning awards in regional English competitions, such as they were, so she knew after about five years that there was not much left she could teach me sitting down. Still things somehow never went past talking. Rich kids came and went though her living room, but only I was steadfast. I couldn't let go. Between Ma and Dad arguing and spewing venom at each other and all the small betrayals from my friends, Madam Vesko was a highlight. She teased me until I finished highschool, left home and could be teased no more. Even Ileana became jealous of her.

My parents seemed to have a rougher patch than usual lately, and so days passed without me being able to find the opportunity to inform them. I got home to screams and curses which didn't stop until well into the night. I constantly found empty vodka bottles buried in the laundry basket and spent tissues from my mother thrown away carelessly on the floor. They would fight about money. The neighbours looked at them with fear and shame when they met on the stairwell because they heard the fighting. They argued viciously about their jobs, about me, about my father's drinking, about my mother's temper and regrets, about father's carefree cheating and about everything else. They would start arguing slowly, with a stinging remark or a curt answer to a banal question, than gradually increase tone by an octave and an expletive at a time until it became full-blown. It lasted hours. Sometimes they pushed each other around, proclaiming their hate and disgust. Sometimes they threw things at each other, which, missing their target, broke on the walls.

Sometimes the missiles hit their target and gave them bloody gashes. It hadn't been so intense since the divorce, and I blamed them both. I was sick of picking sides prompted by relatives – “Who do you love more? Who would you stay with if you had to choose? Your mother, surely?” The more I thought about it, all I wanted to do was get away. I kept waiting for the right moment to tell either of them about the university in Denmark but that time didn't come.

When they divorced they separated after the trial, not before, like most couples. That made for awkward dinner conversations.

“I will call the kid at the trial if I have to, you swine! Don't push me!” Both would say.

When the judge granted divorce, father moved in with a mistress and things quieted down. I would see him in town after school and at my grandparents' house during weekends, and my mother started to get a grip on her life. But when my father was kicked out by his lover about five months later and couldn't afford a place of his own he returned and mom welcomed him. She cooked for him and shared a bed with him that very night. He went back to drinking and gambling within days. I never understood it. He just knocked on the door out of the blue and she said “come in. Are you hungry?” like it was the most usual thing. I started to think she missed him deep down and she liked the fighting as much as he liked the drinking, gambling and philandering. She only divorced him to teach him a lesson, not because she wanted to stop being his wife. They deserved each other, I had concluded, but I wanted no part of it. A complete break was necessary. Going to university somewhere from where I could return at weekends, or even monthly, wouldn't do. Denmark, a country 2,000 kilometres away, was perfect. The farthest away. Tierra del Fuego. If money and other constraints were no object I would have gone to another planet. VIA University College had sent me an email saying I was accepted.

In my room, I played Eminem's Eminem Show cassette and sat at my desk filling online forms for the university. A lot of soft, personal things, nothing to do with knowledge. They assigned me “a liaison officer” – a student in her final year. I tried to ask as few questions as possible, for fear her answers would put me off going. Whatever it was, I'd deal with it over there. They seemed to have an automatic acceptance process provided you ticked the right boxes. I went out to smoke every ten minutes. I smoked these Lucky Strikes a lot more than I had used to, calculating that in the past week I passed the mark of a pack a day. I was about to go away for at least four and a half years, which was to say for ever, and nobody knew this apart from myself and a Danish computer. I could change my name upon arrival, and learn Danish. Four years should be time enough to start some kind of work that would keep me comfortable enough to never return

again. I could see the forest from my window. As it got dark the trees rustled. These pines harboured big brown bears and wolves. Among the last populations of big predators in Europe, on my doorstep. It wasn't unusual in the summer to come back home at night and meet with a large bear going through the garbage cans. Tourists who trekked the peaks were regularly attacked and killed by wolves and bears. It was always tourists who got it though; us locals knew full well the beasts were out there and would never get caught up the mountain in something as flimsy as a tent. The phone rang with a message from Ileana. It had been three months now since we were together; she should know the plans I was making. I hoped for the right moment to tell her.

Meanwhile the gossip about the drugs waned as the school had to gear up for the Baccalaureate. Teachers were using rhetorical tricks to scare us into studying.

“The world needs miners and grave diggers and it needs engineers too. What are you going to be, Palan?” The maths teacher would say but I couldn't be bothered, I couldn't bring myself to take any of it seriously.

My colleagues upped their studying and I upped my drinking and smoking. I hated their moralistic lecturing about drugs and about how Danny and the others deserved what they got and then some, but I was truly appalled when they dropped the subject so suddenly, never to bring it up again. Once dealt with, once they said their bit and were comfortable people around them knew of their sanctimonious position, everyone simply stopped caring. People we knew just a few weeks before were now in jail, their futures snatched away by the system, and that turned out to mean nothing to anyone. Everyone returned to life as usual, as if none of it happened. It was bizarre to me. Then again, I was the one who couldn't build up the strength to go visit my friend in jail. I kept drinking beer to pass the time. Ileana grew impatient with me and some acrimony sprouted between us.

“George, you have to do something about your maths and biology. You know nothing and you will fail. What am I to tell my parents, that my boyfriend failed his Bac? Please, study, at least to pass. Do it for me if you don't care to do it for yourself,” she said.

“Baby, please don't say that. I won't fail, first of all, and if I do, why would you be ashamed of it at all? It's my responsibility and I'll see to it that everything turns out well. Trust me. Look after your own studies and let me worry about mine, please,” I said.

“You don't understand,” she would say with scorn. “I can't have a boyfriend who's a loser. You must do something, George, you simply must. I will study with you if you want.”

“Please, don't. I am what I am, Ileana. You're being weird. It's silly even to talk about this. Come on, let's go out somewhere and forget the whole thing,” I said. “I promise you everything will eventually be fine. Even if I fail how do you think your parents could ever resist my charming ways? They will love me as a son no matter what happens.”

“You don't know what you're talking about George. Oh, how I deplore your making light of this. If my parents oppose our relationship, they could make it very difficult for us to be together. Both of them are very conservative.”

“Let's just take a break from the Bac, please.”

And we did, in between her assiduous studies. We would take long walks, we would talk and laugh at how dumb the world was and we would make grand plans to see it all. We would kiss and go to restaurants, go out dancing and listening to music, and it was good. But inevitably the conversation came back to studying and I refused to placate her. I wanted to but I couldn't bring myself to study and she knew it. There was no hiding from her. I would say I have studied and she would make me swear that I did. I wouldn't swear and she would get angry at my deceit. She would press me harder and I would do even less of what she asked, Eventually I started skipping even the private maths lessons we had together, just to avoid her nagging. In the final days we only spoke through the phone.

I waited for her as she left maths teacher's house. “I can't believe how irresponsible you are, George. I'm really upset with you. How can you do this to yourself? Have you no sense at all? What are you thinking? Where have you been?” she would pounce.

“I was in the bar with the boys. Don't worry... Look babe, I will pass the exam. Everything's under control. Don't act crazy. I love you, come here. Stop nagging me, will you?” I said.

She would have none of it.

“George, just leave me alone. I can't bear to see you like this.” And she would leave without so much as a peck on the cheek.

Before long we started having fully blown arguments over the phone. I would call to ask how she was doing, if she felt like going out, and all she could talk about was the big exam. She would call me an irresponsible idiot and she would say that I drank too much and spent too long with the boys and I would call her crazy and tell her to mind her own business.

What I did study for without making a fuss was the Cambridge exam. I sat down with the books and the recordings every night for about two hours, smoke a few cigarettes and make notes then go to sleep. I looked forward to the exam and to putting it behind me. I went to Bucharest on the early morning train and changed clothes in the bathroom of a McDonalds. I had a white shirt and black tie my mom had prepared for me and I wore smart shoes and a jacket. All business. The six hours passed quickly. I focused and answered every question as straight and considerately as I could. I took no risks with the prose and gave a straight-up recount of a historic event I knew of: Romania's changing sides in the middle of the second world war. Just as the Allies were winning, we joined Hitler. I described the political circumstances that lead to this unfortunate decision, why historians believed it couldn't be helped, and remarked that Romania still has not made peace with this controversial chapter. Classic. I editorialized a bit to end it nicely on a positive cliché: those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. It worked, I felt. I knew I had done at least reasonably well and went home more relieved about the Bac than I ever thought possible. Now I really couldn't be bothered with anything else but late nights and loud music. Ileana's stress levels grew to the point that all we did was declare our love for each other and argue.

The days up to the Bac were a downward spiral of late nights, sick mornings, bar hopping, singing, laughing and bantering with everyone who'd give me the time of day. I would drink with the gypsies in a wedding brass band until their gig came up, then I'd go to the bar and drink with the clients and then with the barkeep, then drink in the park with the bums and then in the taxi home with the taxi driver. I mixed wine, beer, vodka, vermouth, gin, whiskey, bourbon, sambuca and tequila and I seemed to be able to go on forever like this. I stumbled home and I fell asleep with my clothes on and stole money from my mother when it ran out. I lost some weight but I didn't care. My mother got worried:

“George, you seem to be celebrating early. From what I know the exams are still coming up.” I ignored her.

The Bac was a week full of daily testing: Romanian literature oral and written, French oral, Maths written, Biology written and English written. I was the only one in the class who took English written, everyone else called me stupid and took the other option: Physical Education. I cheated Maths. Out of the three hours of the exam I spent the first two carefully probing the ceiling and floor, not writing down one thing. Then the girl who sat in front of me passed me her notes when the teacher wasn't looking and I just transcribed everything. I hope it would be enough to pass. I cheated Biology with notes I had written on the back of thin receipt paper I got from a bar and hid in a plastic bag in the toilet's water reservoir. The rest I sat straight up. I passed. Perfect in

English, French and Romanian oral, just barely made it over the threshold in Maths and Biology, and above average in Romanian written. Overall, gratifying. 82%. Then I looked on the list and saw Ileana had failed maths. My heart sank. I went looking for her in the college's yard and she was surrounded by friends and teachers, all in tears. She was sobbing, and everyone kept saying it wasn't her fault. I went up to her and touched her arm.

"I'm sorry," I said. She looked at me with pure, white, incandescent fury in her eye and said:

"Go away. Leave me alone."

I turned around, confused. Everyone gave me an approximation of the same look she had.

"It's all because of you," the maths teacher said. "Look what you did to this poor girl."

I left without giving a reply. I called Silvan.

"How's the trip coming along, captain?"

"Smooth. Got the car, got the license, got the juice. Got the balls?"

I said yes.

"Pick you up in an hour."

I went home, put on my jeans and my leather jacket, took two big jugs of 80 proof moonshine my grandad had made, took cigarettes, keys, phone and some money from my dad's wallet (he was sleeping) and I was ready. I left a note on the kitchen table:

"Passed. Flying colours. Out celebrating. Speak soon. G."

Outside, Silvan was waiting in a purple, battered Opel Vectra with Austrian number plates. The car looked at least twenty years old. Rap music was blaring. I climbed in.

"Goddamn, son, at least you have a sunroof. What's this, a 1,6 petrol?" I asked, cocky.

"Think again. 1.8. It's a beast. Give me a swig of that moonshine and let's hit the road." I obliged, took one myself and off we went, speakers and wheels clanging along the potholed street as we sped past our boring lives.

Two hours later we were rocketing in the valleys of Transylvania, all windows rolled down, booming past houses and livestock at 140 kilometres per hour, stone drunk on moonshine and cheap beer. We sang along the music and stood up through the sunroof with our hands open as if to hug the fast-moving world. My lack of license did not prevent Silvan from handing me the wheel. The

car swerved and fishtailed a lot, but we hoped we'd make it to Cluj without drawing police attention. We stopped to vomit, eat and drink some more at a truckstop. The staff there were reluctant to serve us and relieved to see the backs of us. Eventually we managed to get to Cluj three hours later without major incidents bar a near-collision with a lorry coming from the opposite direction, as we overtook another car whose passengers had the misfortune of sharing the road with us.

We felt like heroes. When we told everything to Silvan's cousin he crossed himself and took the car keys from the table.

“You are fools. You will have to take the train back if you plan on playing the same bullshit games on the way back. No way I'm letting you do this on my watch, you animals. And you! You just got your license, you dickhead! What's wrong with you?” he said, smacking Silvan over the head with his open hand. “We eat and sober up and when your adrenaline passes we may go out. Or I may fucking kick both of you out my parents' house before you do something else stupid, eh, boys? Stupid peasants. We have police here in Cluj. Behave.” That scolding took the wind out our sails for the night.

We went out, drank some more, ate and laughed, but the more we thought about it the more Silvan and I felt guilty and stupid about what we just did. No only we could have killed ourselves, we could well have killed anyone else who had the poor luck of crossing paths with us. We agreed no to do it again. We slept it off, ate well and went back sober and stern, keeping to the rules and wearing our seatbelts. I refrained from driving and watched the road. Silvan drove steadily and without incident. In Brasov we picked up two hitchhikers, girls, who were going to our town. Near Silvan's place, a souped-up car drove up behind us, then overtook us, and then braked suddenly as a dog crossed the road. We crashed into its rear bumper, but everyone seemed to be fine. The driver came up to us and started yelling.

“OK, chief, calm down, we'll have the police sort it out,” Silvan said, confident. He made the call.

“Our hero,” one of the girls said. “Thank God you weren't going faster, otherwise we'd have been dead. You're the best, Silvan,” she said with glee.

“Yes Silvan. Just,” I said dryly.

A cop came within ten minutes and looked at the scene. He talked to the guy in the tuned car for a minute then came up to us, who were still sat in.

“License, registration, and insurance certificate, mister. Your IDs, too,” he said towards the rest of us. Two minutes later he returned.

“You go with me to the station,” he told Silvan. “The rest of you, go home. Bye bye,” he told us. The other driver was still there.

“What should I do?” I asked Silvan. He looked panicked.

“Call my mother, now,” he said and gave me her number as the cop took him to the police car.

I called her and told her what happened then went home. I waited four hours in silence by the phone until Silvan rang:

“What a fucking joke, man,” he said. “That car was stolen. The Austrian plates were false. I bought it from a guy who does scraps down in Ploiesti. He told me everything was sweet. The cops took my papers, they realised I didn't know anything about the stolen car and let me go. They went looking for this guy now. All I have to do is pay the other guy's bumper and I'm fine. My mom worked it out with the chief of police”

“Oh,” I said. I “That's good then?”

“Yes, of course. Do you care for a celebratory drink tonight?”

“No, man, I can't. I'm busy now...” I mumbled. I hung up.

Shit like this seemed unavoidable. I decided to stay indoors. I had a long conversation with my parents, telling them I was already accepted and going to a university in Denmark. After some convincing, they agreed to borrow €1,000 from the bank and give it to me, as well as buy me a plane ticket. I'd sort myself out after that, I promised. We agreed and decided that's what was going to happen. It was the end of June and we set the rough date of departure for late July. I had to start class in August. The university said they'd find me cheap accommodation on campus.

I called Ileana and told her we needed to talk. She apologised for blaming me for her exam failure and said she'd take it again in the autumn and pass it. She seemed to have got over the initial trauma. Her university admission in Bucharest wasn't conditional on the Bac grades. All she had to do was give them a copy of her certificate when starting, which was a month after the Bac re-sit. Only if she failed the second time she'd be in trouble but we both agreed this couldn't happen. I told her I have very important news and she needs to hear it. She eventually agreed to come over to my house the next day after I told her I was moving abroad for a few years.

“Oh.” she said. “Good... good for you.” Then she texted me saying “I want us to spend as much time as possible together before you go.” She was the best. How could I ever doubt this girl? I felt uplifted.

“I love you.” I wrote back.

The next evening she came by and after I told her all about the plans, blowing the haughty qualification of Global Business Engineer out of any imaginable proportion, essentially promising her that this university would make me a jet-set multinational corporate executive at the tender age of 25, she smiled and accepted my decision.

“It is what you need.” she said, adding: “I hope we will stay in touch.”

She asked if she could spend the night. I fell over myself agreeing. The next morning at breakfast it became clear both my parents adored her. On their best behaviour, they both suggested without saying it that me having a girl over was a rarity, meaning she must have been a very special young woman.

“How would you like your eggs, Ileana? God, you are beautiful. I'm proud of my son, he seems to not be the waster I thought he was, having you around!” mother said.

“Architecture you say? Brilliant. It takes a big brain to think of all those angles. Plus, with the way people are breeding nowadays, you'll never go out of business. It's fantastic!” father said.

Both acted as if harmony and love flowed through our three-roomed apartment like honey flows in a beehive.

“Was the food alright, sweetheart?”

“Oh yes, dear, the best! Shall we go to the lounge and watch television? Leave the kids alone to talk?”

“Let's!”

Incredible stage skills. Ileana relished the pantomime although I suspect she saw through it, giving me these slight, conspiratorial glances over the eggs and bacon, as if we were both in on a secret nobody else knew. When my parents looked at her, she smiled warmly and broadly and seemed comfortable. What followed was a hot summer month in which we were practically inseparable. We went together to visit our relatives, we went to the seaside for a few days and went up the mountain together, spent every night together until the last one before my departure,

anxiously hoping that the bond we were forging would withstand the tribulation of insurmountable distance and four and a half long years.

On flight day, a friend of my dad's drove all four of us down to the airport in Bucharest. I had a ticket straight to Copenhagen, and a baggage allocation of 50 kg. I took about 30 kg of possessions, and my mother used the rest to pack food – cheese, sausages, pastrami, hams and jars of chutney, all home-made Romanian country food that one would never be able, or inclined, to find in any Danish shop. I protested but mother was unstoppable.

“It will do you good to alternate your diet with what you're used to. Who knows what they eat there! Do you want to upset your stomach? Listen to your mother and don't stand in my way, boy.”

I was surprised customs let me pass with all of it, despite the funky smell. Dad wouldn't let me take any of his moonshine, so I had to go to my grandfather's house the day after I had already said goodbye to get some.

“What's wrong George? You're still going, yes? The university haven't changed their minds, have they?”

“No, just that Dad won't let me take his drink...”

“Oh, is that all?” Grandma took care of me: three litres of rocket-fuel, crystalline, 70 percent alcohol by volume, fuck-off, sheer cliff, evil-tasting moonshine. That was the real support I relied on to pass the lonely times ahead, and two cartons of Lucky Strikes.

As I left for the boarding gate my mother started crying and Dad held her. Ileana was teary-eyed too, but she held it together.

“I love you, babe. Skype me when you arrive. Have a good flight,” she said.

“I love you too babe, speak soon,” I said and left them with a grin on my face.

The plane was a small, blade-engined contraption which flew low, or so I thought compared to stories I heard. It was my first flight and I was fascinated by the sensations it gave me. The clouds opened and closed in front of me and I saw the land underneath appear and disappear in spectacular fashion. The plane didn't climb above clouds high enough to put the ground entirely beyond sight. I thought of human advancement and of how far we have come as a species if a billygoat like me could hop on a plane and look down at the Earth all the way to Scandinavia.

In Copenhagen my heart beat fast with anticipation. I took a high-speed train to Horsens, and two things amazed me: the price of the ticket and the underwhelming development of urban centres in this supposedly advanced country. Horsens looked like what it was: a pig-farmer market town in the middle of the Danish flatlands, with a disused port, a fjord and a high street designed to feign the existence of some kind of viable service industry in a place that didn't really need it. The university itself – all glass and shiny plastic – looked more like the head offices of some anonymous corporation than a place where human spirit sought higher reaches.

As I went to collect the keys to the accommodation I left my luggage in the canteen at VIA University College, which was all glass and steel, like an office building, and went looking for the library. I found a minuscule, embarrassing little assemblage of five or six medium-height bookshelves, all technical, in a corner of the place. A ruffled copy of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* stood on the counter, glowing ominously in its solitude. The librarian's pastime, or the cleaner's, I assumed.

III

Life in Denmark began easily enough. We were a bunch of students, all of us far from home for the first time in our lives, and all of us keen to have as much fun as possible. That is what we did for the first three months in Horsens. I have always enjoyed drugs and late nights but what got me going for real was women who enjoyed either of these things more than I. When I met one, which was not often back home, the electricity inside my brain changed from alternative to direct, it seemed to me. A devilish magnetism. Not love exactly, but an irrepressible drive that came from the loins rather than the soul. So it happened that the first moment I lay eyes on Gina, the bloodflow in my veins reversed direction.

She had on a green parka, black tights with glittery spots, black Chuck Taylor sneakers with white tips, a cap on the top of her head with the logo of The Mighty Ducks hockey team, and a loose t shirt with a picture of the Ramones band spangled over -- the hipster's uniform. I couldn't stop staring at her long, thin legs and angelic face with full-bodied red lips. She wore her red hair loose and wavy. She danced to the house music like there were no bones in her body and kept her eyes closed as much as she could like she didn't care about the world around her and there were much better things happening in her mind. When she opened them she looked straight into mine.

There were not many of these worldly girls where I came from and to have a very attractive one make inquisitive eyes at me was proof that I was making progress in life. I became obsessed with her and she knew it.

How did a girl like this end up at a student party in the armpit of Denmark, I wondered. God, I hoped she would talk to me. I walked up to her through the dark room, pushing my way through the staggering bodies, and I said hello. She said hello back. I couldn't believe my luck. I approached her plainly, asking her if she'd like a cold beer and giving her one. Then we went out on the balcony. She turned out to be the same girl who I spoke to on an Internet chat room a year or so before and with whom I developed a sort of pen-friendship. What an extremely strange coincidence. She seemed to like me so much back then, over the internet, that I grew suspicious of her being some dirty old man and I dropped out of the whole thing. And now we met in flesh. What are the odds?

"I really did like talking to you back then. You knew a lot about music I liked. I was hurt when you suddenly stopped writing back," she said.

Music. Always the best way to a woman's heart, I thought.

"I'm so sorry, Gina. I thought. Had I known you were really... the lovely, beautiful woman that you are and not some weird internet psycho, I would've never stopped it. I just followed the old rule that there are no pretty girls on the internet. Please forgive me. I mean, you were using the nickname BabyEyes88, there must have been thousands of men trying to talk to you."

"Okay. Don't worry. I had a boyfriend anyway. I still kind of do..." she said.

Within the hour we were at the flat I shared with another Romanian guy from my class, where the faculty put us up. I rushed her in my room for fear she'd smell or see the eight fully-grown cannabis plants in the lounge and get scared. She was half Romanian half German and I held positive prejudice against Germans as overwhelmingly upstanding European citizens. But she smelled the weed and was unfazed. In my bedroom we put on a Sade record and laid down on the bed in the dark, making smalltalk in each other's arms.

"Are you growing weed?" she asked with a glint of mischief in her big black eyes.

"No, it's my flatmate's. I just help him with it. I could get you some if you want to have a toke, though. No charge," I winked.

"Oh, no, I don't smoke it," she said. "But thanks."

Gina was there on an Erasmus scholarship from the European Union. €400 a month in her pocket to go to classes. The next day I walked her to the bus stop and texted asking to see her again almost immediately after she left.

"You are getting to my head," she wrote back.

"You too," I wrote.

Gina's arrival was the first good thing to happen in the most dissolute months I remembered ever having to live through. I kept promising my parents I would find work but all I did was drink, smoke weed, attend incomprehensible classes, and watch *The Sopranos* on my laptop with my flatmate, a Romanian named Stefan.

The university assigned me a room in the period flat in the town centre, next to a beech-lined cemetery. Stefan, who had three tall Indian hemp plants in his bedroom, was already living there for a semester and a half. We put a large canvas depicting Bob Marley up on the wall, his wild dreadlocks wrapping around the room.

“Stefan, you have a good thing going with the weed. Why don’t you expand it a bit and make some sales to a few friends?”

“I don’t know man, I’ve been growing it for myself for a while and I had no hassle. I smoke for free and nobody bothers me. If I started selling it things could get stressful.”

“I can help you.”

“I don’t know George, I’m not so sure about the risks.”

“We can make rent, pay bills and smoke for free. We just sell to students and the cops will leave us alone. I don’t have work, you don’t have work. It would be stupid not to,” I said.

“I suppose we could do it until we got jobs.”

The shortest road is often the one you know and so it followed that less a year after many of my former friends got thrown in Romanian prison for handling negligible amounts of hash I was again involved in supplying drugs, this time to students in Denmark, where the law was permissive and prices were consistently high. Another factor was the language barrier preventing us from having any job except cleaning toilets in hotels and unloading trucks in the warehouse. All Danes spoke perfect English, and the university taught us in English, which somewhat removed any incentive we may have had to learn Danish fast. But to have even a clerical office job you had to be fluent in reading and writing Danish, a complicated language spoken by the 5 million or so who live there. Even the teachers at university admitted something like that might take years. In the beautiful European experiment of dislodging tens of thousands of young men and women from the edges of the union and placing them all together in a small Danish town to study at a new university, Stefan and I found ourselves relegated to the only reliably profitable economic activity we could perform alongside our study. Our stock of weed sold like hotcakes among the students and some of the younger faculty. We soon made plans to move into mushrooms and light powders. There were none at all available in Horsens despite the 10,000 students living there, all eager to get as intoxicated as possible, scratching as much off their bucket list as possible before they put on ties and suits and went to work for the first multinational corporation that accepted them. Docile, gentle people these international students. No trouble at all. No junkies. They lapped up everything, always paid upfront and always came back for more. They even looked up to us in a way, although they kept a comfortable distance. I was happy with that. I wasn’t looking to open up to anyone, so having an aura of slight perceived danger keeping people away from me was just what I needed. Business flourished as much as Stefan allowed it. All the stock went, no matter how much he had. They

preferred buying from us than going to the local Arabs who had pitbulls and kept machetes on the table. They didn't need that in their student lives. We had no aspirations of violence. All I wanted was to make some money until I figured out what I was doing with myself. Until I found steady work. It was stressful to walk around town with weed in my bag, counting Kroner in my head. 100 a gram. With speed it was the same but it cost 200 kroner a gram. Stefan bought it for 100 from some Polish factory workers and doubled his money. We would go see them on a Thursday and buy about 20 grammes, so as to not have anything left come Monday. If there was something left we would snort it or put it in our coffee, but our heart was never in it. Gram for gram we always sold more than we took.

“You need to be clear-headed, good with numbers, personable – even friendly when you have to, laid back, and paranoid just enough so you don't act stupid. If you like showing off and being loud or relaxing too much, then the job's not for you. You must be modest too, otherwise you'll sell more and more and eventually you will be arrested. The cops know what's happening in their street. And it is theirs. They will know you are a dealer long before you see a badge. Be low-key enough that they won't bother with you. With the clients, the cardinal rule is to keep your word – be on time and make sure the bag contains as much as you say it does. Don't rip anyone off. That will keep you on their speed dial. Beyond that, always stay away from shifty people and especially junkies. Even if your product is weed, you will encounter that increasingly widespread species of stoner who acts as if he (or, more rarely, she) is in desperate need of the drug and will do anything you ask them to get it for free. These are the posers, the makebelieve addicts who behave that way because they lack dramatism in other areas of their life and they want to scapegoat their failures on their marijuana habit. They are the pretend addicts. Avoid them like the plague. They want trouble and seek it enthusiastically. Keep any kind of addicts away from your business despite the urge to have them on as steady punters. The stuff will always sell. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower, but it will sell. That is also the reason why you should never give credit unless it's to someone you trust or unless you don't care about getting paid back. Chasing clients for money is a bad situation and a waste of time that you don't need. If you don't know when you're being taken for a fool then you're being taken for a fool all the time. People will always try you on. Don't make friends out of customers. Have friends who know what you do but let them take their business somewhere else, at least half the time. Get high with them and only them. Minimum risks, maximum rewards, Stefan sermoned me. He was in his second year, and had worked for a year in the warehouses before joining the university, so he knew Horsens and Denmark very well. He said he wanted to get his engineering degree and it was a hard subject so he had no time to work. Growing weed afforded

him plenty of time to study. What an extremely weird coincidence that I would get put in a flat with a drug dealer after all that I had been through.

Thus I began in provincial Denmark's booming soft drugs trade. I soon broke every single one of those rules. What started with my flatmate's small horticultural-pharmacological enterprise soon developed into a cooperative. Coco, yet another Romanian who we'd befriended and who also started helping Stefan, was dead keen for us to travel to Amsterdam in his car. Stefan accepted because he knew we might be able to smuggle in some weed to sell. Neither Stefan nor I had smuggled anything before, but we were both curious to try our first big deal. We all packed up and set for Amsterdam before dawn in Coco's car. With €500 in cash each in our pockets, we started the 450 mile drive to find the cheapest kilo of weed possible.

Coco had a load of speed with him. We each took a snort. It was all very dull motorways and rolling green fields with clear skies and mild traffic. Straight road guided by the computerised voice of the GPS machine. Take this exit after a mile. Take the second exit after that. Even with the raw Polish speed jangling up our heads we had difficulties staying awake. We had no choice but to crank it up. We turned up the volume to the generic German techno playing on the radio, rolled down all windows, and snorted another gram from a CD case, split into six fat lines. It made things more lively. The dashboard computer showed just under ten degrees outside and because we were doing about 140 kilometres an hour with all four windows open, there must have been about three degrees in the car. Nevertheless, I was sweating bullets behind the wheel. If sleep had been a problem minutes before, now I was finding it impossible to stop shaking, gurning, and keep the car on the road without swerving. My jaw was clenched so tight from the drugs that I felt my teeth slowly cracking under the pressure.

“Come on, go, you dickhead, I wanna get there while we're still young!” Coco said, and punched my shoulder to illustrate his point. I cringed.

He seemed to take it much better than me. His was the only proper reaction to the drugs - Stefan looked out the window with his eyes and mouth ajar. I couldn't tell if he was enjoying himself or about to pass out. I didn't have time to care. The road commanded all my attention.

“Like granpa said,” I began to Coco, “the secret to getting things done is never rushing. The quickest way to do something is to get on with it without alarm. I'm driving steadily, not quickly. You calm down,” I said.

“What? Bullshit.” he snapped. “Fuck you and fuck your silly granddad. We have 500 more kilometres to do. Step on it now, you country cocksucker, or I’m driving.”

I sped up to 150, or 160 kilometres per hour. The car got steadier and it stuck more closely to the asphalt. This loosened my jaw enough to start talking more. We shot over the imaginary border with Germany without so much as a pause to let the engine cool. Flensburg, the town where we bought cheap beer and brought it back into Denmark, came and went past in minutes.

“Actually, Stefan, you say we never smuggled anything, but the Danish law says you can’t bring more than five litres of alcohol into the country without paying tax on it. We buy about 100 litres every other week from Flensburg,” I said.

“Maybe that’s true but noone enforces the law and so it’s not really smuggling. It’s more like tax evasion I guess. Plus, there’s the single market of the EU so that Danish law might be referring to VAT or something. You’re not supposed to pay taxes on moving goods inside the EU.”

Then it started raining on the approach to Hamburg, where traffic was thicker as well. At 160 an hour in the pouring rain you don’t need wipers to clear the windscreen. The water disintegrates on its own and starts running up the glass, defying gravity. You need the wipers and the screenwash for clearing the hundreds of insects you obliterate though. For those poor bastards our base-range yellow Seat might as well have been a primeval curse from the netherworld, the way the car was decimating them. By the time we reached Amsterdam the whole jug of screen wash had gone on cleaning up the cadavers.

Coco relaxed as well by the time we passed Hamburg – the dead insects and the rain seemed to have had a calming effect on him -- and Stefan was absorbed into the scenery and barely spoke all this time. Doubtless he was running numbers mentally. He rolled up joints and passed them around, occasionally saying 'hey' and nudging me when it was my turn. By the time we reached Bremen, roughly the half of the trip, we were all coming down and the car needed fuel. I pulled into a filling station, at which point Coco got at me again.

“What are you stopping for you fool? Everyone knows Bremen is full of racist cops who hate Romanians. We’ll go to German prison instead of Amsterdam if you stop here. Drive!”

I ignored him and stopped to a halt.

“You are losing your grip, my friend, and if you don’t recover I shall have to take measures to contain you.” I warned.

Fuel and food sorted, we smoked another joint in the parking lot by the German motorway and dozed off on the lawn by the car for a few hours. We woke sober and fresh, ready to reach Amsterdam Dam during the early afternoon with Stefan driving. I kicked back on the passenger seat.

Not half an hour away from Bremen, a gray estate Skoda appeared in front of us and in its rear window a blue LED light sign popped up saying “Police – Stop”. So we did. All the drugs were safe in our crotches – speed, weed and a few Valiums all bagged up and sealed with brown tape in spheres that looked like anything but drugs. We felt confident we'd get away as we stepped out of the car at the request of a blue-eyed, middle-aged cop. We were placing all our faith in our student ID cards. He said something in German and Stefaan said in English that we don't understand. He sized us up and asked for our papers and the car's in good English.

“What are you doing in Germany?” he asked. “Working?”

He was speaking slowly and loudly as he expected us not to properly understand English either. We said we were university students in Denmark and were driving to Belgium to meet friends. His attitude changed for the better upon receiving this information. He was relieved we were just passing through his land. He didn't say why he stopped us so we could only assume it was because of the Romanian tag. He handed us back our cards and papers and walked back toward his car without saying anything. We looked at each other optimistically curious if we were free to go, but he swiftly returned, asking:

“May I look through your car a moment?” Stefan said yes, so he started going through the glovebox and under the chairs, finding nothing. Then he went to the boot, he removed our backpacks and examined the boot carefully at the joints, with his torch. He opened Coco's backpack and patted through it and then Stefan's and mine. His eyes lit up when he grabbed something: my weed grinder. I swallowed hard. He opened it, smelled it and came up straight to me:

“You smoke weed? You got any on you?”

“No and no. A friend from Belgium left that at my place on a trip last month and I am returning it.”

I affected a trembling voice: “i never smoke weed, sir. My mother wouldn't allow it.”

He smacked his mouth and threw the grinder in the roadside bushes.

“Go away.” he said. “Bye bye.”

We climbed in the car sheepishly and drove off at moderate speed. As soon as the police car was out of view we started yelling and clapping our hands.

“What a fucking idiot! Hoorah! Fuck the police!”

We turned up the music.

“Thank fuck boys. Let's see that shit now,” Stefan said. We brought out the drugs as he was driving and we looked at them. We had come so close to trouble because of them. A good omen.

We put the Wu Tang CD in, turned it up, and suddenly the car's engine seemed to pull harder. After '89 American culture washed over our country like an unstoppable tide and we drank it all down. As we were growing up in our neighbourhood everything worth listening to on the stereo or watching on the TV was American, or at least English. Naturally, due to the social class to which we belonged, we mostly related to gangster movies and rap music. I remember there was a film when I was about fifteen, a low-budget comedy called *Don't Be a Menace to South Central*, which combined both of these, and it turned the life of the neighbourhood upside down. We would copy it on CDs and watch it obsessively, learning the dialogue line by line. We would talk to each other using lines from that film, and listen to the soundtrack every where we went. One of the guys even started calling his girlfriend Dashiki, like one of the girls in *South Central*. In the summer we would put out sofas between the cement blocks, stretch a bedsheet on the side of the block and project the movie on it, wired to speakers for everyone to hear. It was a party. We used a projector we stole from the school nearby and wheelbarrows full of ice would cool the beer. We'd fry sausages and ham over fires and stay up late laughing and feeling like we lived the same life as those people.

“Hey did you know they wash the streets with Coca-cola in Canada? My second cousin was there and she told my aunt. It's true.”

We unconsciously figured out that if us Romanians as a nation had to pretend we were Americans and absorb and live out American culture wholesale right out of the TV box, we felt we had no choice but to associate with the underclass – especially the black people as they were shown in the movies. We called each other nigger quite often, although neither of us ever saw a black person in reality. For someone who came from a country where any black people actually lived, or for a black person, this must have been a surreal, unseemly caricature – a bunch of Romanian kids calling each other nigger and saying to each other 'hey, what you say about my momma?' in a rough, broken East European accent attempting to sound like black Americans. Not that anyone like

that ever ventured to our neighbourhood. But this is what it was and we felt good doing it. Poor and hated is poor and hated in America is poor and hated in Romania is poor and hated anywhere and we knew it in our bones. Like they say: louse draws louse, cash draws cash. So we kept at it. Years later, when we learned about slavery from history books we understood it was hardly the same thing. But the gangster movies never mentioned slavery so how could we know. Even is there was a passing reference to the enslavement of Africans we thought it was a metaphor.

So here I was in this yellow car prowling down the motorway into The Netherlands now, with these thoughts flying through my head like sparrows in Vermont gardens. Meanwhile I had stifled the mutiny of my ambitious comrades, installed myself back at the wheel as the two conspirators were dozing off. Signs pointing us to Amsterdam began appearing more and more often. They had taken a hearty sniff of ketamine each and they went out cold within minutes. I didn't even know we had ketamine on us. I parked the car in an underground lot, paid, and woke up the two.

“OK, dear fellows, as sweet as your dreams may be, we haven't got much time. Wake yourselves up now and get the fuck out the car. Take your luggage. It's on foot from here. Welcome to Amsterdam!”

They mumbled but obeyed, sensing that it was in their best interest. Before long we were pacing the canals of the Europe's playground, smoking weed and drinking cans of Heineken. It was still daylight and our money was burning holes through our pockets. We stopped at a Bulldog coffee shop.

“We need a plan, boys. Why don't we put aside 1,000 euros for the weed, 300 for the hotel and 100 for petrol and see what else is there left to get fucked up on,” I opened.

“Lower that fucking noise, idiot! We'll get arrested before we finish our beers!” Coco hissed, his eyes bloodshot with weed and paranoia.

“Calm down, man,” Stefan came to the rescue. “Look around: everyone's either a tourist, or drunk, or high, or sleeping, or all four. Nobody's listening.”

So we got the money together and resolved to find a hotel to leave the weed money and our backpacks then go out to find what the city had in store. Staff at the Bulldog, the McDonald's of weed, couldn't help point out a sensibly-priced establishment that wasn't a hostel, so we just went out. After three or four tries we found Hotel Du Toulouse, where we got three rooms with showers. We counted ourselves lucky, washed up and went right back out again to catch the sunset.

We decided to scout for the small, mom-and-pop coffee shops. In Amsterdam they call weed bars coffee shops. I never understood this Northern European need for euphemism and verbal prudishness. They don't mind colonising half the world, but God help you if you say something too plainly out loud. I guess camouflaging one's real intentions could be a smart move. Anyway, we went into this small coffee shop and figured we'd start by smoking some weed and drinking some beers. We waited on the terrace as Stefan bought three joints of the Blue Cheese strain and three of Jack Herrer.

"What'd I tell you about these paper rules?" he said triumphantly when he sat back down with the joints. "There's a rule here about showing your passport when you buy weed but I said I didn't have it on me and they sold me the weed anyway. We'll be fine buying as much as we want."

"Why do you have to show your passport? To prove you're 18?" I asked.

"That too but also because there is supposed to be a register of sales so that nobody buys more than five grammes in a day, to prevent its export. The Germans complained about this."

It seemed promising. If they don't care about the quotas then they surely must have enough weed to spare and sell at a discount for three harmless students. The Blue Cheese was insanely strong. Not like anything I've tried before. Smoking it I felt a surge of panic and emotional anxiety overwhelm me and it took a while studying the others to realise they were going through the same thing.

"OK, no need to panic now. It's no big deal... everything's under control... isn't it?" I said, but it was obviously too late.

The weed in our brains turned our nerves into mush and made us into cowards. We all, I am sure, felt powerfully that we mustn't go ahead with the plan to smuggle anything into Denmark lest we wanted to call our families from German prison. To his credit only Coco was brave enough to admit it.

"Look man, I don't know if it's the weed or just my good sense kicking in at long last, but fuck all of this, eh? Let's just have a good time and forget about buying and selling and all that shit, fellas? What do you say? I mean, I'm a mess right now.... The only coherent thought I can pull out my head is that I want to run to my mother. I miss her terribly, I want to be with her." He was in tears. "Eh?" he demanded, with desperation in his voice.

We smoked ourselves into puppy-eyed, droopy-faced childhood. None of us said a word for the next half-hour.

“Fuck this weed,” I said eventually. Coco looked up hopefully, but his smile changed into a smirk as I read his thought and rushed to disagree with him: “Fuck smoking, I mean. I don't know about you two, you do what you want, but I'll be damned if I return from here empty handed. I don't want to be a dealer my whole life but right now I think we are all just trying to survive. Even if they catch us, what's that? A stern talking to and maybe a criminal record in a country we'll never live in? Fuck the Danish warehouses and fuck university man. I need the money. That's what I'm here for. Sorry but I can't reverse on that right now, Coco. I know how you feel but I just can't.” I said. “I mean, European countries don't even share criminal record data, do they?”

“I'm with George,” said Stefan. “Sorry, I know it's a shitty thing to do, sell drugs, and I am ashamed of it, but it just doesn't make sense to quit now. We came this far, Coco. Look around. We're smoking the strongest weed in the world in plain view on the edge of a canal in Amsterdam, man. It's a paradise. Nobody cares. Nobody would care if we stuffed a fucking train carriage full of this shit and took it back to Denmark.”

He was right. I looked around and it was beautiful. The tall, crooked old buildings made glistening reflections in the dirty water in the canal and the sun was setting over us as we came back to our senses. Bridges carried dreamy people across the waters, all of them walking to their own versions of a good night. If you took a minute to listen to the vibrations in the air, that was it. Nobody cared. I went back in the shop with renewed enthusiasm and asked the barman, a Spaniard as far as I could tell, whether by any chance we could have €1000 worth of weed. Something cheap. He asked how much was I looking to get and I said I needed as close as I could get to a kilo.

“This is an upmarket place, my brother, we don't do that kind of weed here. What you say would cost you 5-6 thousand with me. Try down the way for some purple haze. That grows outdoors and there's plenty around.”

“Thanks.”

“Good luck,” he smiled.

After a few more failed attempts, each punctuated by another joint, we felt like we could smoke or walk no more. Our brains were numb. We were, for all intents and purposes, sleepwalking across the cobblestoned alleys, with no possibility of logical thought. Speaking was a huge effort.

When we walked into Der Hotstep Corner coffee shop, we were greeted by an ageing rocker, with a blue denim vest on, long, black ponytail and mutton chops, aviator sunglasses and motorcycle boots.

“Welcome. I am Mick. You need a refreshment.”

We stared back at him from behind the woolly haze that clouded our eyes. He had a learned American accent but English wasn't his first tongue. I thought Slovakian, or Czech.

“Sit. Come on. I'll get you some drinks.”

He brought tall mojitos full of slush ice and shots of what seemed like whisky on the side.

“First round's on me. It's my place. Where are you from?”

The shots were actually dark American bourbon, much stronger than the usual kind. The drink brought us back to life.

“Wild Turkey,” Mick said. “You like it?”

We nodded. The mojitos were refreshing. We took a shine to Mick immediately.

“Sir, thanks for your hospitality. We're Romanian students in Denmark. We're here to have fun, but also to look for a good opportunity,” I started. Mick, without flinching, said:

“So you discover Amsterdam and you want to take some of it back to your fellow students as a souvenir? Right?”

“Something like that. We want to buy some good weed for other students who are friends of ours who couldn't make the trip. We hear that purple haze is good. Do you have any?”

“Well, it depends how much you want. But if you are just after a reasonable amount I have it, no problem. How much you need?”

“Well,” I said, “sir, we have €1,000 and we would like to have as close as possible to a kilogram.”

Mick paused.

“OK guys, here's the purple haze I have. It's grown outdoors and it's harvested and cured last month. Good stuff. Grew it myself. If you like it, I will give you 750 grams for €1,200.”

We looked at each other, suddenly all three of us sober. We never could have believed it would be this simple. We took a handful of it, sweet-smelling weed and examined it closely, passing it among each other. It looked and smelled quite like lavender. We smoked a little of it in a pipe. It was pleasant and smooth, it didn't scratch the lungs like the Jack Herrer did. And the effect

was mellow and easy, relatively strong but it got to you gradually, unlike the common Danish skunk. The girls would love it. It had an artsy air, like Jimi Hendrix.

“Now or never. Let's do it. Coco said.” Stefan nodded.

“Mick, this is lovely. It's not as strong as we were hoping but we like it. Call it 800 grammes and we can shake hands.”

“Hmm, let's have another round of drinks first while I think about it.” Mick got a second round and added:

“Come tomorrow morning for the weed. I haven't got it all now. Unless you want to buy half now and half tomorrow,” he said.

“I'm not sure about our hotel,” Stefan said. “Tonight is our last night in Amsterdam. Can you get it now please? We don't know you, so, er... you know, tomorrow we'll be afraid to come in. What if there will be cops waiting for us?”

“Don't get this the wrong way, but we're just students. I'm sure you are a good guy.” I said, apologetically.

“No offense taken, boys, I'm sure 800 grammes is the deal of a lifetime for you, but I sell that in a few hours here. In Amsterdam cops don't move for less than a truck load. I just don't have enough today because I sold it, but I will bring a bit more for you tomorrow. I sell two-three kilos in this joint every day, and I'm a small trader compared to other people. Don't be afraid, come on. Everything will be alright,” he said and he combed his mutton chops with his hand. We rose our glasses and toasted.

“All right then, sir. Thank you. See you tomorrow.”

We stood silent until we turned the corner, then we burst laughing and jumping around with exultation like children on Christmas Eve.

“Mick is the best,” Coco said. “What a cool man. I wish he were my father,” he said.

“I wish he were my father too,” Stefan said. “Then we could be brothers and smoke his weed for free,” he said.

“Good job, man,” I said. “I never thought it could be so nice and professional. That felt good. It felt less shady and tense than anything I've ever bought in Romania or in Denmark. Hope he comes through now.”

“You heard the man. Small business. Small amount for him. No problem. We are doing good,” I can feel it,” said Stefan. “Let's go get some more of that Wild Turkey and make a night of it. Time to celebrate.”

“Right, but not too hard,” I said. “We're still empty-handed and money will be tight with the extra two hundred he's charging us. But let's go,” I said.

“Fuckin' A,” Coco said. “Have you seen these women here? I haven't seen whores like these anywhere in my life. They're like pornstars. I'm not saying go mental tonight but let's break out a bit more of that powder and get a move on. We don't have to get in early now, do we? We'll sleep on the way back.”

“Makes sense. What would we do if we don't do this? Watch TV in Amsterdam and think about tomorrow? Jinx it. No way. The Wild Turkey is a good idea. It will be good luck for us if we drink more.” Stefan offered.

So we went to the shop and we procured ourselves a full bottle of the brown spirit. We then went to a park and for each swig we took, we snorted a line of speed mixed with ketamine. By nightfall, you couldn't recognise us. Hell, we barely recognised each other. The curious effect of speed and ketamine when mixed half and half and sniffed up the nose was that it mitigated the worst hallucinations of the ketamine and the worst palpitations of the speed, giving out a nice, balanced high, like ecstasy but without the drippy sentimentality. Rounded off with cocaine, which we also obtained from a street corner, it was happiness on tap. The drink emboldened it.

We were break-dancing, or trying to clumsily break dance, mostly falling over ourselves, listening to music off our phones and smoking cigarettes in the park until the whisky was gone. We went back in the streets searching for a party.

Amsterdam at night is carnivalesque. The litter is fluorescent on the wet floor and the walls of the buildings shimmer with broken light from the canal water. Naked women under red lamps swing at every move, lascivious whispers inviting punters in to live out their wildest visions. Drunk and drugged people with expressive clothes and inexpressive faces covered in colourful hair walk fast by, stumbling over yourself and each other. They smile wickedly with pierced lips and tongues, piercing eyes and ears full of earrings. The talk mixes with music from different places at the same time and it's all noise, upbeat and chaotic, moving you on an on, not letting you rest but filling you with anticipation. You don't want to rest. Who are these people? Where are they going? Where are you going? Your friends pull your sleeve. That girl. That woman. Look at that car. Look at that

couple dancing on the pavement. The night is a party in a circus after the performers have locked up the doors and finished the show. And as I was following my two friends aimlessly through this amalgamation of faces, people, temptations and sounds, I saw something big looming in the corner of my eye approaching me at unnatural velocity, wanting to crush me.

It was a huge, white-and-blue tram on rails going as fast a train only metres from me, directly to my right, and as I stopped so did my heart when the colossus passed my face and nearly took off the tip of my nose, letting out a deafening horn blare. It nearly killed me. I saw my face in its paint, I was so close. What an end to my life that could have been. I stopped for breath but my friends didn't seem to know what a near miss I had. They were both yelling at me to keep up. So I went after them, with a pulse like a jackrabbit's.

Both wanted to go to a techno club and to dance. In that part of the Red Light District there seemed to be a cluster of black women selling themselves. Black women, all naked or almost naked, with bare legs and large breasts waved at me from the windows, exposing their beautiful skin and shapes to our lustful eyes. Their shiny, rich lips moved slowly.

“Come to me,” they said. “Come have me.”

“OK, time to split up. The hotel is just next door almost. See you there,” I babbled to my friends not knowing if they heard me or not as I sidestepped into an alley and into the arms of a beautiful, curvy Nigerian woman dressed in pink underwear and white stockings. She slid her hand under my shirt and lifted it, and then pressed herself up against me. Her skin felt softer than silk and creamier than butter. She smelled like ambrose and flowers. I gave her 60 euros and she pulled me to the back of her room, closing the blinder.

“Yes, baby, come with me. What a nice looking face you have,” she purred down my neck.

She got on her knees and I sat on the edge of the bed. Minutes later, I was back in the street, fixing up my clothes, and drinking a cold can of beer – the consolation prize from the beautiful whore who had used me. I felt empty and alone.

At the hotel, I woke up the next morning on the floor with my clothes on and vomit next to my face. A heartfelt wish to jump out the window in order to stop the Spartan war drums from pounding inside my head. It hurt as bleeding on the inside might hurt. The shame and guilt I felt as I crawled to the bathroom made the pain worse and I feared looking at the mirror. Undressed, I put the hot water on and hoped one day I would be able to say no to drugs out of genuinely comfortable sobriety.

I swear the whole war on drugs hysteria came about a morning very much just like this one, after that insufferable donkey Richard Nixon had a few lines of cocaine and a couple of bottles of whisky and woke up in a bad way. Only a man in this sorry state of pain and guilt can think up something like that. And because most of us hold the same hateful contempt to hangovers, we went along with it knowing that the only way drugs will go away can be cutting them off at the root, since there's no conceivable way any bastard anywhere would be able to casually refuse them when they're under his nose. One or two evolved creatures might be able to control themselves, but never mind having *all* folks doing it constantly. No, drugs are here to stay unless they are somehow exterminated in the process of manufacturing.

In my comatosed stupor I had had the strangest dream. A dream of the dirt road between parcels of hayfields in the village of my grandparents where I grew up. I was walking with a light step like I was floating on the light of a summer day, and I felt healthy, young and thin. I was enjoying the walk on a narrow path with outgrowth in the middle and carriage tracks on the side and after a turning I saw a calf, a young bull of black colour which for some reason unsettled me and made me change my mind about where I was going. So I turned back and took another road that crossed this one, a broader one with big rocks through the middle.

And I remembered being wary of danger while treading this treacherous path yet being also determined to go ahead. But after a few miles I felt tired and I felt like I had been walking for a long time and there was nothing in sight except fenced pastures with tall grass and plum trees but no people. The rocks got bigger in my way and the space between them and the barbed wire of the fences tighter and tighter until I had to squeeze through and the barbs tore up my clothes and the rock bruised me.

Then a bull, a full grown raging bull stormed out of a garden in front of me and aimed its horns at me and started groaning. I made an escape towards the farside of the road and it came at me before I got through so I turned back again and made it come after me, thinking the rocks would give me cover. It expertly jumped from one rock to the next and then when it was getting so close I could smell its foul breath I turned back again, spinning on my heels and I jumped ahead through a small gap in the fence before the beast had a chance to cut me down and then I ran for a while without looking back. I was hungry and began wondering if my grandmother had any food made for me and although I didn't know where the road was anymore as I was walking through green pasture now I kept walking ahead because I seemed to be sure it would lead eventually back to her house, even if it would take me many years. Then the clock rang. I took a shower and put on clean clothes and I remembered that vivid addled dream.

I went downstairs, where Stefan was already up and munching at a bag of crisps in the lobby.

“Come on, George, let's have a good breakfast to back off the demons, eh?” We sat at a table and he called the waiter.

Stefan and I were in the lobby, nursing big breakfasts with three-egg omelettes, grilled tomatoes and all the other trimmings. Cold pints of Guinness, newspapers, cigars. Coco came down all dapper and fresh with sunglasses, clean clothes, a clean face, polished shoes and his hair licked all the way back with gel. He sat down slowly and gravely, pompously, and I thought for a moment he was stretching his hand out for us to kiss it, such was his demeanour, but thankfully he was just reaching for the toast and butter on the table. Stefan and I collectively breathed a sigh of relief.

“Look at you, Coco.” I sniggered. “You smell like Coco Chanel's transsexual chihuahua pissed in your armpit.”

We ate at leisure and back we went to the Red Light District to complete the drug deal that would make out little triptych into the very embodiment of the Romanian French Connection. Mick, was rubbing his hands with glee at the sight of us.

“Come right in, and make yourselves at home. Had a good think last night?”

“Good morning, Mick” we said in choir.

“Yes,” I started, “we thought on it hard and we want it. We found better offers but we are looking out for the long term and we like you most of everybody we met. We think you have good character and you are a fair trader,” I blurted.

“Stop it now, pretty boy, you'll make me blush. Got the money then?”

Stefan handed him an envelope with the money.

“Good. It looks all there but since it's our first time together you won't mind if I hold it up to the candle light, yes?”

And he took out the money, spread it on the glass showcase where he kept his weed specimens for sale, and from underneath, as if it was something he did often, he put on an ultraviolet torch to check if it was real. And it was. He gave me a paper gift bag with a bag in it which contained another vacuumed bag where our weed was. We looked at it, shook hands, and said goodbye.

“Thanks,” I muttered. “We have to go now.”

“No drink then. OK. Good luck boys, behave and we'll meet again soon,” Mick said as we left.

We went around the corner and instinctively drew away from the passing crowd. It was clear before either of us said anything that the mood was no longer light. Looking in each other's eyes we saw that we all fully realised from then on we faced jail from any false step.

“Frankly, that smells strongly and I'm wary of taking it back to the hotel. It's a pretty upmarket place and someone might clock us and call the cops while we pack. I'm nervous and so are you two and that adds to the problem. The concierge will see we're dodgy from a mile away. There may be some police informers in this city after all,” Stefan said.

“Right on,” Coco said. “One of us needs to go buy a roll of tape and some bin bags so we can wrap this thing properly. What if we meet the same cop who pulled us over on the way here? He'll have a good day off our backs.”

“OK,” Stefan said. “Let's go to the Bulldog or someplace where there's plenty of smoke and everyone is stoned. Everyone will just think we are paranoid from smoking and leave us alone in there. We can wrap up the stuff in the bathroom and then see about checking out the hotel. George, will you kindly pop into that supermarket there and get us the tape and the bags? Buy some WD40 as well so it doesn't look suspicious. And some beers, please. After all, we *did* do it. Might as well have a beer,” he said with a grim smile.

I went without a word. Mute. There was a lot of fear brewing inside me which I was struggling to contain. It's just the fright before the jump, I thought. Natural. It will pass, I told myself as I went to the shop and returned. The fun had gone out of the streets, it seemed, and the previous night could just as well have happened in another lifetime. We all walked down the canal to the nearest Bulldog coffee shop. Stefan went to the bathroom and came back within minutes. The fluffy bag was now a solid lump no bigger than a travel-size dictionary. Nobody even noticed we were there. As always, the Bulldog was full of stoned tourists and the assorted hustlers. We were safe there.

“You know, I'd like to get home as soon as possible,” I said. “Why don't we take a tram to the hotel, pack up and leave within an hour or two? I really don't want to stroll casually down the road with this on me. I feel I won't be able to walk properly and I'll either have a funny gait or just attract attention in another way somehow. I'm just too self-conscious,” I said.

“True, same here,” Coco said. “Let's take a tram like the one nearly ran you over last night, eh?” he said. And we did.

What a bad judgement call. The inexperience already showed and we weren't even well on the way yet. When you are walking you are busy moving your legs and looking around to know where you're going, so at least a part of your mind is busy. If you whistle or chat shit with a friend as you walk, you will after a minute be able to carry an armed nuclear payload on your back. But sitting down in a tram carriage full of people feels like hell will break loose any second. Everyone stares at you. When someone does actually glance your way you jump slightly as if stung and look the other way, forcefully turning your head. You look at the bag of drugs you are carrying as if it's not yours, and all this behaviour is very conspicuous. The twenty minutes on the tram seemed like hours and days. When we got off at the hotel we were sweating like dogs and the tram had air conditioning.

“What a trip,” I said. “I hope they thought we were high.”

“Jesus man, you nearly lost it in there,” said Coco. “Know what, I'll wait here with the bag. You take my passport and my stuff. Best to keep this out of the hotel just in case.”

“Just in case what,” I said. “You don't want to run away with it do you?”

“Yes, George, you thick bastard, I'll run away without a passport and claim political asylum in Germany. Say the fucking Hollanders were persecuting my Rastafarian faith by selling this fucking shit to me instead of giving it away for free as a gift from Allah. You cunt. Get my shit and shut up. Stefan is right, you are fucking losing it.”

Stefan and I turned around and went to pack up and check out.

“How the fuck do I know he's not lying about his passport and carrying it right in his back pocket?” I muttered.

“Don't worry, there's plenty of time to fuck each other over at home, man. At least if there' three of us we split the load and therefore the sentence. It would sound more plausible to say it's for our own use if we're caught together,” Stefan said.

Fifteen minutes later we were all walking towards the car with backpacks and shopping bags among which there was the package. Once in the car, we started having serious second thoughts again.

“Look,” I said, “you may think I’m going mad, but I just think with a Romanian car we have a huge chance at getting stopped by police again and losing everything. With a bit of powders and some joints we might have passed off as tourists but there’s no way we’ll be let off with almost a kilo of grass. I just think that if we so much as see a cop we’re as good as fucked.”

“He might be right, you know,” Coco said. “But what are the chances we’ll get stopped? Lightning can’t strike twice in the same place.”

“Well not in the same place but how about a few metres down?” said Stefan. “I also feel like the risk is huge. I feel there’s impending doom on us. If we see those blue lights at the back or the front of us, we’ll go to jail and they’ll take the car. Then they’ll have to inform the rightful owner of the car, which is Coco’s mother’s company back home, that they took it. At least if it goes bad without the car nobody has to know and we might yet get ourselves out of it with minimal loss. Coco? It’s your car. In a worst case scenario how happy do you feel with police contacting the legal owner of it to say it’s been seized in a drugs operation?”

“I don’t feel great about it now you mention it. But what else is there? The train? I really don’t want to sit on a fucking train and change trains in a city centre in Germany with this on me, man. Plus, what’s going to happen with the car? Even if we get stopped, we say we found the weed and took it to smoke it ourselves not sell it. They’ll have to believe us. And we bail out the car before they tell anyone. I say we take our chances and get back as soon as possible. It’s, like, three pm, if we get going we’ll be home by midnight. In a train or a coach we’re looking at tomorrow morning.”

“How about if you drive?” Stefan said, “and George and me make our way with the shit? We’ll be inconspicuous as tourists from the Netherlands. Mind that cops watch the road into Germany a lot closer than the one out. Same for Denmark. If we got stopped going out, we’ll get stopped twice going in. You take the car, take as much time as you need, drive, rest, whatever. You got plenty of petrol and everything. Just drive it normally and all will be fine. I’ll take a train with George into Germany and in Cologne or Hamburg we’ll get a coach straight to Horsens. Nobody will know we exist. It’ll cost a bit more but we’ll settle that score back home.”

“I’m happy for you to drive it back, frankly. I’m named as a keeper on the papers, you just say you borrowed the car from me and call me if anything. I’d prefer sleeping in the train the way I feel right now.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Why can't I fucking drive and you to do all the hard work? Why does it have to be me? I'm thinking seriously to drop everything right now and go home. Part of me wants to do just that,” I threatened.

“Well, George, since it's my fucking car I kind of make the rules. And Stefan is at least thinking of all of us, as opposed to you who are only thinking of your own fucking self. So that's why he gets to drive and fucking relax as you sweat a bit more. And because I'm thinking of all of us too, I let him drive. I could just as easily do the easy work myself. So it's settled then. You come with me or you fuck off,” he said.

“Settled,” Stefan said looking at me with scorn.

“Fine.” I said. “I'm game.”

We split up. Stef drove Coco's car in the Dutch sunset and Coco and I took *the bag* and went toward Amsterdam Centraal. The more I wanted to complain the more I hated myself and agreed with them for being hard on me. I deserved it. They were thinking of all of us while I was thinking only of myself.

The first train to Cologne left in an hour. The one to Hamburg in an hour and a half. We waited for Hamburg as we knew for sure there was a coach station there where we could get on a night ride direct to Horsens.

Stefan texted Coco as we waited on the platform. He was on the motorway, close to the border.

“God help us,” he wrote.

On the train we were so exhausted from it all we shut ourselves down and slept with headphones on and hoods on our heads. The carriage was empty and there were no cops in sight. We took some diazepam to calm down and get drowsy before climbing on the coach, fearing we'd bring attention on ourselves if we were too sober, like it happened in the tram back in Amsterdam. After crossing the border into Germany I had a pang of paranoia and wanted split the weed between Coco's and my luggage and made him sit at the other end of the carriage making like we didn't know each other. But because it was in a vacuum I eventually decided against it. Thought that improved our odds of getting away with it. On the seat as the dull German landscape passed me I had visions of that wicked prostitute who I visited the night before. It never is as good as it should be with the whores. They just do this so much they hardly find any pleasure in it and it shows. And if you don't care if she's getting herself off as much with you like you are with her there must be

something missing in you. Now that I know how it is I don't think I'd ever, under normal circumstances, go back. Much better when you earn it. Any sucker can pay for it, and they probably do. You start picturing who else she's been with. But, boy, the advertising is hard to resist. The scent, the flesh. The sweet, sweet promise of unconditional love that you fall for and just the second when it's too late to walk away you realise it's not going to be like you wished. Her name was Sky, she said. Or Skye, maybe...

Amsterdam was a strange place. I scribbled some notes in a notebook I had. Flashes from the night before. The street. The circus. I made sure I wasn't putting down anything incriminating. What madness. Or were we the mad ones? The inadequate strangers. Who knew what was right anyway? In Romania there was no noise, no decadence in the street – but there was terror and debauchery behind closed doors. The need to get off your head is bottled up back home, but badly so. The Eastern influence. This gives birth to violence and tension. Mutations. Out here they don't bottle anything up and they're probably dull and bland in their homes. Relaxed. No yelling, no hate and frustration. Or maybe not. Maybe we'll never know if it's only us who were brought up ill or if everyone was like that. Maybe it happens in every country. It might do no matter where you're from.

I drifted in and out of consciousness all the way to Hamburg. I dreamed of the hooker and Gina and meadows full of poppy flowers where we three lay down and looked in the stars hand in hand. I missed her and I appreciated her even more now. Her arms would heal me with their soft embrace. The exhaustion and the pills pinned me down and I was thankful for it. On the way to the toilet a couple of times I passed Coco and saw him sleeping like a baby. The bastard was looking as happy as a pup in a bed of goose feathers. Part of me wanted to kick him for it but I let him be. It's good that at least somebody is enjoying it, I forced myself to think.

It was long dark when the train stopped. I saw Coco getting up with his phone alarm and we left the train at different ends then convened outside the station. We got coffee from a machine and looked around for the coach to Aarhus. Neither of us was in a mood to talk much. We made it this far, we thought, and we better not spoil it with precocious displays of relief. We were still another hop short before we could do that.

Coach came an hour later and the driver said we'd be there by midnight. He asked where we were from, I said Portugal and Coco said Macedonia. There were only three or four other people in there so we indulged in sitting closer to each other this time, across the aisle from each other. We popped another couple of downers and zipped back into the abyss. Sweet oblivion. I thought of new

combinations of drugs we could try. I thought I'd use myself as a lab rat and if the results were good I'd try them on my friends next and then the open market. Drug-selling is the ultimate free-market enterprise. Completely banned – so automatically when you start dealing you enter a market with no rules – completely deregulated. Economic theory in action.

When my GPS application showed we had crossed into Denmark without so much as a peep, my mood lit up considerably. I had a big sandwich and sobered myself up. Coco was already up and alert by the time we were approaching Horsens. When we got off the coach we were barely able to stop laughing. Stefan was waiting in the parking lot.

“Eeeeeeh, look at you two young travelling fucking salesmen,” he said. “Not a fucking care in the world while your faithful comrade chain-smokes in the parking lot like a maternity ward, waiting for you, thinking you were lost forever to him and the world. Come here!”

“You! You miserable, eloquent fuck! Come here! How's my car been, eh? Get me those keys!” Coco said.

We hugged like long lost brothers who've been through a war and worse. We climbed in the car and went back to the flat. Stefan had a bottle of prosecco in the car which he popped from behind the wheel.

“Crafty bugger. You got pretty good at driving didn't you?”

We drank and passed the bottle amongst us. Amazingly, we had made it back home without a scratch. We thought we would get rich the next day. Arya, Coco's girlfriend, and Gina were at the flat, waiting for us. Gina jumped into my arms and put her legs around me when I came through the door, kissing me without saying anything. I kissed her back and didn't say anything either. We all gathered in Stefan's room, which also served as a living room, and drank some more. He called one of the girls he saw sometimes to join him for the party. We poured the weed on the table. It was 20 grams less than we bought, which dampened the rush a little bit, but we calculated it should still be enough to double our money and go back for more within a month provided we didn't smoke too much.

Joints followed beers and powders. We laughed and told jokes, put on the music. We felt we loved each other and that we finally belonged. We had something together which was ours and nobody else's. It was the best feeling in the world. Gina seemed proud of me and she had a new light in her eyes, like she looked up to me, like I was somebody. I relished it and encouraged her with bravado. Mick became a fierce biker “who probably had a gun in the cupboard”. Amsterdam

was “paradise, the coolest city in the world”. And we, of course, “never doubted ourselves for a second.” The whole thing, more or less, was “a painless kill” and “no big deal”.

Towards morning, after carefully shaving all the mirrors and pieces of glass on the table for drugs leftovers, and shaking all the empty bags for residue as well, I came up with the idea of combining everything – ketamine, cocaine, speed and MDMA – into one gel cap and eat it. I thought of it like the sandwich you make with what's left after a family dinner. May be a bit chewy and hard on the stomach, but can't really do wrong. I was right. It blew off my gaskets and after about half an hour of incoherent gibberish and laughter I came back to myself and took Gina to bed. Everyone was passed out on the floor as the sun came up. We made love and promised each other care and happiness.

“I feel you are my man,” she told me as we went to sleep.

“Likewise, babe. You are my woman,” I said.

The next day we put out the word there was new weed in town and got to work. People were wary at first, but we promised them good size bags, so they came. With the money I got on the first day I went to a drug dealer and bought five grams of ketamine, five of cocaine, five of speed and five of MDMA, then I went to the pharmacy and got some gel caps. I had an idea.

I combined the MDMA and cocaine – half and half – into gel caps, thirty in total, and called it Life of the Party. I did the same with the speed and ketamine and called it Raver's Delight. Figured we'd launch a new product line – weekend specials – and stick to weed during weekdays. The boys loved both the idea and the product. I had to lock the pills away just to keep them from popping them like candy. Gina was only rarely taking the drugs but she sure loved the high of being around someone who sold them, which motivated me tremendously to carry on. University faded rapidly into the background of my life.

We had returned to Horsens brothers in arms, baptised in the small fire of the marijuana pipes that lit everywhere we went. We flew to another world where morality doesn't exist and the only cardinal sin was failure. We were unbound from the trivial expectations of the provincial towns we were born in. We found an exit clause in the small print of the new social contract. We owed nothing to the Danes or the Germans nor did we feel any human rapport with them. They weren't either superiors or direct enemies but distant neighbours who we envied. We never cared what they thought of us. It was a liberating feeling. By the time the second week ended we were cash rich, but asset poor. We had to make plans for replenishing our supply, which meant another

trip to the Netherlands. I also got a part-time night job at a furniture warehouse, simply in order to find more clients among the immigrant workers. It was part of our strategy to avoid the aboriginals.

We figured this time two of us would go by train and come back through another route so as to not be spotted by the same conductors in some freak occurrence. We were really careful about planning it. Between the dealing and working nights in the furniture warehouse for 100 kroner an hour, things were looking up. Gina all but moved in with me and we'd spend every living moment together. We'd wake up, make love, make breakfast, go shopping, I'd make a few stops to drop some weed on the way, come back home, play music, watch movies, read, make love, go swimming and partying with our new friends every night. The summer came and the sight of it on the Horsens fjord made me into a romantic. I let my hair grow and we'd throw parties at the beach, with big speakers. We sold my Raver's Delight and Life of the Party to make up for our own consumption and a bit on the side, and everyone wanted to join in. We played reggae tunes as dusk came at ten, eleven in the evening and we played house as light broke out at three or four in the morning. Everyone was smoking weed and dancing, drinking beer and laying on the beach or jumping in the water. People were hopping off the wooden pier into the blue fjord with their clothes on and sparks were flying from the bonfire. In the North it never gets dark during the month of July.

The cops came to the beach and went but didn't bother us. Horsens was a sleepy, boring pigmarket town before the university came and we with it. I think they liked the new wave of young foreigners from all over the world spending money and working cheaply everywhere there was an opening. We didn't complain much, didn't get ill much and always paid our taxes. The authorities didn't give us a hard time at all. Night after summer night we did this. Five or six in the morning we packed up the speakers and the generator and drove back to the flat.

Gina held my hand every one of those nights. Her red hair in the wind and in that Scandinavian glare, where the sky is so close to you you can grab a cloud and inhale it, and her soft, all-understanding smile, were making me feel new. I never wanted to go back to the dull life I had before, and all the worries. We'd take mushrooms together, listen to Apache and Sufi songs and dream of leaving this world together and making our own somewhere in one of these fjords. The glory days. We were tanned and became accustomed to each other. She taught me to stop caring and wear shades even if I can only see properly with my glasses. Because she was born rich this sort of thing came naturally to her but I took a long time to learn it. I felt rich too, now, and by my own standards I really was. I never had, or saw, so much cash in my life. I had about 20,000 kroner in my bank account, about 10,000 in my drawer and about five or six thousand at any given time in weed, mushrooms and powders.

“I love you, Gina,” I told her.

“I love you too,” she texted me a few hours later while I was out on a delivery.

The rich girls I got with even as a high school pupil always possessed a nonchalant detachment from the mundane concerns of life. They enthralled me with their sufficiency; I knew they didn't usually care about me but as a matter of fact I believed that they don't care about anything, and that was a large part of their appeal. I knew they saw me as a plaything, a delinquent who they'd happily sleep with and go out exploring the seedy part of town at night but they'd never invite over to their parents home, or ever leave alone with their bag or jewellery box. I was an intruder on their elevated plane of existence. I was borrowing their lives for a few hours and I loved it. In this regard, the usury was mutual. Only this time, I went way beyond that with Gina. The thing had evolved and it now had a life on its own. I felt I was in uncharted territory. I was in some kind of love with her, or with the life I could live when she was around. Ileana, I knew, would disapprove, but I couldn't afford to think too much about Ileana lest it ruined everything.

Gina's father had a coffee processing plant in Colombia, a financial consultancy in Frankfurt and a cargo distribution centre in a Romanian port. His wife slept with his driver and sometimes with Gina's boyfriend, and he slept with his secretaries and with prostitutes on three continents. He drove a black Range Rover and owned five houses and apartments. Gina hated him and told me the life his parents made for her made her feeble and confused emotionally.

“My heart is still at the age of fifteen, when I first discovered how they were cheating on each other,” she told me.

“I'm so sorry baby, I promise nothing like that is ever going to happen with us.”

I fell for her hard. Two weeks after we first met at that party we were living together in my room on Ormsgade, telling each other long-forgotten stories. We drank and smoked ourselves silly, spending as much as possible in bed and in any case avoiding the outside world. We got lost in each other, we were each other's outside world. For a few months we neglected everything else but ourselves utterly. What prevented us from going away to a desert island to live the rest of our days in peace, we wondered at times.

But society would not stay buried much longer; tensions appeared when our money ran out. I lost my warehouse job due to too much fun, and the boys and I hadn't yet gone back to Amsterdam. Gina took exception with my idea to phone up her parents and ask them to send some cash, so I had to phone mine. I got a lecture about me being the one who was supposed to send them

money from abroad, like all the other wandering sons in the neighbourhood, and I got a stark reminder that I was a loser who didn't sound like he was doing well at all in his university course. In other words, mother had me clocked from the other end of the continent, just by the sound of my voice. Resentment toward Gina germinated inside me for this.

Because we needed to cover bills and food, and the summer was over, there was not much partying anymore – either with each other or with our once-broad circle. We had found ourselves with too much time on our hands. I was half-heartedly looking for jobs during the day and scribbling notes in my notebook to pass the time, while she listened to endless remixes of minimalist electronic music on her headphones. Part of me started to miss the old country a little, but I decided to get myself out of it.

I needed something to impress Gina with. I felt she was getting bored. I read the Anarchist's Cookbook and started to shoplift clothes and drink. You have to know what you want if you don't know what it looks like, I figured. When I showed her how I changed prices for clothes and bought nice ones for the price of rags, she became interested and started doing it herself. If there was a pair of jeans or a leather jacket that I liked but had an alarm tag on, I'd go to the till with it making like I'd buy it. The shopkeeper would remove the tag with the special key they have and then my credit card would be declined, so the item stayed in the shop, tagless. The next day I'd go in and either swap price tags with some cheap discount item and buy it from the self-service till, or I just put it on and walk out right through the front door. I don't think Horsens had seen much shoplifting before then – everyone was oblivious.

In the supermarket, I'd pile a lot of groceries, crisps, cheesy puffs, newspapers, towels, random objects, on top of bottles of gin, vodka and whisky – which back then didn't have safety tags. Then I'd take the basket out to the self-service till, pay for the cheap stuff but leave the booze in the basket and I'd walk out with the lot. Nobody would bat an eyelid. Other times I'd take a large case of beer and lay it on the floor by the counter. I'd walk up with a basketful of noodles and chopped tomatoes to the shopkeeper and while she was busy bagging and scanning it for me I'd push the crate out to Gina, then distract the shopkeeper as Gina got out with the case and nobody seemed to notice. It was too easy. Could it be that the Danes were so embarrassed by our savage thievery that they couldn't bring themselves to acknowledge it when we were blatantly performing these stunts in front of their eyes? Because it was almost inevitably native Danes working these tills in the shops. If they were aware of what we were doing but refrained from speaking out, it didn't do them any favours. Of course we bragged about this profusely to everyone who'd listen, and of course

they started shoplifting everywhere themselves. It spread like wildfire. I think after a time of us doing this they introduced alarms for bottles and tightened security in the shops.

Gina got pretty good at it. She came up with a genius idea: we'd hang around the mall, waiting for people to come out of expensive clothes shops. We'd watch who throws away their receipts and pick the crumpled bits of paper up from the bins discreetly. Then we'd go in the shop, steal a copy of whatever was on those receipts, and the day after that we'd go back again and return the stolen things, for cold hard cash. We shared this ultimate scam with nobody and we were very happy to be finally earning again. It turned out easier and more profitable than even selling weed – something I thought was hardly possible until then. It was an unlimited supply of money: designer handbags, jeans, boots, sunglasses, underwear, suits, ties. These things, in the good shops, cost fortunes. When people didn't throw away their receipts fast enough Gina would simply go up to them and ask, playing in her hair and glancing sideways with those black eyes like she tried not to forget something:

“Sorry, do you have a piece of paper? I need to write down a phone number quickly.”

Nine times out of ten they'd give her the winning receipt. Our relationship was once again fulminating. We were having sex in the private booths of clothes shops and in the toilet of the mall. After a few weeks of this we made plans for a holiday. I'd given Stefan my share for the next batch of weed and with the rest of the money I booked tickets to Sardinia for Gina and I. It was late August and rather cold in Denmark but the Italian islands were still hot. We took off on a Ryanair flight two days later for less than the taxi fare to the airport.

For me, Sardinia looked more exotic and quietly decadent than I'd ever dare imagine. When we got there, on an arid prairie with dirt roads and stone villas overshadowed by orange trees, olive trees and vines, I thought I was in heaven. Gina, who had been outside Europe before and had seen other Mediterranean countries, was distinctly unimpressed.

“Let's get a hotel room, some food, and go to the beach. The food here is great.”

I agreed with her, but got distracted when I saw the seaside castle of Alghero taking a contour against the spotless blue sky. The old people there had a well-worn roughness to their complexions, with tan, wind-sculpted wrinkles on their faces and deep looks in their eyes. They were used to looking far into the sea. Us mountain people gazed differently, we held our eyes open wider, being used to not having too great distances to ponder.

We found a room in a tourist villa right on the beach. It cost €70 a night and included a fridge full of supermarket food from the previous residents. The sun shone and a gentle wind fluttered the large white curtains to our narrow door which opened a few metres from the waves. The restaurant we went to served big pints of Italian beer and fresh seafood, with margherita pizza as a starter for about the same price we paid for a large kebab back in Denmark. By the time we finished our meal I had decided that I'd not take the plane back but instead make a life for myself there as a bohemian fisherman.

“You can be my bohemian fisherman's wife, babe,” I said.

I bought a bottle of vodka and paced the beach for about a mile right up to the castle holding Gina's hand. Her hair and my linen shirt mixed together in the quick breeze as we walked barefoot. We looked at each other and smiled. I took swigs of vodka right from the bottle, and listened to a slow violin song that played in my head with the sound of waves.

The castle of Alghero was built inside a large medieval citadel with huge walls and watchtowers right on the rough cliffs by the sea. The waves smashed violently in the cliffs which were the foundation to the castle. The walls on the sea-facing side were covered in foam and the noise this spectacle made was terrific. We stood in awe. After a few minutes during which Gina respected my contemplative silence, she got bored and pulled me away.

“Let's look at the shops,” she said.

“Goddamit,” I said, “you're insatiable. Haven't you had enough of that?” I asked her with scorn, thinking she meant she wanted us to go rob the poor, wonderful shopkeepers of Alghero.

“This time we're paying for it, you pig,” she replied.

She wanted a linen dress, to go with my shirt. She got that and a pair of red stiletto shoes, which made her look even more beautiful and curvaceous than she already was. We went back to the beach, took the clothes off and got in the water. We stayed on the beach until sunset, holding each other and drinking vodka. The stars in the clear Sardinian sky were the clearest. I could never have thought that such beauty could lay all around a living man at once. Sardinia is an island where there is little human intervention compared to the rest of Europe, and as such little light on the ground to take away from the glitter on the ceiling. At this pace a week went by until eventually the money ran out again and I changed my mind about my life as a fisherman, so we went back to Horsens just in time not to miss the return flights.

Then, Gina's father told her he'd buy her a brand new car if she passed her license from the first go. She accepted the challenge without much pondering, and thinking her odds would be better in Romania, she packed her bags and left, just as another year at university was starting in earnest.

"I'll come back in a while, George. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." And she was gone.

Gina sometimes wrote on the internet and told me she missed me and wanted to be with me, but I felt I had lost her and was just clinging to her because I didn't want to face up to being alone. I got the impression she took pity in me and felt guilty for choosing a car over me and that's why she sometimes sweet-talked me into believing we still had something.

I looked up Ileana again and wrote to her full of regret and remorse. She was disappointed in me but at least she talked to me.

"You got yourself in exactly the mess you deserve, George. I wouldn't be surprised if you got arrested, to be frank. I think in fact that you should get arrested. And you also need to come home to convince your parents you aren't a junkie. Rumours around here are that you are a drug addict and your mother is worried sick. She is suffering," she said.

Strangely, that was the first time I had ever encountered the thought that I might be in a bad situation. I thought I was doing well, but Ileana's words made me think differently. And the rumours at home were worrying too. I didn't much care for what my parents thought but I didn't want to send my mother to an early grave either. I wrote to my parents a load of lies, how university was going well, how the lecturers were taking notice of me, and how I loved what I was doing. I added that I had in fact only taken a break from the warehouse job and I was now back on. Feeling better, I started cracking the books to catch up.

There were thousands of people at the university, most of them foreigners from all over the world. In Global Business Engineering semester one, my class, there were 20 Danes, five Poles, six Romanians, one guy from Ghana, a girl from Sri Lanka, a married couple from Tunisia, an American, an Australian, three from Iceland, one from Nigeria, one from Hungary, one from Slovakia, one from Lithuania, one from Latvia, nine from Spain, one from Argentina and one from Brazil. It was a dazzling scale of ethnic diversity if you thought about it. I almost thought they gave us places not by our abilities but by nationality. They wanted the UN utopia and we wanted it too. We were happy with the arrangement.

Apart, of course, from Paulina, who was a Romanian girl at Marketing Management semester one, who flew in on the same plane as me and our mothers met in the airport. I didn't keep up with her too much but she once mentioned in passing in the university canteen that her mother and mine were now keeping in touch. The women had bonded over their emigrated offspring. It could only have been this woman then who was spreading the rumours about me that Ileana mentioned. She must have seen me high sometime and told her mother. In turn, her mother, as between friends, told my mother that I took drugs, and my mother must have freaked out and told someone else, also in confidence. And now everyone was talking about what a drug addict I had become and dragging my mother into a feedback loop that was undoubtedly driving her mad. I was livid, when I first put this theory together. I wanted to track down Pauline and put the fear of God into her but that would have made things worse, I realised. I decided to play it tactically.

I called my parents the next day and told them everything was fine, university was good and my grades were the best I've ever had. I told them again that the lecturers love me and they are fighting over getting me as a permanent lab assistant, but my heart was set on business management, not academia, and that was the end of it. I was working hard in the warehouse and money was scarce but I was getting by and enjoyed myself.

“I read in my spare time. I don't go out much, I prefer to rest. One day I'll be a CEO, mom, you'll read about me in the finance newspapers.”

“And listen!” I added. “I know you see those films on TV where all the university students take drugs and drink all day, but that's really not how it is. Denmark is a very peaceful country. There are no drugs here. OK Ma?”

Out of desperation for some good news or just out of happiness to hear I could articulate semi-coherent speech, she seemed to have bought it.

“Good boy, George. You keep at it. Momma loves you – you let me know if there's anything you need,” her voice twinkled down the line.

“Will do, Ma. Talk again soon. I miss you!”

Meanwhile I was still depressed because of Gina and the guys, labelling me a downer, went to Amsterdam themselves for the resupply. I was thankful for it. Everything had gone well and with zero effort on my part within days we were flush again. I took the lead on dealing to make up for the missed run and I spent most of my time either between drops or making bags at home. I felt I owed it to the guys and it kept me busy with something other than sulking about Gina. I was really

disciplined and thorough this time and in a zealous pang decided to go as far as to pay myself for the weed I was smoking and demand the same from the boys. At the beginning they were skeptical.

“I believe it will help us break even much faster. Last time we dipped a little too much into it. Like they say, don't get high on your own supply,” I expounded. “I believe we could...”

“You believe? You know what I believe?” interrupted Coco with consternation in his voice.

“What?” I asked, earnestly.

“Fuck you! I didn't go all the way to fucking Amsterdam to have to fucking pay for it when I get here. I want my cut,” he added. “Now.”

“OK, calm down now. I take your point Coco but we did dip quite a lot last time, he's right on that one. Maybe we could pay for it for a week and see if it works,” Stefan said. “It's a game anyway, we'll be using the same money we get from selling it to the punters. It's still paying for itself, like,” he said.

“Yea,” I jumped, “that's exactly right.”

“You can keep the money for it out of my cut,” Coco bargained. “I'm not paying for my own weed. It's stupid, like we're robbing ourselves.”

“No,” Stefan said. “It's not about that. You must pay for it yourself, with your own hand, otherwise the act doesn't register. Otherwise it's like giving yourself a credit card for weed. Why do you think people use their credit cards like fools? Their brains don't register the expenses they rack up. I've read some shit on this. It's financial psychology,” said Stefan.

“Right on,” I offered. “Psychology, Coco. You have to attach a daily cost to the consumption otherwise the profits will go down.”

He gave in and two weeks later business was better than ever. It was a triple bonus because we spent less time getting high and more time working, making money faster, as well as selling the product we saved from our own smoking. Our consumption went down from about a gram and a half a day each – so nearly five grams a day – to about a gram a day for all three. We were onto some breakthrough economic theory of productivity with this. We could have gone for a prize, but since that academic year was beyond salvation because we missed so many classes, we decided to go to Barcelona and party instead. None of us had ever been there before, so we booked the low cost flights right after our weed was due to run out again.

The Catalan city was sunny and full of tourists. We stayed in a hostel next to the Rambla, where save for the television in Spanish and the staff speaking Catalan, you could have sworn you were in America. The food was mediocre and the bars were bad, full of old people and drunkards. Young people drank in the street. We decided to get high and drink on the beach that night, but first see the sights. Gaudi's park and house were good, like taking a tour through a child's dream. An old man was playing a peculiar instrument in one of the more cavernous parts of the place, where the sound had strange echoes. It was a deformed acoustic guitar with two handles and the sounds the man was making on it with his long nails were mesmerising. Like he tried to tell us a story without words, the ballad of some desperadoes who took a bad turn somewhere and ended up in this maze of a park. The song had a symphonic streak to it.

We smoked what little weed we brought with us on the plane and went to the Sagrada Familia – “a temple for all faiths, but let faithless not go in,” according to the guides. We went in. This one also seemed quite strange and amorphous, like a sand castle or a Dali painting. Were Gaudi and Dali related? I didn't know much about either art or architecture but I got a distinct feeling the Catalans had an impish character which reflected in their weird city. The light broke up in rainbows on the walls. That was just about all the decoration. No furniture, no painting and no windows – it was unfinished. The facades and the spires didn't match each other. It looked to me like a sandcastle.

On the beach, we sat with big bottles of San Miguel and drank but had to move twice because wherever we sat couples of teenagers would come with blankets and they had sex, in broad daylight, in front of everybody. We were the only ones who felt embarrassed. We couldn't understand it. All three of us were completely thrown by the ways of this new city. Did these people have no inhibitions? Or had the buildings driven them mad? Our Orthodox Romanian upbringing started boiling inside us but we tried to be tolerant. We forced ourselves to laugh about it.

Later in the evening as Stefan and I were trying to score a little hash, a dealer took us to his apartment in an old Gothic building, up seven flights of steep stone stairs. He opened the door and asked us to go in the hallway. Then he said we had to wait five minutes, he walked out and locked us in. We got scared. We went into a room and there was a skinny black guy on a mattress smoking something that looked like we had heard heroin looked like from a tinfoil. He spoke no English. In a French patois he said he was from Mali. He had a shabby pair of shorts and nothing else. There was a pair of scissors on the table, which Stefan grabbed without even trying to be discreet about it. I sat on a cast iron chair in the middle of the room. We looked at each other and we understood we were

sharing, maybe for the first time in our lives, a genuine fear of getting killed. We were sweating and our hands were shaking. The guy on the mattress looked up, said-

“Ca va, jeunes hommes?” and offered us his tinfoil. We refused. There were low voices murmuring in the other room.

“We should break the door and run. I have a bad feeling,” I said to Stefan.

“OK. You try to break the door, but it’s going to be hard from the inside, and I stay behind you with the scissors if they attack us.”

We went to the hallway and the door. Another door, to what looked like had once been a kitchen, was open now and there stood our dealer. We hadn't heard him coming in. He was in pains trying to break a chunk of hash into equal halves.

“Open the door.” Stefan said.

The dealer said the smaller half was 20 euro, the bigger one 30. Stefan showed him the scissors and said

“40, all of it. And open the door now.”

“Hey, cool down,” I told him.

I got out the money, took the hash, and paid the dealer. He opened the door and before we knew it, we were back on the Rambla.

“Jesus man. That was the first time I saw a real junkie. Have you noticed there are absolutely no police in here? I need a drink,” I said.

He nodded in agreement.

“This town has a big problem if people like us feel the need for more police,” quipped Stefan.

In an Irish pub we met Coco.

“This is a weird place. We should have gone to Valencia,” he said.

We couldn't have agreed more. We drank whisky in silence, then beer, then more whisky. At nightfall we had a large joint each and went walking on the streets. I had my wallet in the back pocket of my trousers and a couple of juveniles walked up behind me, took it and ran away. They were no older than 17. I couldn't believe the nerve of these brats. By the time I realised what was

happening, Stefan and Coco were both running after the two devils. When they saw that, the kid with my wallet took the money, without stopping, and threw it. We all stopped.

“How much was there?” Coco asked.

“50 euros,” I said.

“Well. Good that you have your ID and your credit cards,” said Stefan.

“Thanks to you. If you hadn't run I would have been done for. Drinks on me but at the hotel. No more of these mean streets for us.”

Off we went. The next day consisted of a breakfast, a beer on the hostel's porch, and a flight back home. We hadn't been ready for Barcelona, and Denmark seemed friendlier than ever when we returned.

Pavel, Coco's roommate, who had spent the summer with his girlfriend in Liverpool, England, taking an internship, had just returned, making us feel like losers for not living in the legal world. We decided to take a break to salvage whatever possible from our courses, hoping that by divine mercy we wouldn't have to repeat the year. Tuition was free, but we still thought highly enough of ourselves to wish we weren't the dunces of the class.

Pavel came back from Liverpool a different man. He was playing the guitar daily, and had got good at it. Three months before when he left he was a quiet, lazy young man who didn't do much but play computer games. Now he was telling us how he worked in the music industry in Great Britain, finding new bands and helping them make a name for themselves on the internet and in Liverpool's night clubs.

“It was easy, good music is everywhere in that country. On the radio, in the bars, in people's cars. Everyone knows someone who's in a band and every other band has something going for it at least for a while. I mean, it's the country of the Stones and the Beatles, you know?”

We were mesmerized by Pavel. He had pierced his ears with big, 10 millimetre wide flesh tunnels that you could see clearly through. His new attitude was silent but thoughtful and it seemed like nothing got past him. He was witty and relaxed. He had a look of playful wisdom in his eye.

“Pure class, man. The buildings, the people. It's a huge country and it's supposed to be European but it's really not. It's unique. You can't explain it, you have to be there to know what I'm talking about,” he kept telling us. “London, Liverpool, Bristol, Brighton, Newcastle... it is a place of charm and art.”

I ordered a stretchers for my ear off a website – a spike made of plastic that was meant to stretch a regular piercing hole into a flesh tunnel. I went to the pharmacy and bought grey IV needles, the thickest they had, the ones they use to change peoples' blood. Pavel offered to do my piercing but I bought two big bottles of Jim Beam and went home. I locked myself in my room, turned up the music and drank one bottle in about two hours. Soon I could barely stand up. I went to the bathroom, took off my shirt, got my head under a cold shower, wiped, poured aftershave in my hand and smeared it on my left ear. Then I took a deep breath, held it down and took the IV needle from the side of the sink, uncapped it, dipped it in aftershave and pointed it at my ear, while holding the lobe with the other hand. I touched the skin with the tip of the needle and chickened out. I was afraid it would hurt even in this state of stupor.

I paused, exhaled, took another deep breath and tried again. This time I pushed the thing in more, but to my surprise the meat and the hide were tougher than I anticipated. It didn't hurt, but it wouldn't go through either. I took another breath. I put two fingers behind my ear and with the palm of my other hand I just pushed as hard as I could against the needle. It resisted a moment then it gave. I relaxed and looked in the mirror. My ear was red but there wasn't much blood. I exhaled and waited. With the needle through my ear I went to the bedroom, opened the other bottle, took a gulp and took it with me back to the bathroom. I decided to get it over with. I took out the long stretcher, dipped it in bourbon, then took out the needle and put the stretcher in the hole. Only the tip of it would go in by itself and it barely made it to the other side. It also stung like hell. I smeared some cream on both sides of the ear to lube it up, then pushed. I felt my flesh tearing, ripping apart, and it stung badly for a moment but there was still not much pain, just this drumbeat coming from the earlobe that I had just mutilated. A dull pulse and heat in the flesh. The stratcher had gone halfway. I put on some more cream, took another gulp, then a breath and made the final push. The flesh tore again, and blood started dripping on my shoulder, but it was done. I soaked it in aftershave, then cream, then I put two little gaskets at either end, like I saw on a Youtube video, to make sure it didn't slip while I slept. It was a Tuesday in September. I can't remember what kind of music I had on, probably the radio.

The university had automatically rescheduled me for the exams that year after I forfeited them by absence at first sitting. Danes had a wonderfully modern system whereby you got as many chances as you needed to take the exams, for as long as you needed, at no cost, until you passed the hurdle.

The idea, the dean explained in a plenary, was based on the inherent human honesty the Danes made a great show of believing in. Universities – privately-owned but state-funded – would teach students in the best way they saw fit, and government teachers in Copenhagen would mark all exams, which were anonymised, and only pay for those students who passed. That is how universities got their funding, half from the state and half from corporations who had their middle managers trained up in them. This system was the reason my university decided to allow a large influx of foreign students in – Danes simply didn't apply in large enough numbers and the faculty needed cash. I discovered the university, keen for the students to pass exams, was not inclined to prosecute cheaters too aggressively. That's how I passed that first year – by submitting papers I plagiarised from Romanian works, so they couldn't trace it back with their software, and by cheating exams with my mobile phone in my lap, because the supervisors were always old ladies who didn't bother to walk between the desks as the trial took place. They usually read their newspapers and dozed off.

I took down chemistry, computer science, marketing communications, renewable energy, physics, algebra and geometry like they were internet surveys. The problem arose when I was faced with a six-hour exam that combined computer programming – to be written on paper – advanced calculus with some kind of open-ended integrals and a mechanics problem – all of which focussed not on the answer but on the method. All cheating was thus rendered useless. I sat through the whole thing scribbling on the spare sheets, at the end feigning illness and walking out without handing anything in. It was safer to not hand anything in because I feared that whatever I wrote there would reveal the true depth of my ignorance and move the university to review all my past exams. The trouble was that this mega-exam didn't include any new subjects. Rather it evaluated old subjects that we've already supposedly learned and passed, but this time marking our “creativity” and “problem-solving” neither of which we were prepared academically for. It was some new government programme they rolled out unexpectedly to all technical universities, specially designed to show how Denmark has one of the most progressive education systems in the world. It was really touchy shit, something to do with taunting China, we gathered from the lecturers, who were as puzzled by it as we were. The Chinese were forcing their students to learn

everything mechanically, you see, like machines, the story went, and the Danes wanted to prove their methods were better through this act of scholarly one-upmanship. They even talked about it on television, for God's sake. Half my year failed. They rescheduled it three months later and rebranded the first one as a test run.

I went to the rector, or, in their lingo, programme manager, to make it sound more corporate and thus help us adjust to the world of work better – and begged him for an exemption. It was out of the question. He said many other students had failed, but only seven did like me and turned out a blank exam paper at the end. The trouble with these exam papers was that they had serial numbers and they had to be sent in any which condition back to the central in Copenhagen. The central, the rector said, was asking questions about these students who filed in blank exam.

“Why did you not even try?” He asked me.

“I was afraid to, sir. I thought I'd get it all wrong and preferred to plead with you for some deal. I mean, it just took me by surprise when it was announced.”

“OK. The thing to remember when you take it again is there's not just right and wrong, it's the method and the thinking that you show in the calculations that matter too, alright? As opposed to a normal exam, you do get points for just trying, as long as it's coherent.”

“That's what I'm afraid of,” I said.

“Six other people told me this,” he said, intrigued. “Nothing I can do but wish you good luck.”

Unfortunately, all six were also Romanian. The rector couldn't legally bring this up as an issue because of discrimination policies, but it was obvious that he felt uncomfortable with the situation. Turns out the Romanian education system wasn't that different from the Chinese... if only the silly Danes had realised this earlier, before handing a few tens of thousands of high school graduates straight from the communist learning pits of Eastern Europe, the keys to their pristine and forward-thinking temples of enlightened achievement. In the end, I learned, the European Union paid the Danish government for our tuition, through cohesion funds.

We would be closely watched, the rector said. His name was Anders, a high-strung, bald and skinny man who tried, as far as I saw, to imitate Steve Jobs. He gave you the impression that he was trying to prove himself to his bosses through you, and he would be furious if made to look bad. The more I thought about it the drowsier I felt. I was so terrified I actually made a sincere attempt at studying the whole subject going back a full year. It gave me nightmares and I had to give up after four days. My family had sent me there to become an engineer, and without passing this I couldn't graduate. “Obligatory assessment.” I could take the coward's way out and transfer sideways to some marketing course but in the eyes of my grandmother it would be the same as dropping out. My

uncle and my father – both her sons – had been engineers to varying degrees of failure, but they did at least graduate. My grandfather – her husband – had been a car mechanic, a crack electrician and a welder and metalworker, and had always wanted to be an engineer. It would break her heart if I failed too and I couldn't stand the thought of it. I stopped eating. I didn't really care what my parents thought one way or the other but I really, really didn't want my grandma to be disappointed in me. I quaked every morning I woke up in this predicament. There was no way out of it. Catastrophe lay right in front of me and I got ever closer to it with every breath I drew. I started to devise ways of killing myself but making it look like an accident. I preferred ten times over to face Satan than my let-down grandmother. I vowed that if I failed this it would be the end of me – I'd change my name, shave my head, grow a beard, throw away all my possessions and stowaway to South Africa on a ship out of Hamburg. I'd never set foot in Romania or Denmark again.

After a week of agonising and drinking myself to sleep every night I quietly approached Mihai, one of the other seven who were in the same boat as I.

“Didn't Stefan tell you? We have a plan lined up,” he gloated.

I was stunned. I couldn't believe my own friend would do me like this. Stefan, the traitor, hadn't said a word about handing in a blank exam. I thought he had passed.

“He mentioned it in passing,” I lied to Mihai. “But we were busy and didn't have time to catch up. Can I buy you lunch?”

We went to a bistro in the pedestrian strip of the town centre, got two large platters of chilli con carne with nachos and cheese, pints of Tuborg, and he ran me through it:

“Look, we're all chipping in 500 krone, and one of us will make a copy of the subjects on a small piece of paper. We'll take it to the loo and hide it in the reservoir, and someone – who we're paying – will get it, solve it and leave seven different sets of correct answers there. In six hours we're all going to have enough time to go to the toilet, get the papers, mix them with our spare drafts, and pass the fucking thing. Whaddaya think?”

“Sounds great, Mihai. I'm game. And really happy you decided to bring me into this. It's miles more than anything else I figured out. When can I pay you?”

And we shook on it. I paid him the 500, plus the meal and gave him a rather fat bag of weed for his trouble. I didn't want to know who the person solving our problem was. I was pretty sure this constituted a criminal conspiracy if money was changing hands, so the less I knew about it the better.

I knocked on Stefan's door the next day, eager for an argument. I was half-expecting the backstabbing idiot would even try to fight me, so I resolved to talk to him in the narrow hallway

where he had less space to swing a punch. He opened the door with a groggy face and asked me to come in.

“Why the fuck didn't you tell me of your plan to cheat the exam? You thought I wouldn't find out? And why would you do this to me after all we've been through?” I blustered.

“Hey, calm down, man. I was gonna tell you when I got round to it. I thought you didn't give a shit. Don't get at me like that for no reason, man. I'm still your friend, so fuck you, eh?” He said.

It dawned on me that him and everyone else could be excused for believing the exam meant nothing to me. That was my behaviour since I started the course. Thinking of this made me a little sad – for the first time I saw myself through the eyes of my peers and I didn't like it.

“So, are you in or out?” I asked.

“Well, man, I'm in because I have no choice, but I've been thinking. I've been seeing strange things around the street lately. I won't grow weed anymore after this batch is finished. We'll sell this one off and then no more for me. I'm out. We've done so much shit in here and always thought we were the big men. Now we're dragging this poor nerd into our mess with the exam. I'm starting to get sick of all of it, you know?”

“What geek man? What strange things? All I know is it costs 500 kroner.”

“You know Sanda, right? The poor peasant girl from some village in Suceava?” he said.

Hell, didn't want to know that. I knew Sanda, and she was really a tragic case. She had come to Denmark on her own money after working as a waitress for two years after highschool. Her parents were dirt-poor and illiterate and they all slept in a mud shack in a village in the plains. A bad situation, but the girl was so straight and worked so hard she put them all to shame. As soon as she arrived in Denmark she got a job as a cleaner in a hotel from four am every morning and then she came to class. She didn't miss one class, but she never came to parties or barbecues. She worked, studied and kept to herself.

“What? Why would she do that for a few hundred? Didn't she have a job at the hotel?” I asked, vexed.

“I hear her father is ill back home and she needs all the cash she can get to send him for medicine. They have it really fucking bad down there man, I don't know. I wasn't the one talked her into this anyway, but it's no good. And I keep seeing the same three or four cars driving slowly around everywhere I go lately. I think we're under surveillance,” he said.

“No man, you're just paranoid. Nobody's following us. I would have seen something. Don't worry about that,” I blurted.

Truth was of course that there could have been a Soviet tank in the bathroom when I went to take a dump, I still wouldn't have noticed with the state my mind was in the past few days. This new information only made it worse and I didn't want to be involved with any of it.

“Look man, now you're in, just keep your cool, OK?” said Stefan, as if reading my mind. “Don't let anything happen to get us caught. If this girl gets into trouble because we couldn't pass a fucking exam I'll never forgive myself.” he said.

“OK,” I said. “Me either.”

Stefan walked out of the apartment with a bad frown. We barely spoke to each other after that, and as the exam got closer we were avoiding each other completely. To get busted for drugs in Denmark, as students, was an honour almost, something we never truly believed would haunt us for the rest of our lives, but this thing was ugly. It was petty for one, no glory in it, and it was exploitative of Sanda. Part of me wanted to look her up and tell her to return the money, and pay her it out of my own pocket. I left the flat to do this one afternoon but didn't know where she lived so I just ended up standing in the rain for a couple of hours next to the library hoping she'd show. She didn't.

All the signs were wrong on the big day. The university's main hall was totally empty. I hoped it would fill up later otherwise people would ask questions about what Sanda was doing there, an eminent student who long since passed her exam, on the same day a bunch of flunkies retook theirs. The seven of us convened for cigarettes behind the university at 7 am in the morning. We were to gather in the room at 7:30, get registered and start the exam at 8. Neither of us had slept well. We looked at each other and offered half-hearted encouragement.

“Just be cool and shut up. Everything will be fine. She said she'll do more versions just to be sure. Stick to the plan, OK?” Mihai pled. We nodded.

Coco sent Stefan and I the same text: “Good luck, motherfuckers. See you later.”

He had been spending all his time with Arya, his artsy girlfriend, and we hadn't seen much of him after Pavel got back. He took his cut, did his rounds and kept away from us. As far as we knew he spent most of his time with the girl, driving around and smoking. He was happy and we resented him for it. We wanted him to be here and share the pain like we used to share it before. It seemed unfair.

We went in. Instead of the usual old lady, the rector greeted us.

“How are you on this fine morning?” he poked. “I have big hopes! Please sign your names on this paper and then on this one, each of you.”

It was a contract that said we committed to take the exam fairly, without cheating or collaborating – on our “honour and responsibility”, and we agreed by signing to sustain the full

consequences of the rules if suspicions had been raised to the contrary. This had never happened before in any of the exams. Was it a trap? Had Sanda, the treacherous bitch who I pitied just a minute ago, turned us in? I could see the discomfort in the others' eyes as they scrawled their names on Anders' dotted line. After collecting the contracts, in the door, Anders turned, sought each of us seven out, looked each in the eye for a moment, and then turned again and disappeared. An old lady walked in. The supervisor.

What followed were probably the longest three hours in the history of clock-watching. I couldn't get it together long enough to pretend convincingly that I was working on the incomprehensible subject. Every 5 ticks of the clock's arm I looked up and then looked back down again quickly as if not wanting to let Time know my anxiety, lest the cruel god moved even slower still to persecute me.

My palms were so sweaty I could barely hold the pen. It became slippery and it made it harder to keep jotting down nonsense. I drew stick men, triangles, flowers, with a shaking hand. My mind had regressed to a state of early childhood, but not so my imagination. If they caught us Sanda's life would be destroyed. Now I regretted ever getting myself into this situation and thought that I would have been better off if I walked out without handing in anything again. Damn the exam and damn Global Business Engineering. A riptide of sorrow. I never wanted it. It was all an accident. I'll leave, pick up the pieces and start over with something I really was good at, somewhere I could get a real job, where I could learn the language of my fellow citizens, I decided.

Instead of hating all those happy people who got up early in the morning eager to work, enjoying mildly what they did and spending long nights at the office just to make small advances in their projects, I should admire them. Even if by some diabolical miracle I did manage to pass this exam, where would it lead me? I would be no abler an engineer than I'd be a free-diver or a heart surgeon. I'd be the holder of a meaningless degree that would serve me for nothing else than as a reminder of my dishonesty and fraud. If I did manage to blag my way into a job, I would be unhappy and depressed, always looking over my shoulder, waiting for the inevitable day I'd get unmasked and thrown out. I'd never be capable of anything remotely notable in the field I'd have graduated in. A wasted studentship warped into a wasted life. A waste of space, I was. I hoped I'd get struck by lightning or spontaneously combust.

Maybe it was too late to turn around my life and be the man I would like to be. Too late to truly do my grandma proud. But what if I tried? She'd be upset at my failures for a while, of course, but once I'd found my way, she'd see me flourish like a thistle into the grandson she really raised and inspired until she lost him in the streets and into the indifference of the world. If I walked out

now, I'd make it, I said to myself. Now is the time. Now or never. Now was my last chance at a decent life. I grit my teeth and pushed my heels into the floor. I was getting up.

I looked up and Mihai got in the classroom, obviously returning from the bathroom, with a bland smirk across his face. He sat down, crouched a little bit, pulled some papers from under his shirt and shuffled them among the other papers on his desk. Then he started writing in his exam sheet. There were three hours left. The plan was working. Stefan got up and left for the bathroom. The old lady didn't move. He came back and did the same as Mihai. Alina, Bogdan, Vasile and Adina too, one after another, like patients to the doctor. I got up and left after them, the last one. Two hours and a half to go.

I left the classroom. I stopped on the hall. Drew air in. Coughed it out. Drew in more. To my surprise I hadn't made the brave choice to leave this behind at all. I left all my things in the classroom – the jacket, the pens, my watch, my bag – and the thought of having to return for them after the exam ended disheartened me and took the sheen off the thought of going away. My phone was there on the teacher's desk. I'd get back, take the things now and then leave again, for good. That's it. But first go to the bathroom to splash water on my weary eyes.

They all seemed to get on with the exam as I returned. The old lady faintly acknowledged me with a nod. I wondered if the papers were any good. Sanda doubtlessly did a good job, as was her way. I didn't care though. That was her business and theirs, not mine anymore. She could keep the money. It was the money I paid to get my life back, that's how I looked at it now and always. I'll take a year off, quit selling drugs, quit taking them, quit smoking and drinking and go on a long trip somewhere. I'd live in Mexico for a year and speak to no-one until I found my way in life.

Just out of curiosity I puled the papers from under my shirt like the others did. I looked at them. Incomprehensible gibberish they seemed to me. In so many years of studying maths I hadn't even got familiar enough with it to know what it meant, let alone produce it in an original fashion. Doomed. I closed my eyes. I was sleepy. I yawned. It was all downhill from there. The minutes raced by as I didn't seem to manage to copy everything fast enough. I freelanced – I put in some small mistakes to add another layer of difference to anything else that might be similar to the other papers. A period and then a zero after the result. Added 5 to an equation then subtracted seven and two. I got creative a bit. I felt confident now. It wouldn't alter the result but the piece would belong to me a bit more. A module of a positive number, a cheeky x mirrored by another x on the other side of the equal sign. The end solution would stay the same, I thought. No worries. I turned in and left. The results should be in after a week, the old lady said. She wished me good day.

The next day we seven met at the Vitus Bering pub in the old town centre and over pork scratchings and bottles of Tuborg we unanimously decided the scheme had been a success. We were

still wound pretty tight – too tight to throw a party -- but we got drunk anyway without much conversation, in the far-fetched hope that if soaked in cheap beer and vodka this sad caper would seem more like a distant memory in our lives rather than the terrible and immediate clusterfuck it actually was.

I got called back into the warehouse on different shifts than Stefan so I still didn't get to see much of him after the exam. We never sat down and pored over this exam the way we did for all the drug runs and drops, deals and everything else to do with our other illegal undertakings. The bewildering thing about it was that although on its surface it should have been mere child's play after we had cheated so many exams before it, we still seemed to sense bigger menace than with all the other shit put together. Even after we knew Sanda was in the clear. There was a magnitude to it, a momentous undercurrent to doing it in a deliberate and organised way, in concert with others and by drawing a completely innocent civilian in our midst, whom we thoroughly corrupted, that in fact dwarfed our past misdeeds. We knew we both were thinking this because every time we met we looked at each other, said hello and made excuses for leaving each other's company as if we couldn't live with ourselves and we reminded each other too much of what true joyless lowlives we were when we met. The loud bravado we exhibited daily, before the exam, was just filling to hide the cynicism and misanthropy. It was all out now, because all seven of us had conspired to do it. The secret was known by six others, and so the world knew it.

Luckily the temp firm had put me on a night shift with Polish workers who didn't speak a word of English. I didn't speak a word of Danish or Polish and with Gina Gone and Ileana upset with me still I didn't talk much either way anymore. I got in at 11 every night and left at 11 every morning with barely a strictly functional whisper uttered the whole time. A packet of cigarettes, a us ticket, a half-hearted hello. While at home I slept. I made money, kept busy and felt like I was rebounding in about a month.

This all sank back into oblivion when, on results day, no results were published. Next to all out names on the exam list the course website there stood an ominous phrase: “deferred for inquiry.”

We all had emails that morning from the rector summoning us to a meeting in his office, which he scheduled for that same afternoon. We didn't have time to think, or talk. We just went. Before we came in the rector's quarters, Mihai whispered between his teeth and under his breath, “Protect Sanda, whatever you do...”

“I want you all to look in my eyes and tell me, slowly and one at a time, what happened in there,” Sørensen said. “Tell me everything now and you may yet save yourselves. If you don't I won't be able to help you.”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about...” I began, feigning surprise and mild offense.

“Stop that song right now and tell me. You cheated. The government knows it and we know it. What I need to know is how. Tell me now and we won't go to the police. Cheating exams is a crime in this country, If done in a coordinated group it's even worse. You may get a criminal record?”

Everyone just stared. Not a peep. Blank stares and discomfort followed for about five minutes as he kept threatening us with the police, expulsion, even prison. I thought about Sanda and kept quiet and I suspect everyone else did too. Finally it was the Dane himself who broke the silence.

“They found the same mistakes in your papers. The underlying method was also the same in all of them. Statistically, that's almost impossible. It's unprecedented. The only possible explanation is cheating,” he confessed.

“Ah,” Mihai perked up, “Sir, but, er... we haven't cheated. Otherwise you'd have surely had evidence?” he baited.

“Don't play smart, mister. We have the evidence I just told you.” Anders Sørensen fingered his black turtle neck.

“Ah, sorry, but that's just evidence of similar methods and preparation. You see, we spent a lot of time together to prepare for this. We even had broadly the same notes. Maybe that's why, 'cos we haven't cheated,” Mihai said with gall.

Alina cut in:

“I have copies of the notes at home...”

“We all do,” added Mihai.

Sørensen looked bewildered. We'd turned and cornered him.

“OK, everyone out but Alina,” he said. “Wait downstairs and I'll call you.”

We left, she stayed. We went downstairs to the canteen and sat around a table. Fifteen minutes later, Alina came down, pale and stiff.

“He really grilled me, that bastard. All kinds of threats and pressure, he said the police is getting involved. I told him nothing. He'll do all of us separately, he said. Mihai is up next,” Alina stammered.

“The story is this,” Mihai said – as much for himself as for the rest of us -

“We failed together, we studied together for the new exam. Simple. We took the same notes and had the same theories, so could have made the same mistakes. We all have notebooks at home to prove it,” he said. We all nodded.

"I'm off to start making some of those notes happen," said Alina. "I'll make as credible a set as I can and then pass it round for each to copy in their own handwriting."

"We really should have done this before," Vasile said.

Mihai went up. He returned in 15 minutes and claimed he kept solid. Everyone went and everyone said they stuck to the story. Stefan and I were left for last. I went before him, and as I entered the small office, Sørensen got up and pulled the blinder behind him then sat back down.

"Palan, look. I know you cheated and I don't care about that contrived story you are making up. It might hold for the others but it won't hold for you. You are mine. The police is getting involved now. I'm expelling you tomorrow. Got the papers here. By the end of the week you could be deported back to Romania, I think," he said, deadpan. He waved some papers in Danish around. My name, George Palan, did seem to be written on them.

"May I ask why?" I said calmly, knowing the bald man was bluffing. He was trying to intimidate me.

"Well, you are special in several ways. Your paper had some random calculations on it that didn't make mathematical sense and couldn't possibly return the same result as the others, but it did. On top of that, you also had the very same mistakes as all others in three places. Regardless of you having done your homework together or not, this is proof of cheating, you see."

"Is it? I don't know what you are talking about, Mr Sørensen," I said.

"Look, I'll make you a deal. I'm not looking for your confession. I have enough on you to expel you and enough to pass to the police for them to add to their growing file on your little drug dealing operation with Stefan. That's right. I have been talking to the police, I'm not bluffing. They knew your name. You thought I was bluffing?"

I felt my stomach shrink and my eyesight sort of faded into a blurry mess. My ears started whizzing from a high-pitched sound and I couldn't say anything. I clenched my teeth and stared back at him. My face must have changed colour because unbridled joy came on to Sørensen's.

"It is true then. Oh, calm down. I said I'll make you a deal," he began again. "If I formally find that you cheated on your exam, this will go back to the government because it's a government-run exam. For reasons that don't have anything to do with you, this would be a difficult thing for everybody, so I'll let you off honourably if you withdraw voluntarily from the university," he said.

"What do you, er, mean by that?" I said.

My head was spinning and I felt the taste of bile and metal in my mouth. I thought I was about to have a stroke.

"I mean that you can take your transcript for a year of university, quit with a clean record, and move somewhere else. If you don't do this, I'll expel you for dealing drugs, on account of

information provided by local police officers. To put it simply, you are done here at VIA,” he explained.

“And this exam?” I blurted, without actually knowing what my question meant.

“You’ll probably pass it,” he said. “Like the other six colleagues of yours. But the police investigation for fraud will be still technically ongoing as will the one into the drugs.”

Focus reverted. This man was letting us cheat because he wanted in turn to cheat his government who wanted to cheat the European Union, who was cheating the Chinese, like we heard on the radio. He was using the drugs to get rid of me after he’d had his way with us for the purpose of this exam. Once the exam bit was done all seven of us would be liabilities for him to worry about. What if we one day openly admitted to the whole thing?

“Why can’t I stay?” I asked, thinking that I’d have given anything to be able to get this conversation recorded. How I wanted to record this sleazy Scandinavian and post his connivance on my Facebook page.

“I’m not having it. You are a delinquent and not VIA material. Whatever the results of this exam, I’m not giving you a degree from my course. If you persist, frankly, you’ll be arrested for drug dealing by this evening,” he said. “That is grounds for expulsion,” he said.

“Really?” I snapped back, incredulously. Coming from Romania, I never expected to experience it on my own here in Denmark. “What about the others? You frame them for drugs too?”

“Oh, you are looking to test us? The others, well, they will transfer also to other universities. They already agreed to do this. Stefan, well, you know why, and the rest either have tax problems or earn bursaries from VIA, which I have discretion over. If you do not submit I will pick up the phone this second and send police to your house.”

“OK. I said. I will do as you say.”

“If I receive from you a neat request to withdraw from the course citing personal reasons by tomorrow, Palan, there will be trouble,” he said in his robotic accent.

I got up and left. I didn’t bother going to the canteen. I went to the bus stop and texted Stefan: “Rector knows about the takeout kebab with everything,” I wrote. Takeout kebab with everything was one of the codewords we used. I got on the bus.

The sky, preparing for another night, was turning purple with streaks of orange in slim, string-like clouds that looked like the tracks a skier would make. I sat at my desk watching it and thinking of all the things that I believed my life was and all the things that never crossed my mind before that my life would now become. I got up, took all the drugs and flushed them down the toilet, then sat at the desk again to look at the sky. Ravens jockeyed over the best space on a telephone line, croaking.

An old hippie with whom I traded Polish speed and ketamine for weed and hash a couple of times in the Christiania section of Copenhagen floated up from my memory. I saw his bearded, white and yellowing whiskers in the loud purple dins of the clouds. He told me that sitting around doing nothing, spring always comes and trees blossom by themselves. This was something from the Zen philosophy he said he was practising.

The next day I wrote a letter of withdrawal citing personal reasons and inadaptation, signed it and went to see Sørensen.

“We have nothing to talk about, please see the department secretary for your transcript,” he told me.

I went downstairs to the secretary and when I told her what I wanted to do she frowned at me, nonplussed.

“Why are you doing this, Mr Palan? I thought you were getting on well?” she said.

“Er... I have a letter of motivation here. It's too hard... I can't get my head round it,” I said, blindsided by her question. I was expecting her to be in on it. Maybe she was but she pretended she wasn't. I put the letter on her desk, and she looked up at me, deepening her frown.

“Hard? Too bad, then. No need for a motivating letter, just fill out this form and we'll mail you your transcript.”

I filled the form – two pages of personal details and box-ticking. Have you used the confidential counselling facilities on campus? Have you had a health check in the last six months? Has your student visa expired before course completion? Have you been arrested? Have you lost financial stability? What a strange way to ask if you can afford to go to university, as if financial stability was something you naturally ought to have, like hair or nails, and only rarely you lost. Anyway, no, no, no no no. Tick, tick tick tick, tick. Please briefly state your motivation for leaving the course ahead of completion. Inadaptation. It occurred to me that I needed to avoid my parents for a while. They were some 1,800 kilometres away and still I felt too close to them. I couldn't even think of my grandparents. I shut my phone and got on my bicycle. I rode around aimlessly. Horsens wasn't a bad town if you had the feel for it. Houses were relatively cheap if you had a steady job, good jobs were relatively plentiful if you spoke good Danish, women were relatively easy if you were Nordic, taxes were relatively low if you didn't earn too much...

Horsens Fjord, the Baltic Sea and a couple of lakes around Jylland made pretty decent sailing places for a small boat. You could buy a sporty fibreglass 20 feet yacht and have a good time there at the weekend. I needed to get as much money together as possible without selling any more drugs, and go away. I didn't know where yet, but it would come to me. Money was what mattered. There were a couple of hills in Horsens, but no good views, or if there were, I hadn't seen them. I

climbed one on my bike as fast as I could so as to use the exhaustion and the strain to clear my head, then relaxed on the other side of the slope. The wind in my face was good. I took a bend at Vitus Bering park, went left climbing up on Allegade and left again later on Farbikvej. They named everything here Vitus Bering. Vitus Bering park, Vitus Bering pub, Vitus Bering school, institute, so forth. The only remarkable from this town the Danes call a city. Bering went to the Arctic and named the Bering strait. He's everywhere in Horsens, statues, portraits.

On Fabriksvej, I knocked on a door in a building where some nasty bikers lived. One answered and called me in. There were machetes and on the tables, pitbulls lazing on the floor and very bad rap music playing, mixing with good hashish smoke. The biker with neck tattoos sat me down. I gave him a 200 kroner bill and he gave me a lump of hash. Alina was coming up on the stairs when I was leaving. We exchanged pleasantries and she said Stefan was going to her flat to smoke later with some of her friends. Coco would be there too she said. I said I'd go. I went home, smoked a joint and wrote two emails. One to my mother, telling her I got a "promising" job and I wasn't going home for Christmas – it was only October, but better to give fair warning – and the other to the recruiting agency: I was available to work full time from there on in.

Stefan had got the same deal as I had. His plan was to sit a year out until the thing blew over and then pick it back up again where he left off as if he took a year for himself because he wanted to.

"Well, George, it's bad but it could have been worse. We'll get credit for that exam and in a year no-one will know what went down. Sanda is safe. I reckon we pulled it off, eh?" he smiled.

It bothered me even more to see him so at ease. I wanted to tell him about the police investigation but changed my mind. I was hoping for us to share our misery but I was on my own. I wanted to be good, I just couldn't. We drove in his car to Alina's flat with the hash. Coco and Mihai were there too. We kept going there after that almost every other day after work.

Now I lived among sofas, weed, Xbox, beer, and warehouse shifts. Our insignificant provincial conspiracy had brought us together but isolated us for everyone else. Days and weeks blended into a couple of months of the same routine. Before we knew it, we stopped talking about, or even mentioning the exam and we spent most of our time together either at our flat or at Alina's, which was nearby, next to the spanking-new Horsens Stadium. We got high and jumped the fence to the outdoor pool at the back of the stadium regularly, drank, swam and then ran back home before the cold settled in. November wasn't the best time for this but we missed the summer and since university was out and dealing was out our quests for entertainment grew bolder. It had reached us that Sanda also quit university and went back to Romania to look after her parents full-time. December bore heavy snow – the heaviest in years, the news said – and I for one felt good

keeping to myself, getting high with a small group of people, and looking at the snow. Besides working in the warehouse, which I could do quite easily while stoned on hash, all I thought about those days was drinking and taking drugs again, but the pleasure was gone. It was more of a chore now, like something we did just to pass the time. I'd drink maybe 10 small bottles of beer a day and the others weren't far behind. We took mushrooms now instead of selling them. The mushroom kits would come in the post with the spores and the earth already in place from The Netherlands. European regulation banned the mushroom but not the spore. All you had to do was bag them in a large, thick translucent bag to act like a greenhouse and give them plenty of water. The others all cancelled their holiday plans in order to stay in snowed-under Horsens. None of us could face our parents that Christmas. The drink, the hash and the mushrooms sedated us, kept us in superficially good spirits as the snow covered the regrets and the poor choices we made. Hair of the dog. Poor choices breed fast.

On Christmas Eve, we all got together at Alina's. We started drinking vodka in the morning while we lit up a barbecue in the back yard. We grilled chicken legs, pork ribs, lamb chops, shish kebabs and beef steaks. Apart from a large load of cubensis mushrooms – the whole crop from two Dutch home-growing kits ordered off the internet – we acquired ketamine, MDMA and speed, our usual menu. As night came, Coco and I were getting hot for some action after a few sniffs of speed and a large bottle of vodka between us. That Smirnoff was crap, I always preferred Stolichnaya, but the others didn't see the point in paying more.

“37.5%, 40%, who gives a shit? You'll drink it just the same,” Coco said as I tried to argue at the supermarket the day before.

He was right. I drank it just the same. So we got in his car after a few and drove down to the edge of town, where the big strip malls and home improvement stores were. We parked a bit further down on the edge of the road and crept up to a Jysk furniture store which was shutting. We used to do warehouse shifts for that company, so we thought of it as a Christmas bonus. We got in and hid behind some large boxes as the automated door was closing, then, through a window we removed the biggest, most beautiful Norwegian Christmas tree – price tag 2,000 krone. We carried the tree to the car a bit let down that there were no alarms ringing behind us. We hoped we'd have a taste of the old days but it felt nothing like it. At the car we realised we had no string to tie the tree to the roof, so Coco said,

“Fuck it. Let's just put it there and hope it won't fall. It's in God's hands. I'll drive slow.”

Amazingly, either because it was so large and heavy that it stuck to the roof or by some true Christmas miracle, the tree sat there peacefully as Coco drove back the three or four miles of snowy road to Stadionsvej. At home there was no stand so we slid it into an upside down plastic beer case.

For decoration, Mihai's sports socks and a string of lights they kept in the landing. The atmosphere the tree created was festive, almost familial. We put on The Godfather trilogy on television and more drink flowed as the seven of us stood around the screen, with our new Christmas tree and our celebratory feast. Like that, we fell asleep by morning and woke up embarrassed on top of each other like dogs long after midday. It was the first Christmas either of us spent away from our families. We would never admit to any religious beliefs or any other allegiances in public, but the very fact that we preferred being together during this time showed we were after all missing the people back home. I heated up the leftover barbecue meat in frying pans with scrambled eggs as a breakfast. We had beers, shots of vodka and glasses of wine around the table.

"I'm happy to be here with you," Mihai said. "Please, nobody eat anything else after this today or the mushrooms we're about to take won't do their job properly. That's the main dish. Merry Christmas."

We laughed until sunset. Mihai's alarm rang at 5:30 while we were taking turns playing Grand Theft Auto IV on the Xbox. We found the game, especially its Eastern European gangster protagonist, to be extremely far-fetched and implausible. We all knew people who looked and spoke like the guy, Niko, even dressed like him, but the level of violence seemed alien. We played it like a game and nothing else, but that didn't stop us drawing parallels with our own lives when the opportunity arose. Niko, occasionally dealt with people who seemed like people we knew. A pimp, a thief, or just a luckless drunken immigrant from the Balkans.

"At least somebody's made some money of our misery," we giggled, although Niko was Albanian.

Mihai got up and went to the kitchen with both boxes of mushrooms. He boiled a big pot of water and put the mushrooms inside with a lid on.

"Tea's brewing, my friends. There must have been a half kilo of fresh Mazatapec in there. We'll be fucked."

A half hour later, the water had turned a deep blueish green, a bit like Bombay Sapphire but darker, and the smell of it was arousing our thirst. We sat in a circle on the floor, turned off the Xbox and put on a playlist with house music, Indian music, Pink Floyd and Outkast.

We had a large cup of the potion each. Mihai cut up lemon slices and put it in the middle of our circle.

"Cheers!" he said. "Merry Christmas!"

We sipped it moderately, not too much at one so as to not vomit and waste it and not too little because it was too disgusting to taste for too long. After it was done we just laid back and

stared at the ceiling, thinking about the music. Five or ten minutes went by, nothing happened and Coco got bored. He got up to play Xbox.

“I’m not sure the thing is working on me. I don’t feel anything. Maybe it’s cancelled out by the booze...” he complained. Stefan joined him.

Five minutes later Alina got up and ran to the bathroom. We could hear her throwing up.

“Hey, are you OK in there?” Mihai asked.

“Yes. Fine,” she said, then retched again. She came back looking spaced out.

I continued to sit there and listen to the music getting louder. The song Rosa Parks by Outkast was followed by Liberation. I always liked Outkast and knew both songs but this time they sounded differently. They sounded not just as if I was hearing two songs I liked for the first time but like I was hearing music for the first time in my life. A sort of childish enthusiasm washed over me. The music was so vivid that I just forsook all my other senses and listened. Opening my eyes I saw dancing shapes on the ceiling, like waves in a pond that formed intricate models, stars and baroque drawings in movement. Animals of all sorts, hunters after them, then royalty, saints, children with crowns on their heads, all paraded along to the music. A procession of colours and characters caught life.

“I’m just glad we got over the exam well,” Alina said. “That alone deserves to be celebrated.”

But when I looked up at her, awoken from my musical dreams, I didn’t see her looking like somebody who was celebrating anything. She was blank, hugging her knees with her back to the wall. She looked troubled.

“Yea, well, I don’t think Sanda is celebrating anything, Alina,” said Vasile harshly from the sofa. Alina flinched and looked at him angrily.

“So it really depends how you look at the whole thing,” Stefan continued.

“What do you mean?” Alina asked. “She made pretty good money out of it. It’s not like we forced her to do it. The bitch should be happy we didn’t tell Sørensen about her,” Alina said.

Her expression turned mean. I couldn’t articulate speech, and looking around I saw that Coco couldn’t either. He was trying to say something but mumbling and he kept playing the video game. Mihai stood back with his hands behind his head and his feet crossed and dumbly grinned.

“That money broke her. The whole thing broke her I think. She took our money because she needed it and when she realised the size of the crime she got involved in I think she just gave up her dreams and ran away home,” Stefan said. “That shit is on us, and that includes you too, Alina,” he argued. His tone had climbed a notch.

“Not on me. I'm perfectly fine with everything. If she feels regrets it's her problem not mine. And way to go spoiling my buzz, by the way,” she said. Her tone was climbing too.

Mihai was still smirking. Coco had disconnected and I was the only one who was following the conversation but lacked the capacity to step in. I would have given anything to be able to get back into the music, but it was too late.

“Well which is it, are you celebrating or is your buzz spoilt?” asked Stefan sarcastically.

Alina said nothing.

“One more thing,” Stefan continued, as if he had got the upper hand. “If you don't reckon we had at least something to do with wrecking this girl's life then I'm not sure who really is the little bitch, eh?” he said.

Alina turned red. I could see her fuming.

“OK, ok, enough.” I said.

But it was no use.

“Enough what? What the fuck are you saying?” she said.

“You heard me. Sanda's life is fucked because of us and we're here getting high, passing exams and drinking shots and she's in Romania in her shithole village after she quit university,” he said.

“How the fuck do you know she quit because of us?” she asked.

“Fair point,” I intervened.

Stefan got up aggressively, put his jacket on and left.

“Fuck all of you,” he said as he was slamming the door behind him.

I got up too, not knowing what to do. Suddenly my attention was drawn to a big steak knife on the table. I took it and looked at it. Then I had a flash of horror and threw it under the sofa.

“What the fuck is it with knives and mushrooms? Fuck!” I yelled.

“OK, everyone out,” Alina said. “Party's over.”

“By everyone she means you, Vasile and Coco, George,” Mihai said before I even had the chance to catch my breath.

“I live here now,” he added, still smirking. “Come on, both of you,” he said.

I grabbed Coco and ushered him out.

“We must find Stefan,” I said.

We left barefooted. I was carrying both of our shoes. The snow somehow didn't feel cold at all on my feet. The texture of it was like ash. It was freezing and there was a blizzard. I was hallucinating sound and sight, seeing giant birds that weren't there, and Coco had still not uttered a word.

“Shit Coco, man, this is crazy,” I said.

He looked back with a terrified look. So there I was with Coco out in the cold Danish winter, locked out of the apartment on Christmas night, in t-shirts and track bottoms. We had to reach my place soon so we didn't freeze to death. I shook him.

“Hey Coco, are you OK?”

He was still unable to speak, still mortified, and I had no idea what was going on in his head, since I had my own racing thoughts to tend to. We got in his car and as I tried to talk to him with no success, he started the engine. He drove out of the parking lot with unexpected ease and then he started accelerating and braking very quickly and hard. He didn't seem able to see what was before us, let alone steer the car. I grabbed the wheel and shifted down the gears noisily, clutch-free, as he was driving straight toward the fence of a building across the road. After struggling with him – he was clenching the wheel with all his might, still acting like he wanted to drive – I managed to pull the car over on the pavement, braced on a mound of snow, from where I was sitting in the passenger seat. We had barely made it 50 metres out of the parking lot. I turned off the engine, then I walked out the car and went round to open Coco's door. He put up a fight when I tried to pull him out, so I had to hit him over the head, then forcibly drag him out and lock the doors. We abandoned the car and walked towards my flat – a distance that under normal conditions we should have covered in 10 minutes. Coco was staggering and falling at every other step. I tried to walk with him, talk to him, yell, kick, spit, anything. He was like a rock. I went ahead and I noticed he was following me. He must believe he's turned into a goat, I thought, and started laughing loudly and hysterically.

He kept following me for a while, until we reached a junction. To the left was a local high school, and to the right was the way home. Coco stopped in the middle of the intersection and wouldn't move any more. He just stood, empty-eyed and looking like a madman. I left him. I only looked back once and he was still there. I got home and the second my body felt the pleasant heat of the indoors, the Mexican cubensis mazatapec kicked in again hard. I played some music, smoked cigarettes and lost myself in a world beyond, where all the people were each other, all the languages were the same and I lived all these millions of lives from the beginning to the end. I lived my life from conception until death. I remember feeling like I knew everything, the past, present and future of the whole world and universe and I wondered whether reality as we commonly understood it existed or it was simply a figment of a deeper consciousness. Then I gradually reverted to alertness till I fell asleep at some point. I woke up during the afternoon the next day, and still no sign of poor Coco. I started having remorse about letting him stay there and I could clearly picture his lame ass frozen to death in the foetal position in the middle of the street. I picked up the mobile and called him. He told me,

“Don’t freak out George, but we need to talk.” He was at Vasile’s place, on the university campus – miles from where I’ve left him last night.

I told him where his car was, told him the keys were with me and we decided to meet there and talk.

“Why would he tell me not to freak out? He should be the one freaking out, because he missed his car, surely?” I thought on the way.

We met; turns out that while I was drooling in tranquility at the sight of the rainbows shooting out of my floor and the patterns of light on my walls, Coco had been acting like,

“A very, very confused little boy. I continued to stand in the intersection where you had left me, thinking I had died and gone to hell. I pissed myself with fear”, he said. “The warm piss put some feeling back into my legs and I realised I could move. It was the best sensation I ever experienced, like rebirth. However hot might my piss have been, it didn't keep me warm for too long. I began freezing again a few minutes later and this time there was no more piss left in him so I had to actually find shelter. I started walking towards a building nearby, which proved to be the local college. The wetness on my legs became really uncomfortable, like a layer of frost on my skin, and my jeans were becoming stiff because they were wet and freezing. I kind of panicked.”

He went on:

“Still very heavily under the influence of the goddamned mushrooms, I tried to open the keycard door that was keeping me from entering the college. After several failed attempts at punching in a code, I took a tall outdoor ashtray made of iron that was sitting there and I smacked the buttons on the wall next to the door hoping that this will somehow short-circuit the door open, just like it happens in the movies. Then I threw the ashtray at the glass door and broke through it. I entered the school, it was all dark and creepy with drawings on the walls. Still suspecting that I was dead and in hell, I got undressed and hung his piss-wet clothes on the radiators in a classroom while munching on some candy the kids had left behind. Then I called my mum and when she answered I realised I was not in hell. I was so happy I had survived that I just had to tell her. I told her I have many airplanes that fly everywhere,” said Coco.

“The poor woman blamed it on booze and hung up on me just in time for me to realize that there were a security guard and two policemen in the classroom with me, puzzled by the sight of me, and just looking at me standing there naked from the waist down, talking in Romanian on the phone on Christmas night with a mouth full of chocolates. A silent alarm went off when I broke the glass door, they said. They were nice, they escorted me to their car, assuring me I could be given access to professional medical help if I needed it.”

Coco paused a few seconds for breath.

“I told the cops I lived at your place,” he then said. “I gave them the address and brought the police to your door, behind which abundant amounts of illegal plants were growing. What a thing to do, George, no? Just because I wanted to hide a minute amount of drugs at my home I nearly brought them to you, where there is a considerable amount.”

“How selfish of you,” I said. “But obviously since we are all here, things went another way. So, I suppose, thanks.”

“Just when the cop rang the buzzer to yours, the twat that I was, I had a flashing of reason,” he told me. I started screaming at them that I made a terrible mistake, and that I didn't live there, and I convinced them of it. Something to remember, the Danish men in blue are naive to say the least. I told them instead that I lived on campus at Vasile's and they just took me there.”

“I was confused at first but after a few quick whispers in Romanian I pretended to the cops that Coco does live here,” Vasile said.

“But they might have smelt the plants, man. I mean, I think the smell was what made me tell them to take me to Vasile, you know?” he asked.

“Don't worry about that, Coco. I think they smelt them long ago but they just don't care. If you made them look at them with you in the room though, they would have had to act. So it's good that you didn't. Why don't we go for a beer? Good mushrooms last night no?” I said.

“Good, fuck.”

If there ever had been any writing on the wall, I couldn't see it until then. But that was the turning point. I was never able to enjoy weed properly after that and about a year later I quit it for good. What Coco told me, perhaps combined with the afterglow of the mushrooms, which tenderized my brain the better for it to absorb information, altered the way I regarded the world. Since then, since that closest of close calls, whenever I've a decision to make I go back to this story and try to think harder before doing something stupid. Before this thing, I never even considered that I was capable of doing anything stupid. I had to seek another trail.

I wrote Ileana a long letter, an email, without expecting much in the way of a reply, more because I knew she would read it and she was the only person I knew who would show me any empathy. I knew she was yet another person that cared for me and I let down, but I needed to talk straight to somebody to get my thoughts in order. I also held a torch for her, truth be told. Often I found myself having new ideas when I'm talking or writing to somebody, ideas that I've never thought of before, and wouldn't have had if I just mulled it over on my own. I felt stupid keeping a diary and couldn't commit to it. I had tried it a few times but it was just too awkward to bear, so I gave it up after one or two entries. I told Ileana everything that happened that summer, in detail, including how I had quit university and in what circumstances, all the drugs and the cops and the

fallout with my new friends. All about Gina too, and the stealing, the parties and the drinking, Amsterdam... even the whore. Everything. It took me about an hour to write that email to her but when I pressed the send button I felt much better. I could understand for the first time why people went to religious confession and paid for it. And, I apologized to her and said I would understand if she didn't want to have anything to do with me but I would like her to at least be my friend if nothing more than that was possible because of my callous behaviour.

Then I set to working like a madman in the warehouse. They promoted me to full-time and I got more work than I could handle. Six nights a week I was toiling in the warehouse, unloading thousands of thirty-kilo boxes of furniture by hand from containers, carrying them on a pallet, then grabbing the pallet with a forklift and taking it to the orders sorting section. A very repetitive and physically demanding job. I was listening to music in my earphones, sweating like a dog and making money, and carried on doing it for four months. I quit taking drugs and drinking. OK, I had a joint a day in the morning after I came from work to put me to sleep, and had a couple of beers for breakfast when I woke up in the late afternoon. I lost weight and my body grew stronger. I started reading more than before – Irvine Welsh, Jack Kerouac, Hunter S Thompson, John Fowles, Ernest Hemingway... mostly relatively new American and English literature took my fancy. I also watched films. One every day. I stayed away from comedies and anything made before 1960, except Citizen Kane. I kept a lot to myself those days and I saved money.

Miraculously, a few weeks later Ileana replied to my email. She hadn't given up on me.

“George, I will always hope you will do the right thing eventually,” Ileana wrote.

She was doing well. She was studying architecture and it was hard because she had no money. She was living in a dorm with other girls, studying and going to classes all the time and she had no time to work a paying job. Her parents had split up and her father went to Italy to work, but hadn't called or sent any money in almost a year. Her mother was depressed and her uncle was paying her tuition fees. She was making a sideline from writing papers and making scale models for the rich students and she had a little website where she sold slothes she painted and braceleta and earrings she made by hand out of wood, wire and coloured glass.”

Immediately, I logged on, bought five t-shirts and had them sent to the address of the family I knew in Bucharest, where I'd stay for my English lessons. An anonymous purchase.

Ileana was happy, she said, and the girls in her room were good with her. They helped each other and they had fun at the weekends. She was seeing a guy called Horia but it was “nothing serious” she said. “We are still mostly friends,” she wrote. The “mostly” worried me, but who was I to talk? I had to swallow it and I wished her all the best. I thanked her for writing. I was happy for her and I was happy for myself, that she had written back and she was in my life again.

Days and nights shot by in short order. Between working nights emptying containers, reading, sleeping, watching movies and cycling through Jutland, it was April again. The newspapers were full with the customary spring hysteria about Eastern Europeans, who, like migratory birds were returning to Western Europe after the winter for seasonal work – honest, salaried employment for the most part, but also a bit of pimping and whoring, or thieving, credit card skimming, begging. One night at work in the furniture warehouse in the village of Udlum I ran into another Romanian who lived in the area, Catalin.

“Romanian, no? I recognized your look,” he jested. “I left home worrying that I’d forget my own language, but there must be two thousand of us just around here,” he added.

“No way we’ll forget the old language. I’ve been trying for years. How long you been here?” I asked. “I got here two years ago.”

“I got here about four or five months ago. I paint and work in the warehouse. Live in Vejle.”

Vejle was a town 30 miles south, identical with Horsens in every way apart from an elegant white stone viaduct. These Scandinavian towns were like cigarette brands. They all claimed to be different in their own special way, but in the end they were so alike you didn’t care which one you were on.

“Do you paint outside or in?” I asked, thinking he must be moonlighting as a house painter.

“Both,” he said. “I do walls at night and some canvasses and watercolours at home.”

“Ah, a true painter,” I said, hiding my embarrassment.

“Trying. No sales or anything yet but it’s a good way to spend money and time since I quit drugs. Come along one night if you like. It’s a laugh,” he said.

“Drugs? Yea, I quit too sort of. Not that I was into anything heavy, just stopped to clear my head I guess. Thanks for the invitation.” And we went back to work.

After a week or so I felt like taking some fresh air one Saturday but I didn’t want to see any old faces. In only two years I had managed to create the same problems for myself that I ran away from in the first place. I called Catalin and took a bus into Vejle. He waited for me in the station with his girlfriend and another two friends of his. All Romanians. Our nation was going out and conquering the world, it seemed. Only the world might not have been expecting us and maybe it didn’t want to be conquered.

“We are discreet,” he said. “Tonight we’ll do trains. Come on.”

We walked through town to the train station then up the tracks about a mile to a train depot. My companions took off their backpacks and unloaded what looked like a hundred cans of spray paint between them. I watched them put up mini floodlights next to a train carriage and then Catalin drew a sketch on a piece of paper. They started spraying the side of the carriage, with gas masks on,

and at first it seemed all random and chaotic but after about two hours it came together. They were well organised and they each covered a part of the plan.

In the morning the carriage had a huge graffiti on it – at one end stood a muscular, masked and hooded humanoid alien holding a spray can and giving the middle finger to the spectators, with gloves on. From the nozzle of his can green vapours emanated and engulfed the train and melted its side, revealing a techno-biological organism beneath the sheet of metal. Windows untouched, though. Denmark Railiens, the signature said. I was impressed. I took pictures. These people were artists.

“Why not paint over the windows too?” I asked.

“We're hoping they'll use it as it is. The carriage isn't out of order and mechanically it's fine. We want all Denmark to see our work. They can't use the carriage if we cover the windows,” said Catalin.

By this time it was daylight and we went back home. Catalin's graffiti became my weekend pastime. I'd take books and a little bottle of whiskey with me, one of those flat ones you carry in your pocket, and I'd spend Friday and Saturday night with his crew. Catalin was the only serious one, the others were just bantering, hoping some of his talent would rub off on them. But they did do as he told them when it came to the paintings.

“I've got a rough idea for a graffiti in my room,” I said. “Reckon you would like to do it? I'll cover all expenses and entertainment,” I said one time.

“I'll speak to my agent,” he answered. “But from memory I'm free next week.”

So he came down with two bags of spray cans and laid a two by three metre red octopus on my wall, in outer space, the Earth a mere orb the size of a basketball in its tentacles. The details – eyes, stars, even the continents on the planet – were astonishingly realistic. The thing looked beautiful. I stood mute in contemplation.

“I don't know how to thank you,” I told Catalin after six hours' labour.

“Don't worry. My pleasure,” he said. I thanked him again and walked him and his girlfriend to the bus station. I felt like a fine art collector.

I never liked daytime television or the people watching it. All conversations about television shows were beneath me. It was only when I got to look at that painting on my wall that I understood why people watched television. It was a form of meditation. Something effortlessly engaging to keep you busy while the mind rests. It enthralled the top of your brain while the back and the middle of it went free. I would look at that painting for hours. I had a battered sofa in my room that I had picked up off the street once. I moved it to the middle of the room, facing the painting, so even when I was reading I had the thing in my peripheral field of vision. Although I watched it I

never articulated a meaning for it, and I suppose that like with most works of art the meaning is subjective, so I didn't feel entitled to give it a name. It was beautiful. Once I thought that it signified I had learned something from my life. Not many people had paintings, even fewer had murals, and nobody in the whole world had this one mural like me. Only I had it and I enjoyed it. It gave me faith. I started thinking that if I paid more attention to everything around me good things could come to me and I could become a better person. I never thought that before. The mural changed me.

One day before work I went to Catalin's for a barbecue. We were both on the early night shift – starting work at 9pm. We figured we'd eat and have a few beers before work then go to work. While the meat was sizzling on the grill in the back garden of his small block of flats, he got the idea of doing a little drawing on a garage wall opposite.

“I'll use brushes, though, not spray. I don't want the vapours to get in our food,” he said.

Fair enough, I thought. So as I manned the fire he took care of the wall, painting a motorcycle with wheels of fire and a bulldog riding it, clouds of dust kicked up behind.

“Impressive you could do that in an hour,” I said. I pulled up my phone and took a picture, then we ate.

“It's a rough one, but maybe I'll put on the finishing touches at the weekend. I'll go change and we'll be on our way, OK?” said Catalin.

“Sure, go ahead,” I said, munching on a chicken leg. He wasn't gone five minutes before a police Volvo pulled up in the parking lot and two uniformed officers came right at me.

“We had a call about vandalism,” one of them said in plain English. I was relaxed, not registering what was going on.

“What vandalism?” I asked. One of them pointed to the drawing on the wall.

“Did you do this? This garage is private property. Someone called us just now. I can see the picture is fresh,” he went on.

“Ah, that, I said. I don't know, what's wrong with it? It seems pretty good to me.” I said, mumbling.

“OK, so if you don't know then maybe your friend does. Care to tell us where he lives? I know it was two of you here ten minutes ago,” he said.

“Er, what? Sorry, one second. I was eating here... I'm not sure I know exactly what you're referring to...”

Damn. They want me to give up Catalin. Fucking cops, don't know what art is. What was I doing with my life anyway? Again cops, all the same old shit everywhere. I couldn't empty and fill containers for the rest of my life and I'm so conspicuously foreign here that even the cops can tell I speak not a spit of Danish. I would never speak it well enough to get what is called a career. They

will have me in warehouses until retirement before I learn Danish, that much I was sure of. I had tried, reading the papers, listening to the local radio. Nothing. It sounded to me even after two years like a German person had something stuck at the bottom of their throat. It's a mighty throaty language, Danish. They swallow the Rs, they ventriloquize the Os, the N is an L, the L is also an L but a bit different, and then there's the grammar and the special characters. A mess of a language, which only 5 million people in this world speak. Hardly universal.

"Hey mister, are you ignoring us? I'm talking to you!" barked the blond cop.

"D'you know what?" I said. "I've done it. Just now. Whaddaya think about that?"

"Done what? The vandalism?"

"The graffiti. Yes."

"Oh, OK, so you admit it."

"I do."

And I gave them my health insurance card and my student ID.

"Go ahead officers. I was alone."

I figured Catalin wanted to learn Danish, settle here. He told me so before. A criminal record would get in his way. They took my information and wrote me up for criminal damage, vandalism. They said I'd have to pay for the repairs and I will be summoned before a judge within thirty days. Then they left. As soon as they were gone, Catalin came out the block.

"What happened man?"

"Ah nothing. One of your neighbours called the police about the painting. They gave me a warning," I said.

"Bastards. At least you took a picture of it. Can you send it to me on Facebook please?"

And that was the end of it. We went to work. Taking that charge made me feel good about myself for the first time in very long. Catalin didn't need to know. Before I got home the next morning I went to a cash machine and checked my account. After four months of saving and very little consumption I had saved 30,000 kroner. A handsome sum by my standards, which became all the more so when I calculated that with my previous lifestyle I would never have been able to do it despite making more income than I did now.

My sights settled on The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for the following academic year. I started to acquire all the popular British culture and language I could get my hands on – Skins, The Thick of It, Shakespeare, the Guardian, the BBC, Charles Dickens, Adulthood, Kidulthood, Irvine Welsh, Akala, The Rolling Stones, Banksy, Jerome K Jerome, Layer Cake, Guy Ritchie, dubstep...

Pavel knew people over there and I made him promise he'd help me get set up. The most important thing was finding a place at a university. A university course that I enjoyed would ground me into society and give me purpose. I didn't feel too serious about studying but I knew that university would be a good in with the Brits. The campus and the status as a student is a valuable resource and an easier way to obtain residence papers. Horror stories of Romanians failing to integrate and getting deported as criminals from the UK were all over the Internet and we Romanians in Denmark all knew someone who knew someone who'd been through it. It was a rough, edgy place, this UK, I thought, despite Pavel's eulogies, but at least I'd speak the language. The limeys couldn't be worse than the Danes, after all.

As a kid I used to enjoy gazing into the flame. My grandmother would light an oil lamp on the table in the downstairs reception and I'd look at the dancing fire for minutes on end. It commanded my attention and enthralled me. I guess it was the same predilection that got me going out into the European Union. Bluebells and sunflowers rustled across the fields of Kent, thrilled by my imminent arrival.

V

Southampton, the place where the Titanic sailed out of and sank, looked fine in pictures on the computer. Leafy, affluent. After weeks of research and planning I'd made peace with the reality that

in London I'd likely be homeless after three months of paying the going rent and I didn't know anyone in Manchester or Bristol, the other two places I liked. Pavel would help me settle into Southampton, where his girlfriend lived and thrived. I'd stay a year until graduation, and then I'll see. That was the plan, at least.

British media were full of Romanian child traffickers, cannibals, pimps, thieves, crooked politicians, vampire legends, poverty and abuse. Commentators were flabbergasted that my country had been admitted in the European Union and Romanians allowed to travel to civilised countries unchecked. At the same time – hell – on the same page even, as they were lambasting the Romanian government for institutional racism and social exclusion of the Roma Gypsy nation of two million souls unfortunate enough to have been born there, the papers were reporting rather dispassionately how local councils in Italy, France and England were evicting campsites of Irish and Eastern European Gypsies and deporting them back to wherever they crawled from, proselytising about 'the Roma problem'. Even the French president used those words more than once.

Romania has tormented and enslaved its gypsies for hundreds of years, to be sure. We, as a nation vassal to different empires, sometimes two at a time, enslaved the gypsy and when we could enslave him no longer we made sure to pass a visceral hatred and fear of him down through the generations. Growing up, I knew I could not tell my parents that I was playing football with the gypsy kids in the neighbourhood or hanging out with them after school otherwise they'd punish me. And if I made the mistake of telling a gypsy kid he was a gypsy, or a Roma even, to his face, he and his brothers would beat me up so bad I would be aching for weeks, although it was true, and nothing to be ashamed about that they were gypsies. The gypsies considered it an insult to remind gypsies of their race and culture after it had brought them so much misery, and Romanians would use the word gypsy as an insult, freely, shamelessly and with impunity, to signify cunning, trickery, hullabaloo and sleight of hand. Segregated schools, police beatings, no jobs, the lot. Little wonder the gypsies were the first to migrate in numbers when we got in the Union, and also they preferred living under bridges across all rich countries that allowed them in, than remain in their own houses in Romania another day. We were probably the last country in Europe if not the world to formally abolish slavery. At the turn of the 20th century we still had slavery of the gypsy nation enshrined into law. If you were a gypsy and you had a master, he could sell you, work you or kill you. He owned you. If you didn't have a master whoever found you that wasn't a gypsy would become your master. Gypsies were sold like cattle, but cheaper. But do you see that in the history books at schools? Not a whiff of it. Nobody talks about it in public, it's only in some historical novels that you see it, written as if it were fiction. But if you ask the history teacher after class, he'll look round to make sure nobody was listening and he'll tell you.

But the cognitive dissonance in the UK papers gave me pause. Not because Denmark wasn't racist in its own right – indeed, in more than two years spent in the country I had never dated a Danish woman or visited the house of a Danish colleague, never mind make a Danish friend even briefly, and not only for lack of trying. To the Danes, both Romanians and Roma were just foreigners, somewhat inferior to the foreigners from rich Western countries. Danes were too polite to tell you to your face they'd never see you as one of them but they did make sure you felt it. The problem is – if it's just as bad over there, why bother going? Still, Denmark was flat and small, without cities. Britain was the opposite. I got over the melodrama of xenophobic discrimination and resolved to ignore it.

The Brits had their charm and their class at least, two features that the hog-farming Danes never had the luck of possessing, so I calculated even the average blonde Nordic Jens Jensen must be overall no more ignorant than the worst English bonehead. Every time I had doubts I recalled that Danish gaze – wide, fixed and empty at the same time, which you usually cannot perform without seriously powerful medicinal interference. But the Danes were naturally adept, they had a real instinct for it. Not many thoughts, little emotion conveyed and a lot of cold water.

Once I mailed my application forms to Southampton Solent University, the second-class university of Southampton, and started receiving correspondence from them, it sank into my head that the end of my prolonged sojourn was actually coming, so I started seeing Danish society with fresh eyes. More and more things started irritating me. The pious egalitarianism, as long as you toed the orthodox line. The blunt jokes. The state control of everything. I concluded Ceausescu, Marx and all the other communists would have loved it here. It's the perfect abolition of human individuality. Eastern European communism and Danish socialism shared a lot of values. That's why I couldn't adapt and never brought myself to put my heart in learning the language. Private property, the essence of personal freedom in the physical world, is a curse in Denmark, which will bring crippling taxes to bear on you. Groupthink. Everyone makes the same money regardless of what they do. They all borrow from the banks, and they all have a little land because foreigners are banned from buying it.

I think that's what that weird theatre-stage experimental movie was about, Dogville, that Lars Von Trier movie, which everyone was talking about. I saw it five times and until then I never knew what bugged me about it. They were all saying it was a thinly veiled jibe at the Americans, but I personally suspected Von Trier actually slipped a fast one on his own people. The ugly bastard had seen what I had seen, and he made Dogville. It was an apt portrayal of the Danish soul.

Often a slave will beat you harder than the master because the latter has nothing to prove. The slave knows that if he doesn't show enough zeal he might join you at the whipping bench. So it

was with us Romanians. The Romans owned us and the Turks owned us, the Russians after them and now the Americans after the Russians. And what do we do? We cannibalize off each other through corruption and dishonesty, and we exploit the gypsy. Either that or we go away. Many millions of Romanians migrated since the fall of communism, to every corner of the world. Soon there were about three million of us in Italy, two million in Spain and more than a half million in Germany, Britain and France each. About half a million in the US, a quarter million in Canada, and another million or so spread around randomly in the other countries. Often blindly. Anywhere but where we were born. There were so many Romanians in Castellon, Spain, that they became the majority and elected a Romanian mayor. There were a couple of Romanians on a gold rush in Sierra Leone, an African guy from university said. He had met them there.

So who was I to judge the Danes, or anyone else? No, they had more right to be unkind than I had. Nobody runs from kindness. We were the cruel serfs, the abusive acolytes. Why was that? What was so bad about Romania that made everyone who could stand it run away? Not too much kindness. How about the betrayals? How did the communists stay in power so long? Everyone worked like horses and lived like rats. Nobody had anything. Anyone told a joke or made a gesture the Communists didn't like, they'd get disappeared. Of course, the communists also ruled half of Germany for the same period they ruled Romania, or just about. But the horror stories in Germany were less horrific than in Romania. The Securitate got their information from somewhere. There wasn't enough technology to listen to everyone like there is now. It was people who gave them the information. Brothers gave up brothers, husbands wives, sons mothers, cousins, sisters, daughters and uncles – for a pittance. A holiday by the seaside. A new car. A human life for a pair of jeans. That's how the bastards stayed in power so long. And do you see that in the history books?

No, I wasn't one to judge. I gave up on my own people too in a way so I have to take what's available. If I didn't fancy the Danes, the only honourable thing I could do was leave and find a place I liked, then integrate. Be one of them.

I asked Jens Friis, a financial accounting professor who tutored me in my first year in Denmark, to write me a recommendation letter for Southampton. To my surprise he did. He asked which English university I wanted to go to. I hadn't the heart to say Southampton Solent. I said Southampton and stopped there.

“Ah, the Russell Group. Good. Good luck,” the old man said as he handed me the letter in five copies, all signed and printed on thick paper with his letterhead in colour. He had been a Chief Financial Officer at a Danish pharmaceutical corporation for most of his career and now he was semi-retired at 60, running a consultancy and driving about in a green Maserati. It was all private jets, five star hotels and boardroom meetings for him. He never was uncivil and he never said

something loud. Quiet inference was all that was required of him, because everyone always listened closely. He had grace and tact and everyone tuned in instinctively when he spoke. I wondered could I ever be like Friis? I sent the recommendation letter and other papers a few days after my motivation letter, and the university responded with a “conditional” offer for a place. I was such a frightful loser that even Solent would think twice about admitting me, but thank God I had Friis on my side. Solent wanted me to get ten more credits that semester – or what was left of it. Ten credits meant two softball courses – I picked marketing communications, which is to say advertising, and organizational English, which means corporate speak.

I was whistling through these classes. Positively singing. I'd write to Ileana every day by now, trying to prove to her and myself how I'm being good. She'd write back, sometimes signing off saying she missed me. I'd always make it a point of beginning my emails saying how I wished she were there. But it wasn't to be. One day Gina just turned up at my door and I was powerless to resist her. She had come back casually, like she left, like nothing ever happened.

“I passed my driving exam,” she said. “We must celebrate.”

And we did, for days.

“I'll join you to Great Britain,” she said when she heard my plans. “I'll follow you anywhere.”

This last line cinched it. No-one ever said anything like it to me and I didn't care to question it. I wanted to believe she was truthful and I was barely talking to Stefan any longer so I didn't even think of asking his advice about any of it. I fell right back in with Gina and didn't snap out of it or second-guess her even when Gina later told me, between sips of wine and weedsmoke that she returned,

“Mainly because my father didn't buy me a new car like he promised he would if I passed. I mean, I held up my end of the deal, right? Instead the sonovabitch got my mother a new car and offered me her old car. A Polo. Can you believe that? Who do these people think I am? No, babe, I didn't even tell them I was leaving. I'm never going back and I never want to see them again. Fuck them, all I need is you. You love me, right?” she said.

“I do babe, glad to have you back,” I replied.

Hell, smarter people than me have long accepted that those that she makes fair, she scarce makes honest. I daren't oppose it.

We were due in Southampton in September. By early August we hadn't paid rent for three months – why bother? The law forbade the landlord to evict us earlier than three months. The letters from the tribunal and the police over the vandalism charge were pouring in. I missed two court dates and they scheduled me another. We had timed the by now inevitable eviction so that we'd

already be gone before the bailiffs came. We used the money for bars, restaurants and nightclubs, and we were already dipping in my savings. Gina wouldn't work and she wouldn't ask her parents for money, but I didn't care.

Gina felt like partying before we left.

“I want us to remember the good times in this country, so let's have more of them,” she said.

I couldn't help but agree. I got a tip that there would be a psychedelic trance rave in a forest in the North of Denmark, on the outskirts a tiny village called Ajstrup, midway between Aalborg, one of the four cities, and Skagen, the northernmost tip of Jutland going into the North Sea. Early next morning we loaded up on MDMA and ketamine and with a bottle of vodka to take the edge off we were ready to go. We wanted to hitchhike straight to Skagen, figured we'd do the sightseeing while we still had our eyesight, but it didn't work out. Skagen was farther away than we expected, so by the time we got there our senses were gone. Gone was the vodka and gone was a gram of ketamine after it. We had shades on but we still stank of booze and staggered on our feet. Skagen, especially in the summer, is a family beach destination for easily-offended middle class Danes and Germans. We slurred in Romanian and vowed eternal love to each other, falling over in the sand and taking too long to get back up. We were really obvious and the stares we received made us paranoid.

“What are these people looking at, babe? Haven't they seen true romance before? These bloodles...” I said.

“Forget them babe. Whoever doesn't enjoy my public displays of affection can kiss my ass,” she replied, while bending over and slapping herself loudly on the asscheeks. She fell and I crawled to her between the onlookers. Eventually we found each other in the sand and retreated behind a dune, a pile of sand rather, where we tried to have sex. There were still some onlookers. We were so off our heads that we ended up not all the way naked on top of each other because removing our clothes was too big a task. Eventually we passed out right there and woke up two hours later, no more audience.

“Oh babe, I'm so hungry.”

“Me too.”

“Let's go.”

We weren't that hungry but the drugs wore off just enough to make us embarrassed of ourselves. Changing the scenery would help forget. Gina hailed for another ride as I hid in the bushes, someone stopped maybe after two minutes. No wonder, they thought she was single. Red hair, pearl-white skin, short and crazy tight jeans, tank top, big breasts and red bra in plain sight. God would have stopped.

“Aalborg?” she asked the driver while playing flirtatiously with a lock of hair.

“Yes dear. Come on up. What's your name?”

“Her name is Gina,” I said as I power drilled from the bushes on the back seat of the car next to her before the poor guy realised what was happening.

“Is this man with you?” the driver asked, stunned.

“Yes, he's, like, my boyfriend,” Gina confirmed, looking out the window.

He drove on disappointed.

Eventually we found our way to the party. It was an illegal rave in the middle of the forest, with sound rigs mounted on the back of two lorries parked in a wide angle against each other. The edge of the forest created a natural fence to the party and to our surprise we were charged 100 kroner to get in. We paid, ate some MDMA crystals wrapped in smoking paper and laid back on the grass as the repetitive, geometrical psy trance sounds were washing over us at high frequency. More people were coming. Before we knew it we were off our faces again. Night fell and Gina was dancing while I stood on my back in the grass taking her and the scene in. Grown people with pacifiers in their mouths and dyed hair in unnatural colours were holding glow sticks and waving their arms in the air like canes of reed in the wind, all mimicking each other to the music. There was a rewarding symmetry in the sounds and the trees, the clouds, the people and the breathing of Gina and I. We take drugs to forget that we're human. Sometimes it's a burden to have reason and consciousness, and we take the drugs and turn ourselves into something that's closer to the surrounding nature. We feel we were dropped to this world from somewhere else. We don't quite fit in and we can't see much around us that explains why we are here except eat and fuck, why we should be special when everything else knows no beginning and no end. Plains of grass blend into each other seamlessly without knowing it, but we have identities and names, and sometimes it hurts. I saw the people there were happy to have taken enough drugs to forget their own names. Drugs are a shortcut to sensations that we would otherwise achieve rarely and so briefly we wouldn't even notice. Keys to the darker, more primeval parts of ourselves, parts that have much more in common with the rest of the world than modern men and women.

Gina came up to me and handed me a ring she fashioned out of a piece of paper.

“Here,” she said. “Now's your chance to ask my hand. I won't say no.”

I put the ring on her hand and she kissed me. The music went on. There was no end to it. We got up and looked around for a safe place to rest. Maybe a dozen bikers were riding in a circle around the whole party with carbine rifles strapped to their shoulders. We couldn't leave. I washed my face with water from a bottle and looked up again. Gina was holding my hand tight, still wearing the paper ring. The bikers were unsettling her. Had they been there all along? Had the

music been so loud we didn't hear the roar of the engines? Indeed, here were about ten heavy-set, heavily-tattooed hairy men riding motorcycles in a tight circle, most of them armed. There was no escaping this image. We were in the middle of this circle. Some of them had swastika tattoos. We sat down and looked around. The music was so loud nobody was noticing the sound of the bikes, just as we hadn't until a minute earlier when we got up and walked off. Nobody seemed to care. Was this the same place we were in a minute before? Was this the same Bower of Bliss? It sure was, to the reed people at least who were still dancing, but the bikers had taken all the fun out of our ketamine and MDMA, and by the look of her, Gina commiserated. Neonazi Danes don't include Romanians on their idea of Aryanhood, I could bet. It was time to go, but how? We turned back to the other ravers who remained oblivious. Drugged and stupid. Well, who can blame them? There are a lot worse things you can be than stupid. Like Romanian, which is to say gypsy, as the Danes didn't understand the difference between Roma and Romanian, so like Romanian at a Neonazi biker party in a Danish field, miles away from any hospital or police station and with no phone signal in your pocket. We wished we were stupid, none the wiser to the roaring murderers drawing circles all around us. We used to have something close to the Nazis in Romania as well before the Communists took over. They were called the Legionnaires and they murdered many gypsies, homosexuals, intellectuals and any kind of dark-skinned person. Were these bikers similar in nature? Gina and I didn't know what to do. The drugs weren't enough to relieve our anxiety. Should we take more? As a matter of fact they were increasing it. We had finished a second bottle of vodka, all the ketamine and most of the ecstasy and we weren't as high as we should because of the adrenaline injection the circling barbarians gave us. It would be dawn soon and as the party would subdue we were more likely to be approached by the others. Our total incomprehension of Danish and sandpaper English accents would instantly out us. The only chance we had was leaving while it was still dark, somehow.

We would feel every last thing these monsters would doubtlessly inflict on us as soon as they laid their hands on us. In a panic, we joined the crowd trying to blend in. Gina was shaking now and my jaw was gurning so badly that I could barely talk.

"It's going to be OK baby," I muttered but it came out all wrong.

The people dancing around us were throwing their hands up and down rhythmically without paying attention. One of them who was closer snapped a glowstick at Gina, making her pull back. He said something in Danish and then let out an all-enveloping sigh. I looked at Gina. She was tense. Going in towards her to comfort her I noticed a little stain on her face. A drop of fluorescent green mucus had leaked from the dancer's glowstick and found Gina's forehead in its cosmic travel through the ether.

“Do you have any lipstick babe?” I asked. She did. I took the red lipstick and drew flowers on her face with it, then she did the same on mine. Then, making like we were dancing we borrowed some glowsticks from one of our dancefloor companions, broke them and using that goo we painted stars and drops of luminescent shit all over our faces.

“Now we're like them,” I groaned.

Gina put her finger to her lips. We swung with the crowd for another half hour until dawn. Eventually the party relented and we put our shades on, pretending to be too high to talk. The bikers were sill riding. I grabbed Gina's hand and went for them, then as we reached the moving boundary I started making retching noises as if I was about to vomit. One of them slowed down and started cursing at me.

“For hellve!” he screamed.

He pulled up his bike, peopped it and came up to me. I was vomiting. Gina was watching from a few metres away. The fat, burly, long-haired biker grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, yanked me to my feet and said,

“Hey man, are you OK? Do you want some water or something?”

I ran through the opening towards Gina without looking back.

Soon we were in the back of another car, going south to Horsens. On the radio there was news about vigorous protests against a proposed ban on bestiality. Politicians have been trying to ban zoophilia for decades in this country, to no avail. It was like banning smoking in Turkey or shooting in America. The world's largest pigfarm was apparently keen on its rights to have sex with other species, and another parliamentary session passed without cowing it into submission, the news said.

Horsens at last. We went on the main street, got a couple of polser dogs and two cold beers and celebrated the outcome in the warm light of the morning. Gina never looked better. What we had been through had strengthened our bond, I felt. If I harboured some niggling little doubts deep down about her real reasons for being with me, the previous night eliminated every last bit of it.

“Sorry I lost the ring,” she said, referring to the paper engagement ring.

“Oh baby, I'll get you a real one soon, you'll see.” I replied with swollen eyes.

She went home to rest but I couldn't go in and felt too agitated to sit still, so I went to the harbour and got a ticket on an empty tourist yacht for a final tour of the fjord. It was my way of saying goodbye. The boat was a rigid, fast little nipper, 24 feet and not too wide with no engine and no wheel for a helm, just a stick and ropes. The two masts had the big racing sails on them including the spinnegar. I would have loved to have a boat like this all to myself, but life had other plans. Turned out I liked the drugs more. I could have sailed this nifty sucker all the way up to

Sankt Ptersburg. The sea never scared me and the Baltic Sea in particular I found appealing, with its smoky blue shades and deep currents pulling the boat up when you least expected. Zigzagging through the fjord she tilted 45, 50 degrees at full speed and it kept going still. The ropes were creaking and the hull was nearly horizontal but it had the long wing down and I knew it'd hold. The helmsman just nodded at me with satisfaction, said nothing. I could almost touch the water if I stretched my arm. The ripples I made caused the surface of the water to look like snakeskin, like I was gliding on the back of a huge translucent snake. The white, hollow little fibreglass yacht was doing a good job clearing my head. I'd buy myself one of these on day. I heard you could have got it for 50,000 kroner, that's like 8,000 euros. I'll be able to afford that, I thought. One day. After about two hours of zigzagging around the fjord the skipper got us back to the marina and I helped him unroll the sails and wrap up the boat for the night. He was going home for the day. No locks, no keys. Anyone could take it, but nobody ever did. I liked that about Scandinavia. Will this careless ownership last as the European union keeps expanding? Not likely. I went back home in a slow walk looking around and hoping I would remember all the details. Gina was sleeping with my jumper on. I climbed into bed next to her. We slept for what felt like days. We woke up, made love and slept some more. We stopped using condoms after that night.

I opened the conviction letter for destruction of public property, vandalism and misleading an investigation the same day we drove off in a rented Focus. Misleading an investigation? God knows. 7 days in prison or 40,000 kroner in cash. As it turned out I'd become a fugitive for a graffitti someone else made. C'est la vie.

On that August morning we fled, rented Ford tyres spinning in the Scandinavian sunset, crossing the border to Flensburg before nightfall. Gina had taken up DJ-ing more seriously while studying for her driving exam and her newest tech house mixtape was blowing the speakers wide open. Windows unrolled, sunglasses, cigarette in the corner of our mouths. Thump, thump, thump... First stop? Amsterdam.

We discovered on the way that the crafty Germans had instituted a silent tax on bodily functions. You either pissed in the field on the side of the road for free or you paid €0.70 every time you wanted to go to the bathroom, for the benefit of the German economy. We paid once, then went to the field. By the time we got to the Netherlands we felt happy there remained a country in Europe civilised enough to let its people use the bathroom at no charge. We availed ourselves in Amsterdam of €500 in purple haze, which I saw as an investment for the uncertain times ahead. For a rainy UK day. I stuffed the package in several bags to make it odour proof and then hid it at the bottom of my luggage. Smuggler's logic dictated you never got caught on your first run, and this would be my first into the UK and technically, France, too, as we had to take a ferry across from

Calais. We went to a restaurant on the canal and had a number of cocktails, bloody Marys and Long Island iced teas, topped off with a half-bottle of wine, and a joint and beer in the car leaving the city. We were drunk and high, carrying enough weed to be arrested if caught, granted, but we were too elated to make time for trifling interlopers such as the Dutch police. They were on another level somewhere deep beneath us. The music injected confidence in me through the ears. I squeezed the life out the little Fiesta rental as soon as we reached the motorway. 1.6 petrol, 90 horsepower... it wasn't a bad ride. "This little bitch is going to get us to Calais in circa four hours, my love, we'll see the sun set on a boat tonight," I declared.

She put her hand down the crotch of my trousers. A raspy, bouncy tune came on just then. We were doing 160 kilometres an hour, a good cruise speed, according to the screen of the navigation system. The dial of the car showed more – one of those nanny corporation contraptions they have nowadays, to 'nudge' you or 'incentivize' you to do what they consider to be the right thing. I was tapping my hands on the wheel to the music. Something they called grime in Britain. Black kids invented it a few years before and it was the sound of the street now. Rap on top of heavy synthetic drums and bass. We had crossed Belgium and were presently approaching Dunkirk. Not melody as such, something like blank verse, but had a certain charm going for it. I got so into it I thought I was seeing disco lights. Stroboscopes, red and blue were flashing in my eyes, dancing with the music. I started bobbing my head and turned it up.

"Yes, baby. This is great," I said to Gina.

She didn't reply straight away. I looked at her and her face was frozen in a contorted grimace approximately halfway between fear and disgust. She put a chewing gum in my mouth.

"What's wro..."

Before I finished the sentence sirens overcame the music and a police car rolled up next to me. The driver, a uniformed cop, was making hand signals at me. He was pointing towards the left side of the road.

"Pull over for God's sake and don't breathe in his face," Gina said. I complied. Pulled up and stopped the engine. The officer came up and said something in French. The car's tags were Danish. A good start.

"Sorry officer, we don't speak French. I imagine you want my license and the car's papers, though," I swooned. "Here you go. Apologies in advance for whatever I might have appeared to be doing wrong."

"You were speeding, mon ami. Why are you in France and how long are you staying please?"

He was young, plump and rosy faced, with bad teeth. The uniform fit him badly. A geek,

someone who would live with his parents and play World of Warcraft all night.

“Monsieur, je suis desole...” I tried to point my mouth at the floor and at the same time I looked towards him so as not to arouse his suspicions. About three hours had passed since I had my last drink so I wasn't visibly impaired, otherwise he'd have brought it up by now.

“What?”

“Sorry about that sir, I didn't realise it. I know the limit is 130, I thought I was on the limit. We are driving up to see friends in Lille, and we are going back to Denmark at the end of the week,” I lied. In fact I had to leave the car with the rental agency's branch in Southampton by tomorrow.

“You were doing 164 according to my device. I'm giving you a fine. Have you had any drink or drugs today?”

“No sir we haven't. We don't do drugs and we had no drinks yesterday either as we knew I was going to be driving and Gina here is my co-pilot. I am truly sorry about the speeding. Excusez-moi.”

“This is the road from Belgium. I imagine that coming from Denmark you would have passed The Netherlands. Have you by any chance stopped there? ” He asked.

Tenacious. Not such a geek after all.

“Well, sir, yes, we stopped for a walk and some lunch. It's a beautiful country.”

“Beautiful yes, but full of drugs. Many people your age – that's the only reason they go there. You haven't bought a little Ganja for your friends in Lille? A little souvenir from Amsterdam?”

“No sir, of course not. We don't smoke it.”

“I hope so because it would be international trafficking. It's only legal inside the coffee shops, you know. Please get out of the car and meet me at the back. Open the boot also please,” He said.

I complied. Thank God I was still a bit addled, otherwise I'd be shaking, I thought. The drink and the drugs kept me composed. I tried to talk low, still somewhere in the direction of my shoes so as to prevent the bastard from catching a whiff of my surely fetid breath.

He started to search through the bags. He removed them from the carboot and pulled the carpet. Looked around the spare wheel.

“If you have something, better to say it now. If I find it it will be worse for you.”

“Nothing, sir, please look all you want.”

Nothing but about 100 grammes of purple haze. Christ. Go away, I thought. God, let him go away.

“You got anything in your pockets maybe?” He said, motioning towards my pockets. I took out my phone and the keys to the car and turned them inside out readily.

“Socks?” he inquired.

This cop clearly knew his business.

“No sir,” I said, smiling. I showed him.

“Shall I take off my shoes as well?” I offered.

“That won't be necessary.” He said.

“Here is your fine, 150 euro due in ten days, and here are your papers. Have a safe journey.”

“You too,” I said.

I got back in, parked in a dark corner of the first petrol station and took Gina doggy style on the back seat to celebrate. I tried to hide the car as well as possible between some rubbish bins and some trees but I still think a couple of people saw us. Then we smoked a joint and drove off. By nightfall we were in Calais, and after waiting about three hours in the car for the ferry, we finally started the crossing. Calais, at least the part we saw, and the Channel port, were a mass of concrete, mesh wire, signs and asphalt. And the ferry? Like a bus terminal on the inside and on the outside the gales raged so hard that the cigarette I lit smoked itself after a minute and we had to hold the rails of the ferry's terrace to keep from falling over. The sky was dark, no stars. The only way to tell we were on a boat was from the movements of the floor. Otherwise pitch dark everywhere.

Police dogs greeted us upon arrival, but we aced the customs at Dover. We did not celebrate this final victory because we were so tired we forgot about the weed in the back altogether. The British border guards were mostly concerned with us remembering to drive on the other side of the road. It was another 150 or so miles – over 200 kilometres – to Portswood Road, Southampton, Hampshire where Pavel's girlfriend lived. She said we could stay in her living room for a few days until we found a place of our own. Pavel would be returning to the UK for good in a few weeks, she said.

The motorway – apart from having these cat's eyes on it to mark the lanes and the slip roads while the rest of Europe had just glossy paint – was simple enough to use because I couldn't go on the wrong side of it even if I wanted to, due to the separating wall between directions. I came to meditate on this defining trait of motorways only later, when I found myself having difficulties maintaining course on a regular single carriageway. Never before have I thought with such depth and admiration of the humble separating wall of motorways as on that narrow piece of British street. My cursed instinct kept making me veer on the other lane, facing oncoming traffic, and fatigued as I was, this urge was difficult to repress. Which part of our daily routine is learned instinct and which part deliberate reason, I wondered? Anyone's guess. I kept catching myself twitching at the wheel towards the wrong side of the road, and then correcting at the last moment. I

had sobered up thoroughly by now but the car wobbled due to this left-right steering on an otherwise straight stretch, so from outside it must have looked like drunk driving.

Gina was sleeping on the passenger's seat when we arrived in Southampton a little after 1am. Portswood Road looked like a central road but I hoped that it wasn't the central street of Southampton. If it all looked like this, rundown, lots of discount fast food shops, and second hand clothes, we might have miscalculated our migration. Polished and neat Denmark made it look poor, I thought.

Miriam laid an inflatable bed for us on the floor of her living room and after hot showers we slept like babies. The next morning we went to buy British SIM cards and we saw Southampton in the light of day. Endless fried chicken shops, betting parlours, pubs, supermarkets, small and dingy terraced homes and liqueur shops. Everyone seemed to be wearing grey sport trousers and white trainers, and everyone had tattoos. The upside I saw in this first contact was that there could be no better place in the world to sell weed. The downside was that it could also not be farther away from what I had in mind when I decided to move here. Yet I relished being able to speak in English with everyone, although they couldn't understand most of what I was saying, with my heavy Eastern European drawl, and I had to repeat myself a lot. I also made them repeat themselves a lot because I wasn't acquainted with their accents. I had thus far listened mostly to American English pronounced, so any variation from it seemed alien.

"Hello sir, I'm calling about the flat you posted on Gumtree. Is the room still available?" I would say on the phone. To them it sounded like someone put a wrench in a tumble dryer and set it on.

"Could you say that again please?"

"I'm sorry. The room you advertised. Is it still free?"

"Ah, yes it is actually, thank you for calling. I'm scheduling views for Wednesday afternoon if you're interested, but I must tell you it's non-negotiable and I already have a lot of interest. What do you think?"

"Sorry, could you please say again?" I would go. "A bit slower please?"

"Yes, it is available. You can come see it the day after tomorrow at 4. No discount on the price."

"Yes, yes, thank you. We are coming. See you then."

The first objective had to be to talk more to rinse out my accent and get a feel for theirs. And cocaine was practically everywhere. On our third day the pizza delivery boy sold us half a gram. Jobs were easier to find too. Miriam found us temporary work cleaning the student halls of the proper university of Southampton, the one in The Russell Group. Until students got back in

October, we had a month of cleaning up their rooms to look forward to, but since the rents were high – surprising since we didn't bother to check thinking they couldn't possibly be higher than Denmark – we could use the £40 we got for 6 hours of work every day.

The rent would end up somewhere at £400 a month, or 4,000 kroner, or about €450 for a double room. Our own flat, somewhere on the edge of town, would cost us £600 plus bills. We only had about £1,200 and the weed to our name. Yes, we cleaned those dormitories with zeal. We figured we could use some of my money to buy another half gram of cocaine to get us through the day's work and use Gina's money for expenses until we found income and a house.

Cocaine in the UK is very weak, the bottom shelf product at least, and so the one half gram would be enough for about ten lines but we had to spread it pretty thin for it to last all day. It was never enough for us to actually get high, it just made time pass faster and numbed our senses to the squalor we had to clear up. I don't know if these students were too busy studying to clean up after themselves, but some of these rooms wouldn't pass basic hygiene in Romania. There was hair everywhere, they were shedding it like cats, these students, and the layer of dust under beds was an inch thick. The toilets were the worst, caked in waste. These were supposed to be the best of the best, the future scientists and doctors, but I was happy I didn't get to know them. Then again, who knows what kind of nasty habits some of my best friends were entertaining in the privacy of their own homes? You never know a person until you clean up the room where they sleep and the toilet they piss in. With that truism firmly planted in my brain, I must admit Gina and I did leave some of them a couple of souvenirs that required turning over the mattress. Coke made us randy and we were all alone in these bedrooms for hours on end. It wasn't all work.

After the third week we were once again free to explore the town without worrying about waking up in the morning. We were happy to give up the coke though, as after so many half grammes it started to creep up on us. Although we didn't really crave it, we found ourselves looking perhaps a bit too much forward to the next line.

“Baby, I swear this coke is already working on me as soon as I see the lines ready on your phone,” Gina told me. “I'm already keyed up before I snort it.”

The cultural life of Southampton, the one that we could afford at least, constituted of three museums, a series of bars where live rock was played, and various student festivals of amateur comedy, improvisation and open air theatre. It was wonderful, as there was nothing like this in Denmark. The pubs were the best of it always full and cheap, and it was always easy to talk to people.

When university began our spirits were much higher. I went with Gina to my first day of the induction week, prior to the actual courses. The institution had two buildings, one sleek and new on

the pedestrian high street, and another one across the East Park in a mutilated Brutalist contraption that evoked a factory. It reminded me of the old town in Romania, where we once had a diesel pump factory also with two buildings. In one the diesel pumps were made, it was grimy, dark brown and shapeless, sprawling. It imposed solemn apprehension onto passers-by, and downhearted toil on those unfortunate enough to see the inside of it. Many annexes have been attached to its sides over the years for various reasons, and it resulted in a metal collage. It was remarkable only by its size and lack of deliberate form.

The other building was a lump with straight edges. Very coherent, a simple block in rectangular shape. White walls, blue windows, one big entrance, corporate HQ. The offices where they took orders and kept the books for the diesel pump business around the corner. This was the new university building on the pedestrian alley in Southampton. Might have been a call centre, in a corporate landscape of strict processes and learned replies.

Southampton Solent University prided itself on the creativity and free-spirited nature of its graduates, in the marketing brochures at least. In reality it was a second-grade, newly-formed university taking advantage of government deregulation of the higher education market, not very different from VIA back in Horses. Its biggest redemption was that it had been started a few years before VIA and was bigger, in a bigger city, in a bigger country, with a language I knew, and offered courses that were less openly geared to fit students into the ranks of corporate middle management. The interior of it was bland and contained exceedingly curved furniture like the waiting room of a consultancy firm or a posh dentist's. It wanted to be modern and colourful but got out of its way to avoid anything that might offend anyone at all, therefore it went out of its way to be as meaningless as possible, since any clear meaning will eventually cause offense to some living creature. This mentality informed all the statements made by staff, including most of the lecturers, as well as the text of the books we were requested to read. The result was a blowhard emptiness, where debate was shunned and conformity keenly encouraged.

One could study many things at Solent, including hospitality, football and rock music. After the induction week I was left with the distinct impression that it was those who invented this place who were the really creative, not the students. My course was European Business Studies, made up of the following modules: human resources management, business innovation, European markets, financial accounting, marketing management and cross-cultural management. I had wanted English language and history but they rejected me saying my background was too technical. They were teaching us how to obey orders. Like VIA, it was a factory churning out Ikea customers and customer service assistants.

Gina decided immediately she wouldn't be caught dead on one of these courses, and I

respected her all the more for it because it was exactly what I would have decided if I wasn't so afraid to not have a particular reason to get up every morning. She signed up to DJ at a university-affiliated nightclub every other Friday instead.

Just as Miriam was showing signs we had overstayed our welcome – small things like omitting to ask us whether we wanted something from the shop when she went out, or how our day was, but more often inquiring whether we saw any places to rent yet – we found Sanjay. Sanjay was a British Indian law graduate who lived in Southampton and who managed to survive the financial crisis without having to go bankrupt or sell any of his six properties thanks to students who came from abroad. He let us a one-bedroom loft in a decrepit, crumbling four storey house in Swaythling, a neighbourhood by the motorway, for the handsome figure of £450. Much cheaper than anywhere else, and we had the whole of the top floor to ourselves.

“I'll skip the credit checking if you pay two months in advance and we'll take it from there. No bills included and I only provide basic furnishings,” he informed us.

“Is there a bed?” I asked, cautiously.

We were prepared to take it without a bed but I wanted to probe his definition of what was basic. The flat was at the top of a steep and slim four floor walkup. The building had been condemned by the council and Sanjay had two years to demolish it before they did it themselves. The windows were just for decoration, wind blowing freely through them, the floor was creaking and the walls hadn't been painted in at least ten years. There was a bed, a kitchen sink, a toilet, a bath but no shower, and nothing else. Two electric heaters had been installed in the lounge and the bedroom, which an Internet search said would cost a fortune to keep on during winter. All the more so since the place was not insulated. We took it straight away.

We bought a used washing machine from a shop which promised delivery and installation were included in the £50 we paid upfront. The shopkeeper had two of his aides, fat guys with sleeve tattoos of football scenes and short hair, load the machine, an old Hotpoint with a dryer function, into the back of a small pickup they had. Because the pickup only had three seats Gina and I took the bus and we met the aides at the house. They were sitting in the car smoking, looking at the house when we got there. The house was a large, detached, square building with white varnish and stone on the first two levels and blackened wood garnishing the top bit. The roof was tiled. It didn't have a fence and it was rather close to the road without much of a front yard, just two haggard overgrown rosebushes to mark the separation of the public and the private realm. It was in a state of longwinded decay, the roof slumped and uneven in places, missing tiles and the paint chipping off everywhere. One window at the second floor was boarded up. We looked at it on that sunny day and for the first time saw it as our own. That was where we lived. It looked haunted.

"It's pretty rundown," said Gina. "Many people must think it's abandoned and we're squatting it."

The guys saw us and got out of the car.

"Round, the back, fellas. I'll hold the door for you. Care for a cup of tea as well?" I said.

"Yes please, mate, thanks," one said.

The Polish family who rented the ground floor flat from Sanjay were out in the back yard smoking and drinking coffee.

"Hello, hello, neighbour George. Need help?"

"No thanks, Lech, you enjoy yourself. These two guys are helping us."

Gina went upstairs.

"I'll make the tea."

With great strain, the two brought over the machine to the landing.

"It's upstairs is it? You didn't say anything about that," one told me, dismayed.

"Well, yes, it's all the way up the stairs. We live in the top flat," I said. "Did you want milk and sugar with the tea by the way?"

"Yes please, both," said the other, "but what do you mean all the way up? How many steps are we talkin' about here?" he added, flustered.

"Not sure how many steps, but see this here stairwell?" I said. "Three others just like it."

They both looked at me like I was mad. One of them went in for a minute and came right back out again, shrugging his shoulders.

"Not me mate, you never said anything about no stairs. It's gonna break our backs."

"Yes, sorry mate, we can't do it."

"What do you mean you can't do it? Gentlemen, I bought this on the understanding that it included delivery and installation."

"Well," one of them said, "it's more specifically front door delivery sometimes, but if you get it up there yourself we'll be happy to come and install it tomorrow."

"No, no, guys, please, we need this done today. Let's just do it now and finish the job, eh? I'll help you. It shouldn't be too hard for the three of us."

"The place is too narrow for three people to hold it at once. Sorry mate, we're outta here." said the other one, and they turned to leave.

"Wait, wait. I'll call your boss now. This isn't fair. Hey, just wait..." I said to their backs as they shrank out of view. I ran after them and blocked their way. "I'll give you another tenner if you do it," I offered.

"A tenner each, yes?" The man said, apparently interested.

“All right, each. Let's just do it.”

“Alright, mate, but you'll also have to help us in turns, yep?”

“Deal, just come on.”

I ended up carrying the iron mastodon more than either of them. I and one of them – to immense effort – carried it up the first set of stairs. Then they switched places among themselves so the other could rest for the following set, as I stayed on post, further straining my back. By the time we got up, my hands were falling off and I thought I was dying, sweat drenching my shirt and my face. My back hurt terribly.

“Here you go, boys, your tea,” Gina said.

She gasped when she saw the state of me.

“What's wrong with you George?”

“I'll tell you later, babe.”

The two installed the machine, showed us it was working and left to spend their undeserved tips on scratch cards, cider and pork scratchings. Gina and I put a load of washing in and when the machine started spinning and draining Gina got naked and climbed on top of the shaking appliance.

“Come here, George, I'll show you another thing a washing machine is good for,” she said.

I didn't keep her waiting. Slowly we settled in. We got used to the creaky furniture and taking the bus and paying too much for drink and cigarettes, and we got used to nobody understanding what we said the first time we said it. We also got in the habit of buying pork scratchings and cider, and coke at the weekend like everyone else. We cooked and shopped for food together and while I was at university she did her music mixes. I did not feel comfortable asking people if they wanted to buy my weed so we ended up smoking it ourselves.

“George, we really should have sold that weed,” Gina kept saying.

“I know, but it doesn't feel right asking these people at university yet. I feel I need to know them better first.”

Meanwhile the stock kept dwindling. The plan now was that I would get a part time job of any kind and she would either work part time and DJ at the weekend for extra cash or she would work full time. We'd save enough money for a better place, then find better jobs and eventually we'll speak so well nobody would know we were foreign. We slowly bought bits of furniture from the classifieds and the house became our haunted home. A couple of chairs, a table, a rug and new curtains can go a long way. There was a pub down the road in Swaythling called the Talking Heads, and another one further down in Portswood called The Hobbit.

The Hobbit was something. It was built over a whole ten-acre valley between the road and the railway, and its garden must have held 50 tables all sprinkled at different levels and all linked

with each other by alleys and stairs. Murals of JRR Tolkien's novels decorated all walls and fences. There was a barbecue and a dark room inside like a nightclub as well as a proper bar room like all pubs have, which was the front room. On sunny days, fewer and fewer in mid October, we spent all afternoon in The Hobbit drinking beer and making plans. Gina loved a beer as much as I did.

"Of all the girls I know I'm the one who likes beer the most," she would say.

"I agree baby, you're the queen of beer."

And we stood in the garden admiring the graffiti and the flowers. But the money started to run out again and again neither of us wanted to go hat in hand to the parents. My parents didn't take well to my move, and they seemed disinclined to subsidise it. If I was going to ask them, I would have to forego dignity and straight up beg for alms, appealing to their mercy rather than parental duty.

"So you left a job and a good school in Denmark to be unemployed and broke in the U.K.. We have small earnings, my boy, we can't support you for ever. What are you planning to do?" My mom would pounce at the slightest opportunity.

Gina's relationship with her parents had not improved any since she ran away on them. If anything, it degraded.

"I'm not even sure they know I'm in the UK, George, I sure didn't tell them. If they checked my Facebook they might have seen, but either way they haven't gotten in touch and I'm not going to them to ask for money. We need to find another solution," she said at The Hobbit.

Winter was coming. November's rent was due in three weeks, and we were already short without even counting the expenses up till then and the bills coming due with the rent.

Something obviously needed to happen. I applied for all the jobs I could find but nobody would get back. Gina had a friend in Brighton, an old English guy with a French name, called Jean. He was a DJ and they knew each other from Germany, she said, and they always kept in touch online. He invited us over for a weekend.

"He calls himself Jean the Geezer," Gina said. "He has a crush on me and I'm sure he would help if he can. Maybe he has some work for you. He does interior decorating on the side." she encouraged me.

"Right, I'll become Jean the Geezer's apprentice. I imagine interior decorating means painting and plastering, right?" I enthused.

"That's right. Now let's just go and see him and see what Brighton is like. Then we'll figure something out. At the very least we'll have fun," she insisted.

I wasn't feeling like having fun. Still, I purchased round trip train tickets, leaving Friday, returning Sunday. £60.

“Our expenses are beginning to worry me, Gina. Without jobs I don't see how we'll make it past next month.”

“I know, babe. I'm worried too, but everything's going to be alright in the end. You'll see.”

The train ride took us through the British countryside towns of Chichester, Fareham, Arundel and Littlehampton. Small, unassuming places with decent-looking people inhabiting them. Connected by hills, slopes not too high and not too steep, like their houses. Jack Russel terriers and Skoda estates. Afternoons in Whetherspoons and nights in Oceana. Sundays at the game, Mondays at work, lotto tickets, NHS, public libraries, Margate, Majorca, Primark, a bit of E a bit of Valium... I was getting the hang of this country. Honest, and predominantly mediocre, which was good. Mediocre for some people is in itself an achievement. Hell, for Gina and I it looked like a pipe dream from where we stood. All ambitions of greatness deserted me on that train and left me content to shoot not for the stars but the starter home. All the green pastures we passed looked like they were someone's property but I couldn't tell what they were growing on it. Everything seemed touched by the hand of man, not with the desire to exploit, but to make pretty in a modest way. Even the very shape of the land seemed designed in a deliberate fashion. This hill here, a mound there a slope there and flatness further down. There was no wilderness in Great Britain, naturally or otherwise. I remembered reading that there hadn't been any wolves here for centuries. A long time to be civilised, centuries. A couple of well-managed reservations like the New Forest which seem natural enough but have sewage and electric cables running under the moss, a bit of hunting ground in Scotland. Maybe Wales had some wild in it? I couldn't say. But England, Hampshire, Sussex, these places I was seeing sure didn't and it seemed to do something to me. An urge to become civilised overtook me. No more wolves. We are after all mere products of our environment.

We alighted in Hove, which we were told was actually the same thing as Brighton. In fact, there was no physical distinction between Brighton, Hove, Portslade and Shoreham, just the old town names which were now blended into one, by civilisation, or as locals called it, residential development. Jean waited for us in the station in a flat cap and raincoat. He was tall, more than six feet, and skinny, with salt and pepper hair, long teeth and long fingers. When he shook my hand his fingers wrapped around mine like a vine or a whip. They were clammy. I gripped his hand and squeezed it.

“Hello there, Gina, it's so good to finally see you again. And you must be George. Pleased to meet you,” he hissed in a low voice, while continuing to shake my hand.

“Likewise, Jean. Gina told me very much about you. She admires your musical style,” I said.

“Jean, you have aged gracefully since I last saw you. What is it, four years now?” Gina said.

“I don't feel old, but seems I can't escape it. Anyway, you do look beautiful, Gina. Let's get a drink and then go back to mine. We're going clubbing tonight and we need to prepare.”

We followed him out and round the corner to a tavern. He ordered full English breakfasts for all of us

“Plenty of fried tomato as well,” Jean said. “Beers to start.”

He laid three pints of pale ale on the table.

“Local. Don't worry, I'm paying. I know you two are jobless,” he laughed. I swallowed my saliva and took a sip of beer.

“Thanks.”

“What you need to know about Brighton is that it's crawling with hippies. Hippies and draw everywhere. I mean, we have the only Green Party council in the fucking land. They actually scrapped all the council lawnmowers and they brought sheep in to graze the grass in the parks. Fucking sheep, right? And they pay council workers, the ones who used to mow the lawns, to pick up the shit behind the sheep. By hand. And drugs, except heroin, which the hippies hate, are all practically legal. There's plenty of heroin about, but it's no tolerated like the others.”

Gina looked at me like she already knew all this, but I was sceptical.

“Legal how?” I asked.

“Here come our breakfasts.” He said. “Bona finde ‘ippies, right?”

A bearded and extensively tattooed barkeep, in the rockabilly style, brought us three platters with eggs, sausages, fried tomatoes, beans, bacon, mushrooms, toast and hash browns. We tucked in.

“And three more ales, mate, this is gonna take a while,” Jean said.

He started eating without taking off his cap.

A half hour later, we could barely move from all the food but Jean was still at it.

“Been in Brighton nearly 40 years now. Lived in Amsterdam on and off but that's it. Smoked weed every day, took pills every weekend, and never got pulled by a cop. Not once. I smoke at work and I smoke weed at home. It keeps me sane. Sometimes when work dries up I grow it in my council flat. In fact, I think the council themselves smoke weed between planning meetings. It would explain some of the more recent buildings out here if you ask me,” he giggled, satisfied.

“What's planning?” I asked.

“Planning is when you want to build something, a building or an extension to a building or sometimes just to make some changes on the inside of the building. The council must approve it.”

“Right. I see.”

“OK, great. You'll love Brighton. Shall we?” Jean asked.

“Yes Jean but I'd rather walk. I'm not sure I'll be able to hold the full English in if we take the bus,” said Gina.

So we walked. In the late autumn Hove had a special grace. Narrow streets and large, sturdy townhouses two and three levels high, with basements that had front entrances through stone stairs and first floors which you had to walk up to on more stairs ending with big double doors. Sculptures, decorations and trimmings on all these buildings. Old mighty chestnut trees lining the streets. It looked majestic compared to Swaythling. A bit further down was the sea.

“Is this the rich neighbourhood?”

“Not really. It's just normal. There are poorer neighbourhoods, but this is just about regular,” Jean said. “In Hove it's mostly houses, there are council estates and towers in Brighton proper, if that's what you're asking. The thing is, this was a tiny village like 150 years ago but then at the peak of the steam revolution all these newly-enriched, bourgeois types from inside the land, like London and Reading and that, got the idea that the sea air was good for their health, and it became a sweeping fashion to have a second home by the sea. So they built this, innit,” he said.

“Oh, I see, the industrial revolution you mean,” I said.

“Yes, my friend, that's the one,” confirmed Jean as he lit a big joint shaped like a carrot. It reeked three metres around us. I got anxious but he was completely nonplussed, walking and puffing past people as if he was smoking Virginia Slims. Nobody even turned to look at him as they got enveloped in his clouds of dank.

We walked among these mature chestnut trees with rusty leaves all the way to Jean's one bedroom flat in a house just like the others. The streets were strewn with spiky green shells and chestnuts but there was no litter. The flat was old but well-kept and freshly painted in white. Jean made us tea and sat us down on his sofa, next to a window overlooking the road from the second floor.

“Why don't you sell some hash? I can get you a really sweet deal. You know, until you get back on your feet.” he proposed out of the blue.

At first I was so shocked I couldn't understand what he meant. Then, when the penny dropped I thought he was speaking to someone else, perhaps on the phone. Then, when I looked at him and saw he had no phone in his hands I figured maybe he was speaking to Gina. I looked at her and she was looking straight back at me, focusing on my eyes and holding on to them without blinking like she wanted to bore into me. She was smiling. I was confused and remained silent.

“I've got just the right connection for you. Pure Moroccan hashish, soft as silk and strong as opium. They bring it in by the boatload down here. You can get a little brick for £400 and within the week sell it at your university for £800. You make £400 a week and all you have to do is go to

school like a good boy. Here.”

Jean, intensely relaxed, leaning back in his chair with his feet outstretched in front of him, picked up a brown boogar from the table and threw it at me. It stuck to my jumper. I picked it carefully with two fingers and looked at it in wonderment.

“What's this?” I asked.

“What d'you mean what? It's the hash, George, you ninny. Now smell it and tell me that's not good hash.” Jean said.

“What do I know about good hash? I don't know, yea, it smells...”

I rubbed it between my fingers and it was elastic and oily like good hash should be. It also smelled fresh. So Jean was trying to recruit me? He threw another thing at me, which fell in my lap. A small metal pipe, not more than three inches in length, made of stainless steel. It had the letters DJ J engraved on the side.

“Smoke it and give me your honest opinion.”

“I don't smoke hash. I'm afraid you got me wrong, Jean, this isn't my thing.” I disclaimed.

“Ah, for fuck's sake George, stop being such a pussy will you? What else are we gonna do?” snapped Gina from next to me, shrieking. Without waiting for a reply, she got up and left the room, slamming the door behind her. I then heard her running down the stairs. I looked after her bewildered from the window as she left the building and walked up the road out of sight.

“I don't know what's got into her. I'm going after her,” I told Jean as I got up.

“No, no, my son. Bad idea,” he smirked. “Best to let the bird cool off before you go to make up. Why did you have to upset her like that anyway, eh? Now be a good boy and smoke that stuff in the pipe and tell me if that's not prime hash innit?!”

Annoyed with Gina making a fool of me in front of people, I sat down, put the grain of hash in the pipe, heated the outside of the cup well with my lighter to thaw the drug, put it in my mouth, lit up and sucked in the smoke, which I held inside with my eyes closed for about ten seconds. When I exhaled a faint bluish steam left my lungs, no trace of noxious fume. A good sign. Also, it went straight to my head, upbeat high and body relaxation, no drowsiness.

“There's a big man smoker,” said Jean. “Don't worry, Gina told me, you'll be fine.”

“Did she? And if I buy £400 worth of hash from you how much is your cut?”

“I'm offended. First of all, you'll buy it from my bruvver Paul from Shoreham, and secondly I'm doing this for Gina's sake, 'cos I want to see her get on and not lack for anything. It's your welfare I'm after.”

“Well, Jean, thanks. I appreciate it. But this is a bit too quick. I'm not prepared, I need to think a bit about it...”

“The offers expires tomorrow. Better get Paul today as he just got a shipment yesterday, and the good stuff goes out first. You can do it today and think about it later, right? It’s only a bit of hash, and you’ll get your money back either way in Southants.”

“I really don’t know, Jean. I’m just not even sure I have the money... and I need to talk to Gina first.”

“I talked to her already. She said yes.”

“Did she? Where's Paul then?” I asked. In the end, Gina was right. What else would we do? This was as good a time as any to get back to what I did best.

Jean made a phone call and in a half hour a white man in his fifties, wearing a gray tracksuit, walked into the flat.

“Paul.”

He shook my hand. He had long hair just above his shoulders, and big sideburns, all white.

“George. I haven't got the money yet.”

“Don't worry, I'll take a cup of tea.”

“There's a cash machine on the corner to the right as you leave the building.” Jean chirped.

“OK.” I walked out.

Of the nearly £600 I had on my card, we had, I took out £400 to spend on hash, and believed this to be a sound decision. I returned to Jean's.

“Is this the same hash as what Jean has just given me?” I asked.

Paul looked at Jean, who said:

“Yes.”

“How much is it in grammes?” I asked.

“50,” said Paul, confident.

There was no point by now to challenge this claim, so I dove: gave him the money and he gave me a piece of brown clay about the size of a mobile phone, wrapped in tinfoil. The he said thank you and left.

“Bob's your uncle,” said Jean.

I didn't know what that meant. I texted Gina: “Come back. I've spoken to Jean, all is fine.”

She came back in the next ten minutes, sat in my lap, kissed me and whispered a lubricious apology in my ear.

“Did you boys get up to something when I was gone?”

“George here has met a friend of mine who gave him a piece of hash to sell to his mates at university and make sure you are well looked after. Isn't it George?” said Jean.

“Exactly right, Jean.” I said, wondering what else Gina and him had planned behind my back on one of their internet chatrooms.

Outside it was getting dark. Jean said he had tickets to a nightclub and that there was a folk festival in town. He pressed a small pill in my hand.

“This Bentley will kick in right in time for us to get out. It's your first Bank Holiday weekend, so it must be done proper.”

He gave Gina a pink pill as well.

“Bank holiday? What does it have to do with banks?” I asked.

“Nobody knows. It's just what us British call national holidays. It's either a Friday or a Monday when working is banned by law, so everyone gets pissed up.”

Right. Gina put on a blouse with a deep cleavage, and I changed my t-shirt. We were ready.

We walked out and as soon as we turned the corner, mayhem ensued. Drunk, loud people everywhere, some cursing, some puking, some laughing. All in groups, some were even dressed the same. There were a lot of all-male and all-female groups sharing bottles of vodka and joints. Some of the male groups were kicking over rubbish bins, spilling the filth into the street. Some spat and yelled at nobody in particular, things like “fuck yea, Brighton, let's have it” or “suck your mum, yea”. Civilisation in England seems to crumble as dusk hits on a Friday and somehow re-emerges bruised and ashamed on Monday morning just in time for work. At balconies in buildings along the high street people were dancing, playing music and drinking heavily. We ploughed on. The pill was starting to work me over. It all turned into a strange, poignant pantomime. Gina was clutching my hand, her eyes glowering like beacons.

“You look shocked. Is it the crowd or the Bentley?” Jean bleated.

We looked at him, saying nothing. He chuckled.

“That's it you crazy kids.”

The club on the beach, sand in our shoes. Thundering waves and the night was balmy, the air soothing and the music just at the right volume from outside. We got some cocktails and decided we'd catch up with Jean a bit later.

“We need some air,” Gina told him.

He took a couple of pills and started chatting with some of his friends who were already waiting for him inside. The Rubicon was a garish, sweaty and overpriced club, with too many subwoofers and laser beams. The music, a melodious, Latino house set, was something off a party boat in Ibiza, I imagined. Gina and I sat on the sand and finished our cocktails. I lit a cigarette and we smoked it together. It was the most satisfying smoke. It quenched a thirst for smoke inside me, an acidity in my chest which vanished when I dragged in the tobacco.

“The waves and the music are lovely, babe, I'm so happy to be here,” Gina said.

“I'm happy too babe,” I said, putting an arm around her.

The sand was coarse and wet, and the foam of the sea sprayed far from the big waves, touching our faces. The water was crashing into the beach in a self-affirming rhythm which complemented the music we heard from the club. Gina climbed on top of me. I put my hands under her skirt. The next morning we woke up on the beach, freezing cold, shivering, and we went directly to the train station and back to Southampton, stopping by Jean's only to pick up the luggage, and, of course, the hash. We didn't stay for tea. He was flat on the bed in the same clothes he was wearing the previous evening, shoes on. The flat cap stayed on too.

We climbed on the train – Gina, myself, and the plaque of hashish. The landscape on the way back, despite being the very same physical surface of earth over which we crawled to get there in the first place, appeared markedly different. My aspirations at civilisation had been frustrated for the time being at least, and now I was looking out the window and listening to music hoping to see some wolves. Gina slept peacefully next to me, with her head resting gently in my shoulder.

We got out of the train at Southampton Central, climbed the hill up to the BBC building behind the Guildhall, and stood took a bus back to Swaythling. Watching the kids skateboarding on the funky modern marble-carved street furniture in their baggy trousers, flat-soled shoes and t-shirts stamped with obscene phrases, I got the distinct impression that I was getting a little old to be selling hash. Then again, Paul, my supplier, was about fifty. Was it really a good idea to risk going to a British jail, surely tougher than a Danish one, or to spend most of my rent money on hash which, it further dawned on me, I hadn't even actually tested, when I knew absolutely not one body who might be interested in buying it? I was in the country not two months. For quick sales you not only need to know people, but you need to know the right people, who you can trust. You can't just walk up to someone randomly and ask if they want to buy something. I had serious doubts about my recent choices, and I felt angry at Gina for luring me down this path. I became silent and sullen. I brooded on the bus all the way home. Without a word, I went to the bedroom, pulled the curtain and put the hash on the table. I peeled off the tinfoil and chipped out a bit from the corner with my fingernail. Even before I smoked it I knew from the way it crumbled. It was like dry clay, not anything like the shit Jean gave me back at his place. Its colour was vaguely similar but paler and it was crumbly and smelt like plastic instead of rich wax and polen. Regardless, I put it on a plate, lit it up and put a tumbler glass on top, holding it up just a millimetre from the plate, so it had enough air to burn through while collecting the smoke inside. The thing filled up and I inhaled with a straw. I coughed and sputtered. It was a dark, toxic smoke with a flavour not unlike that of burning cigarette filters when you forget to stub it out. It left my throat an irritated mess and my eyes

bloodshot, but the narcotic effects were negligible. I had not smoked anything worse in my entire life. I picked up the phone to call Jean but I didn't even have his number.

“What's Jean's number, Gina?”

“Why?”

“He fucked us over with the hash. It's shit. You'd have to be crazy to pay money for this shit. I'm going back for a refund. Your good friend fucked us badly.”

“Hey wait a minute. Don't talk like that about my friend. He didn't sell you the hash did he? What are you going to say to him if I give you the number?”

“Never mind what. Of course he sold it to me, what, are you stupid? Give me his number now, Gina.”

I got up in her face.

“Fuck off, don't talk to me like that. It's your hash, deal with it.”

“Gina, don't give me this shit. He is your friend, I hadn't seen him before, and for all I know you two connived behind my back to rip me off. Now give me his number.”

“Get the fuck away from me, you dickhead. Who do you think you're talking to?”

“Give me that fucking thing.”

I snatched her MePhone from her claws and pushed her away. She went whimpering on the bed and started crying.

“Shut the fuck up.” I told her. I dialled Jean.

“Hey Jean, listen, it's George. This hash is shit, it's useless. Plastic. Can't smoke it. I'm coming back to Brighton for a refund.”

“Hey, hey, whad'ya mean a refund? Are you having me on?”

“Are you having me on, you old horsemouth bastard. The hash that mother fucker John Lennon gave me is fucking dirt. You understand? You put me in it, you get me out. You should call the man and tell him I'm coming tonight to get my money back.”

“Mate, watch your mouth. I'll call Gina later and I'll talk to her, but don't you call me back again on this number or I'll come down to Southampton and break your fucking legs, you get me? You little cunt.”

Beeeeeeeeeeep.

I threw Gina's phone at her and hit her in the ribs with it.

“We're fucked. Best think of a way to get the rent money next month 'cause your fucking loopy friends have all our money now. Do you hear me?”

“Get the fuck out of here and don't fucking talk to me, you fucking animal!” she screamed, all in tears.

“You are a slag.”

I left the room, slamming the door behind me. I went downstairs in the back yard. On the floor in the landing – we had one of those postflaps with no box – was a white envelope with my name on it. On its front it said: “if not delivered please return to Darlington, PO Box...” It informed me that The Student Loans Company has rejected my application for a tuition loan on the grounds of insufficient evidence of eligibility provided. I now owed the university £3,200 or I could appeal the decision. Or I could give up my course. I had a week to decide, the letter said. I got back upstairs. Gina was sleeping. I laid there beside most of the night, thinking.

The next morning I woke with a dread in my heart. I had dreamt that I was walking in a steep valley in a tundra, with thorns and tree stubs coming out of the ground between rotted vegetation. There I found Coco's shop, with a giant blue and green neon firm saying Hanaman, selling music and juice and sweets, but Coco was nowhere to be found. Who even knew Coco had a shop? Looking for him I walked some more and saw a mean gray dog. Its muzzle was mutilated and its eyes burnt out. It was barking and drooling at me. It was tied from a tree with a chain to its neck and it was barking violently and showing me its teeth, pulling the chain. I climbed the hill just outside its reach thinking that I could try to set it free without getting bitten and when I looked down by its shabby doghouse made from a large rusty barrell cut in half there was a dead, eviscerated young German shepherd dog there. The big junkyard dog returned to it and took a piece of it and ate it then got back to barking and sneering at me. Then I woke.

I went to university not fully knowing if there was any more point in it. Part of me was thinking to leave the fallen pieces where they were and do something else entirely. I didn't want to study and I didn't want to sell hash, but I didn't know how to do anything else either. I hung outside the university, too lost in the brooding to attend the course. I went to the cash machine and checked my balance. It said I had £200. If I was to keep a roof above my head I had to sell that hash and what was left of the weed and I had to have means of transport to do that. I went to the library and logged onto the computer, looking for bicycle sale ads in Southampton. If I found one for £80 in good condition. I could get my money back for it within a few days provided I never took the bus again, which I resolved to do as a first step towards solvency. Got to spend money to make money. Austerity, cost-cutting. You learn these things in business school now. There was no picture with the ad. It said, “Nice bike mens front shocker £80 or nearest offer no time wasters pls!!!” That was it. I called the number and a man picked up. I said I was interested in looking at the bike, he said sure, meet me at The Avenue at the bottom of The Common, he said. OK, I said. When I arrived a half hour later there were two young men in sportswear waiting for me, one black one white. The black one said he was Gomez and the white one didn't say anything. The bike was in fine condition,

a blue mountain bike which could only be worth the asking price if it were stolen. I offered £70, and they accepted it. I asked if it was stolen and Gomez said no. Then they asked me if I wanted to buy weed and I said no. Do you want to buy some hash I said. They said yes, how much. I said £20 for one or £30 for two. They said let's do £10 first. I said yes, fine, but I need to go get it. You have my number, Gomez said. Off I went on the new bike to make my first sale.

At home, Gina greeted me by looking away when I came in. We were not on speaking terms, I recalled. No matter, business was at hand. So I went to the piece of hash, carved out a few bits with my pocket knife, weighed them in my hand, wrapped them in tinfoil and left. I returned and took the folding pocket knife, without a fully-formed reason for this in my head. This was no time for reason. I bowled down the stairs and hopped on the bicycle. I need a scale and baggies, I thought, as I pedalled down Stoneham Way and up Burgess Road, past the McDonalds and the real university of Southampton. So many students there, so many prospective customers. All I really had to do was get up to that campus and pass my number around, then the word will spread. Yes, but the merchandise is crap. The word will spread that I am one dealer best avoided. Indeed, what would Gomez make of my product? I turned at the Common and sped down a mudpath. As I rode, I called Gomez to let him know I could meet at the same place.

“Can you come to St. Mary's Hot For You though? I'm out here now,” he said.

“Where's that?”

“Just behind your university, you turn right around the building and come down in St Mary's. You'll see the takeout.”

And eventually, after stopping to ask about four people, I did. It was a gloomy day, the sky heavy with the kind of loaded clouds that make it seem there was never any summer blue sky up there. Gomez and his friend were munching on fries drenched in curry sauce and fried chicken wings.

“Chips?” he offered.

“No thanks.”

“Well, sit down. Do you have the ting ting?” he intoned.

“I do.”

“Give it.”

He pulled a messy bouquet of low-denomination sterling from his front pocket and peeled off two £5 notes which he handed to me.

“Here?” I asked, pointing my nose in what I thought was a discreet fashion towards the teller who was listening. We were his only clients at the moment in time.

“Yea, man, dis here is ma yard, you get me?” He said, with obvious pride.

I gave him the tinfoil. He ripped it up and revealed the hash, if one could call it that. He smelled it.

“Looks OK,” he said.

I could see he was lying.

“How much of this do you have?” he asked.

“I don't know, I just ran into some, this isn't my usual gig,” I stammered.

He looked at me quizzically, eyes wide open and eyebrows up as if I hadn't answered his question.

“About 15-20 grams?” I lied.

“Mmm. Whereabouts in Swaythling do you live man? I'll swing by later with my boys to pick up some more.”

“You know the McDonlads? Right next to that.” I said.

“Sweet,” he said, and he lifted his fist at me. I flinched, thinking he wanted to hit me.

Then I realised it was his way of shaking hands. I showed him an outstretched palm, and he shook it. A good start, I figured. His white sidekick was busy wolfing down the food with both hands. I told Gina about my success.

“I knew you'll make it, babe, come here.”

I was so lustful for her approval that to this day I believe her clothes simply evaporated when I grabbed her ass that evening. Later, Gina laying idly on top of me, the phone buzzes on the floor. Gomez: “Coming for more. Meet at MC-D???? X Gom.” “Sure. Be there in 20. Thx,” I replied. I put some clothes on and took another two bobs of smelted rubber, then I walked to the McDonalds and sat on a bench at the back of the place. About 40 minutes later, so nearly an hour since he said he'd be there in 20 minutes, Gomez rolls up on a bicycle.

“Where's your pale shadow?” I asked, and immediately regretted it.

Gomez disregarded my question. He was a deep black, black lips black palms and thick black hair in braids cut to shoulder length which looked on him like a helmet. I had a vision of him headbutting me. He was stronger than I and about the same height. It was obvious he was going to the gym because of the muscles on his shoulders, which looked swollen even when relaxed, the way only someone who lifts a lot of weights above his head can make them look. I stretched out a fist. Instead he shook my hand.

“No more badman salute for you, George,” he smiled as he lit a cigarette.

He offered me one.

“So, here you go. You wanted a £20, no?” I said tentatively, while dropping the two chicklets in his hand.

“No, not just a score my man. Let me have the whole load and I sell it for you. I buy this £20 at market price, and we go to yours to get the rest. For that we go halves, you get me?”

“Wait a minute, Gomez, what do you mean halves? And why would you sell it for me?”

“I can sell that for you with my weed in a week. Good for both of us. You know how much weed I sell? Guess. I sell half an ounce a day.”

“I'm in no rush. How much did you mean when you said halves?”

“Well I would pay you £250 for your half ounce, and keep the rest to myself. Then when that is gone you go and get me more, and we both make a little money. How much would it take you to sell it alone?”

“I think about two weeks, so not much longer. I'm not sure I'm interested in your offer, but thanks.” My guard was smashed already but I wanted to save face.

“My bruddah,” he said in a Jamaican accent which he didn't have before. “By next week we go on to the next one. Why run the streets when you make money sitting back? Don't you have studies and books to read?”

“Gomez, say I give you a whole ounce, hypothetically. How much you pay me for that and how long to sell it?”

“Mmm, let's see. Still a week and I would do you £450 on the lot. You have an ounce don't you?” He said with an expansive, beneficent awareness of his sharp instincts. His teeth were white, except two canines which were covered in gold.

“I do, Gomez. I bought it from Brighton. I'll be happy to let you sell it if you pay in advance.”

“Ooh, Brighton. Next level, eh? Hash capital of the UK?” he nudged me playfully with his elbow as if to say, ironically, that the god Shiva himself flies over from Kilimanjaro all the way down to Sussex, England every month and crafts pieces of cheeba by his own divine self out of the humble sativa hemp. Sort of what Bordeaux represented for red wine, was what he was suggesting to me.

“Anyway,” he continued, “we don't do advance pay in this business. I give you something to chew on for a week and then the rest after I get mine. That's fair. You can trust me, I wouldn't do you over for £400. Look,” he said and pulled a wad of money from his pocket.

It was indeed an impressive bundle. Thick enough that the outside bill was bent not more than about halfway around, it all sat together by the power of a latex band. A sort of ball of money. My eyes must have bulged, letting Gomez know my amazement. Right here in the parking lot of a Southampton McDonald's, I was being charmed.

“Nice, eh? Stick with me and you'll be carrying one of these babies really soon, you'll see.

It's about £2,000 here. Not much, but not bad either for a week's pay.”

“OK, you win,” I said, intoxicated with the sight and the idea he had effortlessly planted into my brain that I was liable to have such a bundle all to myself pretty soon.

He knows the way things work out here, I thought. I better follow his lead, he seems like a good guy after all. And, besides, the truth is I would prefer to never sell anything at all even if I had the connections. It was a miracle this Gomez was willing to cover my break-even amount. I would get stuck for the train money, though, I thought.

“Let's go,” I said.

“Good man,” he said.

We walked back to my flat and I asked Gomez in. Gina, in underwear and a t-shirt, opened.

“Tea?”

“Oh yes, my dear. A big cup please, two sugars and a bit of milk,” Gomez leered.

He looked her up and down. Her nipples were showing through the white canvas of the blouse. He continued to look as she turned around and walked to the kitchen.

“Love of my life,” I said with emphasis, interrupting his sick fantasy. “I'd do anything for her.”

I brought him the hash. He looked at, smiled, and set it on the floor. Gomez was a big smiler. Smiling all the time, for the smallest reason. He produced an electronic scale from his pocket and weighed it. 26 grammes.

“Not exactly an ounce, I'm afraid, blood. Call it £360 then?”

“OK,” I said. “How much of it can you cover right now?”

Gomez handed me a £50 note which he had in another pocket, separate from the bundle. I examined it over my lighter and it seemed genuine. Red and crisp, a thing of beauty. Gina gave him his cup of tea and looked at the bill, mesmerized as well.

“Mmmm, Earl Grey. You have good taste miss, but there's too much milk in here. It's too white. Do you drink it like this? Next time try it darker,” he trilled.

I coughed. We sat in silence as he bathed his eyes on Gina. She watched him only with the mildest polite curiosity, but did not show offense either at his rather forward demeanour. Then he left.

“You didn't give him the whole piece for £50 I hope.” she said.

“No, this is just a taster. He'll sell it for us and we're splitting the profits. He's paying me another £300 by next week.”

She chuckled. “I thought you paid £400 for it.”

“I did but as you know Jean fucked me over and the product is worthless, so it's a miracle

we are even making back most of what we already spent. I'm telling you, Gomez is a saviour.”

“Is he? How come he's selling it if it's shit?”

“I don't know, he's from here. He knows people. Don't worry about it.”

She chuckled again. I busied myself with getting back into Gina's good graces and attending university – not so much to learn about how to be an obedient employee but to keep my mind off what would happen if Gomez didn't come through. I didn't know his real name, I didn't know where he lived, and even if I did, this wasn't Denmark. People hacked each other with guns and hunting knives here on a daily basis. I had seen it in the newspapers. They shot each other over drugs all the time. So I got up at half past seven every morning, rode the bicycle to university by eight, got a £2 early-bird sausage. egg sub and large coffee, went to class and took notes on the life and times of Jack Delors. At this time Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland were facing state bankruptcy because the banks started demanding higher interest on these countries sovereign bonds – money they borrowed – in order for the most part to give it back to the banks to keep them from going bankrupt, while the bankers themselves made hundreds of millions and while the governing institutions of the European Union for the most part assumed a passive role and only helped out these nations when no other option was possible. The lecturer never was quite able to explain why the banks had to be kept alive at any cost, but he did make out Jack Delors to be quite like a folk hero. I went to class, and I read the material and the related coverage in the news, and I went home.

Thursday came, went and no word from Gomez. I called, texted, left messages. Four days, nothing. He was closing in on two weeks overdue. Rent, of course, was due. I started sweating and it seemed to me that Gina was relishing my torment.

“What, Gomez didn't call yet? Wow, what a surprise”, she'd say to me. She could be cruel when she wanted to.

“I'm doing my best here Gina, if you have any other bright ideas please go ahead. You put us in this mess to begin with, remember?”

We started avoiding touching each other in bed. When we first got together we slept on top of each other naked in an all-night embrace. Not any more. We struggled to be kind to each other and mostly failed. The pleasantries were difficult. There was tension barely hidden under the surface, which burst every night into petty rows. I was calling Gomez maybe twenty times a day by now. Nothing. Eventually, I decided to look for him. How big could this little city be? I dressed in ratty track bottoms, trainers and a hoodie, with an Adidas sport jacket on top to blend in. I figured if he assaults me at least the baggy clothes would confound his shots. I prowled Southampton up and down on my bicycle for a whole day without luck, then went and planted myself outside the Hot 4 You in Saint Mary's where I first gave him the hash. I just sat there across the alley, outside the

firestation, smoking cigarettes and looking around. Nothing. The next day I resumed my stakeout in the same spot. Hours went by. I listened to music, read the newspapers on my phone, smoked about a packet of cigarettes, and at one point towards seven pm, I hear Gomez with his unmistakable faux-Jamaican twang:

“De yea want some ting from de shop my bruddah? Like, chips?”

And he climbed out of a Vauxhall Corsa with dark tinted windows and went inside the fast food. I swallowed hard, took a deep breath and went in after him.

“Hey Gomez, how are you?”

“Oh George bruddah, how are you? Sorry I didn’t get back, eh? Busy busy. Vos ‘appenin?”

He smiled and showed me his fist. I reciprocated.

“Gomez, I need that money you owe me. Where is it?”

“Oh oh oh...” he started laughing. “The money, yea? Come with me, George, we gots to talk.” Now he sounded American.

I figured he’d stab me but I had to resolve it so I followed him back to the car outside. We both climbed in the back and the driver, a young black guy who looked older than both of us, drove off.

“Where is the money you owe me man? My £360.” I resumed.

“Hey, listen George. No more silly talk now. You are new here, yeah? You should be thankful I didn’t let you sell that fucking shit out in these streets or someone would have cut you for sure. You don’t know these motherfuckers out here George.”

“What? So I’m not getting my money? Give me back the fucking hash then.”

“I melted you hash and mixed it with some other hash a friend of mine had. I sold it to him for £100. Here, here’s another £50, your half.”

He handed me two £20 notes and a tenner.

“Now listen, don’t make a big deal out of it. Who sold you that shit anyway? It’s really the shittiest thing I ever laid eyes on, eh?” he laughed with his back hunched forward and his fist held up to his mouth, like he was choking. He was slapping his thigh with his other hand and jumped up and down on the back seat of the car.

“Fuck, man, you don’t understand. That was my only hope. I put all I had in that hash, now I’m fucked and rent is coming. What am I gonna do?” My eyes were on the verge of welling up with frustration.

“Listen, George. Your beef is not wid me, eh? Whoever gave you that ting and told you sell it, that’s your beef. That stuff is rubbish and he took advantage of you. If I were you, I would be upset at them. I’ll take care of you from now on, you won’t be in trouble, don’t worry. Not the end

of the world, eh?”

“Don’t you understand that fucking Sanjay the greedy landlord is going to kick me and Gina out of the house next week if we don’t come up with £600?”

“OK OK, listen ma man. They can’t kick you out unless you are going three months without rent. These are your rights in this country by law. You ged me? Three month. So don’t worry, you will make it.” He showed me three of his fingers, one of which had a massive gold ring on with a marijuana leaf carved into the nut. Three months, like in Denmark.

“Enough of this, man, just drop me back where you picked me up.” I said.

The car turned around and before I knew it I was back out on the pavement.

“I call you when you cool down a bit George! One love, eh? Life is life!” Gomez yelled as they drove off.

I went back home and put the £50 on the table.

“This is all we have Gina, I don’t know what we’re going to do. I found Gomez but the hash was no good so he couldn’t sell it.”

“Well, at least you are back safely. That Gomez seems dangerous,” she said, unconvincingly, just to contrast my lack of inherent menace with Gomez’ clearly superior underworld credentials.

Time became like water and I was drowning in it. I couldn’t sleep properly thinking of the time I needed to recover and I couldn’t think properly because I could not rest. Stress and insomnia. Tick-tock, it went, driving me crazy. For her part Gina acted like there wasn’t anything to worry about. She’d listen to a lot of music in her headphones, play with her DJ console and take long trips to town on her own, while I called friends to borrow money and called job ads to get into work. A couple of people gave me what they could but we were still nowhere near making rent. Pavel gave me a hundred. I hadn’t called my parents yet but because Gina wouldn’t call hers I was more inclined to sleep rough than call them. I wasn’t about to exploit my poor, working and indebted family because Gina had too much pride to ask her rich, pampered family a small favor they could easily grant. Our rent was what her mother spent on a casual evening in the restaurant, but it was nearly twice what my mother made in a month. This made me angry at Gina and put an even bigger distance between us. Now I was the one looking away when she came in. I’d read, ride my bike from high street to high street dropping CVs, and I’d go to university. I’d tentatively started to keep a journal and writing helped. I wrote random thoughts in there, I’d put in a couple of passages about the weather and people I saw, about the news. Nothing at all about my personal life. One afternoon I came home and found Gina whispering into her phone. When I got in the room she hung up on whoever she was talking to and stole out of the house a minute later. I started getting suspicious that

she was doing something behind my back. That night when she went to sleep I took her phone and locked myself in the bathroom with it.

There was a string of texts there from a German number, but the words were Romanian mongrelled with English, the way young people talk in Bucharest:

“You don’t understand how I feel and you never will.” (Nu înțelegi how I feel și niciodată nu o vei face. This is how she wrote all her texts to that number.) “Do you think I don’t miss him? Do you think I don’t want to see him? I’m in a bad situation right now, but believe me, I’m thinking about him every day. This is killing me!!!”

The reply: “We are doing fine without you. My mother has been helping a lot and frankly he doesn’t often notice you are gone. You should take as much time away as you need and, if you are coming, make sure you let me know well in advance. Don’t dare barge in and scare him with one of your scenes or we will report you to public services.”

Gina: “This is totally out of order. I will never forget this and you be damn sure I’ll take my revenge on you and your damn mother for putting me through this. It’s horrible to be forced away from my child. You have no idea. You are just trying to make him forget me but he never will and one day I will be with him again. You remember that. The mother is more important than the father, always.”

She had called and texted this number every day since... since the phone kept records apparently. For months. Did she have a child with a man in Germany? A son? Jesus Christ. I thought I was having a bad dream. I ran some water in the sink, filled it, and put my head inside it. I wanted to take a cold shower but you couldn’t stand in our bath. I smoked a cigarette and let the fact that my lover had lied to me every day sink in. She was a mother and she didn’t tell me, and worse still, she deserted her child to roam around Europe and behave like a teenager. She lied to everyone and she didn’t care. She didn’t love me. Or maybe she did. Maybe I got it wrong. The messages proved nothing. My pulse was racing. What the hell was happening? I broke down. When I went back to bed I felt I couldn’t recognize Gina anymore. But I didn’t feel equal to waking her up and asking her directly about it either. I decided to let the thing cool and then talk about it. I twisted and turned and the next morning I went to university while she was still sleeping. Without any sleep at all, I sat through all classes, not knowing what else to do. I took my notes and looked at the lecturer’s face, or rather through it, with a vacant mind and robotic stare. The day passed and I walked back to Swaythling. Gina was at home, stern like I’d never seen her before. I walked in, set my bag down and took my shoes off and sat next to her on the bed.

“Let’s take a walk, shall we?” she said.

I put my shoes back on and we left, walking towards an open field which the kids in the

neighbourhood were using as a football pitch. The few trees that were there were autumnal, comatose.

“It’s not going well, is it?” she said.

“No it’s not.”

“I don’t think I can live here. I don’t think I can adjust to this country. Everything seems wrong to me out here.” she said.

“Right. I agree. I think that since we got here we started to behave like my parents. I swore to myself that whatever happens I won’t turn out like them. Anything is better. I won’t allow us to become them.” I said.

She took my hand.

“I will go to Brighton for a few days to think about things. “

“How are you going to get there? We barely have enough money for food. Can’t you think here?” A more asinine question could not have got out of my mouth.

“I have some money of my own. My mum sent it.” she said.

“How nice of her. How come you didn’t tell me this and let me struggle? How come you didn’t pay your part of the bills? You know what, I think you should go to Brighton.” I snapped, but that wasn’t what I felt. I felt I would allow her to walk over me rather than lose her.

“I have a friend in Frankfurt. I’m thinking to go live there for a while, until I figure things out. I’ll stay in Brighton this weekend to see how I feel without you and then I’ll come back, book a plane ticket and go.”

“Gina, please. If you leave me, I will never love another woman. I’ll never have eyes for another woman.” A barefaced lie, but the hyperbolic mendacity only revealed itself to me after I’d spat it. Too late to take back. Was I trying to guilt her into staying? She scratched her nose. People scratch their nose because of something they don’t want to hear.

“Don’t say that. You’re breaking my heart,” said Gina.

“You’re breaking mine.” Now’s the time to bring up the messages, I thought. I didn’t.

We walked back to the flat and the next day she was gone to Brighton. I walked her to the train station. I drank two bottles of Teacher’s whisky over the weekend and did very little else. I texted her a few times, got nothing back, and I read some newspapers and a bit from a book by Hunter S Thompson. His last one. Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century. The title oversold the content but the prose had its moments. Through the hopelessly drunken morass I felt I could do something like this too, if this guy could do it. No sign from Gina. She was supposed to get back on a 3pm train on Monday but she didn’t. I was there waiting like a fool, texting her. The next two trains came and she was still a

no show. I was there four hours when she finally appeared, but she didn't seem happy to see me. I wasn't happy to see her either. The wait had humiliated me and I hated her for it. There was no affection left. All her lies kept pounding in my brain. We walked home. Neither of us spoke. It is a very confusing thing to despise someone but be horrified at the thought of them walking away from you. I went to university, stayed through all classes, vacant, blank, took notes, walked home. When I got back home it was empty of all Gina's things. Everything that belonged to her was gone, including some vinyl records that I believed belonged to the both of us. I realised she'd left without a word and I got angry and started sobbing, tears rolling down my face. I kicked and punched the walls until my knuckles were raw. I cursed. She took all but £40 with her. Then I panicked and thought something happened to her. I called her five times, nothing, off the network. Then I called her mother out of all people.

“Madam, Gina's gone, I don't know where she is. I came back from university and all her things were gone, she didn't say a word to me. I didn't hit her and I never laid a hand on her. I don't know why she didn't say anything. She just went away.”

Her mother didn't have much to say. She was embarrassed at me having called her, she apologized and told me she had in fact sent Gina five hundred euros two weeks before. She didn't know we had money problems. Gina called her and said she needed to go to Germany for a medical because she didn't have insurance in England and she needed to book plane tickets. What a stunning woman. At least now I really didn't have to pay the rent anymore. I took a picture of the washer with my phone and posted the thing up for sale online:

“Washer/ dryer, perfect condition, just bought. Warranty. Buyer picks up from 4th floor walkup. £40.”

“Outsourcing. From a human resources management perspective, it’s a modern way of globalising workforce, minimising costs and optimising the cultural balance of the organisation,” she quipped on the podium. Her face caked in foundation, her lips smeared with red lipstick, her brown dress starched stiff and her shoes black and shiny, with thick heels. She had a complicated name which I fail to recall. She spoke monotone, held the left rim of the lectern firmly and gestured in a rehearsed way as she clicked a remote control to change the presentation slides behind her. She stood to the side of the lectern rather than behind it, for us to see the presentation and also, I suspect, so that we could see in her frontal speldor how dolled up this confident, experienced, middle-aged woman with Lithium eyes was. I was in the third row of the amphitheatre, strategically placed behind two obese students who were either sisters or a lesbian couple with the same haircut who shared a passion for dark clothes. I could do with some lithium as well, I thought.

“The social workplace.” The issue of power within the workplace. The psychological contract: the perceptions of the two parties of what their mutual obligations are towards each other. “A considerable impact on performance.” Conversations and appraisals are good management tools. Managing expectations. Pluralism and individualism. Customer service. Ethos. Idiosyncratic dealing. These things flashed before my eyes in large blue type, sans serif, accompanied by stylized humans similar to those shown on road signs, but more loudly coloured. But not too loudly. Moderately more loudly coloured. A darker shade of beige.

“Your first assignment will be a technical essay on the following question: employers and employees have different expectations of each other both in terms of work generally and in terms of particular people and jobs. Discuss. Employers tend to push towards harder work, for their own interest, which is the same as the company’s, to a certain extent. Sounds good...(?)” the lecturer recited.

She probably asked that of us, but her intonation was flat, so she could just as easily have informed us the assignment sounded good to her. To me it sounded frighteningly vague, like something out of Kafka. Whatever you say is wrong and will cause frustration. Discuss. Maybe she was talking about the obvious conflict of interest between the owners of the business and the employees? The former want to extract as much money against as little cost as possible, while the latter want to extract as much money against as little effort as possible. Income for the latter is cost for the former and income for the former is effort for the latter. I jotted this down, proud of having

birthed an initial thought. I started to wonder whether it would be a good idea to turn wildly homosexual and video-document it all on Youtube in order to spite Gina.

Innovation and Creativity lecture next. An old lady, probably a pensioner on a supplementary position, spoke of the Gruber and Marquis model of innovation in four stages, giving as an example a mobility scooter. To be clear, now she was lecturing us on how to be innovative and creative. I guess she found the mobility scooter fitting. To her generation, these scooters had been a godsend. There were nearly 40 of us in the class. Were my colleagues polite or inattentive? I couldn't say. I drifted away for the rest of the show. After that I had an appointment with the Admin office to receive my student identification card and my student email address:

9grgpln8@solent.ac.uk. I was made to sign and date a legally binding document that said I took ownership of these two things. By contract I committed to check the email every other day at least, and swipe the student identification card on an electronic device placed next to the doors to the lecture and seminar rooms to prove I was in attendance. If I was in attendance but failed to touch the card, which contained an electronic chip unique to myself, as far as the university was concerned it was just as well if I missed the class, the Admin office explained to me.

On the bus home I listened to music through a pair of headphones and all of a sudden the song called Something, off of Big Krit's KRIT WUZ HERE mixtape came on. It had lyrics about a girlfriend leaving in it, which despite listening to the song at least ten times before I had no idea about. On that bus, when the girlfriend lyrics came on, I started crying like a baby, with choked out sobs, thinking not so much that I would die without Gina and that I would give anything for her to be with me as that I must really be an egregious failure for her to dare to leave me without a single word, like I meant nothing to her. And how cowardly of me not to confront her about her apparently having a child with some man in Germany. I felt hopeless and alone. When I got home I was so depressed I ignored the bottle of vodka waiting on the table and went to bed. Booze is for those who still hold deeply buried inside themselves the belief in the possibility to cheer up, or at least stop caring. True pessimists don't enjoy drinking, I realised.

Dr. Mark Knotts was my lecturer in European Political Economy. The only designated professor I ever got a chance to meet, he wore polo shirts and old jeans to class, and made jokes about having only one belt and about cycling to work every morning.

"I nearly got killed twice today trying to get these handouts to you and this young man can't be bothered to have a second look at them."

The class roared.

"What does that tell you about economy? Supply is nothing without demand. That's what the communists couldn't get their heads 'round and now look at them."

It became the only course I cared about. Knotts spent his whole life trying to untangle the sensible, compassionate and humane parts of Marxism from the dogmatic, inhumane bullshit and do the same to capitalism, and form a new unifying theory. He made a career of it and became a doctor in the dismal science, which is what he called economics, but the results weren't great. The end result was something in the way of Tony Blair or Bill Clinton's third way, as far as I gathered, but those two were long gone, and their era gone with them. Something darker was afoot in Greece, and spreading. A debt-driven statehood, where society has the primary function of repaying debt that it never benefitted from, but mostly accrued through interest on previously small loans. To stay on top one must make it as friendly as possible for large corporations, who are the new de facto states, with their codes of conduct, targets, and electronic surveillance. The government as debt collector, the creditor as ruler, the corporation as local authority. Police to prevent violence. Lives as spreadsheets. Knotts knew it so he directed his passions toward teaching. There is no doubt in my mind that he was seriously determined to make us understand the way The European Union worked. It was no mean feat. We just had the global financial crisis which brought the banks close to bankruptcy, made millions homeless and unemployed and brought America nearly to civil war, and Europe near to bankruptcy of countries which were previously thought of as rich: Greece, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Iceland and Portugal. Millions of Romanians left to live in these countries but the way it looked now Romania was better off economically because we didn't get hit very hard by the crisis.

"Europe didn't come too far from Mitterand," Knotts would say. "That was 30 years ago. It takes ages to get anything done because you have to have either a qualified majority of 75% of members agreeing over the small decisions, which is pretty hard, or for the big decisions you have to have unanimous opinion, which is damn near impossible, especially seeing as most European countries mistrust each other. I mean, I can't remember the last time the British Parliament ever voted unanimously for anything, and over here at least we speak the same language. 75% is pretty rare too in Westminster. So you see why it's poorly set up to handle the crisis. Meanwhile, half the countries face bankruptcy on their public debt, they increase taxes and cut public spending to extract money from the population whose quality of life suffers, the banks are a shambles with a license to defraud, and it's the only political union in history that has more than a dozen central banks and ministries of finance making decisions – often contradictory, mind you – over the same currency. Riots in the street, bathos in the boardroom, confusion in legislature. You see why a year is probably not enough to deal with this stuff now?"

Knotts was given to raving. A breath of fresh air compared to the others, but sadly the only one. I took to only attending his classes. I'd get up in the morning at half seven, ride the bicycle or

the bus to the university, get an egg sandwich and large coffee for £2.50 at the deli and go hear Knotts, then I'd spend the rest of the morning in the library, then go back to Swaythling and keep quiet. I'd browse the internet aimlessly for whole afternoons and sometimes whole nights. I did it until I could no longer keep from falling asleep and not a second less.

I was smoking cigarettes, listening to music and browsing websites filled with conspiracy theories. I read without focusing, just for sport. The world started making sense when you listened to David Icke and his peers, which worried me because it made a little too much sense, it became narrow. It wasn't a world you liked, and it stopped making sense when you listened to anyone else. It was a mean place where powerful, occult elites have control over the destinies of billions innocents. I fancied myself a revolutionary thinker before long. Knotts I think saw the change in me and liked it. My grades improved. The rich were a clan of sorts, directing politics and business and manipulating the rules of society in their favour – at least according to my lecturers and the latest “conscious hip-hop” albums. Democracy was a cheap masquerade, an empty ritual that kept the masses quiet and content. Credit cards, fast food, pop music, fashion, medication, television, mobile phones, sports, cigarettes and university education itself were tools by which evil, rich people organized in such outfits as The Bilderberg Club, The Trilateral Commission, The United Nations, The European Union, NATO, The World Economic Forum, Bohemian Grove, Illuminati, The Rosicrucians, The Knights Templar, The New World Order and many, many others, were exerting their unfiltered domination of the planet – I learned this from the internet. I learned to save money drastically, living on no more than £30 a week. Having paid no rent for a month and going on two, I was applying the same lesson as the European countries Knotts was teaching me about: shock therapy. Cut all lifelines to jumpstart new ideas. Cutting costs to the bone. Like Robert DeNiro is a method actor, I considered myself to be a novice method student of The European Way of Life.

It was difficult to believe this at first but weed helped. A little bag of weed would last five days. Weed was a positive force in this strange world and the most hardener adepts fetishised it. They said it could cure cancer. I smoked half a joint and read about the evil West. The way conspiracy theories draw you in is with an appetiser of plain information which is true and verifiable, seemingly remote facts on the ground, that later crystallise into bigger, interconnected phenomena that one must believe rather than acknowledge, but by then the reader is already invested in the experience and so a willing participant in the tribal, insider knowledge of the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are folk tales for the modern world. 1,000 years ago the peasants explained their misery by saying there was a dragon down the blind alley leading through the forest and up to a cave. The monster breathed fire and pestilence in the villagers' lives unless they sacrificed a virgin. Now the villagers are poor, unhappy, bloated and frustrated with their sex

lives because a lizards from outer space are running the human race like an ant colony through puppet leaders and capitalism. David Icke fills stadiums at £60 a pop by telling people they are vegetables and have no control over their lives. Those who believe this are made to pay their hard-earned money to hear it and they feel special and enlightenend in doing so. It is a perfect ponzi scheme. This is part of UK civilisation too, I learned.

At one point American bankers started thinking that they had found the perpetuum mobile of the finance world: the mortgage bond, Knotts explained at the university course. They would give out mortgages to anyone and then cut those up into little pieces like slices of salami, mix them together on a platter and sell the platter as a mortgage bond, to pass the risk to investors. This turned out to be the scam of the century, because when the market became saturated with these pieces of salami and started vomiting from them, the bankers still didn't stop and in the end everyone, including Europeans were buying it. When they turned out worthless because the shitheads who got given the houe mortgages in the first place weren't paying them back, a lot of the big banks in the world went bankrupt, and the governments paid money they didn't have to save them. This put pressure on governments, which were highly indebted already. Many of them were terminally corrupt and inefficient with money, and they found the added strain difficult to take. Public spending was cut, investment was cut, lending, borrowing and shopping stopped and many people lost their jobs.

My whole life had been an ongoing financial crisis. Ever since can remember I always lacked for something and for that reason when the financial crisis happened to the world I hardly felt anything. But now I finally related with others, had something to blame ('the system') and was, I thought, entitled to take advantage of the occasion to join the malcontents. I applied to the student journalism association at the university to become the university magazine's economy and finance correspondent. The organ was called: Vortex, a publication by and for Solent students.

The first article I wrote called for the immediate formation of an Occupy Southampton cand "the urgent, robust occupation of the local shopping mall, West Quay, in order to, alongside the citizens of the town, take action against the havoc wreaked by rent-extracting capitalism of the City of London." It went to print in a run of 100 copies a month later on the Thursday before the Easter bank holiday and the article was on the third page to last, with many spelling and punctuation errors. It unfortunately had a much smaller impact than it deserved. Nobody occupied the shopping centre and no Occupy Southampton was formed.

That same day Sanjay was scoping me out from his Lexus when I got home.

"You have three days to leave, George. The notice is in the post," he told me calmly when I walked by.

“Well, Sanjay, I would have paid but Gina left with all my money.”

“Sorry but you chose your girlfriend. It’s on you. I need the flat empty on Friday, OK?”

I nodded. The landlord told us a story about the place, back when we were on good terms, about how at the turn of the past century the house used to belong to a merchant who had a family of servants living in the very attic we were renting. One night the master of the house went up the stairs to the servant’s chambers and murdered them all with a knife and then went back downstairs to finish supper. Good thing Gina and I didn’t believe in ghosts, although ghosts would have explained the hellish noise coming from under the bath whenever we put the hot water on. Many strange things happened in that flat in Swaythling, and for too many of them I have yet to find explanation. We used to turn on the heater in our room at full power and it made the air ten inches around it unbearably hot, but a couple feet further in the room it was still freezing and we could see the condensed steam coming out of our mouths as we were breathing. The windows were closed and so was the door but it was useless – it was like an insulation tank had been put over the heater... the only reasonable solution to this possibly health-threatening predicament was to get drunk every night on polish beer, Irish whiskey and Moroccan hash then get naked under the duvet and make senseless love until we passed out. In the morning everything was fine again and we were still very much in love. I guess it’s true what they say about adversity that it either makes or breaks the bonds between lovers... what I didn’t know and learned the hard way is that it can do both at the same time. I thought that the living conditions during our first months here in England had helped our relationship greatly and we’d be in love forever, until I came back from uni one day to find the house empty and all her things including some of our records gone. No goodbye note, no facebook post, no e-mail. Just empty space and a lot of anger and torment of the soul. A week later I heard from her – she was in Germany, again, living with friends. No mention of her son. Fuck Germany and fuck the people who built this house, fuck the murderous master, fuck the damn servants and fuck the Indian landlord who took our money before telling us the real story. Fuck it all and fuck me for not reading the signs. A man needs his own energy to sustain him. One has to ride the waves of nature. When there’s nothing good in the present whatever comes next will always be better.

Instead of catching up on the shenanigans of the military-industrial complex, that evening I made desperate calls to new landlords and my parents to send me some cash. Eventually I arranged two viewings the next day – single rooms, £280 and £260 a month plus bills. I saw the £260 one first, a tiny ground floor room with a window, a bed and a wardrobe in a battered rowhouse on St. Mary Street. The landlord was a pensioner of Pakistani origin named Hamid. He was slow-talking, slow-moving, short and kind. I told him about Gina and he waived the deposit. I skipped the second viewing and agreed to move in the next day. The kitchen was unusable bar the microwave and the

fridge, provided the food was bagged or sealed. Layers upon layers of grime stood on the tabletop, the sink, the cooker and most of the dishes. The cold water facet worked and the kettle worked. There was a washing machine in the back and a clothes line in the garden. The garden, the other housemates were using as a landfill. The other housemates according to Hamid were a male student from Nigeria, a single mother with a young daughter from Thailand and a French drifter who had just got released from the army. I didn't know their names because Hamid didn't say them. 24 hours a day, St. Mary Street is an open-air drugs market.

“The elite are against legalising drugs in order to criminalize the poor and prevent legitimate social mobility in the 21st century. When regular employment ceases to be a way out of poverty, what are desperate families to do in order to escape the downward spiral of destitution? Marijuana and other drugs provide an invaluable resource for millions of people in the U.K., for whom the mainstream is either a spent option or a moated citadel into which penetration is impossible.”

So read the nut graph of my second article. Towards the end I called for “an occupation of the police station and the town hall until authorities started a serious, inclusive debate on the role of soft drugs in modern society.”

I discovered a penchant for facile alliteration which I mistook for literary talent.

Occupy the London Stock Exchange was entering its first month. The ‘tent city’ was attracting the attention of the Church of England, Parliament and the media. Every morning people were taking bags of food and household supplies to the encampment outside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. Large army tents had been pitched, lights and microphones with loudspeakers wired up to diesel generators, and political debates were being held at all times. With donated money, the occupiers managed to print a newspaper called *The Occupied Times*. A few copies made their way to Southampton. I devoured them. It was an angry thing, full of socialist ideas and aggressive inflammation. The occupiers were clearly an intellectually unequal bunch: those waving the flags and banging the drums seemed from the pictures as derelicts, vagrants who had lead troubled and rootless lives, and ended up there by chance, en route from one homeless shelter to another. These ones – the majority – were frivolous about politics and economy, what they cared about was the energy, the attention and the freebies. The other main group, the elite, who supplied the intellectual thrust of the movement, were a handful of freak academics, scientists, lawyers, writers, poets and journalists, most of them rotten rich, from upper-class families and guilt-ridden by their condition. This bunch wrote the paper, organized the events, made the demands. They were the leaders, only they wouldn’t admit it. They kept talking about a leaderless, grass-roots organization where everyone had an equal say. They wanted Democracy 2.0. Power corrupts, they said, so they were afraid to take it upon themselves lest they got spat out by the movement when inevitably internal

dissent appeared. If there was no leader, there was no-one to dissent against. But there was no-one to take responsibility either, another thing which scared the occupiers and to which they wouldn't admit. Collective responsibility, they said. That autumn the thing was still growing, with hippies from all over Europe joining the camp in London, and it looked like good fun. Slam poetry, music, political debates, break dancing, beer, wine and weed. I was aching for the university to pay my train fare to go spend a weekend in Paternoster Square and write about it for Vortex. To that end I applied for delegation to the leader of the student union who was also the editor of the rag: Charlotte, who wanted everyone to call her Charlie, was a white woman with dark blue hair and rings in both her nostrils. She said she'd think about it.

From my courses there were written assignments coming due and my money was running out again. I knew it was much too soon to go back to my parents and ask. If I called them for money now they would have to borrow it and then they would have to borrow more when my rent needed paying in a few weeks. It wasn't an option. I went home and opened the fridge. There was food there, Thai food cooked with peanuts and chicken, smelling and looking appetizing, and margarine, bread, cheese, tuna, ketchup, a few apples, milk... none of it mine. Upstairs I had five pounds left. I took it to the supermarket, bought potatoes, flour, frozen mince beef, frozen chicken wings, a can of chopped tomatoes, 12 eggs and a large bottle of beer. I went to the machines that let you scan and pay for the shopping yourself, without human assistance. It was a big supermarket, right in the city centre. It sounded frantic, lots of voices, electronic beeps and rings, people clattering and whooshing bags and produce. I scanned all of it apart from the beef and the beer which together cost about as much as the rest of it combined: £4.89.

"Unexpected item in your bagging area," the machine announced.

I set the two clandestine passengers aside casually, paid, took my change, put everything in a bag including the beer and the mince meat, and walked out trying to stand up straight and thinking about having sex with Gina one last time. I knew that if they don't get you while still in the supermarket or the parking lot, once out, the guards cannot do anything. They'd have to call the cops and why would I stick around for that. They can't detain you either. So the door out of the supermarket with no parking lot is the border over which absolution from crime awaits. I crossed it in elation. I avoided shops with parking lots because I had read in the newspaper about zealous guards tackling alleged shoplifters to the ground as they tried to run away. I planned to bake the flour into flat breads, fry the beef into burgers with onion and spices borrowed from my housemates, stew half the potatoes and half the chicken with the can of tomatoes, and keep the rest as provisions. This would feed me for two weeks, I calculated, if I controlled my appetite. I could still sell my bicycle if I had to but I still hoped for a job and I knew I'd need it to commute, so I kept

it. I sipped the beer on the way home through the park. The clouds were heavy again and they were bulging but there was no wetness. A mild wind blew and occasionally rays of light shot from behind the cracks in the blanket overhead. My face was thinning, I thought.

At home I made sure there was nobody around and helped myself to a spoonful of instant coffee from a jar in the cupboard, to give me a boost while I scrubbed down the kitchen. This would become a habit, as the others didn't seem concerned with hygiene. I sipped the hot coffee, cleaned everything with a steel brush and bleach, rinsed it with boiling water and started cooking and baking. I was surprisingly adept at this. Hunger it the best chef, it's true. The flatbreads smelled like fresh bread ought to smell, of warm yeast, motherhood, fatherhood and nutrition, and the burgers – fried in my housemate's oil from the cupboard – were looking positively obscene in their own right. Juicy, plump. I worked out six burgers for six flatbreads. Four eggs I'd used with the mixture, so the eight remaining, were to be my breakfast and lunch for the following week. Now for dinner: I boiled the stew for about two hours, until the chicken meat fell off the bones on its own volition and let it rest for 20 minutes before eating. It was sub-normal workers canteen food in truth, but to me this was the first time in my life I'd ever have to actually make my own. Curiously, in a period running on four years since I'd moved out of my parents' house, I'd never been forced by circumstances to take my cooking past fried eggs, bacon and the occasional barbecue.

The rest of the chicken I stuffed deep in the freezer behind bags of Thai vegetables, and the potatoes, wrapped in two plastic bags, I put under the sink. If going hungry was no longer a concern I could concentrate on studies and finding a job. I felt like I had just extended my lease of life. Without distractions, studying went well and I turned in two assignments I was fairly happy with in the next few days. One was for the human resources course and the other for the European one. Satisfied with my newfound equilibrium, I took a walk out in Derby Road. Two houses down the corner from my street, a short, curiously old and tanned-looking fellow wearing the baggiest clothes I'd ever seen, was puffing away at a blunt, creating a cloud of smoke which smelled like bubble gum, tobacco and pungent marijuana around him. The road was a hive of cars, bicycles and pedestrians going back and forth. People walked in and out of shops and houses, whistled, shouted and laughed at each other. It was sunny and people were out drinking beer and tea with their neighbours, leaning barefoot against the short walls which acted as fences separating the public domain from the private. Sipping, spitting, smoking and talking. Everyone here was poor and most were immigrants without steady employment, but this was not a depressing sight. On a good summer's day, Derby Road in Southampton is a happy place.

The guy in the baggy clothes stopped by me.

“Hey, man, when did you move up here?” He had a thick Spanish or Portuguese accent. “I

seen you around the past few days. Where you from man?”

We talked. He shared his joint then offered to sell me some weed. I told him of my financial predicament. The funds for entertainment had been scrapped in an efficiency effort pushed over me by a difficult market, scarcely recovered from the financial crisis. Eduardo – that was his name – understood completely.

“I was the same way a few months ago, man. You go down, you go up, you never know what happen. Come by here any time if you want to smoke. I have a Playstation at, we can play Fifa, man. I live five houses from here, the blue door, you see?”

I told Eduardo how happy I was to make his acquaintance. I joined him straight away. Not smoking for even a few days after a long period of daily consumption, and then smoking a whole joint again can make the experience even more intense than the first time in one’s life. Eduardo’s weed had rendered me incapacitated. I nearly crawled back home. I spent the rest of the day in bed in a liminal state between sleep and hallucination. But again, like in Denmark, I hated it. The music I was listening to, some garden variety electronica on an online radio station, made me nauseous. Noise came from the street below and I could hear my housemates’ laughter in the sitting room downstairs. Hours passed before I was able to think straight again. I heated up a burger and a flatbread in the microwave and as I was eating on the stoop of the house resolving mentally to one day build up the courage to clean up the rear garden enough that a chair and a table may fit inside it, a black two-door BMW rolled past, then reversed and stopped before me. A black tinted window buzzed down and Gomez, with a head full of skinny dreadlocks looking like a black, steroid-taking Medusa, smiled at me.

“Hey, welcome to the neighbourhood, boy. Hop in.” So I did.

“Had a haircut?” I asked.

“A style-up, my man. Going back to the roots to resist the Babylon system. My life gwaan change this year, seen?” he said. He seemed to have settled on the Jamaican accent.

“You sound like Bob Marley. How does that work out with your less spiritual activities?”

“Man gwaan do whatever he can to feed in this wicked world. Today you learn a new business lesson from me George, and you tell the youths in Romania about Gomez, yeah?”

“I’m busy, Gomez. Thank you for the offer though. Please leave me where you picked me up.”

“Hey come on George, there’s nothing bad’s gonna happen. We gwaan pick up my new girl and then we’ll drive up to Winchester for an hour. You’ll be good, you’ll see.”

He drove up to a council estate in a neighbourhood called Shirley and rang his girlfriend’s phone.

“Are you ready my queen? Me a wait for you with bruddah George.”

Minutes later a white English girl with thick, long and blonde dreadlocks appeared and climbed in the car. I moved to the back seat and we drove off. Gomez started ranting about colonialism and the British Museum and how the English raped and pillaged everything and they stole all the art and the culture and kept it from the people who made it.

“How many Egyptian and Jamaican presidents ever been to the bomboklaat British Museum? Mi a tell yuh: none.” Said the girl, forcing a rastafari accent also.

“Yes, mi lioness!” Gomez cheered.

“These pretentious English bastards think we will sit down and take it but that’s not what we are doing. Today me an yuh mek street art to express the pain of the people.”

Gomez put on a plastic mask like a Pharaoh’s and his girlfriend, who introduced herself as Monique, painted her face like an Apache Indian and put on a headpiece as we drove. Winchester is full of rich people, they said. We arrived and went up to the main shopping street in the town.

They put out a box and a sign reading: donate for the education of illiterate children in Africa Then Monique said to me:

“Colonial payback.”

She took out a violin from her backpack and started scratching the bow across the strings in a tone-deaf commotion. People were staring hard, throwing vicious looks at them. Gomez sat up straight, and when a passer-by looked on the brink of yanking the thing out of Monique’s hand and smashing it on the pavement, he stepped forward officiously and said that was the sound of pain for the needy people that have had their rights taken away.

He repeated this exact line several times without flinching until people walked off in confusion. Eventually, some started throwing in coins. Some spat next to them in disgust, but the donors were more numerous. A small crowd gathered, behind which I retreated. I looked at the two crooks in awe. Police patrolled, but paid no attention. By now at least £15-20 was in the box in small coins. When Monique got tired she handed the violin to Gomez, collected the money which she stuffed in her purse and read passages out loud from a book. She really screamed the words out, making everyone uncomfortable.

“I thought, well, I’m alive and I’m sitting here and nobody’s bothering me,” she shrilled. “Then I got up and wiped, looked; what a mess, I thought, what a lovely powerful stink. Then I vomited and flushed it all away. I was very pale. A chill convulsed my body, shaking me; then there was a rush of warmth, my neck and ears burned.” She paused for breath then shut the book and slammed it on the pavement.

“Was that about a guy wiping his ass?” A voice from the crowd asked.

“Yes,” Monique cut in. “About a man who is very sick.”

This is how many people in poor countries feel but they don’t even have toilet paper and they can’t read or write. Gomez upped the tempo of his scratching with the bow. A few hands gathered around the box, throwing coins in. Monique recovered the book. It was by Charles Bukowski.

“I went and sat at the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette. I hadn’t wiped myself very well. When I got up to look for a beer there was a brown stain.” she kept reading.

This went on until sundown, when the two artists went to KFC and came out with a large bucket of fried chicken, which they started eating on a bench. They were eating and smiling and feeding each other fried chicken and kissing and whispering sweet love whispers in each other’s ears. The sight was mesmerising.

“I walked into KFC and stood next to the bathroom door. A geezer left this extra large bucket of chicken on a chair and went inside. I took it and came out with my man,” said Monique, momentarily foregoing the patois and passing me a piece of food.

I took it and ate. I wasn’t proud to eat or proud to know them but I was happy in way for them. I thought of Gina and how she’d never again be my accomplice. In the car on the way back they counted the winnings: £78 and change. They gave me £20, which I took.

“Shall I make a zoot, honey?” Monique offered.

By zoot she meant joint. I shared in that too.

“Monique, what book was that?”

“Bukowski. Charles Bukowski. Factotum.”

We parted in front of my new house. The next day I went back to Eduardo’s with two cigarettes. He yelled at me from the lounge to come in. As I walked down the narrow hall, he stalked towards me slowly. His baggy trousers didn’t move when he stepped, making him look like he was sliding on the floor. He shook my hand and offered a cup of tea. He was rolling a joint, not the first of the day, if his face was any indication.

“I’m here because I like to party and in Portugal it’s hard if you don’t have money. Here, is easy to make money and nobody bother you.”

I learned Eduardo was Portuguese and 29. He had four brothers in Portugal, he said. Two of them in jail and another still at school. He said he loved all his family dearly and missed them very much, but Portugal was no good for him. He didn’t go into detail as to why. He showed me a tattoo of Jesus spreadeagled on his entire back, crucified, and one of the Portuguese flag on his arm. His knuckles were tattooed with the blotched initials of his brothers and parents. He said his father only taught him five things:

“One. Fuck her and run, two, if you don’t open your eyes you are dead. Three, it’s better for her to cry because you fucked her than for you to cry because you didn’t fuck her. Four, one well-timed wank is as good as ten bitches. Five, in your life if you aren’t happy you are a fool.”

“Is that all?” I asked.

“I can’t remember anything else,” he laughed.

He said he believed in God and went to church but he loved sin and he was sure to go to hell. He had a ring with a goat's horned head that he says he wore as a reminder. He took out this ring and showed me the word hell engraved on the inside of it. He said that he never started a conflict but he doesn’t back down either. When he was a kid he used to be bullied for being short.

“They always made fun of me at school but I didn’t care. Never did I hit any one of them for calling me things. But one day one of the other boys who was jealous I played football better than him hit me over my head with an iron. My head bled and I stayed in hospital for three weeks. When I got out I found out my brother was in jail for beating the boy up and breaking his arm and his ribs. My brother was judged as adult because he was 18. We were 15 but this kid who hit me was really tall and fat. My brother did two years in prison.”

“Is that the same brother who is now in prison?” I asked. It was.

“He came out and started hanging out with bad people. He was cold inside when he got out and he didn’t care about hurting people any more,” said Eduardo. “He hurt a lot of people.”

Eduardo said we should go out for a walk because the sun was shining. We went out, bought a box of chicken wings and curry chips each from the Perfect Chicken and bought four beers from the off license. Then he gave me his tour of the neighbourhood. He kept pointing at houses saying this and that person lived there and he knew them and their families and what illegal things each of them did.

“This guy here is a benefit king. He make £5,000 a month from benefit,” said Eduardo.

Apparently the guy was using multiple identities to claim various unemployment and disability aid from the government. Eduardo said he changed MePhones every three months and he drove a Mercedes.

“This guy is a big weed grower. I shift parcels for him sometimes. He has farm in the country. Nobody knows,” he boasted.

“How do you know?”

“Everybody in the neighbourhood trust me,” he said.

“How long have you been here?”

“Four years. I spoke no English when I first move. Was really hard.”

We walked around the neighbourhood sipping lager from our cans and Eduardo told me more about himself and the people of St Mary’s. Several people stopped us to talk to Eduardo about various nothings. Football, the weather, the dole, jobs that they got or they knew other people got, who was employing, any barbecues people had, house parties coming up. People liked him. All shook his hand and the younger ones bumped his fist.

“See you around, Eddy,” a guy said.

“See you, irmão,” he replied.

It sounded more like ‘yu’ with his accent. He always brightened up when he talked. Maybe he had such a difficult time in the years he spent learning English that he developed a passion for speech after he finally managed to get it out. Every word Eduardo said, he had the air that saying it was an accomplishment. He was a proud, prolific talker, really enjoyed the sound of his own voice. A lover of words. I related.

We walked down to the trainlines and crossed them, passed by the stadium of Southampton F.C. which Eduardo said he also loved and followed, and we went behind some warehouses and close to the water. The map on my phone said before us flowed the river Itchen. It didn’t look like much, especially that bit of it. Eduardo said that there are many rich people with yachts on the river but not there.

“I smoke weed and I keep it, distribute it and bag it and deliver it for the dealers. Police know I am a very little soldier and they leave me alone. The dealers pay me good money to live on and I don’t trouble anybody. I am everybody’s friend. I also get benefit. Life is good here.”

He was rummaging behind some bushes while he said this.

“Yes, it’s here. Come George, look at this.”

I went. He pointed me to a lump of metal hidden behind some debris. On closer inspection proved to be a revolver handgun.

“Jesus Christ is that real?” I said and reached for it.

Eduardo slapped over my hand and held me back.

“What yu doing yu crazy? Don’t touch that. You don’t know what it was used for before. I just wanna show it to you. I just wanna show it to you for fun, silly. Har, har har.”

I realised what an idiot I was and thanked him for stopping me.

“I found it a few weeks ago somewhere else by the river and put a glove on and hid it here. If the cops catch me with weed I show them the gun and they let me go. See? You smoke with me you are safe, George.”

I understood that he wanted me to look up to him for being so clever. He was looking for a disciple. I told him I appreciated the effort. We walked back.

“You should think better before you do things.” he said. “If I let you touch it your fingerprints would be on the gun. What if police finds it and it was used to kill a man before you touch it? Big trouble, G,” he lectured me. “Nature does not call by name those who it crushes. The wolf comes in silence. Same with people,” he added.

I decided to avoid that riverbank in the future. The food was running out again a few days later and this time there was no more money. I called Gomez, ostensibly to ask how he was. He knew instantly what my ulterior motives were:

“My nigga, you broke, ain’t ya? I hear it in hour voice. Not to worry, I have just the ting.”

In a half hour a car’s horn was blaring outside the house. Gomez texted me: “Don’t keep me waiting boss. I be in da whip downstairs.”

As we drove around the town he unfurled his deeply compassionate feelings toward me:

“Life iz hard George and you are a fighter. Look at you, you are riding around with bad boys in de UK but where were you last year eh? In Romania, poor and without a future... but I have your back George. You are my bruddah and I look out for you.”

“Well, Gomez, actually I was in Denmark training to become an engineer. I wasn’t as poor as I am now and I had some future. Now I have no future. And you are not protecting me, you ripped me off with that hash, remember?” I told him. He didn’t like it:

“Hey listen George man, that was before we waz brothers, innit! No hard feelings. And I did you a favour with the hash. Dem boys in here would have killed you George if you tried to sell them dat shit. Anyway. I want you to think of other people who want to be here. Think for a moment of how good life is here and how bad it iz in Romania and Africa. It’s bad and poor, my

bruddah. And think of how much you would like to have a good woman to love and care for you. To make you feel like a man George. That's a real woman, you get me?"

"Wait, what are you talking about..."

"Don't interrupt me George, dis here important ting for everyone. After your experience with that slag – sorry but she was so – don't you want to know what real love feels like? I'm your uncle, George. I mek it happen for yuh. I know just de woman."

"What? You're joking. The last thing I want..."

"You get married with nice, good African woman and you settle down George. Mi a take you to meet her."

I jumped in my seat. I had a bad feeling.

"Are you mad? What are you talking about?" I asked, in a tone of disbelief.

"I'm talking about yuh bright future, George man. Yuh a lucky lucky man, I am a about to introduce to the love of his life. Yuh future wife George."

"Listen, stop the car. I don't know what scheme you cooked up Gomez but I'm not interested OK?"

He kept driving. He sped up even.

"Hey, open your heart George. Open your mind. I pay you five thousand to marry this woman. And you try it and see and if yuh don't like it yuh don't have to live together. But I'm telling yuh, she da bomb."

"You must be high. An arranged marriage? Gomez, you can't possibly expect..."

"Oh I expect. She expect too. We all expect. She sexy bomb from Gambia, George. Real woman. She make yuh happy man you deserve to be. And the £5000 is a wedding gift."

"Bullshit Gomez. How much are you charging her for it? I'm an EU citizen so if we get married she gets a visa to stay here. You must think I'm an idiot."

He drove straight through a red light and a speed camera flashed a photograph behind us. We were doing 60 on Onslow Road.

"Nuh nuh nuh. Mi your bruddah. I know you smart man. Look. This is a big favour to you. You use the money to get on your feet. She got lots of money. She is rich girl, she just need a visa,

OK? I know her brother, she don't pay me nothing. I do good for my people and good come back to me by Karma yes? You my friend, I do good for you. What do you say?"

His eyes were imploring me, like a fawn.

"I'll think about it, okay, but we can't go see her tonight. Tonight, right now, we turn around and you let me go home. And we talk more tomorrow."

He lit up.

"Yes, George my man. I knew I can count on yuh. You good man, You go far wid me, you wait. Now listen, you think about it and you say yes. Everybody happy. Could you be loved George, and yuh love. Seen?" he beamed.

"Yes. I see. I will think about it. Now I just want to go home."

He seemed to believe me. He slowed down and turned towards St Mary's. He dropped me off at home. First thing I did was look up the legal status of sham marriages. Illegal immigration, perjury, fraud. Years in jail. But I needed the cash. I lay in bed fretting and by morning, after barely a wink of sleep, I found myself wondering whether maybe I should go meet this woman. Was she pretty? Did she like the same music as I? Then I came to when I thought about Ileana's possible reaction to my would-be marriage. I sat down at the computer and wrote her to the effect of:

My dearest Ileana,

I hope this message finds you better spiritually and materially than I am as I'm writing it. Without beating around the bush, the truth is I have fallen down much below the already low point I was at when we last spoke. I have taken to stealing food from shops and contemplating selling my name in sham marriages to receive sustenance. England, while less so than Denmark, remains a hostile place. I am feeling the difficulties of integration more painfully because the help provided by my parents on my previous adventure is now absent. I am fending off completely on my own (Gina has gone) and doing a disgraceful job of it.

Speaking of jobs, my applications for gainful employment have yet to yield fruit. Because of this I have learned to cook. Hunger is indeed the best chef. I am now making a range of stews, breakfasts, soups and salads with total ease. Before long, when I get back on my feet, I will have you over on a gastronomic exploration. While you may remain immune to my charms, I am positive you will be ravished by my culinary artistry.

University, though anodyne and boring with the exception of a single course, is keeping me busy and focused. It is for now the only connection I have with society and I plan to maintain it. I am attending classes at a steadier pace than ever before. One teacher stands out for wit and passion. His subject is the European Union – its laws, history and bureaucracy. I have grown to share into the ideals of The Union through a combination of past personal experience and the aforementioned professor's ability. He has inspired me to examine more closely the situations I have been through in my itinerant life. I intend to pass his course with a high grade. I arrived at the belief that the European Union can become the embodiment of the higher ideals of the human spirit, but right now it is far from it. Much work needs to be done and it is up to our generation to undertake it. If successful it will be a breakthrough the likes of which humanity has never seen. Think about it: a political union in law and practice between Europe's peoples, under a single constitution, citizenship, economic market, currency and set of moral values, by mutual popular agreement and without the shedding of blood. We would be lucky to see this in our lifetimes – it is an idea at once very distant and close within reach, depending on your historical perspective. We must strive for it, it is too precious a thing not to make an effort to achieve it.

The people here are fascinating. I live in the house with people from Thailand, France and Ghana, and I have friends from Portugal, Germany, Nigeria and Morocco. It is truly a diversified country, but do not think there is awkwardness. Rather there is more curiosity than it would be in a place with few foreigners like Romania, due to the evident differences between us. These disparities, of culture, mentality and past experience draw us to one another. We are interested in understanding what each other's lives have been like thus far.

The town of Southampton is clean, rather warm, or at least I'm told warmer than other places in the UK such as Newcastle, and it is also lively. The society of the town is animated by the two universities and by shopping – you wouldn't believe how much the English shop – and also importantly by the harbour. Indeed the harbour is what makes Southampton special, as it is one of the world's most important destinations for leisure ocean liners. Very large cruise ships stop here as a matter of normality. It is the Titanic's home port, but the tragedy of that ship has not cursed others. Whenever a big craft arrives it is an occasion to celebrate and indeed the people of Southamtopton (Southamptoners? Sotonians? They shorten the name as Soton sometimes... I will investigate further and return to this point) – yes, the people of the town celebrate such immense ships as The Queen Elizabeth II, Queen Mary II, which I believe are the biggest in the world, and many others. When The Queen Mary II arrives it simply dwarves everything around it. It is a colossus which would make all the mountains of Romania, and the skyscrapers of Tokyo seem like

ant mounds. Only think of the miracle that it floats despite being made by the hand of man and it is one of the most luxurious, comfortable establishments in the world. With its huge propellers and motors, and guidance system, it is also a feat of engineering.

But how are you? How are your studies and how is Bucharest? I often long for a walk and a coffee with you in the narrow streets of Bucharest. I sometimes feel your hair's scent in my nostrils and in my heart when I am in the crepuscular state between sleeping and waking. I only wonder if you'd find me a nuisance if I came to visit you. I wish you all the very best and I am sure of your future success. Sadly I am not in a position to offer much help presently beyond my total moral support should you need it, but rest assured whatever my current situation you may always rely on me. Do please write back as soon as you can.

Ever yours,

George Palan

Three Staffordshire Terriers with studded collars howled in unison in the next door house. I pushed the send button and lit a cigarette. Gomez was in for a big disappointment. The only question was how I might feed myself and pay the rent. Something had to be done in that regard. I wrote a letter to the student rag mandarins, renewing my application for travel to London, to bring our readers the latest about the coming revolution. The sum requested? £50 – transport and lodging. To my immense surprise a reply came almost immediately. “Trip approved – lucky for you a photographer we booked cancelled & refunded fee. Spare budget £100, yours to spend on worthy journalistic endeavour as outlined. Need good pics. Pick up camera and cash at Student Union office ASAP. All best, Charly.”

I put my coat on and rushed downstairs, cigarette dangling in the corner of my mouth, incandescent ash coming off it in all directions. I took the money, kept £10 for emergencies, then went with the £90 straight to the landlord's house. I gave it to him as an advance, with an attached warning that the rent due the following week will likely be late.

“I'm good for it, but had unexpected expenses, university books and things,” I said.

He reassured me of his patience and thanked me for fronting some of my debt in advance. Sweet old man. But I had now only £10 and needed to go to London to write a story and take pictures. If it weren't for the damn pictures Charlotte asked for I could have written the story from St. Mary's using transcendental meditation and live video feeds from social media. Alas... no other

option than hitch-hiking. Two days later the missive went to print. It started with a poem I wrote in a builders' cafe in Harrow.

“Purple sunset

Ten of clubs

London sirens

Wailing round.

Beer from Tesco's

Break it out

Give me money

Fill my rut.

Go on laughing

Roll a blunt

Mary Wanna

Never doubt.

Late upheaval

Get a home

Winter coming

Still alone.”

On Sunday morning, early, I returned from London with a heart full of something new. I couldn't make it out properly but I knew that it attracted me immensely. The impressions this city left on me became gradually clearer as time went by. When I filed this interminable monster of a story I thought the editor would see me as value for money and send me again. I figured if a quarter of it got published I would be happy. When I saw it took up half the magazine I was elated. All I

could think of next was another good motive to return to the capital. I seemed to me not just the capital of the UK but of the world itself. I never saw so much life in one place.

The perpetually immediate concern, money, was addressed haphazardly by more experienced colleagues in the newsroom of Vortex. My story went down very well with the editorial team although not one reader seemed to have had time to send their congratulations for the reportorial tour de force. In fact there was no proof that anyone had read it outside the editorial team, but none was needed, as the old hands who produced the organ relied solely on their own judgement.

“Very well-rounded piece, old chap. I love longform, me. Reading, not writing. I’m more of a short and snappy writer. Just the facts, you know? But you have a slightly different touch. We need that at Vortex,” said Andrew, the sports writer as he walked me to the student union bar downstairs.

“What’s your tippie? Guinness alright?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks. And thanks for reading my story,” I said.

“Don’t be silly.”

He turned to the barmaid:

“A Guinness for the budding foreign correspondent to my left and a Devilscrotch Pale Ale for me, please, darling.”

He turned to me.

“I’m paying. Maintenance grant came in yesterday.”

We went round and sat at a table. Students mingled with polite affectation all around us like in a Jane Austen novel. Everyone was obviously in good spirits but at the same time acted slightly constipated like they felt certain discomforts when shifting their feet or turning.

“I’m glad Romanian students were given maintenance grants as of last year as well. Frankly to have the Tory scum discriminate against you like that was a disgusting scandal. I wrote a piece about it,” Andrew said.

“Oh really?” I asked, perplexed.

“Yes, of course. I was the political correspondent last year. Stopped it because I was too passionate. It was too stressful. Sports is much better. Match on Sunday, story on Monday, and the odd uni basketball game – they never win.”

“No, sorry, I meant are you sure Romanians get maintenance grants? How much is a maintenance grant?”

“You didn’t get one? These corrupt bastards are trying to take away your rights. I can’t believe it. I’m so ashamed of living in a country that voted in these inbred elitist sissies. I apologise on their behalf and on behalf of the British people. You must complain at once. God, I can’t wait for the Conservatives to be thrown out.”

“Right. Thanks. So how much did you say it was again?”

“It’s £350 each semester, George. A pittance, and they are still holding it back from you. After this drink we are going straight to the student liaison officer. It is unacceptable.”

I finished the drink first. He gulped his as well and off we went to the student liaison desk, where the person tasked with recording student grievances and aiding their resolution sat in silence. She was a not terribly busy law undergraduate who had been given a paid job and an office inside the main building.

“Let me do the talking,” Andrew said. “I feel terribly responsible.”

He stormed in and demanded in a loud voice that we be given the proper documentation for a formal complaint against the student finances company. I shrank in the background and looked at the anodyne, abstract paintings on the walls. Then I filled a form applying for a non-refundable maintenance grant as Andrew wrote frantically the complaint.

“... and unless the funds are paid as a matter of urgency, with supplements for the grief induced by the delay, accompanied by a full written apology for the abusive treatment and denial of my rights, I shall instruct the Student Union solicitor-in-chief to take the matter up with the competent authorities...” he read as he finished.

“There. That should grab their attention. Now sign.”

I signed.

“Does the student union have a solicitor-in-chief?” I was incredulous.

“Yes, but she’s not technically a solicitor yet. But they don’t know that. Don’t worry, they’ll pay you.”

“Right. Thanks.”

“Not at all, old boy. My pleasure. Let me know if you don’t get paid your money by Monday. And we’re all looking forward to the next dispatch, alright? Be well.”

We parted ways. I was unsure whether Charles feigned this sense of entitlement as a joke to emphasize the generosity of the system in a self-effacing English way or if he was serious. After the conversation we had I thought the odds were 50-50 either way. In any case, I was now a published journalist. A special correspondent for *Vortex*, the sharpest-tongued magazine in provincial Hampshire. Outside the university, in the park, the view was of manicured apple trees in bloom and tender green grass under a clear, windless sky blessed by new spring. Curiously, an exceedingly refined spray of rain fell despite the lack of clouds, as if to add a mild glow to the lively picture. I walked, still a tyro to the ways of this eccentric system. The metaphysical blue of the Crunk Juice in my plastic cup gazed back at me as I sipped it measuredly at Eduardo’s house. He was watching football on television when I arrived, smoking weed and drinking vodka with cranberry juice in the living room. Two continental teams were playing, one seemingly German, the other Italian. I toasted with him for small triumphs. Absorbed in the game he didn’t ask how I was doing nor did I tell him. He didn’t know we were celebrating, yet he rolled a blunt. Thick aromatic smoke filled the room with dreams of bigger worlds we might one time see. In the mind’s eye plains of red poppies and here and there an elegant cherry tree were flown over by millions of starlings in freewheeling abandon, describing concepts of glee that we may yet name. The starlings take unpredictable turns and although they can’t see the bigger image that they form maybe they can feel it, like soldiers on a parade. In their random spiralled choreography you see the future of the world in abstract flashes and dancing shapes of life between earth and infinity. The starlings push up the smoke into clouds of warm medicine for the hungry, careworn hearts of men lost like long days of drought. Football fans cheered and three police cars with sirens and lights raced outside the window in hysterical sequence ostensibly coveting an end to the oblivion.

VII

Dear George,

Thank you for writing that lovely letter. Is it right to call it a letter, or would it be more accurate to say it was an email? I wouldn't like to demean it by calling it a message, because it was more than that, but email sounds too heartlessly professional, which it sure wasn't either. So letter it is.

I am sorry to hear you are having problems, but I would suggest the last thing you need is to feel sorry for yourself. It is at times like these you mostly need a cool head and the will to pick yourself up and move on. I have every faith in you. You never lacked spirit and I doubt you do now. You just think you do, but you oughtn't unless you have stopped being my dear George Palan. Now please stop stealing. I posted £20 for you on Western Union, you can pick it up whenever you need it. I don't imagine this may dissuade you from entering a sham marriage, but then again no amount of money would if your mind was made up. You wouldn't stoop so low, however, I daresay, so in truth I am not worried about missing my chance. I know you are suffering for Gina and I am truly sorry you lost her. She sounded like a fun woman to have around. But if it wasn't meant to be you shouldn't dwell on it. You are teasing some affection out of me with your self-pity and I understand it. I freely offer you all my affection as always, readily.

Come home and see me when you can. I am sure England is beautiful and I am very curious to see it (as I am to experience your newfound cooking talent) but for the moment I can't. I am tied up in my university course and as much as I love it I am also quite exhausted by it. It takes up every waking moment of my life and also much of the time I should be sleeping. Soon though, when I become an award-winning civil engineer or architect it will all have been worth it. I jest, of course. To be a plain, everyday architect would make me just as happy. No thought makes me happier than knowing I will one day create the places people will call home and fill with their love for one another. Three more years of this, then a year of work experience – likely unpaid, for such is the competition in our trade – and another two years in a master's course and my dream will come true. Until then I am supporting myself by working weekend shifts waiting tables in a restaurant and doing kitsch portraits and landscapes in oil for rich people. I cannot claim to be an artist but their delusions of patronage and good taste fascinate and amuse me endlessly. I also sell some clothes that I make, and I help university colleagues with their assignments, for small considerations. I live in a dorm room with three other girls in a quiet part of Bucharest surrounded

by green grass and lakes. There is also a wonderful circus here close by. We are good friends, the four of us, and we spend inordinate time together working on our courses. There is a vast park next to our building which is full of squirrels and dogs. I go there to read and think. Please see the enclosed picture of the park. It was taken yesterday. That sunset is something isn't it? I know how you like a good sunset.

I am happy that you found solace in your university studies at long last. Do please apply yourself to the topic you are studying and I have no doubt you will before long be remarked by the lecturers. In fact I would be surprised if the European studies lecturer you mentioned hasn't already grown fond of your wits.

You must also find honest work, however. Keep trying and you will make it. Have you thought about writing for a living? The English teachers always said you were exceedingly talented with words. I know you will be fine in the end, it just takes time sometimes to find your path.

Until you do, please don't hesitate to seek my counsel and warmth.

I remain,

Yours ever,

Ileana Olar

I could hear her melodious voice whispering these beautiful words. With renewed ambition sprung from the dirty shame Ileana's letter and her money caused me I put on clean jeans and my only long-sleeved shirt, buttoned up, tucked it in, combed my hair and went out the door to the grubby net cafe down the corner where I printed off ten copies of a copiously ornamented CV. I drank a can of BOOST energy drink for £0.25 and set about my way with the papers. The first two restaurants I went to mistook me for a customer at first and only reluctantly took my CV. The manager wasn't around, staff said. The third, a Vietnamese restaurant, needed me to speak Thai because everyone else spoke Vietnamese. The fourth wouldn't take my CV because I had no kitchen experience. I made a mental note to add some fictitious kitchen experience to the next batch of CVs. Two pubs took my CV saying they may need back bar help, and two declined the paper but I left it there anyway albeit without doubt they would bin it as soon as the door closed behind me.

From billiards hall to hotel, to takeout shop and post office I ended up in industrial country, beyond the rails. There I heard intense mechanical activity in one yard. Yelling, hammering and electric grinding filled my ears with hope of financial emancipation: I walked in.

"Hello. My name's George. Is the manager here?" I said to a young man in black overalls who was busy drilling a hole through a thick piece of steel plate.

“I’m the manager. Albert. What do you need?”

The man finished drilling, got up from his stool and shook my hand, then he lit a cigarette. I shook his hand. He offered me a cigarette with a flick of the hand in which he held the packet and I took one. He lit it for me.

“Thank you, Albert. I’m looking for a job either full or part time. I have warehouse, services and manufacturing experience and I will take any wage. Here’s my CV.” I smiled broad.

“Oh mate, I thought you’d be after a job. You know, we do ironworking here. Different orders for garages, home decorators, some ship builders. But it’s small beer now. A family shop. Ten years ago we had this whole street and 49 employees plus my dad and I. I grew up here, see. But now there’s no work, mate, I’m gutted to say. We’re just five of us now.”

He smoked and looked beyond me, into the trees that edged the river Solent. He blew the smoke with a wince, like it tasted badly, then smoked again.

“Ah, sorry,” I said.

“We just do little projects for self-employed people now. Like a hobby shop, a family shop. All the big orders go to China on the Internet. The chinks now, if you have a big order, they’ll take it on the Internet and deliver it in a container in a month and it’ll cost half as much as it costs here, if not less. The steel and everything else is cheap there. They just took over. Between them and the shipyards moving to Romania and Bulgaria there’s no point competing, with the costs we have. Just the electricity alone here is above all the production costs in China. Funny thing is they sell everything half price from us but they profit more than we do because the steel and the iron are dirt cheap. The steel in China is cheaper than ore is in Wales. Imagine, eh? It’s all gone, mate, you know? Now we just do small, custom jobs for the town. Barely pays us.”

“Oh, I see. And you don’t even need someone to clean up and oil the tools at the weekend? My folks back in Romania were wood workers and iron workers too, so I know how to look after a shop.” I said.

“Sorry mate, but no. Breaks my heart. Better go down the high street to Pollystr or whatever. The expensive clothes shops. They have jobs because all the wealthy Chinese come here shopping. They design the clothes in London, make them in China, ship them back to the UK and sell them to the rich tourists all over the high streets. The foreigners want to be able to tell their mates back home they bought UK stuff, see? It’s for them like Italian suits are for us.” He tossed his cigarette now.

“Right. Thanks. Well, I’ll try. Here’s my CV anyway, maybe give it to someone? And maybe design some stuff here and have it made in China, eh? OK, bye now,” I said and withdrew.

“If I have it made in China what am I gonna do all day mate?” he answered.

A few hours later without CVs left, I stopped by Eduardo's to see why the music was so loud. He was with a friend of his in the small landfill garden of the house, listening to reggaeton in shorts and lifting weights. Both topless.

"Hello Jorje!" He yelled. "Ley me introduce you to my associate Hakeem. We were just pumping some iron to get in shape for the ladies, eh?"

I walked cautiously in the garden. It was littered with empty bottles, old food boxes and wrappers, cigarette butts, a few skeletons of bicycles, tall weeds and rags. They had cleared out the middle area and put two chairs there on which they stood and lifted their dumbbells. Hakeem used a 10 kilogram one and a large carrot-shaped joint in his mouth. He shook my hand.

"Salut. Ce faci? Haha. Yes I'm Romanian," he continued. "Just half. The other half is from Saudi." He grinned.

"Right, yes. Great for you. Salut," I said, a little thrown by his being Romanian and Arab though looking like neither. If I had had to guess I'd have called him Slovakian or Serb for some reason.

Unprompted, Hakeem went on:

"Got born in Romania, then moved to Saudi, then my parents divorced and I got sent here to boarding school."

He was making strenuous efforts to sound British now. The result was mixed and disconcerting. You feared some of his back teeth were dislodged or he had a big sore spot on the top of his mouth cavity which he was trying to avoid touching. He squinted as well and his skin complexion was as white as goat's cheese. He got up, rested his joint on the chair, flexed his muscles and looked in window reflection of himself. He cocked one arm and checked the size of his bicep, then did the same to the other one. Seemingly pleased, he picked up his mobile phone from the edge of the window and made a call in which he talked in Arabic, or what sounded to me like Arabic. I couldn't make out a word but he was yelling and looking at me in the corner of his eye, nearly tipping over with pride. He abruptly hung up while I thought I heard the other person still talking in Romanian, but I couldn't be sure.

"Yes. Hakeem," he said again.

"Hakeem," I said.

"After boarding school in Winchester my dad insisted I go to university so I came to Solent but I have no time for the classes. I'm more of a street guy. I am an entrepreneur." He mispronounced entrepreneur. Still in monologue:

"I have the best food in the hood and there's no nigger who can step up to me or I fucking shank them, fam. I shank all of them." He looked awkward.

“If you need anything take my number from my partner Eduardo and I’ll sort you out.”

I nodded. I left Hakeem in the back yard creaming his belly and went in to say goodbye to Eduardo. He was watching TV.

“Is that boy OK, Eduardo?” I asked. “He seems a little jumpy.”

“Depends,” came a reply. “He is a good worker for me. He doesn’t ask for much money and he sells a lot of weed and pills. He doesn’t care about the cops and he loves doing it. All I have to do is keep him supplied and take the cash off him. But he is troubled. When his parents divorced he tried to kill himself with prescription drugs, then when he came out of hospital he started acting out, like he was looking for trouble. I try to keep him under control and I watch out that he takes his medication.”

“Medication?” I asked.

“Antidepressives and antipsychotics. Mood fixers. He has moods.”

“Well maybe he shouldn’t smoke weed then.”

“Weed is OK. When he takes cocaine it’s bad.”

“Cocaine?”

“I never let him do it but sometimes he does it to impress his friends.”

“Do his parents know he does these things?”

“No. They think he is a good student, although he is very rude with his mum. His dad is some bigshot in Saudi Arabia and his mother divorced and ran back to Romania, and now they don’t keep in touch. They haven’t seen each other in two years. Sometimes he goes back to Saudi but never to Romania. Hakeem just talks to his mum on the phone.”

“Damn. Take care. I’ll see you later.”

At the house I cooked a pork sausage slow-simmering stew. I put in two cans of chopped tomatoes, two big chopped onions, two pints of beer, six cloves of garlic, two chopped courgettes and six chunky potatoes. I liked the symmetry, I avoided putting odd numbers in. The onion I peeled, cut in half and then with deliberation and patience like a weaver I sliced it lengthwise only, so as to obtain a bunch of nice even-looking strands which I ruffled like hairs and dumped in the hot oil casually. I always started with the onion, let than melt away then add the garlic. I plucked the garlic from the bulb with the skin on and crushed it by covering it with the side of the knife and smacking it with my hand. I taught myself this. Then I put in four chillies. I liked to have a hot meal, it felt more engaging because it created bodily sensations like sweating and lingering numbness in the mouth. Then the sausages. After these shed a small pool of grease, I added the beer, the potatoes and after these boiled for a bit I added the tomatoes, the other spices and let the thing bubble down for about a half hour until it moved slow and thick like lava and the smell

invaded all the rooms in the place. Look into the pot and get hypnotized, get transported over years and miles through all the bad moments of your life and the good ones. Go over the setbacks with an easy heart. No hard feelings. It's easy to make peace with the past when you're cooking. Cook and feed people. Then at the end gently put in two fish fillets whole, as a prize, and a bunch of parsley and kill the fire five minutes later before the sensitive bits disintegrate. Rest for a half hour with the lid ajar. I ate two bowls of the stew with a big baguette of bread. I dipped the bread in the rich sauce and ate it, juicy and filling. As dusk prevailed I left for the library. The library closed at 12 on weekdays and there was nobody around after 8 apart from the odd catcher-upper. I could walk around the aisles and pick books.

By the East Park in a mild pleasant wind on the other side of the road from me stood a man in a fedora hat about my father's age. There were no cars coming a long way away on the long straight stretch of road. The man looked both ways, saw it was free, and pushed the button you push when you want to tell the stop light that pedestrians are waiting to cross. The light was red for pedestrians. He pushed the button, the yellow light says wait came on and he looked again both ways. He waited although it was empty. He had a t-shirt on and a watch on his wrist but he didn't check it. He looked at me, then he looked at the sky and the trees, then beep, beep, beep. Green for crossing and the sound telling you that in case you're blind. He crossed at leisurely pace and nodded ever so slightly when he came past me. That man didn't rush across the road because the light was red and he had no problem with waiting until it turned green. He knew who he was and where he was going and he knew what his life was and what it meant to be a part of the world around you. He could have chosen to be a world unto himself and clash with the world around him which at that moment consisted of a stop light at a road crossing put there by other people to make it safe and civilised to cross the road. He understood how the whole society came together to make the act of crossing the road a mannered, elegant action as opposed to a throw of the dice. And he went on ahead and made his mark on the world in some way without causing too much pain to anyone. Nobody had to be miserable for him to be content. That man's life wasn't a zero-sum game. There was enough in the world to go around to everyone as far as the man in the hat was concerned.

My life here resembled too much my life back in Denmark and my life back in Romania. This was indicative of my bad habits and weak character which attracted only the dregs of the world, among whom I felt at ease. No point travelling, emigrating to a new country if you're gonna live like you lived before. I decided to purchase a hat at the earliest opportunity. Ileana said I was able to make something of myself. I didn't know enough about myself to contradict her but I knew that the university magazine was probably going to accept another commission for me if I pressed it onto them.

Pam, the Thai student and single mother who lived in the same house as I asked me to stay with Jo, her eight years old daughter, for ten minutes while she went to the mailbox out on the corner. I tried talking to the kid, asking her how old she was and what cartoons she liked, but she ignored me. She said absolutely nothing the whole time her mother was gone. She yawned once and she picked her nose. It was puzzled as to why Pam would ask me to stay with her at all. Usually it was another housemate, a middle aged postgraduate named Siriporn who seemed to speak no English at all, who looked after Jo when the burly motorcyclist came to the house to pick up Pam every evening. Pam greeted him happily, in short skirts and high heels, climbed on the back of the bike and they left in a rumble. Jo stayed home and Siriporn watched her. Neither made a peep. They whisper to each other and take walks in the park, smile at each other and comfort each other, both fish out of water clasping the other's hand warmly as if to suggest that things may one day get better. Not once has Jo spoken to me or looked me in the eye despite us meeting almost daily. I've been eating their food. Lots of peanuts and chicken. Emmanuel, the French ex-soldier sat in his room all day and he didn't speak either.

Andrew suggested I write another article about the Occupy Movement for the university magazine. Something to do with how the internet is causing irreversible political change.

"I'll get you the commission, George. You're welcome."

And get me the commission he did. There was nobody in the office to hand me any cash so on the promise I'll receive it when I returned I resolved to make do in London on a frugal budget. My morbid curiosity about the fate of neo-communist scallywags of Occupy mixed unevenly with a craven desire to just write anything that might get published, so I accepted these poor terms for lack of a better option. Editors and publishers, I would later learn, as a rule do not hesitate to make monetary profit out of the infantile haste and crippling sentimentality of greenhorn reporters. I wanted to stay in London for a night this time and the cheapest accommodation I found was a spare mattress in Islington, for £20. Andover Estate, 12th floor, beautiful views of the capital to behold while pondering the political philosophy nascent inside it. "Close to both Holloway and Islington and Holloway Road stations," the ad said. Both? I thought. It sounds like three to me. This person must be dim. But then I looked it up and learned Holloway and Islington are one. Why not just call it Islington then, or Holloway? I pronounced Islington in the same way one pronounces island. I called up the number from the ad and an old-sounding woman picked up. Yes, the mattress was free. No, there was no bed. It was a mattress on the floor. She was offering it because of the Olympics coming up and there was a dearth of lodging. Everything else was booked up, she said. I accepted the offer and she gave me one hour to post the money in her account otherwise the mattress would go to someone else. I told her how can I know that isn't a scam. She gave me her

address and her full name – Victoria Omanga – Swainson House, 96 Hornsey Rd, London N7 7NJ. She asked me to look her up on LinkedIn. I did. She was a teacher. She said if it's a scam I should go to the police. She gave me the account number and the sort code at NatWest. I went to the bank, deposited the money and sent her a text. The mattress was mine. The rain was merciless when I made my way in a coach.

At Victoria Station, forgetting I only had £10 on me I bought four cans of continental lager for £5.59 and a Big Mac and fries for £4.29. As I ate I stared dumbly down the escalator to the tube station, trying to think of a way to reach St. Paul's before the Occupy protest of the day ended. The camp at Paternoster Square had been disbanded, so if I missed the protest I missed the assignment. I thought of walking but I was informed by a warden that St. Paul's cathedral was about five miles away. So I waited, right at the top of the escalator, not knowing what to do next. After about an hour of this a Spanish woman came up to me and said:

“I'm going home, here's my day ticket you can use.”

She gave me her ticket and smiled politely. This cost £8 and I just got it for free. My heart swelled and I virtually levitated through the gates, the train and the stations up to St. Paul's. This sort of miracle happens in London every hour, I thought. But it was too late for the protests and by the time I got there only a leftover banner stood testament that the revolutionary movement had ever passed through. Dismayed, I aimed for madam Omanga's place at the address I had written down in my notebook. I had helpfully sketched out directions from St Paul's, apparently exhausting all of the foresight I had in me that day, with none left to remember public transport in London was not free. Instructions said: St. Paul's – Central line Holborn – change Victoria Line Holloway Road – off Holloway Road, walk north on Holloway Road – take right turn on Jacksons Road, left on Hornsey Road – big set of buildings on right. I followed these instructions and I arrived at the said address in a state of confusion. The madam was not impressed. She unceremoniously showed me to her living room, where three other mattresses laid on the floor, under three other people. One female, dark hair, caucasian. One male, short brown hair, caucasian and one male, short blond hair, caucasian. The place was very crowded with old things that must have belonged to madam Obanga and it smelled powerfully of hospital disinfectant. I have come ever since to equate that smell in my head with perfidy. I sat on my mattress, pulled out my laptop and started writing. At three in the morning I filed my story to Vortex, closely in the spirit of the previous item.

I wanted it to be inflammatory. In truth, I didn't know if I had any politics. I knew I hated communists and fascists and any kind of dictators, but apart from that I figured that anything that people voted for should be given effect. In Romania I only saw the depressing afterglow of 50 years of violent and repressive communism, which had rendered us mistrustful of each other in our

personal lives and cynical, corrupt and deceitful in our business dealings. My father, I was told by my grandmother, was in the navy when he was arrested by the Securitate for selling Magnetophon reels of Western disco and rock music, and blue jeans smuggled by some Arabs he met in the port. They kept him in a basement for a week, beat him senseless and my grandfather had to pay them most of his savings to get him out. Capitalism, cruel and craven as it is, at least acknowledges the baser, more dangerous instincts of humans and employees than to some wider purpose, a better outcome – greed for money and fame is used to inspire people to invent, create, work, achieve, trade and so on in the world, with strong policing, is altogether better for it in the end. It has nature on its side, it lets things run free. Communism, with its unfathomable chasm between the ideal and reality, entirely denies our evil side, and when denied, it flourishes in the dark, It gives people immense powers of control over the minutest aspects of the lives of the other people, and under the pretext of the communist ideal, the people with the power rob and abuse the people without it. My idea of politics thus far was that it is in the end nothing but the art of making a digestible compromise and in their personal views people often tend to use political ideas to justify their own choices. If you're greedy and voraciously ambitious, the morality that suits you and allows you to sleep at night is free-market capitalism. If you are a wimp, incapable of making up your own mind, lacking motivation or initiative, given to sentimentality and overthinking, blaming others for your problems and loath to take responsibility for yourself and make your own decisions, you felt attracted to communism. Most people I had met were somewhere inbetween, and I respected capitalism for allowing them to live their own way.

The sight out the window was a twinkle of city lights – cars, buildings, towers, planes, helicopters and cyclists moving, living intertwined. London throbbed, pulsated with millions of searching souls, all pacing along the twisted vectors of their particular appetites but always amongst each other, hopelessly linked. I slept with my clothes on and woke tired and stiff. I almost put the toothbrush up my nose to banish that all-consuming antiseptic smell. Even the coffee smelled like a surgery floor. I left without saying goodbye. Back in Southampton, I found the story posted on the website of the university rag and in my inbox laid emailed promises of printing preparations, with allusions of front-page treatment.

“Nice work, authoritative,” said the Charlotte.

Sure enough, the story came out in a mangled form which I barely recognized, with all the music squeezed out of it almost clinically before publication. That smell again. Imagine my surprise when an email from Adpumpers magazine, the famous protest organ which credits itself with sparking the Occupy Movement, arrived a few days later congratulating me on the article and offering to reprint it without pay in the next issue.

“The exposure you will get from this is life-changing. We are a global anti-brand of radical thought and social change. We effect impactful subversions of the neoliberal status quo worldwide with each of our dispatches. A change of paradigm is coming. Your perceptive reading of the situation in London adds an important and distinctive voice to the growing chorus of the 99%. Soon we will be impossible to ignore. Keep fighting!”

I wrote back accepting the proposition although it was not clear my consent was requested. When Andrew heard about it he jumped:

“This is fantastic. You are the next Owen Jones. Adpumpers is a bible for the learned radical. It’s the activist’s Vogue. You made it. I saw it in you.”

We drank beer and played pool and he wouldn’t stop talking about bringing down the system. In the end Adpumpers dropped the story because they thought it was “dated”. However, right before that happened I wrote three dozen emails to low-tier music and so-called culture magazines in London along the lines of:

“I am the Chief Political Correspondent of Vortex Magazine, a monthly publication based out of Southampton but covering all the world’s main developments. As graduation day nears, I am looking for new challenges in London, where I have already built a strong network of political contacts among the most influential activist groups. I have been commissioned by the global anti-brand publication Adpumpers to cover the Occupy Movement and my articles have appeared in other publications as well. I am open to diverse writing assignments, both on-site and roving. Please write any time etc.”

Exam season was rudely interrupted by a few polite but short refusals and another delegation came from Vortex to cover the Occupy protest on May 12 in London. I took £200 – the fee increase was also milked from the Adpumpers email – and convinced Eduardo to join me for the day. The result? Unjustifiably expensive, arrogantly left untitled and best omitted.

Eduardo was smoking weed outside Liverpool Street station as we waited for the night bus.

“If I knew these hippie fuckers smoked so much I would have brought my whole stash and then it would have really been worth it, eh, Jorje? How crazy are these motherfuckers man? The English ones at least are really crazy. All of them have rich parents they want to piss off by pretending to be communists. But Che Guevara is gone man, and he isn’t coming back. it’s all bullshit. You can understand why the Spanish and the Greek ones are angry, they really got fucked over by the government back in their country, but what the fuck they are doing protesting in London? Go protest in fucking Madrid, you cunts! No? London and England is good for people man. No reason to complain unless you want to. The cops don’t have fucking guns for fuck’s sake,

can you believe that? Where the fuck is the oppression these faggots are talking about I don't know."

Out of reflex, I started:

"Well, Eduardo, the rulers here are not stupid, they know how to keep the people in line. And they give the people some things to numb their senses and make them think everything is all right... But it's not, it's bad..." I drifted away, not finishing that sentence, realising I should have kept quiet. Eduardo was looking for an argument.

"What the fuck is not alright George? Fucking look at yourself: you came from Romania a fucking shoplifter and now you get £200 to write in the school magazine and how much to go to school on top? Loans, grants... eh? All from the government. They took your ass in and fed you and you want to overthrow them? Bullshit man. I know you want to be cool but don't try to sell me your bullshit ok?" he passed me the joint to soothe the sting.

I took it and smiled. I had nothing to add to his flawless judgement. As far as my own person was concerned he was right, I didn't have much to reproach the UK government, but I wasn't about to admit that. I smoked and I smiled some more. Eduardo slept on the seat while I devoured a copy of LICE magazine. Despite its arrogant and contemptuous tone and its fact-light, opinion-heavy reporting which seemed to envision the world as a burlesque drama there to entertain white, narcissistic, Western European teenagers and young adults, I liked it. People of no obvious knowledge, qualification or experience wrote with a self-regard that blew my mind. I read it not as much in admiration as in awe of what was possible. I studied it anthropologically, so to speak. Undergraduates not very different than I was seemed to get paid to write about advertiser-friendly banalities in way that made the events appear extraordinary. They mentioned sex, drugs and misdemeanors alongside vaguely anti-establishment politics and reported on such things as going out to restaurants, having sex at work, using various phone applications, shopping on the internet, going out at the weekend, watching television – there were a lot of articles about watching television and playing video games, smoking and drinking, losing weight, going to the cinema... all the guff that you normally see in lifestyle magazines for middle aged housewives was now made to appear interesting and rebellious. It was mediocrity and mundaneness lifted to the rank of news. It is a delicate matter to consistently do the perfect opposite of what you pretend you believe in, but LICE managed it. One week you publish a lengthy article about how listening to Pink Floyd will subliminally induce you to support conservative politicians. You publish a long, on-the-ground first-person dispatch from an anarchist riot in Paris against extended working hours and extended tax rebates for companies, where the reporter manages to make himself seem like the most audacious journalist since Seymour Hersh. Firebombs, expletives, mortal danger, brief detainment by police,

the desperation and injustice felt by the everyday French worker, are all filtered through the young intrepid correspondent's deep perceptiveness and idiosyncratic-but-surprisingly-down-to-earth-for-someone-with-such-a- white-and-wealthy-background sensibilities, in a rich vocabulary full of pop culture, sex and drugs references, with an implicit disdain for convention and the establishment. The next it emerges in trade press that the 78 year-old magnate who owns three right-wing tabloids that LICE usually lampoons, and dines with all the top politicians in the world on a regular basis, has bought 20% of LICE, sending its market cap soaring. And the next again it's news that the unionisation of LICE staff is refused by management, followed almost immediately by a wave of redundancies. It goes something like, I interviewed Donald Trump on Acid and it was the weirdest trip in my life. I ended up cutting him off to talk about how I almost got killed by cartel sicarios when I went on an impromptu trip to Mexico with some of my friends from Brooklyn. It was scary to be high in a foreign country not knowing what's going to happen next but by some miracle we outsmarted the murderers and narrowly escaped with our lives. It made us reflect on our privilege but then we got wasted again at the afterparty in a midget strip club in Guatemala and forgot about it... There was a suspicious number of videos of self-confessed paid assassins talking about their exploits on the LICE website, but all these individuals were masked and none gave any verifiable details that might be traced back to an actual killing. It seemed extremely convenient that LICE had these connections but wouldn't pass its research to the police because it wasn't hip. That to me sounded like proper postmodernism, when everything is true and false at the same time, facts are opinions and feelings and they are always subject to arbitrary revision. These were masters of psychic acrobacy, mental contortionists of Olympian grade, who could breed Rock and Advertising into a new, in vitro-born species of unreliable but captivating infotainment. The publisher of the magazine, which also had a website, radio station, television channel and phone application, and bureaux in 40 countries, said once that LICE would take over the world; "It will be news, sports and music all rolled into one," he told a more trustworthy publication. LICE grew into a fascination and obsession for me, an epitome of this new world I lived in. I applied for a job. LICE was onto something. But to hedge my bets I also applied to a dozen other publications, which tried to imitate LICE to varying degrees of success. All were based in the same area of East London, east of Moorgate, north of the river, West of Stratford, and South of Dalston.

I took to sleeping during the day and reading and writing these annoying, snarky blogs during the night. I would wake up at three pm, eat, go to the library at the university where I'd get myself worked up on Hunter S Thompson and Charles Bukowsky and then go cycling for a few miles without aim around the xeroxed suburbs of the city. Places like Shirley, Nursling, Eastleigh, apart from the slight variation in the wealth of neighbourhoods made evident by the size of the

houses, the degree of cleanliness in the shops and food parlours and the quality of the cars in the driveways, all looked the same. Southampton was probably the quintessential British town because it was full of Brits in equal measure of white British and Asian descent, but there was absolutely nothing attractive about it apart from old stories about ships and that one time Jane Austen briefly lived in Hampshire. It could have been anywhere. Betting shops and supermarkets, pubs, post offices, taxi stands, kebab houses, council estates and rowhouses on endless tarmac roads whichever way you went. People were happy here, lots of Polish and Pakistani immigrants, lots of students. I cycled and saw them all. The air whistled in my ears as I pedalled to new ballads that called me away, tunes, portents or good omens that rang like a music I hadn't heard before. One night on the high street I found a £20 note on the pavement outside the South Quay shopping mall. I cycled passed it and then in my brain I became aware of what I had seen from the corner of my eye, a fleeting spectre of a bluish, purplish note and I figured what the hell, I'm broke anyway, so I turned back and there was my fortune, in some other person's bad luck. I picked it up with a heart full of hope and went on to Livingstone Road. Another night a man was lying unconscious on the side of the road on Portswood Road at about 3am. I pulled him up on the pavement. He smelled terribly, of stale piss and sweat. He was clearly homeless He started convulsing when I moved him. I called an ambulance and told them I wasn't sure he was OK he seemed to be breathing but there was white foam on his chin coming out of his mouth and his eyes were spun inside his skull. They made me give all my personal information, name, address, nationality, phone number and the operator sounded a bit annoyed that I told them they should come check. She said she would send someone but I caught a doubtful inflexion in her voice that prevented me from going home until the ambulance showed up. As it rolled towards me I cycled away slowly so as to not give the driver reason to suspect it was I who made the call, lest he started berating me with even more questions, and when I saw them stopping by the guy and getting out I turned and didn't look back.

Then after each night I went home and practiced my writing. I wrote lots of slogans and calls to arms, cathchlines. I would play a song I liked on repeat, such as Gimme Shelter or Gun Street Girl or Tightrope for a few hours and write whatever came to my mind. I would write fractions of memories from my childhood, like when my grandfather came home with steaming hot bread after he finished work, when he was still young and working as an electrician, in his cocksure red car, and I would be napping on the old sofa in the summer kitchen under a ceiling of grapevines. And he'd wake me saying geddup you bandit, did you do the calculations I gave you? Or when I got in a fight with a kid in kindergarten over a toy and he spared me his worst shots because I was wearing thick glasses and he was a good kid. So when I realised he wasn't going to fight me properly I lost heart and gave up on the toy but then he wouldn't want the toy either any longer so

we were both upset and the toy just lay there unused. Or sometimes I would just copy pieces from big classic books like *Great Expectations* and I'd copy and copy and feel bad that that writer was so much better than I was but then I'd firm up thinking that I could get good too one day and so the nights passed for a few weeks. I went to sleep dizzy right after daybreak at about 7 or 8 in the morning with a head full of weird thoughts rushing through it like bats in a cave. When you don't sleep there are new chemicals that come alive inside and sometimes it's not that different to taking drugs. When my confidence waned I would read the news for a few hours – but only in newspapers and on newspaper websites, never on television websites or crackpot blogs, and then I would cook up a blog post of my own about some random controversy which I then sent for publication to a few crackpot blogs. The incompetent editors of these websites lapped up the stuff, mostly because it was free and full of invective, but they always told me I was good and I had potential, something which I wasn't sure how to take, being aware of their uselessness as indeed I was. I coached myself into a discipline of writing and reading and making some form of physical effort to tire my muscles out so I could rest better. I figured that to get good like Dickens or Twain I had to read at least 50 pages of fiction a day and write at least 1,000 words of my own fiction a day. That took about 6 hours all in all and the rest I spent studying for university, reading the news and blogging, drinking with the various people that I knew and cycling or running or playing basketball alone. Weeks passed and the summer was full on. I sat exams and did reasonably well. I hadn't seen Gomez, or Pavel, or Miriam since before I was last in London for the protest, and Eduardo since we returned.

One night, after the exam for European politics, and after a very particular purple sunset which cast a fantastic torch on the sky, lighting up clouds like Chinese lamps unfurling and the Solent river looking like a river of brandy, I dreamt that I threw myself from a tall rock into a deep clear water somewhere in a desert oasis and the water was infinite when I reached it and I swam under it for a long time, going past sea creatures and all the members of my family, and at one point Ileana swam with me hand in hand then she let go and swam away, and I swam with a dog and a cat and cars and bikes and books, newspapers, magazines, men and women in suits and skirts and hoodies that I didn't know, all the friends that I ever had and all the women I ever slept with all looking at me like they were happy to see me. While I swam, I didn't get tired at all although I felt that a lot of time was passing, my hair was growing a lot and it got very long. I had a long beard too now and I looked rough and hairy, I had no ear piercing anymore and years passed as I swam in the cool water. Then I came out on the other side and I wasn't in the desert anymore, there were trees and all kinds of vegetation with bees and bugs, people around like a park in a city, they were looking at me like they were happy to see me too. I had shorts on now so I wouldn't feel naked, I felt good and woke up at 3:30 pm as usual.

That night I typed on my laptop:

*I hope you get fat
And your skin turns bad,
And your makeup runs, you devious cunt.
Just kidding.
Still love you.*

One realises the necessity of somehow earning money when he's forced to choose between a loaf of bread and a can of beer, and it's implicitly understood that a small pack of cigarettes is out of the question. It is at times like these when the most vindictive and wicked ideas seem reasonable. I found the keys to the place where I used to live with Gina before she left me, before I was writing, and before I was broke. Go round and stalk the place for a few hours until the coast is clear. Rich people live in that house now, or at least rich by my standards: they have jobs and a car. At this point, with the keys to the front and back doors to that house right in front of me, necessity is so painful and obvious. The money grabbing, two-faced rat bastard of a landlord, who also runs a used car business, was too stingy to change the locks. How bad can it be to break into an honest family's home and grab at whatever you can quickly turn into cash?

So here I am at eleven o'clock at night in front of the house I'm planning to rob... my ex home in the UK with my ex girl. It is a very old and creepy place and now it's split into seven flats, out of which we had the attic. Anyway, it's been almost six months since then I used to work in warehouses unloading cargo when I met the woman. It might have all gone downhill between us when I stopped working in warehouses. Maybe it's warehouse guys she's really after. Isn't it weird... I thought she was into me for my sense of humour and good taste in music. She resented my vain ambitions and newfangled reluctance to sell a bit of weed and unload lorries. Now, once again, on the alley in the cold night, serious crime becomes a real option, even a hope. Though what kind of callous scumbag tells you that he doesn't care, you chose your own girlfriend and she can be dead for all he cares, he still wants his money? Vengeance on the landlord. I left him the full deposit of £600, a fitted kitchen, furniture. Made an oath never to buy appliances or furniture again. Sanjay still harassed me for weeks for the rent money. I know for a fact he's got an overestimated insurance on the house, otherwise I'd gladly burn it to shit.

I cycled around the house like a coyote and then I went home with the big porcelain moon looming behind me. That was the last time I set foot in Swaythling for the rest of my life.

One of the magazines I applied to be an intern was HYPE, which billed itself as the arch-rival to "hipster LICE" and the "true ultimate guide to modern living". An email from them read:

"Hello and thank you for your interest in HYPE. We have read your CV and your work

carefully and are pleased to offer you an interview slot on June the 18th in our office on 91 Brick Lane, London for the position of hip-hop staff writer, which is an unpaid volunteership. Please confirm your attendance by replying to this email no later than June 15th. Looking forward to meeting you. Keep up the HYPE! Matilda.”

I immediately gave in a week’s notice on my room and made plans to leave. The week flew and at the end of it I had a one-way coach ticket saying the next morning I would be in London. The final night I was going to spend at Pavel’s, but Pavel said he couldn’t have me for lack of space. I was therefore homeless – something I blamed not on Pavel but on my stupid assumption that he would surely be able to put me up. More teens than usual ran the Derby Road that night after dark and I sat watching them from my former stoop. My landlord claimed a notice is a notice and also declined allowing me to sleep in the house one more night. So there I sat. The kids threw rocks and firecrackers that made thunder and lightning. They laughed. When the snakes are closing in and the devil screams ever closer behind you, clawing at your country hide, you get a sense of direction in life. It can be healthy in the same way getting mildly electrocuted can be beneficial too. I left my luggage at Pavel’s and sheltered in a bus depot. I read a whole newspaper with stories about Obama’s latest “watershed victory” and did my best to avoid being shat on by the countless pigeons flying in all directions. These beaked parasites are worse than cockroaches, and along with city foxes and rats make up what is probably the world’s queerest urban wildlife. Then I got an idea to pawn my old iPod at the Cash Generator on the high street before it closes, and with the money get a bottle of vodka to pass the time. But that wasn’t to be either:

“Fatal hard drive failure mate,” the clerk said. “And I’m closing soon anyway so there’s no time to process it even if you do accept the £3 I’m prepared to offer you. Sorry.”

I threw the smooth-looking paperweight in the bin outside the shop and went away, rambling down the streets with no aim, as it got darker and darker. I went into the University library, which closed at 12. At least I could stay there until then and so I’d only be outdoors for six hours. The 119th- ranking British university out of 120, as per the newspaper’s university guide, was finally able to make a difference in my life. The £7,500 I borrowed from the Queen to pay tuition here were paying off. I found a small private study room and locked myself in with a couple of picturebooks of Brazil and Santa Lucia. Warm, lush, distant places to kindle the imagination. Going to the bathroom I met my classmate, Gagandheep Singh, who noticed my sorry condition and stopped for a chat.

“Hey, George, how are you getting on? I’m working on a project for my summer internship at Morgan Stanley,” he bragged, looking at me with eyes hopeful I’d ask for more detail.

I didn’t. I said I was just fine, thank you, and made to move. But anyway he said:

“Oh, yeah, I got an internship there and they’re having me give a presentation to the managing directors as a first project. I’ll be staying at my cousin’s in Millwall. It’d be nice working in Canary Wharf. I love the place. How are you doing, planning anything special for the summer? Got any internships lined up?”

“No, Gags, I don’t. I might go to work for a magazine though, starting tomorrow, but I don’t know for sure. I’m a bit tired, yeah, so please excuse me. Good luck at the bank.”

Southampton: renegade city of sham adoption. Inside the cubicle, I sat on the floor and tried to sleep, knowing I’d need it later. I wasn’t tired enough, however, so just browsed through the charming pictures of Caribbean beaches. Sure enough, the library assistant knocked on the door ten minutes to midnight.

“We’re about to lock up. Must leave soon, alright?” She sounded worried about me.

Alright. I packed up, double layers. T-shirt under hoodie under jacket and two pairs of socks and off I went to the park. I stayed on a bench, I counted more pigeons and I got bored. I read a book in the dim streetlamp but my fingers got numb from the cold after a while and I couldn’t turn the pages anymore. A weak airport novel, *The Peacock Manifesto*. I walked into an all-night bookies, full of singing, colourful flashing slot machines. Free coffee for gamblers. I gambled £1, lost, and had a cup. I gambled £1 again and had another. The flickering lights of the place were playing on my softer keys. I was never a casino man. Dad was. I always hated gambling and feared the misery it brings. Then I won £4. Enough. I left and sought to go back to a park bench. Five hours to go.

On the high street I found myself surrounded by wild-eyed students. Freshers on the lash. All drunk and high to the point of nausea. Some vomiting on their shoes, some preparing to, some screaming, some laughing. About 30 of them. Stumbling together like a pack, they caught me in their midst. Some fell. I helped one up and two steps later she fell again, face down. No attempt to cushion the fall with her hands, her forehead hit the ground first and she lay there still. I helped her up again and sat her down on her ass. The more unlucky ones were falling into the puddles of jumbled kebab and Jagerbomb vom left behind by their companions. Startled and disgusted by the horrible smell, they got up much faster than the others. They wiped their faces on their T-shirts and went on. All wore cheap, white t-shirts with the word ‘carnage’ written across the chest in red. I wondered if the kind-looking, middle-aged lady in the casino perhaps spiked my coffee with something that made me see things. Were these youngsters real? They must have been, because a police was now questioning a few of them and I saw no police drinking coffee in the betting shop. I went up and asked the time to make sure.

“Two am, mate, now jog on.” Gruff.

The hordes of waster tweens seemed to be endless. The park was also full of them. The night was getting weirded that some of my most memorable nightmares. On Above Bar High Street, doormen were fighting the more plucky freshers off from trying to enter their establishments. Another young man staggers into me and falls from the shock of the collision. I grab him and try to stand him up.

“Katieeeeeee!” He yells, his eyes rolling over in the back of his head.

He swerved like a broken merry-go-round and limped on.

“Katiee, bad girl, shat herself. Katie if my lady elf,” he mumbled.

Katie, I realized, was a sweet girl with long legs, beady green eyes and a thin, delicate body under her still-clean carnage t-shirt, waiting for her partner down the road. She giggled at his taunts.

I sat on a bench on the high street. The Guildhall marble clock tower now showed three. I cracked open a beer. Another hour and the damp started to turn into frost. Three hours can be a long time in this temperature. I pulled a cap over my head and rolled a cigarette. The beer was lukewarm. Now seagulls, another member of the unusual fauna making up the entropy of Southampton’s nature, invaded. About 50 of the carnivorous beasts circled above and spat empty, high-pitched croaks. Had they joined the drunken rampage? I was tempted to walk to the policeman and ask him to arrest me, perhaps kick him in the shins to provide a reason, so that I could spend the rest of my time indoors. But kick too hard and I might miss the bus to London, I thought.

An hour before go time I was half-asleep in the lobby of a Premier Inn hotel. The receptionist said nothing, kindly ignoring me. I returned the favour by keeping as still and quiet as possible. The sunrise woke me and made me optimistic once more about the possibilities of human existence. Platitudes and high-minded aspirations have a big utility in this world. They make good television and are cheap to embrace. They provide us with a horizon, with and end to the sympathy scale. Beauty, love, peace, happiness, purity. Lovely things. The days are so crisp, the nights are so silky, the sun is so cool and so raw in the morning, the moon is so corruptive. A dawn so relieving when it comes again on a city unworthy. So liberating it all certainly is, I thought as I was passing Basingstoke at the back of the hoarsely coughing diesel coach.

In Whitechapel I walked out of the underground station to the left instead of walking right. I had missed my stop and had to recover lost time. In front of The Blind Beggar pub between Mile End Road, Cambridge Heath Road, Sydney Street and Whitechapel High Street, inveterate, intractable, pervasive, inscrutable rain. Blinding rain. At 10 o’clock Muslim men in dresses and flip

flops and women in hijabs and burkas were clamouring between stalls laden with vegetables, fried pasties, heaps of rubbish and plastic homewares – buckets, basins and bowls of all colours and sizes. Men were yelling from behind the stalls in a language I couldn't make out. All I could hear was the rain and it soaked up everything.

“One pound! Comanavealook!” Cried one behind me. Before the zebra a map kindly informed me I was headed the wrong way, so I turned round and entered the thick of the bazaar, tarpaulins flapping.

I had my interview on Brick Lane in a half hour and I had missed Aldgate East station because I was sat in the middle of the carriage and by the time I pulled my immensely heavy bag I had that morning recuperated from Pavel, the door had shut and the train moved on. I stood on the pavement opposite the Royal London Hospital getting wet and getting worried about missing my interview at HYPE magazine. From a thrash mound I took a big black bag and covered my luggage, fearing it would get heavier if it absorbed a lot of the rain. Down it poured. I somewhat composed myself and walked. Tried to walk. Carried the army oversupply bag full of all my clothes, books and shoes for a few yards, then had to set it down out of exhaustion. I made it to the East London Mosque in ten minutes. From a stall's improvised cover, an accumulation of water spilled in front of me, soaking my boots. At the same time I was sweating so badly I thought I'd smell, but luckily the rain camouflaged the odour for the time being. On I pressed, past endless Muslim shops selling fancy, gold-leaf copies of the Koran, halal fast food joints, hairdressers and South Asian candy shops. The smell of soot and rain mixed with the Pakistani spices and stale frying oil steaming out of the establishments. People were walking past me in all directions and I dragged and pushed and lumbered the millstone along the straight boulevard. In the breast pocket on the inside of my jacket a passport and a CV as well as two clippings from Vortex with my very own byline on them. Hope to God and Allah they don't get wet. Past Altab Ali Park now, according to the sign, and round the corner where Brick Lane was supposed to be, stood a sign saying Osborn Street. I panicked, left the bag in the middle of the road, and, with the laptop messenger case hanging round my neck comparatively feeling like a mere pendant, I rushed to the nearest map by the bicycle rack. I looked carefully and it seemed that half of the street was called Osborn Street and half Brick Lane for no apparent reason. But I was in the right place, so I continued round the corner and up. Now it was all graffiti mural, artistic pieces on all the walls, and curry restaurants – all of which had hoardings proclaiming themselves to have won at least one international, or, the more modest ones, national, award for the best curry restaurant in a given year. Outside the restaurants, in the clobbering rain, with umbrellas, touts:

“Come on mate, are you hungry? Take shelter with us and for a tenner we’ll wine you and dine you.” Brown skin but Cockney accents.

“Fancy an early lunch? We’ll get you a bespoke menu boss.”

I walked past not bothering to answer.

Shops selling old clothes (“vintage”) appeared further up between the curry houses. Finally I made it past Hanbury Street and into the large courtyard of an industrial-looking building which called itself the Truman Brewery but had been converted into office spaces. The security guard stopped me and when I said I was there for an interview to become Hip-hop reporter he called upstairs and checked while I waited in the rain. My appearance made him decide against allowing me inside the building for fear I would try to squat it. He let me in and I hid the bag under the stairwell then jumped in the elevator to the fourth floor. In the mirror on the wall I used my hand to comb my wet hair all in one direction and I breathed deeply. The glass wall showed me the road outside in all its splendour. Rain is beautiful, contemplative when you look at it from a dry observatory. Childhood memories, music, nostalgia for long-lost lovers, fuzzy and warm sentiments come into play when you look at powerful rain out the window. Everything comes to mind but the horrible discomfort it produces when it catches you without an umbrella.

There were many companies’ offices on that floor, and HYPE’s was only marked by its purple logo slapped on an otherwise unassuming door. I went in and heard

“YO. You George?”

Many people were there gathered around laptops, at tables, on the floor and sitting on the windowsills, all looking terribly busy. The room was rather small for a magazine’s headquarters. One man was older than the rest and he wore a baseball hat with the same logo as on the door on top his afro hairstyle. He was the one who said yo. I looked at him.

“Do you like to do things big?” he said, with a superior smirk.

“Well, I have carried a big load on my way here. So yes, I guess.”

“Good. Let’s go for a chat in the office.”

The office was a walk-in closet with two chairs and no windows. After asking me if I was ready to go to the top and change the world he offered me an internship “plus expenses” and promised that if I’d do well he’d make me rich and famous within a few months. Koshi, for that was his name, enjoyed hearing himself talk, much like Eduardo but slicker. It saved me a good deal of effort in the interview, since he took up most of it. I agreed with him curtly and accepted his offer. What else was I going to do? Go back to Southampton? At least here I would be in the big city and maybe I’d get to meet some celebrities as well. I left and bought myself a small bottle of Bells whisky from the offlicense. £4.50 for 20 cl. I sat on the luggage, drank and looked at the time on my

phone. June 10, the day I took on a profession. But where would I be sleeping? I called a few numbers from the ads on the internet and found a sofa not far away. Brick Lane was damp and the sky was still heavy with water and fog. Not many people around at that hour and those who were present were either yuppies between coffee breaks and meetings or vagrants scanning the floor for half-smoked cigarettes and spare change fallen out some tourist's pockets. Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were touting their restaurants, young kids on BMX bicycles were selling £10 bags of drugs, and the murmur of traffic encompassed the whole scene with a levelling tone. Further down were the skyscrapers of the City, where stockbrokers and investors were hustling for the big money. We on Brick Lane were the entertainment, I calculated. A glass of drink, a cheap shot of cocaine or ecstasy, a plate of curry, and a freesheet filled with advertisements, overglamourised pictures of singers and interviews with rappers and electronic music DJs. A couple of shops with the allure of stylish but still mercantile, salient rebellion. You picked up a free copy of HYPE with your cup of coffee, leafed through it thinking of something else and when the ten minutes were up or the coffee got cold you threw both away whether finished or not. I drank again from my bottle. The liquor made me warm and cozy from inside out. I smiled, pleased with myself. Beats Danish warehouses at least. Here's to cheap alcohol and high expectations. To ten cigarettes in a packet and shoplifting for food. Cup'o'noodles, payday loans, instant coffee, government aid, benefit claims, hitchhiking, squatting, having friends and making new ones fast. Hopes and prayers. Begging or borrowing. Red-haired women with expensive tastes and calamity in their green eyes. Anything that gets you through tomorrow. Charity shops. Sleeping with your wallet, keys and phone under your pillow. Lack of sleep. Did you know that the fastest motorcycle in the world, the Suzuki Hayabusa, an ungodly banshee on two wheels which should require jet pilot training, capable of reaching 100 kilometres an hour in less than 3 seconds, with nearly 200 horsepower, is factory-limited at 350 kilometres per hour? They put a chip in its fuel injection system which cuts off the engine above that speed. The legal limit is 70 miles per hour, or about 117 kilometres anyway, but they chose 350 to set their limit. Why? Why not 300 or 400? Could it be that it may not even go faster than 355, but they limited it to set our imagination on fire? Can it even be possible to try to go faster on a public road? The propensity for impishness, for a bit of guilty fun, is present even within the most hard-boiled Japanese engineers in white robes. Here's to spending time once in a while with people who can't read. Knowing that not even the most desperate vagabond would dare touch the behemoth luggage I had by my side, I walked confidently into the yard of an Asian supermarket with a big parking lot, and making myself look as much as possible (in my mind at least) like I needed to bring something inside the building from an imaginary car I had outside, I borrowed a metal trolley and left. Awkwardly, half into it and half dangling menacingly on the side, threatening to tip over at any

moment, I perched up on the cart my 30 kilo life and slowly pushed it up Brick Lane into Bethnal Green Road hoping not to encounter any hills on the way to my new 'couchsurfing' abode. Dodging mean-looking ruffians I went into Columbia Road through some narrow and uneven cobblestoned alleys which made the springless contraption I was labouring to transport let out the most fearsome jackhammer noises and tremble on its plastic wheels also not unlike a pneumatic hammer, until my arms went dizzy and beads of sweat once again started washing down my forehead. I paused outside a cheese shop on Columbia Road and took stock of my surroundings. It appeared like a strange film studio set for a period production from between the two world wars. Those who arranged it carefully avoided any modern reference as if looking extracted from a different age was synonymous with having elegant taste. The place did have an attraction about it, to be fair, but the prices in the shop windows indicated of a prosperous and distant future rather than the slums of 20th Century London. And there was also a lot of graffiti ("street art") which did not quite belong historically but of which clearly the residents were exceedingly fond of. Towards my right were the Ion Square Gardens which provided a neat shortcut into Hackney Road where my magnanimous host was already expecting me for little over a half hour, in exchange for £100 per week. I had no resources to pay upfront for a full month's rent and I decided that living within walking distance to the unremunerated position I had secured would enable me to meet people who may offer alternative income. Decidedly I did not find it a good idea to pay £350 a month to live an hour by train away from where I had to be every morning. I tried pushing the lumbering pile onto the pavement but the angle of ascent was unnatural and the bag fell over with a deaf thud. At length I restored it to the trolley and resumed the trip. Into the little triangular park I was surprised to find a campsite -- tents and a fire kindled by the very same people who I had interviewed weeks before at the Occupy London Stock Exchange. The activists had decided to leave their homes permanently in order to kickstart the revolution oppressed Shoreditch dearly required. I said hello, remember me, but all I got in return were obviously perturbed looks and mumbles, as if consuming the fried chicken my noseringed, sandalled fellows had in front of them was a concern that preceded the political urgencies of the early 21st Century. Maybe the trolley misled them into thinking I also left my tame, certain life behind and wished to join them, something they clearly discouraged since before I reiterated my salutation all their backs were firmly turned on me. Amid the chirping of birds in the bushes of the green, the sound of munching and chewing made contrast with the mellow Bob Marley tunes coming our of a half-opened tent. Exiting the park at the other end I found myself in Hackney Road, which was good, because that is where I was aiming to go. The house I was looking for was a rowhouse not far from Cambridge Heath station, by a Tesco's and a hotel.

My host, it seemed, had obviously grown overly concerned by my unannounced absence and decided to entertain himself by playing loud, violent video games on a television I could hear – to keep his mind off worrying. So then, because of the machine guns shooting, the zombies, vampires and other mythical critters dying in great, gruesome pain and sorrow, and the volume being turned well up – for a moment I myself also grew disconcerted.

Olly, my kind host, did not seem to hear the persistent knocks I executed with utter force on his door, nor did he hear the phone ringing as I called him from my mobile. The poor man must have been so wounded by my not coming on time – God only knows what he thought happened to me – that he threw himself with abandon into the virtual reality of the shooting video game, which as full of gore and horror as it clearly was from the sound of it, must have appeared more bearable than what his presumably vivid imagination told him had come of me.

So I knocked on the door next to his and a short and thin young woman with blonde hair, short jeans, a tank top and a piece of toast with strawberry jam on a plate presently opened.

“Hello.” she said with the most innocent, disarming smile I had ever seen.

As it later turned out, the women in London are not only some of the most beautiful, innocent, pure and disarming creatures in the world, but their smiles would melt the top off the Kilimajaro at any time of the day. If they had more women from London on the Titanic, the iceberg would have turned into a slushy mash long before the cursed vessel ever crashed into it. But let us keep to the matter at hand.

“Yes, thank you miss. I appreciate your answering. I am a lodger with Olly next door but he seems a bit distracted and he doesn’t hear either my knocking or my phone calls. I don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, you poor dear. Don’t you worry, I’ll nudge him for you,” she said, smiled again, and turned around.

She left the door to her flat open and as she went towards the back of her living room, I could not remove my sight from her jeans, an involuntary reflex which embarrassed me no end. If she sees my face now she’ll think I am a peasant who never saw a city girl in his life, I thought. She disappeared into the garden and I recovered.

“Oi, Olly!” I heard her yell rather more coarsely than I could ever have thought she were able. “You have a visitor. He’s knackered. What the bloody hell’s wrong with you keeping him waiting at the door for half an hour, have you no manners?”

A mumbled, evidently grumpy response came back but the words got diverted somewhere in the kitchen and did not make it as far as the front of the house where I stood.

“Get up this instant and go see to that boy,” she ordered him in a sharp tone. Then she materialized in front of me, with the same big, generous smile, all white teeth and long eyelashes.

“He’ll be with you in a minute darling, OK? Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Thank you very much indeed miss, you are most kind.” I said.

God, my accent must be so offensive to her.

“I am George.” I added, stretching my hand.

She shook it.

“Pam.” she said.

And she shut the door.

Olly’s door opened only three minutes later or thereabouts and out came an unmistakable smell of Jamaican marijuana grown out of doors. Sour, chokey stuff, but weed for sure. Olly stood there, yawning and stretching.

“Sorry, man, I forgot the time. Come in anyway.” he said. I did.

The living room was also the kitchen and the hall. On one side stood a two-seat red sofa, on another a chair and table and on the other the kitchen top with a washing machine, cooker, sink and all the rest. The other wall was a window looking out. To the left as I stood was a small bathroom and to the back a bedroom, with a large bed and a TV almost as large as the bed in front of it. I grew antsy without knowing precisely why.

“George, man, this is you, yeah?” he pointed to the sofa.

Oliver, I didn’t know his surname, spoke in a sleepy, slow and nasal voice. He wore extremely tight trousers that were a bit too short, leaving his ankles uncovered and an extremely large T-shirt. He had Lego robots tattooed on his arms. His hair was curly and brown and he had a short beard. He also had silver rings on his fingers.

“What is me?” I asked.

“The sofa and the living room, for this week, for £100. Right? Like we talked about,” he said, curtly and looking right in my eyes.

“Yes yes,” I said.

Sleeping on that two-seater sofa was already hurting and I had yet to touch it. I felt dismayed.

“I need to get my bag from outside,” I said.

Olly looked at me again, making me think for the most fleeting instant in the depth of my skull that he was going to offer help with the luggage.

“I need to run George. Do you have the money now?” he said.

I took out my front pocket ten carefully-rolled banknotes and gave them to him. He counted them and put them in his pocket.

“Are you going anywhere tonight?” he asked.

“It’s about seven already. I don’t think I’m going anywhere but the shop. I have work tomorrow,” I said with barely concealed pride.

“Then I’ll get you a key tomorrow, OK?”

And he put a pair of pointy leather shoes on and left.

VIII

The following morning I woke up at 8 quite stiff from the unfriendly red sofa, brushed my teeth in the kitchen sink and made for work more or less by tracing back yesterday's steps. I left Olly's flat and there was the monument to my sufferings – the steel trolley which I had promised to return to the shop. I felt like I didn't want to jinx my budding career, so very reluctantly I pushed it in front of me, like a hobo or a mental institution escapee. Nice and clean shaven, with a laptop serviette hanging around my neck, a chequered shirt tucked into ironed trousers and white Converse shoes, I pushed the empty trolley on Hackney Road, went through the gardens, Columbia Road, Bethnal Green Road and down Brick Lane, looking mostly down, to avoid the discombobulated stares of fellow pedestrians heading to their own jobs. The trolley kept my vanity in check, and prevented my ego overinflating from thinking too much about how I may now introduce myself to people as George, a journalist.

I left it in front of the shop I had taken it from and walked up to the office, where things were in a state broadly comparable to the evening before. In the next four hours I had already published a handful of short, snappy and sarcastic articles on musicians launching new albums, various pubs closing in London, and upcoming concerts. Mostly I rephrased press releases or articles from other publications. Everyone did the same. Nobody checked facts the way you would imagine journalists, say at the New York Times, would. Nobody picked up the phone to get an original first-hand quote or a piece of directly-sourced information, however small or trivial. We wrote our way around any kind of journalistic work, and I learned that day that most journalists that write for small websites do the same. Koshi made it clear between the lines that the public relations agents and the advertisers were our gods... the kings, end-all, be-all, motive, why everyone in the online world got out of bed in the morning. They had the money and in exchange they received our undivided subservience. I got the feeling that they simply told us what to write, although not explicitly, and we rephrased it a little, just enough to avoid obvious plagiarism, since the HYPE website unfortunately also used bylines, but no more that absolutely necessary because we needed to churn them out quick.

“Yo! I sent you an email. Give me 200 words on that thing ASAP.” or “Yo! Saw the front page of the Guardian arts section? Big interview with Benedict Cumberbatch. Give me a quick standfirst on that, I've got the copy.”

And I did, and was thoroughly pleased to see my name as the co-byline or the byline. This was intoxicating to me, like I was truly alive for the first time, and I thought it could only get better.

When Koshi said the front page of the Guardian, he of course did not refer to the newspaper, which cost money, and was therefore a no-no for our small newsroom, but to the website, which was free. The budget was extremely lean. There was no coffee, no water, there were no phones, and we were using the open Internet connection of an immigration lawyer's office next door in all likelihood without her knowledge. I worried about some of the stuff we did being illegal, but kept my mouth shut. Every article we published had to come with a picture, but the law said in order for someone to use a picture for commercial purposes it has to have either a common usage policy set by the owner or the publisher must own it through purchasing it or creating it. We didn't even bother finding free-to-use pictures, known as Creative Commons. Just Google it and use whatever you like, nobody ever checks, Koshi said. And so we did. I churned out ten articles a day, mainly small summaries of other people's work in other publications.

A few weeks later he made me online editor, after I complained that some of the more egregious factual errors and fundamental misconceptions of logic, grammar and spelling that we inevitably published on a daily basis were putting loyal readers off and making my colleagues and I wish the byline policy were rescinded.

"We can't drop the bylines man. It gives us credibility," Koshi decreed. "Why don't you keep a closer eye on things as online editor instead?"

I put up two signs on the wall in front of where us writers sat.

"Reporters must follow the national union of journalists' code of conduct at all times, and the AP style guide where possible," said the first, and "Slander, banter and subtle libel are welcome here," said the second.

I lost some of the faith I held that I could turn the operation around because the barrage of conspiracy theory and tedious critique the writers threw at me was too much to edit for one man. I scrapped the first several articles dealing with aspects of the Black Pope, the Bohemian Grove, the Trilateral Commission, Davos, the Bilderberg group, the illuminati and the new world order, but then one colleague, possibly the main author of these things, complained to Koshi, who came up to me and said:

"Let these things out, stop deleting them. The readers love it. They get high and read about these things while they listen to music. They don't take it serious, they know it's wank," he told me.

"But Koshi, how are we going to get into Google News if we don't publish true stuff?" I asked.

"We'll get there one day, George, think positive. One day big Google will come to us, don't you worry."

I resorted to cutting out the wilder outgrowths and toning down the more extravagant flourishes. For example, “American scientists working for the CIA have developed the ability to monitor people’s movements inside their homes using wi-fi connections, raising concerns of dystopian societal developments, campaigners have warned,” was the edited version of: “One step closer to NWO (New World Order): CIA watches your movements through walls using wi-fi networks. Time to wake up and fight the deep state system before they brainwash all of us!” I left a note to the author, asking him to clarify whether the watching was being conducted through walls, or perhaps the people themselves were moving through walls like vampires in old movies. “Because, in that case, I think we have a buried lede here.” But Alasdair, the sixth-form budding social justice warrior was deadpan:

“Let me check that and get back to you.”

Eventually, when the deluge of paranoid conspiracy finally overcame me, I took to leaving an disclaiming comment in italics at the end of these sort of articles: “Note from the HYPE legal Department: A pharmaceutical company who is the sponsor of this section of our website is testing new antipsychotic medicine on some of the HYPE staff, while subjecting them to powerful imagery and urban fantasy in order to test out their cognitive abilities under conditions of stress. The above stories are the result of this test, with the staff members being asked to carry on their work as usual under the changed circumstances. The magazine’s retained counsel said that while the wellbeing of the journalists in question has been removed from the responsibility of the company through a blanket waiver agreement signed under moderate but lawful duress, readers should note: The annoying one-eyed pyramid symbol is used by absolutely every twat who wants to instill cheapjack mystery into their audience – with the inevitable conclusion that from Kanye West to Gaga and the A\$aps all the music idols of today are extraterrestrial reptiles sent here from another dimension. Some call this shit fear porn and some believe it but only an impressionable little punk (if innocent) or a cynical pig bastard Daily Mail would-be hack, preying on the feeble-brained could ever take the aforementioned blabber as fact. In due course we shall try to train Alasdair and the other subjects of this cruel experiment to the very simple, basic principles of blogging but in all likelihood we shall fail. There are papers with guidelines written on them all over the office. In fact, as counsel, on the first occasion I will steal the publisher’s iPad, take it down to the pawn shop and use the cash to buy black and red paint, which I shall use to re-write these guidelines in bigger, bolder appearance on the walls and ceilings of the basement we operate out of – like that girl in the movie Stigmata. However, Alasdair appears to be serious about the presumed findings of the article and he seems confident in what he wrote despite the powerful medication so the guidelines probably won’t get through his thick skull anyway. Therefore my immediate advice is you

shouldn't hold your breath waiting for him to learn something. The only reason this piece stays online is because all these vile little insects infesting the world of written words without any trace of remorse should be exposed. If it were not for the Data Protection Act we would publish the home addresses and the passport numbers of the authors as well. Mercy is a capital sin in some cases, this being a textbook one of them. In a just world, they would all hang by their tongues on the poles of Fleet Street or wherever the fuck newspapers come from, for aspirants to take notice. It is hard enough trying to make a living as an immigrant writer without having to deal with this. D.I. Swines, Barrister.”

Koshi removed that note after publication and told me in no uncertain terms that from then on I would only edit the articles for style, punctuation and grammar.

There were about six of us scrambling together in the editorial team, writing articles to populate the website, and about six or seven other people, Koshi and Harriet, his assistant, excluded, who spoke a lot on their mobiles in an adjacent room but I didn't quite comprehend what their jobs were. They seemed a bit older and a bit more prosperous than us. At five o'clock in the evening Koshi opened the windows and started chain-smoking cigarettes. I looked at him with surprise and he said not to worry, we can smoke now that the yuppies are gone from the building and there's nobody to report us.

“The law is don't smoke in the office,” he said, “but then again the law is don't smoke weed either.”

And he pulled out a long, parsnip-shaped joint from his breast pocket and lit it. I didn't know whether to relax and partake or to pack up and go home. I partook eventually. At seven we shut the office and went away, high, in a gently drizzling rain, fruit flies in a cloud faffing about the front gate. Rather enjoying the rain and the gloss it gave all the colours of the city and the refreshingly clean smell it aroused from the tarmac, I took a longer path home. I walked through Shoreditch up great Eastern Street and then up to Hoxton through the narrow bit of Old Street, then made my way through all of Hackney Road, looking at the people and the shops and the houses. Once you get out of the fashionable bit of Shoreditch into the backstreets of Hoxton and generally away from the high streets which are dominated by fashionable people who have recently repaired to these parts in search of their fortunes, there is a numerous Asian community with deep roots in the East End of 20th Century London, and this populace has very little involvement in the region's trendy renaissance. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian people own a lot of the real estate – flats and commercial spaces in Bethnal Green, Whitechapel and Mile End, but their main businesses are still pretty commerce with food and cheap clothes, or greasy spoon restaurants and fast foods – all of them primarily aimed at their own group rather than the tourists, self-proclaimed artists and the

various social climbers who frequent the postcode of late. Koshi, all the other people at the magazine, and I included, were strangers in this world and there seemed to be a gap of understanding and experience between our lives and the lives of the people who were born and raised in this neighbourhood, the Asians and the English, whose parents were also born and raised here and whose parents probably migrated from overseas directly or had been, generation by generation, simply always here. It was obvious in the coffee shops and restaurants – which were never full of both local Asians and young, modern economic migrants either from the provinces or the UK or abroad, such as the HYPE and LICE bunch. It was either, or, for everything, something I found odd. Like tribes.

As I finally came within sight of Olly's building sheltered by a couple of decrepit pear trees that have long since born their last fruit, I resolved to try to be more than an economic migrant and find some friendship or at least some rapport between me and the native Asians and English. I was sure that most of them were good people in the broad sense of the word and by studying their affable countenance I realised a Romanian might have more in common with a South Asian than perhaps even an Englishman had, thanks to my country's centuries-old belonging to the Ottoman Empire.

It proved a good idea to take the long way to my temporary home and it would have been much better to take an even longer route, perhaps walking through all of London and back, because Olly gave no sign of life, had locked me on the outside again, and this time I could see the TV set was off and the flat was engulfed in deathly silence. I rang at Pam's, but nobody answered. So I waited for an hour under the pear tree, sitting on a discarded wooden crate, smoking cigarettes and watching cars drive by. Two hours later, well after dark, Olly blessed me with his presence. Without apologizing, he said he had been detained.

"I had a horrible fight with my girlfriend. She's such a bitch sometimes," he said as he unlocked the door.

I went to the shower and straight to sleep. The street lights filtered through the white flimsy curtain into the room, making shadows move on the wall in the shape of my haunted dreams.

HYPE, was also a monthly newspaper, a thin colour rag printed on A4-size paper, stapled and full of advertising, distributed for free at coffee shops and train stations. For this it needed features written and sub-editing, so instead of writing those chickenshit web articles at 200 words a pop I offered to write bigger stories, on graffiti painters from around Brick Lane and on some Eastern European hip-hop bands that I knew about from the old country. This played well, to my surprise, Koshi liked the idea. In the evenings I reviewed the spelling, grammar and punctuation of the paper, and in the day I would work on there 'for print' stories.

During these weeks I learned to squeeze various forms of reimbursement from Koshi. Spare change for the bus, which I pocketed for food and walked instead, the odd beer and microwave meal, cigarettes... I offered to go buy weed for him as well, and he sent me to meet his dealer on a housing estate in Bangla Town. He was a young Asian of about 25, with short hair, jeans, white trainers and a small pouch on a belt around his shoulder, like all the other young hood guys were wearing. Stone Island, Ralh Lauren, Nike – the most expensive clothes and yet all of them dressed the same. They wore their hair short in crew cuts and polished their nails. This guy's name was Orlando and he sold me bags of decent quality lemon haze weed for £20. I took a pinch of it out and saved it in my cigarette packet and the rest I gave to Koshi. I did this for four days in a row and the fifth day I sold Koshi his own weed back to him for £20. The writing he could have for free but the menial stuff he had to pay for whether he wanted to or not. After all I had to find sustenance somehow, and my time with Olly was running out because I couldn't afford even the red sofa any longer.

On my last day at Olly's, I still had no place to go to that I could pay for apart from the homeless shelter, but Koshi was moving offices a few days later to a large basement just off Commercial Road in Whitechapel – his third office in as many months – I learned. All I had to do was find a place until then, after which I offered to look after the office for him – open, close, clean up and stock the cupboards in exchange for being allowed to sleep on a sofa. Olly kindly agreed to keep my bag for another few days in his back garden. I slept two hours at a time in bus shelters and on night buses, dozed off in the park and washed up in the toilet at McDonalds, where I also changed clothes. The evenings were the worst, when everyone was leaving work and going home or to the pubs to have fun, and I sat in the park watching them. Nights passed quickly, all I really feared was being attacked by some criminal in my sleep but luckily I wasn't. I was more slow at work than usual but nobody took notice. Then on move-in day I took Koshi aside and told him I wanted to move into the new office for a few weeks.

Again to my surprise he accepted and passed me a set of keys to the lock of the pull-down metal shutter. That night I moved into the HYPE magazine offices, a vast basement without windows in Whitechapel. It was one immense room of which only the corner closest to the door was being used, with the rest either empty or full of old newspapers and random objects belonging to the magazine. I put a few filing cabinets together at the far end of the place, close to the bathroom, and made a wall. I dragged a large old sofa behind them, a four-seater with deep, soft cushions, heaven compared to Olly's, and with a clean sheet and a duvet I bought from a charity shop I made my bed in such a way that nobody could see anything sitting at their desk. Three days in my colleagues had no clue what I was up to. With the benefit of being there virtually all the time,

I managed to learn what the other, better-heeled workers were doing on their phones: sales on commission. The main pitch was along the following lines:

“Hello. My name is Andy Brown. I am a corporate outreach manager at KBS Limited in London.”

The sales company they worked for, it seemed, was different from the magazine.

“We specialise in getting messages out to young people, 18 to 35 year-olds. We have a longstanding partnership with a very popular London-based culture magazine called HYPE. You might have heard about it. If not your kids have for sure. It is a publication focusing on music, fashion, art, travel, entertainment, shopping and wellness, and there’s a very special twist to it: they keep it positive. They only publish good news, so all their readers are much happier than the readers of a traditional publication.”

The sales people spent all day on the phone, flogging advertising to companies in the magazine and on the website. A full-page ad in the first half of the rag was £2,000, a front-page banner above the fold £3,000, below the fold £2,500 and a double-page spread on page 2, the big prize of the advertising salesman, was a plump £5,000. I say big prize because the sales people had a 10% commission on deals. So if one managed to shift £5,000 worth of ads, they’d be 500 pounds richer, which, all told, is not bad going even in London. The enthusiasm these people showed for their jobs, and themselves, was understandable. The sales women could not have looked, and behaved more differently to the women who did editorial. The sales women always wore high heels and deep cleavages, glitter, dyed hair and either skirts or dresses, but never trousers. Two even had enlarged breasts and false nails. The men all wore jewellery like bracelets and rings, had freshly-shined leather shoes on and gel in their hair, and all of them, men and women, talked about money all the time. Of course, one in their position would.

Understandable also, stemming from their dedication to the company, were the frequent exaggerations they inadvertently (I’m sure) found themselves spouting on the phone to marketing managers who were pondering buying advertising in HYPE. These evolved into outright fabrications when they got really fired up.

To wit, I learned from my eavesdropping -- and this is just a taste, mind, because I cannot afford to squander a lot of precious space in the book listing the untruths of the sales department, although I easily could -- that our advertisers were told the following: the circulation of our print edition, “exploding over London like a bomb of fun” on the last Friday of every month, was no less than 50,000 copies; that our website, on average, was visited by 30,000 unique users every day, who spent, on average, 10 minutes “browsing our content” (in the Internet world 10 minutes average browsing is astronomical); that we have previously had successful “brand partnerships”

with Nike, Mastercard, Heineken, BMW and Coca-cola, and that each of these companies has been satisfied with the results and they come back to buy more advertising unprompted “every once in a while”; that the disposable income of our typical reader is “£2,000 – £3,000 a month, but if you only look at 25-35 year-olds, that number goes closer to £5,000”. So despite London rents and high cost of living, our readers were allegedly spending, basically, anything from £2,000 to £5000 every month on things like mobile phones, video games, clothes, hats, nightclubs, trips, alcoholic drinks and fizzy drinks, bottled water, casinos, concerts and renting out cars, to list but a few; how we gained possession of this illuminating piece of intelligence remained unclear. Surprisingly, it seemed that very few of the marketing managers ever questioned the veracity of this pitch, and mostly all were duly impressed. Skeptics were told that “HYPE commissions market surveys and focus groups periodically, and always with the most reputable specialists. Our readers are the most important asset to us and we are invested in a close relationship with them.”

After several lonely evenings spent reading back issues of HYPE in the basement following my move, I could find not one ad from those big companies they mentioned. I was intrigued by this and rather naively sought to verify the other bits, such as, say, circulation. In the past three months that seems to have been about 6,000 – 7,000 copies each month, according to bills from the printers – unless of course Koshi did his printing in multiple places, which I couldn’t prove that he did. After checking the website’s analytical settings, to which as online editor I was given access, I only saw about 947 average daily users in recent months – and at this point I decided to shutter my investigation before anything else emerged. It was perhaps time to leverage my editorial experience from HYPE to another post, one that paid. In other words, I assembled my cuttings and sent them around to editors around London.

Once every two days I snuck into a council-run gym next door to have a shower, a shave, and wash my underwear under the pretext of playing pingpong, for £4 an entry – the cheapest way of gaining entry into this taxpayer-subsidised leisure centre. The care-takers at the centre started greeting me with more than just a little suspicion for playing ping-pong by myself four or five times a week, but they let me be since I wasn’t causing them any trouble at all and I kept quiet. I projected a sense of discretion in anyone who crossed my path those days. Upon returning from a particularly satisfying and much-needed ping-pong session, I wrote to Ileana on a piece of paper:

Dearest Ileana,

London is the biggest city I’ve ever visited and the most wonderful. Although I haven’t had time to see all the cultural attractions, what I saw so far has made me want to stay. Getting a job as a

reporter and editor for a monthly music magazine also helped. The name of the publication is *HYPE* and it's an admired publication for music lovers. I write about current affairs, rap and electronic music and I also make sure that the articles in the monthly physical edition and daily on the website are well-punctuated and correct grammatically. The pay isn't too big but there are other advantages and for the time being I am happy.

My accommodation is near the city centre and near the office, in a charming Asian neighbourhood. Exotic flavours of curry and incense bescent the streets at the feet of the huge skyscrapers which loom so close you have to raise your head to see the top of them. There is a lively artistic community as well – many fashion designers, painters, architects and sculptors live here and I have met some of them over drinks after work. I think you would enjoy their company too.

The colleagues are varied – most of them recent graduates looking, like me, to start a career in the media industry, but some of them are more experienced. Koshi, the editor-in-chief, has been running the magazine for almost 20 years and he knows all the celebrities in the UK and in America. He interviewed Jay-Z and 50 Cent and he is on first-name terms with many known actors and footballers. He said he will make me rich if I work with him. However, I am being lured towards more serious journalism and I am afraid I will have to change work soon, because the music business does not allow for much critical thinking and research – which I have found a deep interest in, beyond mere writing.

To understand what I mean, please take the time to read the article I have enclosed, a profile of a locally-renowned graffiti artist. This kind of story is sadly a rarity at this magazine, but I want to find another publication that will allow me the time to write more like it.

I enclose another copy of the magazine – with one of my articles on the front page! Hope you still have the same dormitory address.

I have developed a taste for Indian food. There are thousands of different types of curries and other South Asian specialities to be tasted here – in fact they say that Great Britain's national dish is Chicken Tikka Masala, an Indian curry. The funny thing about that is that in the Hindi language Tikka mean simply chicken and Masala means spicy – so to any Hindi speaker the name of this intriguing palate is quite silly: Spicy Chicken Chicken. But the Brits love it, and I am sure you would too – you must visit at once, but please let me know in advance so I may clean up the apartment. Life is quite hectic and with so little spare time the house is a mess. I only go there to change, sleep and shower, the rest of the time I spend either at the magazine or out around London looking for new reporting ideas. As a matter of fact I am writing you this very letter at 9 in the pm from my desk at the magazine.

The flat in which I live is quiet, on the submerged ground-floor of an old Victorian building, in the historic neighbourhood known as Whitechapel. This used to be a rough part of the city many years ago and the locals never tire of telling stories about the pirates, gangsters and vigilantes who roamed here through the centuries. If you read Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens, well, most of it is set right in this area. Also, there's the urban folklore about Jack the Ripper, but the locals do not like talking about that because it has been wildly blown out of proportion by the cheap touristic industry and it has brought numberless poorly-mannered American sensation-seekers to the neighbourhood, disturbing the peace. In any case, it is now a perfectly-manicured middle class London district which I am sure you would love. All the danger has long since passed.

My flatmate (you didn't think I could afford an apartment on my own did you?) – is Olly, a video producer. He is English, from Brighton. We get along well.

Now, more about me later. How have you been? How is your university going, and what exciting new projects are you working on? Please send a picture as well next time you write. I miss you. Send my best to everyone back home and do please make plans to come to London as soon as you can. I sorely miss you, I miss looking in your deep brown eyes and holding you in my arms.

*Love forever,
George*

Before you frown, most of that is true in spirit, and Koshi had interviewed some known rappers a few years ago, according to old copies of the mag. I suppose some of the salesmanship from my more ambitious colleagues had rubbed off.

The next day was the last day before press, which meant I had to give the final version of the paper copy a proper scrub. As I was doing that, drinking Irish coffee and staring into the large iMac screen, a hungry-looking, husky-voiced woman with dirty clothes and short hair came in, demanding in loud, unprintable terms to speak to Koshi. I asked her her name, the reason for the visit, and implored her to wait while I get him.

“Noreen,” she said, rather curtly. “He knows why I’m here.”

“Alright, madam. I won’t be a minute. Would you please sit down on the sofa? May I get you some tea?” I asked.

She declined both invitations. She was pulling at her grey tracksuit trousers as she spoke, but conceded to wait. She was breathing fire. I went up to Koshi’s nook behind a piece of drywall at the other end of the basement and told him he was wanted.

“I heard her. Tell her I’m not here,” he whispered. “She’s crazy.”

“What’s it about? Shall I call the police?” I asked, trying to be helpful.

“No, no. Just tell her I’m not here and you’ll get me to call her as soon as I return.”

Back I went, informing Noreen of the unfortunate absence of the boss.

“Where is he then? I’ll wait.”

“Well, er, you know, as it goes, madam, he just happens to be out of town. He is in, er, in Brighton, you know, er, on the coast, er, in Sussex...”

“I know where fucking Brighton is. What’s he doing there? Does his mum live there now?”

“Right, of course. Pardon me. I mean of course Brighton is in Sussex not of course his mum lives there. I don’t know where his mum lives but Koshi is there on business. He is meeting, er, he is meeting an advertiser, madam.”

“Oh, an advertiser. So he has money. OK. You’d better tell him that the last two checks bounced and I’m not distributing one more sodding paper until he pays me what he owes me in full, you understand me? I have a small child, for fuck’s sake. If he doesn’t get his act together I’m going to the police.”

“Oh dear, I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding ma’am, I’m sure he will settle up everything as soon as he returns.”

“Oh, you’re sure, are you? What’s your name then?”

“Oh dear, yes, yes, my name is George, madam.”

“George what, boy? Don’t mess about.”

“Palan, madam. George Palan.”

“And what do you do here? I haven’t seen you before.”

“I’m new, madam. I’m a reporter and an editor.”

She paused for three seconds, looked at me sternly from head to toe without blinking as if to take a mental photograph of me to pass on to the police along with my full name if her check bounced again, then turned her back and stomped out.

Koshi then told me to nevermind and forget the whole episode. He gave me a £50 note to go buy him a packet of cigarettes, told me to keep the change, and as I returned he said he realised he had cigarettes in his jacket, so I might as well keep those too. I returned the packet to the shop unopened and kept the money. Then I smoked Koshi’s cigarettes. I was not so foolish in those uncertain times as to pay the £8 official price for a packet of Marlboro reds, sanctioned by her Majesty the Queen. Instead, I would buy Ukrainian and Polish cigarettes for half as much from the same corner shops, using winks and hand gestures, without the blessing of the sovereign. It turned out Noreen was a chief distributor of the paper, in charge of getting it from the printer’s in Forest Gate to the yuppies in the City.

The trouble was that despite the ad sales people selling more and more ads every day, and Koshi saying the July issue was going to print with my story on the front cover, unexpected delays kept appearing. When I asked how the printing arrangement was going he got shifty and changed the subject, asking me what the website was doing and how many articles I wrote that day. By then he also started feeling less generous about my living in the office, and as such he kept making unsubtle remarks about the place not being a hostel. To his credit though, he did invite me over to his mother's house in leafy St. John's Wood in West London one evening, alongside Harriet, who, it turned out, was also his lover, for a nice family supper while his parents were holidaying in Spain.

We had chicken nuggets and battered prawns as entrées, pea soup with garlic bread for first course, and steak pie and mash with thick beef gravy afterwards. I was ravenous and enjoyed the treat immensely. The perversity of Koshi's approach to his employees was that despite not paying them for their work, and thus putting them in a situation akin to bondage, where they were dependent on him almost entirely for their subsistence, he inspired loyalty and admiration with these well-plotted outbursts of apparent benevolence. It was him who caused the dire need he himself later slightly and temporarily appeased, of course, and I knew it, but a hot, rich meal does something to your brain chemicals and you just can't help feeling grateful to whoever provides it, especially since it's your first of the kind in more than two weeks. With the food we had a nice Malbec and we finished off with lime and sugar crepes in the French style. I was high by the end of it, and felt elated for no better reason than having eaten well. I wasn't afraid to show this to them since it was 11pm on a Tuesday night, and knowing what I knew about HYPE by then, I thought we were way past the pleasantries of the early days. Harriet chuckled at me as I ate some leftovers from the platter:

"Easy, George! You look happy. Doesn't he, Kosh?"

"He should be happy too. He's going places in this world, devil worshipping motherfucker."

I paused.

"Well I might as well get something out of busting my ass for you, no?" I sneered.

"Hey, hey, easy now, George man, I didn't mean anything by it. I hear you. But listen, if you want big money there's other ways you could get it. The bottom line for me is that writing is cheap. It's just words. I don't need to pay for it because people are queuing to give it up to me for free. I have enough writing to stick onto a dozen websites and magazines if I want to."

"So why don't you want to?"

"Don't you worry about that, I have my own thing going. If you want to come in with me here and get to the top together with us you need to make yourself indispensable. Right now you're not. You get me?" said Koshi.

I naturally asked what I would need to do to be indispensable.

“You need to get into the management of the business with me. Help me out solve problems and make money. If you think you can do that I have a job for you tomorrow.”

Blindly, I accepted. The next day I found out the job was to distribute 500 flyers on Brick Lane, advertising for a rave party at the weekend in the Cable Nightclub, an underground electronic music place under London Bridge station, famous for its riotous celebrations ending long after daylight. As I was wearily distributing these flyers, inviting people to attend the “Apocalypse Bash” and have a two-for-one shot of vodka if they show the flyer, on the corner of Hanbury Street, there appeared a familiar face from: Mihai Ursu, an acquaintance from high school. We recognized each other immediately:

“Good Lord, is this George Palan?”

“Indeed. Mihai. How long has it been? And what brings you to London?”

“Ah, years George, but you still look like the same guy I knew. I’m here for an internship. I’m getting into the advertising business – just graduated from university in Bucharest this summer actually. How are you, what are you doing in London?”

“Ah, well, Mihai, thanks, you look fine too, I have to say,” said I. He had a sharp three-piece suit on, a tie and brand new Oxford shoes. “I’m here because I’m getting into the journalism business. But since I’m only at the beginning I’m rounding up my income with odd jobs. Fancy a party this weekend in London Bridge? I know the organisers.” I handed him five or six flyers.

“Yes, George, for sure. Listen, I’m on my lunch break now. This company I’m interning for is just around the corner. Let me have your number and we’ll meet this Saturday and talk more, how about that? Sorry I can’t stay now.”

“Not a problem, I’m happy to see you. Why don’t you bring a couple of people from work? This magazine I write for has offices in this neighbourhood too, maybe they already know each other. I mean, the magazine does carry a lot of advertising.”

“Sounds good. Where roughly do you live?”

“I live around here as well. Not far from the office, you know, saves me time on the commute. How about you?”

“Lucky you. I live in Wimbledon. Far away, but nice neighbourhood. You should come over some time. I’m here for another two months.”

“I will do for sure. And see you Saturday, yes?”

We exchanged numbers. Back at the office, Koshi was sitting on a lazy chair with his feet up on the desk, smoking a big joint as every afternoon.

“How was the walk? Invigorating, I’m sure, right?”

“Yes, Koshi. A downright constitutional.”

And straight to sleep I went, in my clothes. The next day, bright and early, I was househunting through the online classifieds. I sent messages mainly, but what I needed was a rarity: a room in central London not too far from the tube, at an all-told cost of not more than £250 per month. In the year of the Olympics, this was unheard of. But then again, in a city of 9 million souls, what really is unheard of if you look carefully enough? I held fast to the hope that it was only a matter of trying hard. Other than a bed, walls, a door, a source of electricity and one of running water, I had no demands. I scrolled through the ads blank-faced. The ads, you see, came online at a rate of a hundred per hour. You have to refine the search to filter out lettings agents, high prices, the suburbs and the ads that cost more than £55 a week. Multiplying the weekly cost by four, which is the number of weeks my grandparents taught me exist in the average month, does not apply to London, because in London the average month has 4.5 weeks if you are renting directly from a landlord, or 5 weeks if the landlord is a company or an agent. So a cost of £55 a week for me meant £257 and change. I had emailed Mother for some money, telling her I needed a suit, and she said she would put her bank account into overdraft and send me £300.

Now, after a few hours of searching, I refreshed the page once again to see the new batch of ads, and up popped one that was carefully worded along the lines of: “A short let opportunity in the heart of Islington not far from the tube station, on a quiet residential road. For the right person the price is negotiable but it will be no less than £50 a week if the landlord agrees in regards to suitability. Please ring 07etc etc any time after 5 pm. Thanks, Ivan.”

It was 4 pm and I was still pretending to write articles for Koshi when I texted Ivan: “Hello Ivan. Need a place urgently, am good with people and not fussy about details. Will pay advertised amount. Please call – George.”

Ivan, a Pole, called me right back and said that he was happy I was Romanian. He said he thought we are practically neighbours and us Eastern Europeans know how things really work. He said an old, kind man lived in the apartment in the big bedroom and I would live in the living room for six weeks until his regular tenant came back from abroad. The old man – Larry – was ill, and he needed extra money for his medicines, which is why he was double-renting. Also, I should be careful to not make him too excited with loud noises or sudden movements. He gave me the address – Landseer Road, N19, Archway, and said Larry will be waiting for me that evening. Don’t worry, he said, I’ll tell him to take care of you.

So, only taking what I could carry and leaving the rest in a corner of the office, I went. Larry was indeed waiting in the small courtyard of a handsome terraced house. Landseer Road is a cobblestoned street in a relatively clean part of North London, and Larry, smoking a cigarette,

greeted me with big, grey and glassy eyes. He had grey hair and a sincere, joyful smile like I hadn't seen in a long time.

"You must be George," he said. "A good name, that."

He had a Cockney accent which made my name sound much better than it was intended to by those who chose it.

"Marcin told me you were a good guy. You look one. Come right in, George, and make yourself comfortable. I'm Larry," he said, and he gave my hand a good, vigorous shake.

Larry was a short, gaunt and energetic, even antsy, man who bounced up and down on his feet when he talked. He was always on the tips of his toes and dancing like a boxer, which was very surprising to me given the terms in which Ivan had portrayed him on the phone.

"Thank you, mister. I'm George. But I thought our mutual friend's name was Ivan?"

"That's his name for strangers, George, but I can tell you can be trusted. His name's Marcin. Polish. Good guy – like us. But listen, never call me mister again, alright? Just Larry."

"Alright, er,... Larry."

I nearly said mister again. His age loomed large on my country boy conscience. I never before in my life addressed a man or woman over 45 with anything else but mister or madam.

"Alright then. Bet you're hungry." He said. (O'wright. Betcher ungre.)

Larry wore a green turtleneck, jeans and plimsoles, like a teenager, but he was 50, or maybe 60. He was a youthful spirit. The apartment was a one-bedroom flat on the ground floor, with a small bathroom and small kitchen. The living room was the largest, and it had the window to the street. I installed myself there on the sofa. There was a showcase with a lot of personal belongings and photographs, keepsakes from Larry's life. He must need the medicine bad if he was renting to me. I wouldn't welcome a stranger in my long-time home, which is what this flat obviously was to Larry. Maybe he lost his job recently, I thought.

He opened a can of peaches and one of crab meat for me. We smoked cigarettes in the living room and drank vodka that night and he told me that the house was a council house that was given him twenty years before because he was ill, and that he had a lodger who was Polish, the brother of the man who spoke to me on the phone, who was gone on holiday. Larry needed extra money because he lived off a meagre pension and disability benefits, altogether coming in at about £200 a week, which he said was not near enough, because he had an ex-wife, a daughter and a grandson to look after. He hadn't ever been fulltime, nine-to-five employed at all, he said. The council took care of the bills. I felt he was a kindred spirit, a renegade romantic, sort of like my father. A dishevelled, cowardly dreamer. We connected. My first friend. I told him without shame how I got there. He understood. I paid him a week's rent in advance, he gave me the key and when the vodka bottle was

gone long after midnight he went to his room and I went to sleep on the sofa. The sofa was deep and soft, and had no elbow rests, so I could stretch my legs horizontally for the first time in weeks. I slept like baby.

HYPE's July edition was failing to reach the printer's. We were now on the twenty-third day of the month and there was still no sign of our newspaper. Koshi was nonchalant but I started worrying about us going bankrupt when a letter from a lawyer's office came through the post, saying that several advertisers have formed a coalition and sued us for not keeping up our end of the bargain and now they all wanted a deep audit of the magazine's circulation, their money back, some £32,000, and a formal and public apology before next week. Otherwise they'd take the publication to trial. I overheard Koshi saying to Harriet that they won't be able to pay them, and he might have to close down the sales company. Apparently the legal liability was separate from the magazine for some reason, because all the ads had been booked through a sales company which Koshi was about to close.

"But don't worry, we'll start another one when things cool down."

The next chance I got I practically begged him to print at least a couple of copies of the thing so I would have something to show my mother. In reply, he told me I'll be fine, there will be plenty of newspapers coming up where I could write. These were just setbacks.

"I'm more concerned about what I'm wearing at the party on Saturday," he said.

One of the girls who was there in the office writing about fashion had hair whose natural colour was purple, she claimed. Not even this miracle altered our vertically downward trajectory. I printed out all the online articles that bore my byline, and carefully folded them up into my backpack. I tried reasoning with him:

"Listen, Koshi, with all due respect, I know I am from Romania and don't know how things are really done out here, but the fact remains that people don't much read the website or the paper, because the stories are mostly lifted from somewhere else. If we had our own stories, that no-one else had, exclusive like, and they were written nicely in a way that made people satisfied, then they would read our stuff more and maybe then we would be successful."

He said:

"I hear you kid but it's not the days in your life, it's the life in your days."

He was clutching a copy of the Art of the Deal book by Donald Trump, and he was all wild-eyed, like a preacher in heat, giving me a mental nightmare vision which scared me enough to keep me from ever trying to level with him again. Cold macaroni and so-called cheese from a 25p tin can is not as bad as it sounds. I had two for dinner and walked off to Larry's, planning never to return again to HYPE. Just thinking about coming back here was making my liver pulsate noticeably

inside my belly. But when I got home, despite being tired, sleep was not on the cards for a while, because Larry was in a boisterous mood. He insisted on telling me his life story, and there was no way around it. I washed with cold water – there was no hot water in the apartment – and, fixing two cups of tea, I sat down listening. I lit a cigarette which Larry fished out of my fingers before I had the chance to take a second drag, and then I lit another.

“I’m an Hackney boy, me. Islington still feels strange after 20-some years here.” (oim an acknee buoy, me...) “My parents were good working folks but I never felt like following in their footsteps. I was up for seeing the world. So I quit school early and hit the streets. You know, you remind me of myself, George, a little bit, that’s why I want you to hear this. I think we both dove into the deep end without knowing how far wrong one can really go. So then, I was with my friends, we was growing up right in the middle of the seventies. In the eighties we were young men, turned 18. Smack bang in the Thatcher years. Everything was going belly up in this country, ‘part from drugs, London and music. And, being London boys, we was here waiting. Me, Luke, John, Cohen, Simon... loads of us, and our better halves. We threw a lot of parties and we made sure everyone in London was either attending or wanting to. The Lost in Space Air Crew, we called ourselves.” Here his mouth went wide and he seemed to lose his train of thought.

“Our crew. We had this wonderful little LDV van...” he got up and picked up a leather-bound book from the shelf behind me.

He opened it, it was an album, and he showed me a black and white photograph of a bunch of young men and women gathered round a white van.

“This is us. We were always together and always happy. We made money, partied, loved each other and prospered. We were the kings of Hackney back then. Nobody would throw a party in that place without us. We had pubs, warehouses, canal gardens, open spaces, the green, everything. My house was in Clapton, and all I did during the week was survey the area for possible places to party, you follow?”

I nodded vaguely.

“And that’s what we did. Acid house, the Stone Roses, the birth of drum and bass... The rave culture, we invented it. It was the best time of my life. Listen, one time we were coming from a party at six in the morning, walking down Leicester Square, and the opposite way down came none other than Freddie Mercury all leather-clad, with a hat, a vest and leather trousers, surrounded by poofs, you know, and they walked towards us.. and Cohen sees them and he shouts, oh God, Queen... And me, not seeing Freddie, I thought he was talking about the actual Queen, and I go ‘Oh my, the Queen,’ and I look round and I see Freddie, I panic, I don’t want him to think I’m taking the

piss out of him calling him a Queen and so I wave at him and he looks at me laughing and walks past, and, he says: ‘Which queen, which queen?’ and he cracked up laughing.”

Larry was in a paroxysm of laughter now, holding his sides and laughing like a child, in rich roars. I laughed too. He continued:

“A year later Freddie was dead, and with him went all the good life as well. Unemployment and heroin addiction followed. We only knew ecstasy but then all the happiness was gone and the Yardies, Pakis, Turks and Albanians who used to party with us and be our best mates started selling us lots and lots of heroin. What was we going to do. We took it. We sold it for a while but mostly we just shot it up our veins. Eventually the crew broke up and I went to work as a driver for one of these boys, a half English half Paki man called Amer. He was a good man, a good boss to me. He had all the money in the world. Lived in Essex. Brought kilos of heroin in the old country through his dad’s fruit business and sold it up and down England. Millions. I mean, don’t get me wrong, Amer was a heroin dealer, but he had class. These other ones competed with him had no class. He had more class than any other English or Scottish fucker right out of the House of Lords. Never took heroin, always courteous, always gave people compliments and made them feel good. Always dapper, new suits, new coats. You know. I drove him round. Then after a few years he made me manager of one of his hotels in Chelmsford. I wore a suit to work every day as well now and I lived in the hotel in my own flat on the top floor. One day one I fell in love with one of the girls working in the reception. She was nice and talkative, like me. We hit I off, we had coffees, you know, one thing led to another. Because we worked together we didn’t even need to go out. It was like every day at work was a date for us. Emily. We got married a few months later and had a kid. A baby girl, Susan. I was then 24 and she was 23. I moved in with her in Chelmsford in a nice detached house, but not long after than Tamer got arrested and his business was seized, so we had to move into London for work. I took loads of heroin back then, mostly smoked it after the kid came, but it was good, pure stuff, so it didn’t make me sick, it didn’t make my teeth fall off. I smoked it for year and almost nobody knew. I never looked like a junky because I only took the good stuff, not that shit they put about now, with all them fucking chemicals, that’s the shit that makes you sick. It’s not the heroin that makes you sick, it’s the other shit they mix it with. Anyway, we moved here to Islington, got a flat, made a new life. Lovely Emily, my wife, went into business on her own with a driving school. She got upset with me for not finding work and being high all the time and we got divorced and I moved here. Early nineties I got written off as disabled, lifelong addict sort of thing, and they put me on the gyro. Susan and Emily don’t live far from here. Susan now has a boy of her own, lovely Ryan, 12. I take him out every other day, I buy him an ice cream, we go up to Highgate, round The Heath, you know, good times. He asks me: Grandpa Larry, can I please have a doggy?”

My heart melted. I said to him, I said: of course you can have a doggy. And we went down to the pet shop in Holloway and we got him the nicest, most lovable little Jack Russell, five weeks old. Ryan feeds him with a baby bottle. He named it Jerry, he said: I'll call him Jerry. I love you so much grandpa, he said. I spent my last bit of money on that dog, £200 it cost me but it was worth every penny just to see the look on young Ryan's face."

By now I was asleep and Larry just got up and went away. I think maybe he wanted to hear that story himself again more than he wanted me to hear it.

It took awhile for the extent of my new flatmate's habit to reveal itself. I suspected something strange about him from his wild swings in behaviour, but I chalked it all off to alcohol use and unhingedness caused by his previous use of drugs. One night after a long day's work at Koshi's, correcting articles and punctuating yet another print edition that would never see the light of print, I came back to Larry's with a takeaway meal of fifteen chicken hotwings and chips, all drenched in hot sauce, and six cans of Holsten lager. I hung my coat on the corner of the bookshelf, cracked open a beer and sat down on the sofa. The food awaited, steaming in the Styrofoam box on the coffee table when Larry strutted in with a sharky grin on his face.

"May I join you for dinner, George?"

Of course, I said and handed him a beer. He opened it, drank, then casually rolled up the left leg of his jeans and placed his foot on the table next to the food, shoe on. I was gnawing at the wings like a mad hyena, spitting bits of bone and deep fried cartilage in the empty half of the tray when he pulled out a syringe full of what looked like light tea, or good whisky. I realised what he was about to do and froze, staring mesmerised. He held the syringe up in the light, watching it carefully, gently hitting it with his index finger's nail. He pressed the piston gently and a bit of liquid dripped out.

"You gotta make sure there's no air inside," said he.

He expertly spiked his leg's vein, hitting the mark from the first try, no rubber tube or anything to make the vein visible.

"You have to draw a bit of blood first, to make sure you didn't miss," he explained.

The syringe filled with blood as his pupils dilated visibly. Time suspended for a millisecond, after which he shot up quick.

"And another mixture of blood, dope, citric and water disappears inside.," he said.

He instantly stood up straight, eyes the size of pinholes now. He started talking fast about how sick he was and how he lost his bank card the very same day he got a loan in on his account. He started walking restlessly around the room, syringe still stuck in his leg, wobbling as he moved. He took out a tissue, pulled it out – still talking:

“This saves the vein. You have to press hard so it doesn’t burst with pleasure.”

His eyes glossed and moved restless, like two bouncing marbles. He sat down, still talking about furniture and the council who will furnish the house for free next week. He told me I could stay on his sofa forever, if I wanted to. I said,

“Thanks, Uncle Larry.”

That was the last thing I said for the rest of the night. I fell asleep half an hour later with Larry standing by my side staring at a painting he had made ‘years ago’, hung next to a portrait of Jimi Hendrix. Then he fell asleep and started drooling on the sofa. I took him in my arms and moved him to his bedroom, put him on his bed. He was incredibly light for a grown man. He didn’t weigh more than 55 kilos, I thought. Then I turned the cushion he drooled on over, so I wouldn’t have to touch his spittle.

After a while, I became less and less uneasy with his open junk habit. One night I got back home from work with Indian takeout. He asked me what I was having and I said

“It’s veggie Curry.”

“Oh, I was a vegetarian for three years.” he said.

“Spiritual kick?”

“No. I was in prison.”

On another occasion, I got home at midnight, after meeting a Polish girl I met in Camden. I was planning to tell Uncle Larry all about how we hit it off and ended up drinking half a case of Budweiser, smoking weed and kissing on Camden Lock, but when I got in the house he started rambling immediately, while drinking my safety beer from the fridge.

His solicitor said his assault case was being heard in court, and his housing compensation for the sewer which blew open in the bathroom just before I moved in - filling the flat with raw human shit – were at the top of his mind. His ex-girlfriend next, and t-shirts with funny phrases printed on them... and his friends who helped him get back at a bailiff for breaking down his door on behalf of the gas company... He wouldn’t stop. He must have just taken a dose.

A whole monologue went on the whole time I changed, showered, ate a sandwich and smoked a bowl of weed and two cigarettes. Larry proceeded to reveal how,

“Every dealer you buy from needs to be given a transactional analysis. That means talking to at least two of his customers to make sure he won’t fuck you over before you make the purchase. If you’re really desperate, you can go by the cashpoints at Archway Station. Some fucker will always be there in a car, especially on weekends, selling weak stuff to Friday fixers. Some people only get high on Fridays, when the unemployment check comes in. Heroin used to be such a beautiful cure-

all. Now it's just shit gear for old geezers. Young people don't even take it anymore. Now I mix it up with coke for that extra kick."

I kept my mouth shut and took notes. I reckoned this was too good copy to miss out on. I wanted to do a profile on him in the magazine. The savagery of the human spirit goes beyond our farthest imagination. After meeting Larry, I decided my problems don't exist. Although he injected himself with heroin+cocaine, he was still a reasonably functional member of society, thanks to the money spent by the state to keep him from robbing.

"We used to call Pakis wogs, back in the day. That was a much more polite term. It stands for Western Oriental Gentleman. I never hated on anybody, though. There's nothing better than living your life without being a hater."

"But people don't like being called Pakis, do they?"

"They don't and you should only do it if you're close friends."

"Have you ever got yourself tested for AIDS?" I asked at one point.

"HIV positive? I'm a man of the world." Larry answered smiling candidly.

"Half the buildings in London are empty, and they're building more of them every day," he said.

"Do you care?" I asked.

"Yea, I live here."

So went many conversations we had during the seven weeks I spent in his Islington flat. Once in a while some spare change I left in my trousers went missing, but I was careful not to leave any other cash or valuables there, not that I had a lot of those.

The next morning's Metro newspaper featured a small article lost between news of Barclays' chief executive Ted Blinger resigning, and some sex offender being released from custody because his act 'was society's fault' – the paper said quite cross.

Another article's title read '*We're plainly losing our fight to beat drugs*'. The piece itself was a short summary of yet another high ranking official's statement on the futility and destructiveness of the war on drugs. The official, while admitting that there was no way to stop drugs being used, also said that, "The government has no intention whatever of changing the criminal law on drugs."

As I was reading this candid piece on the tube at 8:47 am, a bunch of drunken fat women brandishing American flags on their backs got on the train at Camden station. It was the 4th of July. A fellow next to me dumbly said to them:

"You couldn't look more American if you tried."

Then he grinned at his own insightful commentary, without anyone else in the carriage taking notice, not even the proud Americans. To the official, black-and-white notion of society, the one you see on TV, Uncle Larry is no more useful than microphones to the Spice Girls, or tits on a boar, but to real society – the grey one, drugs on dole money, free council homes and interest-free credit at the off-license shop, Larry is a very important gear, turning at very high revolution. So important is his input in the dynamics of Archway Islington's day-to-day life, that he should be granted keys to the city or at least the borough, along with a knighthood by the Queen herself, were there any justice in this world. Because without him and many other like him, a lot of drug dealers would be poor, a lot of two-door BMWs unsold, and a lot of philosophy and anthropology majors would not have work in the public sector. The pharmaceutical industry making syringes and methadone, the police and prisons, the hospitals, many, many livelihoods these days depend on the humble junky. A lot of the heroin comes from Afghanistan and East Asia and the cocaine from South America, with neither regions experiencing the deserved economic boom from their lucrative exports. So where does all the money go to? At one end the taxpayers who live quietly with all the Fear in their hearts also benefit, thanks to the stamp duty and VAT paid on all the houses, speedboats and luxury offroad cars, plus the money launderers, the accountants and bankers who pay income tax, plus the legitimate businesses who are not more than fronts for the drugs trade. It does trickle down, and it could be reasonably said that the economy would likely be much weaker without the drugs, unless you believe that these junkies would engage with the world fully and legally were it not for the drugs. Some people think that they would just sit around all day doing nothing or huffing glue, but it's controversial. The soldiers who bring it over in their raggedy satchels get a cut. Corporations who own prisons and health services and security firms and public transportation and media outlets who make documentaries about it, and rappers and painters and rock and rollers... I would venture on a whim here and say that the same circle of humongous companies, owned by even bigger financial holdings, groups, banks, etc., are operating and actively encouraging the class A worldwide business, with politicians as their bitches. I guess class A is actually a double entendre, also meaning 'class A assets'. That could be the reason why we don't get lax, realistic drug laws devised to help people and balance out society, because there's simply too much money in the illegal traffic – and the infrastructure for it is already there, firmly grounded. Were it all to be legalised like alcohol or tobacco all these other things would have to change. The production is based in the poor countries where the laws of survival are above the laws of the state, and the trafficker's behaviour is primal. The only real victims being the sober people walking the white line, waking up early and going to work, earning money and paying taxes for everything. The hardcore addicts don't really give a shit about themselves, their families, the large public or any

social contract whatever. They are mere vehicles used for transfer of wealth from the taxpayers. Woe is the most profitable business in the world. Another idiotic rant of an insane nobody trying to make a name for himself by sounding outrageous. Libel. Sickening. Paranoid. No future. Where will it all stop? Is God there? Is this Gonzo? Can you hear me?

That night there was heroin, weed and crack cocaine spread over the kitchen table next to some papers, tobacco and a pipe improvised out of a Tabasco bottle...

“Take a good look, for there are many kitchens equipped in the same manner all over the world,” said Larry from the other room.

He then told me to “have a bump of that gear,” but I said no, if only because I was due for work again in 6 hours.

“No washing machine, no fridge, no internet, no hot water. You might as well,” he insisted.

Addicted to heroin all his life – which he spent in and out of Her Majesty’s prisons, working petty jobs and living off scraps. An empty shell of a man, with an ailing body, a disintegrated mind and a broken spirit, like my father, a libertine terrified of his own appetites, but just good natured enough to make you like him. My landlord. In the kitchen with his friend Jay, a black man of about 30, getting high – one injecting two parts heroin, one part cocaine, in his leg, and one smoking crack and smack half and half from a glass pipe. Jay is afraid of needles. He met Larry at the job centre. Jay offered me the pipe, I turned him down.

The above was the source for my second front-page feature in HYPE, my valedictory article. I furnished it with a dramatic picture of bags of brown heroin, white cocaine, blades, crack pipes, loose tobacco, papers, lighters, used needles and syringes and weed all scattered on Larry’s kitchen table in front of pictures of his family and his Lost in Space Air Crew. With a bit of his characteristic semantic contortionism Koshi almost wished me good fortune, but not quite, and added an editor’s note at the end of my story saying something about how the housing system in London is broken and corrupt and how everything in this city runs on drug money and money is the root of all evil and should be abolished.

I left Larry’s flat at the same time I left HYPE and Larry gave me a smart, one-button grey summer blazer from his youth as a parting gift. I took the jacket and moved to Mitcham, South London in a clandestine hostel which belonged to a South African named Gazza. The hostel was full of South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders, some French, some Spaniards and some Hungarians. There was one man from Madagascar and I was the only Romanian.

“Waings Corner is a big youth house in South London (Zone 3) with housemates from all around the world (any one is welcome); If you’re looking for a place to stay and meet new people get in touch to arrange a viewing. Please note this is not a commercial youth hostel so any potential housemates would first have to come around for a viewing. When replying to this ad could you please tell us your age, where you are from, your gender and maybe a little about yourself. This would save a lot of time and also help us get back to you real quick,” the website said. “Our house has 21 rooms 6 kitchens 6 bathrooms and a cool Roman shower room. Some rooms are share (girls with girls and guys with guys only) and some single. Massive lounge with a free slate top pool table, big screen TV (Sky TV) and a small bar for socialising. (50 meg Wireless internet is also available throughout the house),” it said. “There’s a park across the street and tennis court literally 2 minutes walk away. The supermarkets are nearby and so are the banks. We are close to all major bus routes including two night buses, Tooting Broadway is our closest tube station and Mitcham Eastfields is a 5 min walk away. The rent is £70 per week (1 week deposit) for a room share which includes, all bills, a full time cleaner who comes in 7 days a week, wireless internet and the use of all the facilities in the house i.e. washing machines and dryers,” read the enchanting, if ill-composed announcement.

After presenting the most polite platitudes I was capable of, I was offered a viewing and a room. Gazza, the landlord, was a little surprised at my suggestion to move in the next day but did not ask any questions. Painless. That Saturday I met Mihai at Koshi’s party. I was wearing Larry’s jacket, a clean shirt and appeared confident despite drinking inordinate amounts of champagne. Mihai looked impressed. He brought with him to the Cable nightclub two Indian women, Pryianka and Kreshani, who were cousins and worked in decisive positions, or so they led us to think, at the advertising agency where Mihai was an intern. Pryianka and Kreshani were tall, voluptuous and quite obviously rich. They wore black skirts, high heels, pearls around their necks and diamond rings. They smoked long king-sized cigarettes and blew the smoke slowly about, batting their long eyelashes and puckering their crimson-lipsticked lips. The drum and bass music, with DJs Fabio and Grooverider, two of the best in the world, flowed through us that night under the railway arches, and the champagne flowed with it. We took MDMA and danced, drank and smoked until we forgot where we were and why. The next day past midday I woke up in my boxer shorts next to Kreshani, in her bra and knickers – both black – in Mihai’s house in Wimbledon. Neither of us recognized the other when we woke up and we didn’t recognize the house either. We kept our composure as best we could until it all came gradually back.

“Relax,” Kreshani said. “I thought you said you could read people’s minds.”

“Did I?” I asked.

“Yes you did. We’ll put that to the test soon enough. Remember, you’re starting Monday as an intern for two weeks. If all goes well, you’ll be our next junior copywriter. We need fresh blood.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Pull that curtain before I go blind and get me a glass of water and a cigarette. That’ll be a start. Then get back in here and rub my back. All that dancing and fucking made me pretty sore.”

Birds chirped in ecstatic chorus the sonnets of undying, life-affirming Nature outside among luminescent leaves of fructiferous trees, under the oceanic ether. Tenacious buzzards circled patiently above.

Half an hour later we reconvened in the garden around a barbecue. All of us wore sunglasses and neither was too comfortable talking, so we turned the music up. I busied myself turning the sausages on the grill, seasoning the porkchops and smoking cigarettes. Mihai and the girls were gossiping about work and taking pictures of themselves with their phones. They asked me to join in one, so I did, holding the fork.

“Is it true that I’m starting an internship with you on Monday?” I asked Mihai when I had the chance.

“It is if you’re up for it,” Mihai said. “Last night is a bit blurry isn’t it?”

“It is. And is it true that it might lead to paid work after two weeks?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I owe you big time, Mihai. This could save my life.”

“Don’t mention it. The girls liked the cut of your jib, I can’t imagine why,” he laughed.

On Monday, taking Mihai’s advice to dress informally, “like you would when you went shopping,” I put on a plaid green shirt, jeans and red trainers, a baseball hat, and went to Out&About247’s office in the Fruit and Wool Exchange building on Brushfield Street, in Spitalfields. Brushfield Street was the connecting artery between the sleazy and dissolute East End and the modern, glassed-up and cash-hungry City, by virtue of its starting outside Christ Church Spitalfields and ending in Bishopsgate, outside Liverpool Street Station and the Broadgate parade of global financial firms. In I walked: a ground floor with funky design in concrete, plywood, IKEA furniture and shiny white Apple computers. A large table in a rectangular room with about 20 people working on either side of it. Pryianka greeted me with wrought formality. Showed me my seat.

“Another Romanian chav,” someone said behind my back.

I looked around to see who that was but they were all looking at their monitors without betraying anything. All the other 15 or so employees were South Asian – Indian and Pakistani, I

learned later. Mihai and I were Romanian. There was an English guy who worked part time, and a Kenyan who was a consultant.

The company specialised in something called “multicultural marketing, advertising and communications”. The boss, Ashish Diwani, in a pinstripe suit, salt-and-pepper hair and with the large, imposing demeanour that befit his 1.90 metre frame, sat me down in his office and told me:

“What we want from you is to write our blogs and some advertising copy – scripts, slogans, stuff like that. We also do a lot of events, and we’ll need your help with those.”

“Yes, sir.” I said. “Sounds good. Anything I can do. I love writing and I have been published before, plus, I am interested in the creative industries. Advertising is an exciting field.”

“Well, yes it is, but not all the work is glamorous, you understand. There’s a lot of weekend work and a lot of physical work sometimes – printed materials, hoardings, promotional stuff of all description. And the writing of course, is the writing. Plenty of that. So you need to be unafraid of rolling up your sleeves to bag this job, you understand?”

“Yes sir I do. And I have a lot of experience with physical work and rolling up my sleeves. Almost as much as I have as a writer, so not a problem. Whatever you need of me, let me know and I promise to try my best. I want the job and I want to do well for the company.”

I was sliding off the chair as I said that because slowly, barely visibly, my spine had melted and I was trying to push my legs behind me so I may grovel around his desk without taking my eyes away from the ceiling.

“Very well then. You’ll only get expenses as an intern for two weeks and then we’ll see if we can get you on the payroll, OK?” he said.

I nodded, smiled, stiffened up, and left walking backwards like a crab. I sat at my desk, elated. Better than nothing, I thought. What a lovely man Ashish is and how generous Mihai was to allow me this opportunity. Mihai of course, had no idea about the precarity of my condition, because I did my darnedest to make him think that I was only there for laughs. That night, amid the drunken rancour caused by my other five roommates at the hostel, I nevertheless fell asleep like a piglet catching a soft and warm crevice of flab under his mother’s shapeless belly. At length, the dream I had was disturbing. I remembered it the next morning, something rare in my experience, and I associated it with signs that something irreversible was happening to me. The dream was of a younger version of myself camping alone in a dark, abandoned building with a leaky roof. I had put up a tent in that building, the better to shelter myself, and as I settled into the tent, from a hole in the wall across the room there appeared a small creature which initially looked like a rat, albeit pitch-black and silky haired; The first thought I dreamt I had was to protect my cheese, bread and other

nourishment supplies, but then as the creature kept moving between two holes in the wall I got up and got a bit closer to it. I looked better at it and it was in the event an extremely small goat, a black billy goat in miniature, with a mane not unlike a lion's, but black, and small brown horns. The creature smiled at me a very human smile and disappeared down the hole, which I then barricaded with some stones and loose pieces of wood.

Back in the office the next morning, I was given my first brief on my brand new email address: george.freelance@hereandthere.com. As soon as I received it I had to search online for the definition of an advertising brief. Essentially it's a short and usually highly fanciful summary of what the client wants out of you. This one was about whisky: Mumbai Malteron, a £124-a-bottle single malt, distilled and matured in Scotland and exported exclusively to India. Our agency was responsible for the 'brand identity,' the launch of the product, and subsequent advertising campaigns in print media, television, on the internet and outdoor spaces – buses, hoardings, posters and suchlike. I would do the blog, Sakshi, the head copywriter, informed me. Sakshi was a frumpy, patronising and uptight woman of about 40 who had clearly once had high aspirations and was unhappy with how she ended up. I took being patronised for granted, and cared about making a living more, so I ignored her attitude and tried my best to do as she said.

“You are to get acquainted with the product, the culture of the product's target market, and develop a series of blog posts leveraging this culture in order to promote the product. Please give me a first draft of 600 words by end of play.”

“Thank you Sakshi. I'll get to it straight away.” I chirped.

This gave me an excuse to put on my headphones, put on the hip-hop radio and read endless Internet pages about India, Mumbai and the state of Maharashtra. Seeing as I knew nothing about Mumbai, or the whole country and any of its people, I had my work cut out for me. From what I was reading, India was a wonderful place. I read about Gandhi, The East India Company (to which the building where our office was had once belonged), Sanskrit, Hinduism, Buddhism, independence from the empire, Kerala, Bollywood, the war with Pakistan, the biggest democracy in the world, rats, cows, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, vegetarianism, yoga, elephants, tigers, and finally I arrived at Mumbai. But just then it was lunchtime – an hour all to myself – which Mihai used to walk me down Bishopsgate and show me the other side of the area. The City was totally different. Our office was across the road from Spitalfields market and after that there was the headquarters of The Royal Bank of Scotland, Liverpool Street Station and Broadgate. I had never seen as much steel and glass in my life, and so many tall buildings. I walked with Mihai down to the Heron Tower and when I looked up I nearly fell on my ass. It dawned on me that I had only known the outside bits of London, not the central, well-known ones. I should start remedying this handicap

immediately, I thought. Then we walked to the Gherkin, 30 St Mary Axe. A dark-grey, nearly black building, shaped either as a bullet, an unusually slim and long egg, a vibrator or a suppository, depending on whom you ask. But boy it is spectacular when regarded up close.

“This is the future, hopefully our future, but these people here are already living in it,” I mumbled to Mihai.

“I know, that’s what I thought when I first came here,” he said. “Wait ‘till we get on the DLR and go to Canary Wharf.”

“What’s the DLR?” I asked.

“It’s a special train. We’ll go tonight after work.” he said.

We got back and ate some sandwiches from Tesco on the stairs looking down to Liverpool Street station. I had never seen so many people swarming in such an orderly manner back and forth. I was surprised nobody was getting stamped over. Everyone walking at brisk pace, checking their phones, talking on the phone, talking with each other, eating, looking at the time, being very busy and taking pleasure in it, at once going somewhere and coming from somewhere else, and there was no room left on the pavement to throw a cigarette butt. This chaos had a mind of its own. It was the most impressive sight I had ever seen.

Upon the lunch hour expiring and our returning to the office I found Sakshi had written me an email: “Forget the blog for now. We need a smashing one line or one word that will beautifully capture and convey our message. The copy is written to complement the poetry and general feeling of the coffee table promotional magazine. It is also meant to differentiate and stand out from other luxury brands. Give me some lines and words associated with luxury and pleasure, and sketch out some ideas on how this brand is crossing the India-Scotland border. Regards, S.”

I resumed reading about Mumbai and eventually, still wondering where lay this storied India-Scotland border, in the last hour of the day, I emailed Sakshi:

“A luxurious spirit stemming from the mystique of Indian philosophy and culture, in symbiosis with the Scottish distillation mastery – Mumbai Malteron Vintage is a new, top of the range single malt whisky. In the stylish art deco bottle lies the smoothly exotic key to another world of liberated senses, timeless pleasures and guilt free bliss.

Born from Scottish single malt craft and exotic Indian mysticism, Mumbai Malteron Vintage comes in an art-deco recipient bound to excite connoisseur eyes. Accessible only to the elite, it takes one on a journey of self exploration through all the seven levels of consciousness, unlocking epiphanies.

Unbeknown pleasure awaits single malt connoisseurs in the art deco bottle of Seven Islands Vintage. Sophisticated Indian mystique reveals liminal states of ecstatic bliss to the lucky enough to embark on this inner journey.

The exquisite design of the Mumbai Malteron Vintage bottle is merely a glimpse into the mysticism of this single malt. A privileged few who experience it are in for a multiverse of bliss.

The universe is but a fractal reflection of our inner bliss. Mumbai Malteron Vintage unveils this simple yet life-changing epiphany to its few lucky tasters.

Sophisticatedly mystical, Mumbai Malteron single malt promises and delivers a spiritual experience of divine pleasures. Divinely sophisticated pleasures. Esoteric; Sophisticated; Enlightened; Multiverse; Ethereal Spirit; Otherworldly; Liminal; Fractal; Inspirational; Entheogen; Elemental; Undying; Alchemy; Enthralling; Somptuous; luxurious; bounteous; boisterous; equilibrium; lush. An esoteric multiverse; liminal pleasures. Otherworldly sophistication. Seven levels of ethereal spirit. Distilled with Scottish Dharma; A karmic inner journey.; Karmic self-exploration; Entheogenic journey; Eclectic journey to inner divinity; Mystical spirit of self exploration; Mind expanding spirit; elemental: Noun: a supernatural entity or force thought to be physically manifested by occult means; the alchemy of Indian culture and Scottish craft; symbiotically elemental; Bountifully mystic. Sumptuously esoteric; Enthralling multiverse. Universal equilibrium. Inspirational spirit. Undying lushness; Unlock the Intrinsic alchemy of the Scottish Kundalini. Key to all seven levels of consciousness.”

On the way to Tower Gateway Station, from where Mihai said we would take the DLR train, I was let in on a secret:

“When Sakshi told you to get to know the product, George, I believe she meant it in a more literal sense than you may think,” he said, showing me a diamond-shaped, ostentatiously large decanter of brown liqueur hiding in his bag. Faking the Indian accent, he continued: “Behold the Mumbai Malteron, born and bound from the frosty highlands of Glasgow on a perilous but fateful journey to the enthralling jungles of seven islands Bombay. Collector’s edition. Pre-sale batch. £200 a bottle. You must thoroughly imbibe in order to gain the spiritual uplift of advertorial inspiration, my friend George,” Mihai said down Leman Street as he was handing me the bottle.

I grabbed the sculpted wooden cap and uncorked, then drank from the wide mouth, a big greedy neckful which almost made me retch. I turned hot and unbuttoned my shirt, lit a cigarette. Mihai took the bottle from me and he drank too.

“Welcome to the generous world of for-profit media. You should know we have about 100 of these bottles in our office. Now come on, we have a train to catch.”

We climbed the stairs up into the green glass dome that is Tower Gateway Station, and got on the first train. Mihai said we must go to the front of it. We did, and I discovered the thing had no driver. There were seats right behind the windshield and we could see the city everywhere around us. Presently the train left without apparent human input, with us in the first row of seats looking ahead through the windscreen.

“It’s all computerised,” Mihai explained. “It has cameras and sensors and some lazy operator in a room somewhere looks after some 20 of these self-driving trains. Now this, not the Gherkin, my friend, is the future. The Gherkin is just an old cucumber compared to what’s coming,” Mihai speculated.

I was shocked by this innovative train and slightly worried it would kill us. The sun was setting over East London and we glided through its haze on elevated rails. The fiery yellow of the sky put a strange shine on things and made ordinary colours pop out; all the things without enticed the eye, competed for admiration without being loud for fear of scaring off the timid window-shoppers. By us went the high rises and church spires of Shadwell, Limehouse and Westferry, and in front of us rose a small company of almost martial buildings, steel giants, glass colossuses – with the straight-edged American-style pyramid-topped Once Canada Square leading the charge. The others, each marked with the name of a bank, were the secondary officers – all rising and rising into the early night, lit up and ready.

“Future city. It’s totally different than anywhere else,” Mihai said, himself in awe although it was not the first time he saw it. “Think of where we grew up and compare it to this,” he said.

“It might as well be on a different planet,” I said.

Up and up this New City rose until an opening swallowed us inside it and we were surrounded by glass, unvarnished concrete and water. For two Romanian hillbilly boys who grew up picking fruit and chasing stray dogs, this sight was not far short from overwhelming. It belittled us but made us feel special and proud at the same time. Like it was a privilege to be there. Then, shortly after the imposing buildings were behind us, some short and fat, some tall, some slightly round, but all of them compact and opaque from the outside looking in. They who sit inside them see everything but no-one may look back, like a one-way mirror.

More residential, austere high-rises, more rowhouses and parks, a tunnel and then we got off at Cutty Sark, in Greenwich. It looked like a village, in stark contrast to the grandeur of the neighbourhood before it. Small and quaint, lots of antique shops, narrow alleys and old shop fronts. Middle-class. It was dark by now. We got some big cans of lager and walked up to the park behind the symmetrical white stucco buildings of Greenwich university, and climbed the hill, to the observatory.

“We crossed the Greenwich meridian just now,” Mihai said. “The most important line in the world.”

“Imaginary line,” I said.

At the top of the hill we turned back, to see the whole London skyline glistening before us, a wonderful view in front of which I was once again overawed. We drank and smoked in silence, alternating swigs of whisky with gulps of cold lager. The alcohol grips you much easier when your emotions are tenderized by something, and so it was that I got so drunk so fast, atypically drunk, that I slurred my words. When I realised this I chose to keep quiet to save myself further embarrassment. I took a few pictures to send Ileana, and, with mixed sensations, Mihai and I walked back to the station and parted ways until the next day.

Public transport south of the Thames is much inferior to what lies North, which may explain the steep difference in rent prices. I had to take the DLR back to Bank and from there an underground train down to Tooting Bec, followed by a bus to Figges Marsh, the green triangular pasture opposite my hostel. It was well past midnight when I arrived, but I found Rodrigo, an Argentinian with dreadlocks, smoking weed, drinking and arguing loudly about football with Brian and Jim, two South African brothers who shared my room. I ignored their invitations to join in and went to bed with. What a struggle to climb in the top bunk after all that Indian Scotch.

Next day, fighting my hangover, I got up at 7, washed, shaved, dressed and took the same route back to the office except I got off at Moorgate. I picked up a 50p bread roll from Tesco and, cornering on Brushfield Street, I noticed a man in a white apron putting apples, oranges, pears and what looked like grapefruit in some baskets that were hanging by the gutters of an exceedingly clean-looking gastro pub.

“God, can this be real?” I thought. I was skint. “How one of those grapefruit could complement my bread roll, oh, heavens,” I thought.

I walked slowly and inconspicuously by, then looked discreetly back to check the apron man had got back in. It was a damp, cold morning, so he had not much reason to hang about. In a few seconds he disappeared in the shop. I livened up, made an about-face, and quickly went to the nearest basket, picked up a grapefruit, and then ran into the office. A wonderful start to the day, I thought, as I was munching the grapefruit, feeling the devil hangover whimpering away like a cowering, toothless mutt. I was ready for the world by ten, and not before time.

“George,” Sakshi called. “Can you come see me?” She chirped, striking an artificially high note to suggest how utterly benign the reason for her needing me was. I went up.

“Yes. How may I help?”

“I read you text. Not a bad try, but a bit overdone. You want to infer to the customer, not rub it in his face. Try to be more subtle. Be more discreet with your next draft, and I also want to see that blog post today, preferably by 3 so we can polish it up and send it to the client for approval by six, OK?”

“Yes madam.” I went back to my seat at the long table, between Cory, a balding account manager, and Vikram, a ‘social media expert’ about my age.

Both were browsing random internet pages on their computer, pretending to work, affecting expressions of anguished concentration. Taking personality quizzes, looking at cartoon penguins, reading the tabloids. There seemed to be a mutual understanding between office employees in the company that they would go out of their way to get as little work done as they could get away with, and at once pretend to be toiling like sharecroppers in Louisiana while they were doing it, so as to maintain a conspiracy which protected their mutual interest: the holy paycheck. I happily, silently, signed the agreement to join into this masquerade. The key was, I found by observing my diligent colleagues, to always turn in work a bit late, so the boss doesn’t start thinking you should be given a tighter deadline next time around. In reality, work that I was given six hours to do I produced in two, and the rest of the time I spent idling quietly online. Huffing and grunting as if with hard thinking and mental strain was also part of the act.

In popped a hastily-written email from Sakshi: “Remember george: *“Mumbai Malteron Vintage is a brand of premium quality single malt scotch whisky, build [sic] around the symbiosis of Indian culture with Scottish distillation craftsmanship – with an ethos of luxury and mystique, inherent to India’s cultural flavour. P.S.: Do a script for a one, one and a half-minute Youtube clip to pitch at the meeting next week. Regards, Sakshi”*

I produced the following script:

“THE WHISKY STORY – Sensuous female voiceover – lush scenes from Indian nature

THE INSIGHT

Every man wants to be the king of his castle. He may not be in the real world. We give him that castle where he does rule: And to get there, all he needs to do is escape.

[Grave but sensual female voiceover:] *Let us embark on a journey.*

[Superimposed drone images of the Highlands, waterfalls, reindeer, country estates, followed by Indian temples, jungles, tigers, dancers etc as per art director]

THE LEGEND

The origin of this exotic space can be traced back to the 1500s where furtive texts reveal insights herein unknown.

Legend has it that while the Maharajas were busy battling each other and foreign forces; either to protect their territories or capture new ones, an inner circle was brewing across Indian royalty. During the day, these brave men would brandish their swords and strut through their kingdoms but after sundown, they drew the curtains open to clandestine meetings with destiny.

There was no putsch or revelation under wraps. These underground rendezvous were with the self, towards a movement of the senses. To create a place where daggers were dropped and war ceased. A space of escape for royalty. This space can never be conquered. It belongs to no one.

THE SEVEN LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

And thus, far away, in an undisclosed location, this surreal space was created. Entry was restricted, restricted because only the mind could travel there.

No one is invited. One can arrive only when one is ready. You may come to be there only once your senses have crossed the first level, then the second and third, through to the seven levels of consciousness. Each grows in intensity. As you cross one, you tap into the next.

Sanguinity, Adrenalin, Pleasure, Exhilaration, Ecstasy, Rapture and Bliss.

Sanguinity

Hello Halcyon! Put the daggers aside. You are no more at gun point. Rose tinted glasses are passe. Put on your sunset shades and walk towards the glow of gold.

Adrenalin

You have reached the cliff, but the peak has nothing to do with height. It is about taking the leap from here. Plunge in. The surface is smooth. Feel the rush, the full spirited energy.

Pleasure

Concupiscence. Epithymy. The pursuit of pleasure is complete here. In gratification. You have arrived. Crossed the race line. Hereon, there is no looking back. There is no contest. The only one to look up to is yourself.

Exhilaration

Stimulation is within. It stirs, entices and prods you to go on. Further, deeper. Look around you, they're smiling. Applauding even. Don't be surprised, you deserve every moment.

Ecstasy

The celebration continues as you ride the wave. There is movement within the pause and you are in both states, yet motatorious.

Rapture

Call it time travel. Elation has no pace. It is immeasurable.

Bliss

This is as far as you can get, and as close. Yet, it is not the end. Merely a beginning to the continuum.

[now whisky pours through bottles and glasses, lush scenery in the background. Voiceover continues with more intensity:]

THE ELIXIR

Sheer opulence reflects through the magnificent golden hues of this elixir.

As you raise your glass in a toast, often to yourself even, notes of butterscotch, honey and vanilla, mingled with a delicate hint of spices will waft past your senses. Teasing, tantalising, seducing you to tip the crystal towards your lips.

The first avalanche is upon you. Warm honey, butterscotch and vanilla smoothly roll over the surface of your palette. As these subtle flavours glide down, they leave a faint trace of apples and pears.

Allow it to settle. Clink.

Encore! Your senses are nudging you. Raise your glass once more. Savour, cherish and treasure the richness sliding down.

Aah! Conscious. Right down to the last drop.

THE GATES ARE ABOUT TO OPEN

The heptamerous kingdom is as approachable as it is inaccessible. Unlocking the gates requires a key, possessed by a privileged few.

That key is amidst ourselves this evening. It has been acquired through a laborious journey across the seven seas, through India and Scotland.

Brace yourselves as the key is unveiled – it is the key to heighten your senses and transport you to the space of escape for royalty. Welcome to – Mumbai Malteron Vintage!”

I thought I'd get laughed out of the room for this mawkish drivel but Sakshi said it could work. The rest of the day I spent writing more of the same about Scottish mountains, their tradition of whisky making, and Indian traditional poetry, the vedas, in order to present the client with more options. Not having read a single veda, I could not offer too profound insights in my text; it was more a summary of a summary of a Wikipedia page, but again, Sakshi said it might fly, keep going. An 'overview'. Full of irrepeatable name-dropping, cliché and smug, all-knowing attitude to mask my utter lack of familiarity with the topic at hand. I sent all of it, stared at the monitor pretending to think about something for five minutes, then packed my bag with a stomach that was telling me things were out of order.

“You wrote well today,” said Prasant as I passed by him.

He was the creative director and Sakshi's boss. He had the final word on everything the agency produced. He was middle-aged, hair died blonde, which looks odd on an Indian, his gestures and tone of voice indicated homosexuality, he wore shaded eyeglasses on the lower part of his nose, peering above them, and had a green silk scarf wound around his neck.

"Sakshi forwarded me your blog the other day and today's script for the Youtube hit. I think you show good ability to write for the web. You know the keywords. We are meeting the client tomorrow and we will show them your work, just so you know. When do you finish your internship, by the way?" he said, smiling and blinking as if he had just bitten a lemon.

"Thank you very much. I will finish next week but am hoping for a job here." I said.

"Oh, I see..." he leered in his chair, meaningfully. "I will see the big man about it, put in a good word, you know, as long as you keep it up."

He heavily stressed up and kept his mouth open and his eyes on me as he said it. My skin crawled and I hoped it didn't show. I still wanted the job.

"Of course, Prashant, thank you, I appreciate it." I said and made like I was about to leave. "See you tomorrow." I added and took a step back.

"What's the rush, George? Don't you want to grab a drink with us after work? We finish here in 20. We can talk more about your writing."

"Oh, you are very kind, thank you, but I have a train to catch. I live in Surrey. I will join you next time, if I may. Sorry." I winced.

"Surrey is it? I see... Well well. Next time then," he said and turned without saying goodbye. Relieved, I left.

At the meeting I let them do the talking and I nodded along. The clients, a family of Indian billionaires who bought a castle in Scotland that came with its own distillery, said they would be thinking about our proposals. I took them not rejecting our pitch out of hand as a good sign, even a compliment, but Sakshi and Prashant were pissed off. They were visibly angry and frustrated when they returned from the meeting and told the room about it, so I kept my eyes strictly on the computer and made myself small and innocuous, hoping for the day to pass sooner. Meanwhile, the official launch had been booked in the House of Commons for the following week. Everyone in the office loved the idea and were making plans about what to wear. I was charged with helping to set up the decorations and taking pictures.

I was given no camera so I bought a used one off a classifieds website for £25. A Fujifilm, large, black, bulky-looking, but old. To make up for the out-of-pocket expense, I took home, without anyone seeing me, two bottles of the product. One I hid in my suitcase for consumption at a later date, and one I sold to my roommates for £30. I showed them brochures on my computer

saying it was retailing for £140, so they thought I did them a favour. In my bed I started reading that month's issue of LICE. It seemed very cynical how Lice published articles supporting democratically infeasible extreme left-wing policies, given that Lice itself was in the news for having banned the formation of a trade union for its writers and flatly refused its employees all but those benefits that the law constrains it to give. Perhaps, I thought, it was no coincidence that a publisher known for his rightwing anti-labour law stance was investing heavily into LICE's 'digital expansion' and 'new media verticals', given that its advertising-worshipping editorial policy not only raked in eye-watering profits but also fed the politically illiterate generation of readers it was targeting misleading information that would end up setting them on the fringes of politics, smoothing the track to real democratic power for corporate-friendly politicians that LICE secretly fraternized with. Lice promoted the hard left – anarchy, communism and revolutionary marxism – in order to put its young readers off sensible politics, in order to clear the coast for its owners.

Such contempt and ruthlessness, to feed a whole generation consumerist propaganda and political carrion for news, neither of which you really believe in, bait wrapped up in a glossy cloak of hipster jargon, is unprecedented, surely. One cannot but note how LICE writers are suspiciously keen to say in every other story that young people are good at "sussing out" when they are being deceived; this is a claim that Lice executives in Manhattan also make quite often about their readers, perhaps out of anxiety about being found out – many of their executives have said that Lice readers have "good bullshit detectors" – except of course when it came to bullshit articles and videos Lice itself peddles them... it was almost as if the magazine was deliberately trying to daze and confuse its own readers.

We received special security badges to get us past the tourist queues at the House of Commons, in the Westminster Hall – a grand, gothic and barren ball room to the east wing of the parliament building, right under the Big Ben clock tower. We got there two hours early and were put through the airport-style security by police. Patted down, the works. Luckily there were no sniffer dogs to detect the half-gram of weed I had in my spectacle holder. After I unloaded a van full of whisky, pop-up banners, brochures, and posters – a van which also got thoroughly checked by the police – I smoked the weed out of a small clay pipe to calm my nerves in the parking lot before the presentation. I changed into a blazer and shirt afterwards, thoroughly relaxed in appearance but in fact just sedated by the weed. The room filled with guests – minor politicians, other advertising executives, friends of the agency and the agency's employees, some relatives of the owners of the agency, and a slightly smaller group representing the clients – the owners of the distillery and the new whisky – and their entourage. The opening act, an Indian dance troupe marvellously set the mood by enacting a stylized, downscaled and Indian version of the opening

ceremony of the London Olympics. At least this is what the announcer said was enacted; few onlookers seemed to find the association obvious. Polite claps ensued regardless.

Then the party moved in a better-lit lounge with a bar and waiters carrying lavish cheese platters, fruit and cold meats. A tall man in full Scottish ceremonial garb, kilt, socks and all the rest, played the bagpipes. Lord Spoon, an ageing life peer in the house of Lords, Britain's upper chamber of Parliament, which is formed through the meritocratic selection by career politicians of the most successful and selfless members of wider society without the gruelling process of elections, held a touching opening toast in which he reminded everyone present how privileged he felt to have been invited to this exclusive event, and urged all present to feel same.

A whisky sommelier also in Scottish kilt helped profanes find their inner connoisseur. I took pictures and drank whisky in silence. The bagpipes faded out eventually as the musical Scotsman lost his breath and repaired to the staff room with some whisky and crackers, and the piercing sound of the Highlands was replaced by increasingly disjointed chatter. Addled, middle-aged bureaucrats and their cronies don't make too photogenic models, and they are not the kindest conversation partners either. As I walked through the standing groups I heard passing remarks of "you look like you've had a good night," "you never drink so much when your husband is with you, dear," "easy on the whisky, there, there, it's free, but it's not water" and a lot of constipated laughter and mean, insinuating jokes. Some of the guests even took to openly cursing at each other. The whisky kept pouring anyway even after the clients and the boss of the agency had left. I was there with the waiters and the untraceable hangers-on who were at each other's necks. "Hey, where're you going with that plate?" "Leave the bottle will you, shall I? Don't dream of it," "Oh, get over yourself Richard, you know Sir Michael never liked you. Stop pretending you're the heir apparent, you wanker."

I drank too, and eventually, when there were only about two dozen attendees left of the initial hundred or so, I went back to the staff room to put the camera back in my bag, only the bag wasn't there anymore. I panicked, drunkenly paranoid, thinking that somebody had stolen it. Lord Spoon, perhaps, or one of his aides. I turned the room inside out, which wasn't hard because it only contained a table and four chairs. It was a small room, completely bereft of my yellow mountaineer's backpack. I gave up and called security, in a near-hysteria.

"Hello? Security? Quick, my bag's gone. What kind of people do you keep in here. My wallet, my passport, laptop and notebooks were there," I demanded.

As well as what was left of the weed.

"How can somebody steal from Parliament?" I asked the guard, an old, corpulent man who moved according to his own rhythms.

“Son, you can fill a book with what goes on in here. But calm down nobody steals bags in the Houses of Parliament. Let’s go find your knapsack and you be on our way. It’s late and you need your rest.” He told me as he strolled down.

“I do hope you’ll find it, mister.” I said. “Otherwise I’ll call the police.”

He walked me round to a cloak room, where many more bags lay, among which, sure enough, lay mine.

“The girls from reception collect all luggage in here. Now, you sure this is yours, are you?”

Now I felt like a thief. I pulled out my wallet and showed him my Romanian ID card.

“Far from home, George,” the sage guard said. “Have a good night.”

“Thank you.” I said and walked right out of the British Parliament into the fog of Westminster Bridge, eerie lampposts from a hundred years ago charting me a path into the underground, to a train I took back to South London.

Derangement and alienation seeped from the overcrowded room into the capital night.

“Hey there, stop listening to that kaffir kak, George, what’s wrong with you?” said Sven, a newly-arrived roommate fresh off the plane from Johannesburg.

I was listening to Wu-Tang Clan.

“What’s that?” I said.

“I mean shut down that fucking nigger music, bru, eh?” he growled, in the deepest Afrikaaner accent, with heavily pronounced Rs and Flemish vowels in the back of his throat.

I turned down the music. Sven Schroeder was a young South African white man of 26 who came to the hostel because he heard there were other South African white men there. He immediately took command of Brian and Jim in our room by talking to them in Afrikaans and entertaining them with stories about how rich his parents are, how heavy the weights he lifts are and how he signed up to the British Army in order to have his citizenship fast-tracked on account of his grandmother being born in Devon, and also “to fuck up some Arabs as soon as I get the chance”.

He was rather short at about 1.70 metres, disproportional compared to his mass, which I estimate at about 95 kilos. He had both muscle and lard on him, with big, thick arms and shoulders from playing rugby since early childhood, and short stumpy legs. He cropped his own hair very low -- for all intents and purposes he was bald despite some small stubborn hairs peeking from behind his ears which he obviously missed with the razor, and his eyes, small and uninquisitive, were light blue like children’s toothpaste.

“The ad for the hostel said it was a place of peace for young people and travellers to get away from the world. I want to get away from all the kaffirs in London, eh?”

“Cool down, bru, this isn’t Saffa, eh?” said Brian. “Stop that talk about race.”

“My parents work in finance and agriculture in Cape Town,” he said. “They sent me to the UK to become an officer in the Army and make something of myself. I graduated university in Cape Town two years ago. I talk how I want.”

“With honours, *io*?” Rob asked.

“*Io*, with honours. Come on, let’s go to the lounge, see what the girls are doing in this place, no? Or are you boys gay?” Sven said.

They walked out and I did too, smoking a cigarette with my large headphones wrapped around my neck and holding my laptop. The lounge was an impression of a very small country bar in the Australian outback, I imagined, or the garage of a middle class man, a middle aged denizen of any Anglo-Saxon suburb in the world. Large, concert-grade speakers greeted one upon walking in,

on either side of a wall-size television, about 15 feet across, constantly showing sports or music. Leather sofas, well-worn, broken in, lined two walls. The other wall was fronted by a wooden bar with tall stools. For decoration, flags and vinyl disks, nailed into naked wooden beams. In the middle of the room, a pool table. It was a place of congregation, people came from work and spent the rest of the day there, eating, talking and watching television. In the evenings drinking, dancing and drug-taking would ensue naturally, unprompted or announced. There were around 70 people in the youth house and all of them were to be found either at work or this lounge, or sleeping in their bunks, or on the terrace upstairs smoking – in a second lounge. It was a tribal place, a modern kind of multinational, multilinguistic sort of closed society for rejects, misfits who preferred strangers' company to their own. We got along fine. I would wake up at 7:30, go to the agency, work, mainly avoid work, and come back at about 7:30 in the evening, straight to the lounge. There was a fried chicken shop across the roundabout outside which served six wings and chips for £2, and next to that there was a liquor store which sold cans of lager for £1. Dinner, therefore, was ensured for £3. The weekly shop cost me another £15, and the rest I'd spend on transport and drinking at the weekend. I spent all of my time in the hostel life, and the more frustrating and pointless my new career in advertising turned, the more I looked forward to returning to Wayne's Corner. The summer began in earnest for me in July, a couple of weeks after I settled into the first fixed abode in months and got signed up as an employee at Out&About247.

At the advertising agency my blog posts were getting used and the clients commended the texts I wrote for their websites with flattering words such as “snappy”, “punchy”, “does the job”, “short and sweet”, “edgy”, “tight” and “quirky”. I thanked them and continued. We got new clients soon, and all of them wanted something out of the digital arm of the company. This department was formed by myself and two other employees, the social media man and the design and analytics man – Ishaan – all of us basically on a bit less than minimum wage but hired as freelance collaborators, or sole traders, contractors, external service providers, et cetera, to save the company from paying income tax and social security for us. It also meant we had no statutory employment rights such as sick pay, holiday pay, severance pay or even prior notice if the bosses decided to have us sacked.

But we were living in a brave new world, the digital age, the second industrial revolution, and our expertise was in high demand. We were on our way up, we were told. A lot of what we did was charging people for handling free services for them – social media pages where they could advertise for free, or computer programs that measured how many people clicked on a website. We got paid for something that they could easily do themselves, but didn't care to, and we used only free resources off the Internet. We were digital housekeepers, tech-enabled chimney sweeps and valets. Our clients were a company that made chopped tomatoes and canned them, a soft drink

company, a charity for heart disease, a supermarket chain, a mobile phone network... all of them wanted to use the internet to sell to the immigrants who lived in Great Britain. We promised we would help them do that and they mostly believed us, at least for a few months at a time. We presented them with weekly reports – how many people visited their website, how many left comments, how many ordered something off of it (this was known as a conversion), how long people spent on each page, how many times they returned and whether they shared a link to the page with their friends. Ishaan heavily doctored, one might say even falsified, these reports, but the clients never asked to come in and see the live figures off the back-end software that we plugged into their websites. If they had, they would have, one suspects, been tempted to call the Serious Fraud Office. Sometimes Ishaan asked me to go to a coffee shop or a park where there was free wireless, and with a special software that he gave me to mask my computer's identity create new, fictitious email addresses and social media pages to leave flattering comments on our clients' products, for the other Internet users to see and believe to be genuine. The days went by with ease. Lunch between 11:30 and 2pm, homeward at 6. Once we received a letter from Tower Hamlets Council, the local authority, informing us that the building our office was in was being demolished. An international developer had bought the property rights from the owner, themselves international landlords, and they were commencing destruction in three months, bar the facade, which was protected by law due to it being old, and in its stead would build a 20-storey up, five-storey below ground, office tower.

“Splendid news,” Ashish said. “The lease we have expires in 20 years. They will have to reimburse us for this and then some.”

We all went to the restaurant that evening, at the company's expense, to celebrate the upcoming demolition. We later moved to an attic in a Gunthorpe Street warehouse, which Ashish partly owned through his “special utility vehicle” in the Canary Islands, along with a small-circulation newspaper for immigrants from the Orient on the ground floor. The Orient Express sold a not inconsiderable amount of not particularly cheap advertising space to the clients of Out&About247, although it was kept from the public and the authorities that they had the same owner. I stared down Brushfield Street and the tall, shiny buildings, and went in to gather the little stuff I had. Gunthorpe Street, a much less glamorous affair, is behind an anarchist bookshop, a KFC fast food, a Burger King fast food, and a greasy pub called the White Hart, just like a thousand other pubs. Gunthorpe Street is a narrow, litter-clogged, cobblestoned alley in Whitechapel, frequented by junkies, tramps, schoolchildren going to the inexplicably-placed Canon Barnett primary school, and now a bunch of bottom-shelf advertising workers. It is also where Jack the Ripper reportedly murdered a prostitute in the 19th Century.

Sven started a rugby team which I reluctantly joined.

“Yarrrr, George, you are a brave man, go!” he would bark as I tried to keep the other players from breaking my neck.

I mostly ran as fast as I could and passed the ball as quickly as I could before some crazed antipodean tackled me, but despite my best efforts on several occasions I have been mowed down and unceremoniously but intimately introduced to the lawn covering Figges Marsh.

“Kiss the grass, George. How do you say nice to meet you in Romanian?” the others would laugh.

“To hell with all of you. This is an idiotic game,” I’d say, aching.

“Oh, no, don’t be like that, come on. We were only joking, we need you on the team.”

There were ten of us who volunteered and if anyone quit the fun would be spoilt for all. Sven rotated the teams five-a-side every weekend. I took it as divine punishment for past sins. After the game we had beer and cognac in the sunshiny park, with girls from Wayne’s Corner wilfully coming over to us and starting conversations, making party plans. Getting hurt made them more interested in us. We limped on the outside but strutted internally.

One weekend we had what Gazza called a braai. In his massive brick fireplace on the terrace we burned logs and old furniture until a thick layer of coals smouldered emanating intense heat, and then we grilled hunks of meat the size of bus tyres. Gazza would play the guitar for us, singing the blues, and into the night the grill was replaced by a bonfire of chairs and broken doors and benches, and we’d gather round telling stories of our childhoods, how they were or how we wanted them to be, to each according to their own prowess to entertain. I looked sidelong into the hypnotizing orange flames tonguing the air as if inviting me inside the fray, and ceded my turn to the next eager talker, afraid and embarrassed as I was of my accent among native English speakers. Only later did I realise that in the office, despite all of my colleagues being Indians and talking in heavy Indian accents, broken English and often Hindi and Punjabi dialects, they were too native English speakers. Because English is taught in Indian schools, it is one of the 22 state-recognized languages, and due to its prolific birthrate India is the biggest English-speaking country in the world.

There is, I learned, a sort of British, or rather English, pragmatism which percolates throughout this country, Great Britain, and its people, whereby the ultimate sin is incuriosity and sanctimony, and nothing is dismissed out of hand. The first human duty is to be self-sufficient, to provide for oneself, and to behave in a civilised way. Looking on the bright side, this has created a wonderfully active and elegant way of life, an open-mindedness that is not naive and a tolerance of the broadest spectrum of human experience that is not amoral. Indeed, only in Britain one finds that every person is treated by strangers with consideration and care, with a very basic and simple form

of human respect which everyone deserves simply for belonging to the same species. A sort of anything goes attitude towards life, guided mainly by common sense and self interest.

There is something inside the soul that is attracted to this promise of freedom and untold possibility in this restricted world of ours, where the laws of physics curtail us, inviting us to think of ways to overcome them. In the hostel, playing pool, I saw dozens of new arrivals coming and going, some less happy than others. London is not for everyone. Maybe it will turn out it's not for me either. Some were finding out before me that it wasn't for them, like a French girl called Simone who moved over for the summer from her parents in Lyon to learn English and work. She was 19. Two weeks in, you could see the depression in her face. What were once bright eyes turned gloomy, melancholy. She would sit on the threshold smoking and blowing circles at passers-by, checking her mobile phone every other minute for messages from her boyfriend who was back in France. She found a job in a bar in Soho but people were frequently drunk and rude to her, and she saw no point in enduring the humiliation so she resigned. Simone had a soft, proud heart and was wont to let her emotions get the better of her. She was skinny and had her black hair in a bob. When I asked her what was wrong she said,

“Leave me alone, I don't want to talk.”

And she lit another cigarette.

“Sorry,” I said.

And I played pool with myself again. When the others were gone I would sit alone in the room on my bed and read or stare at the ceiling sometimes. I came to cherish being alone more than I used to. They say you have to be alone for at least an hour a day to keep sane. I jotted down notes and wrote emails to Ileana, telling her about all the good things in the hostel, the job and the city and none of the bad; Inside myself I did my best to acknowledge the bad but not fear it. Ileana always wrote back encouraging me. She, I sensed, was applying the same way of looking at things back in Bucharest. Times were bad for her. She had had a kidney operation and lost weight because of the pressure university studies put on her. She slept four hours a night and to earn money, not having time for a job, she sat exams and wrote papers for rich students who couldn't be bothered. Her uncle paid her tuition. Her father was still missing somewhere in Italy. Her mother was hard up and her little brother was misbehaving and having nervous fits. She thought it might be epilepsy but the doctors said it was not. She ploughed on, writing me that one day she would be a successful woman and she would be able to buy things for her grandmother and her little brother, nice things from the nice shops where if we go in now the clerks watch us like hawks. She would fly back to her grandmother in a chauffeur-driven car with sunglasses on and give her smooth silk scarves made by skilled French hands, and refined perfumes and comfortable but good-looking shoes to

wear. She would be a good architect and look after poor people. She would find new ways of building free housing for the poor out of cheap but durable material, that would be both economic and warm in the winter and cool in the summer and fireproof. Her buildings would be like good music, they would speak to you and envelop you but you would never be able to quite put your finger on why they are good. Everyday you would discover a new thing you liked about them.

And every day I discovered new things I liked about Ileana. Do it baby. You go ahead baby. I believe in you.

“And I in you.” she would reply.

Summer was nearly over, and in order to mark the occasion the British give everyone a day off work, which they call the Summer Bank Holiday. They have several bank holidays. This one was on the last Monday of August. In London, former slaves from the Caribbean colonies, known as the West Indies in English speaking countries, have had a bloody revolt in the sixties in Notting Hill, where some of them died. The journalists who wrote about these peoples’ deaths at the hands of police have somehow initiated a parade that carried on every year on the summer bank holiday in that neighbourhood. Jerome, a diminutive Australian with many tattoos and many earrings, explained this to me. He was 33 and living in the hostel because of Cara, a Spanish nurse he met in the hospital. She treated him for superficial stab wounds one night at the Royal Free Hospital, he said, and they have been in love ever since. That parade became the Notting Hill Carnival, a street party, Europe’s biggest, according to the papers, not unlike the more famous Rio carnival. Every year it brings ruckus and disorder to one of London’s most expensive neighbourhoods and the residents board up their houses and take refuge in their other houses in Cornwall or Tuscany. When they started the thing it was a ghetto, Notting Hill, a no-go area, but times changed and the real estate market with them. Now it’s a sign of harmony to have a poor people’s parade in the third-most expensive neighbourhood in world’s most racially diverse city. Jerome had assembled a group, tagged us all with a red line of Cara’s lipstick on the forehead for mutual recognition and walked us to the nearest train station, a ride to Clapham Junction. He gave me a large capsule filled with powder on the way to the train station.

“Take this,” he said. “It’s going to be real special for you, mate.”

I took it. On the way I felt that my body contained in the skin had liquefied into vapours and snot and I couldn’t talk properly. In the train I struggled to recognise my companions, and the words I tried to talk were not coming out my mouth right. The obedience I once was able to impose on my limbs and other extremities now faded. The carriage tottered down the rail in a slow movement but I felt it was shaking and waving as if it were a roller coaster.

“Mate, look at me,” Jerome seemed to say.

He slapped me.

“You are drooling George. You look like a goner. Have you not taken ketamine before?”

I nodded. I hadn't. Not on its own and not as much. I tried saying something but drool was all I could do. I held to the bar.

“Listen, come with me, yeah?” Jerome said.

He dragged me to a corner of the carriage and arranged some of the other people from the hostel to stand around as a paravan. From his pocket he pulled out a bag of white powder, sprinkled a little mound of it on his phone, then shoved a piece of drinking straw up my left nostril and blocked my other nostril with his finger.

“Now sniff this man, quickly.”

I did, and I felt as if I got pulled up from muddy water. My head cleared and I could talk again.

“God Jerome, thanks. This is quite a livener. The thing before though, tranquilizing.”

I said, with wonderful joy that my tongue unfroze and could once again convey my thoughts and feelings to my fellows.

“Shit, George. It's fucking horse tranquilizer mate. I thought you had it before. You were in a deep k-hole there man. Good to have you back.”

“Thanks Jerome. Now please tell me again where we're going and could I please have some more cocaine to ensure the ketamine is vanquished?”

“We're going to Notting Hill Carnival mate. The biggest party in Europe. Maybe even the world. You'll love it. Sorry about the ket, yeah?” he said, with eyes full of sorrow.

“No problem.” I said, so as to not make him feel too guilty.

In reality I was jolted and jittery. One white powder replaced another, with the effect that I was now feeling extremely anxious, on the verge of a heart attack. I looked at Jerome with despair, but dared say nothing.

“Oh, George, now you look a bit speedy mate.” Jerome said, catching on. I thanked God he read me.

“I feel speedy, like I'm going too fast or something.” I said. “I thought you gave me cocaine.”

“It's meth.”

I looked out the window. The train was passing Battersea power station. Cranes were removing the white chimneys off the building that once was deemed handsome enough to front a Pink Floyd album cover.

“Speedy as fuck Jerome. What do you think?” I asked as if I was asking a doctor.

“I’ve got it George, don’t you worry. You hold tight and I’ll get Cara to help you.”

“Thanks,” I said, worrying that summoning Cara, a nurse, meant my situation was escalating, becoming worse. “No worries about holding tight,” I said. There was nothing about me that wasn’t tight.

Cara appeared, with her face painted in a rainbow, Coca-cola glasses, a one-piece pink swimsuit for an outfit, plastic bracelets and tennis shoes, and looked at me dispassionately. She grabbed my face and squeezed it, perhaps wondering why I wasn’t wearing a carnival mask. She deliberated for a minute then she opened her purse and gave me a pill.

“This is Valium,” she said, in a crystalline Spanish accent. “This will help you relax. Take it now before we arrive, yes?” she said.

I swallowed it immediately. We got off at Shepherd’s Bush station, then walked round to the BBC building and into the residential neighbourhood – surrounded by police – where the carnival took place. In a haze, I walked with my peers. The crowd was immense. It was everywhere, a mass of dancing, prancing, smoking and drinking people, surrounded by loud music. Dancehall, reggae, rap and Caribbean soca – a kind of synthetic repetitive music not entirely dissimilar from Balkanic turbofolk. Lorries slugged on through the narrow streets, on their back platforms bands and dancers, concert speakers, agitation. In the street people howling, tripping over empty bags, bottles, all of them half naked and drunk. Middle-aged men with pot bellies and receding hairlines wearing purple fishnets and sheer shirts through which their hair poked out. Frenzied. My comrades from the hostel were dancing, taking pictures with the parading women sporting little more than a couple of peacock feathers and underwear.

On the lorry platforms topless women of all races danced to the deep haunting drums banging out the overpowered speakers. At once the man on the microphone called a stop to the vehicle and the music.

“Someone was injured,” he announced. He said, “Please make way for a first aider... we have an emergency at the back of the truck.”

I could not see clearly whether a doctor or medic presented herself but presently the MC resumed the sound and chanted:

“Soca!”.

The prime minister and his closest allies live in this neighbourhood. It’s five million for a flat and there are underground extensions five floors deep with hydraulic garages and windowless ballrooms. Meanwhile the poor people from the council estates mix with the tourists and the immigrants and party on pissing in the gardens of the rich, who are praying the great unwashed don’t piss in the rosegardens through the double fences or find a way to bypass the multi-point

alarm system. In vain they pray, because the ravers, drenched in lager, piss everywhere indiscriminately, vengefully almost, they urinate on doors, garages, patios, stairs, shutters, marble statues and polished gates. Stabbings occur with alarming frequency as gang members from rival neighbourhoods meet and fight. Police, present in the thousands, is assaulted, spat at and cursed by a portion of the revellers. Other take pictures and shake hands with police. Jerome laughs at a viral online video of an officer dancing with an almost naked woman from the Jamaican caravan. He pumps, and she twerks – she bends over with her backside rubbing against the crotch of the cop, while he makes thrusts. Viral content, shows unity and goodwill from police. People share it on social networks in the spirit of the carnival. Thievery and drug taking are also rampant. This year there were 300-plus arrests on day one, according to a newspaper report. Outsize chunks of police budgets are spent.

The calmness provided by the powerful prescription medicine administered by Cara is making me an impartial observer of the goings-on. A flatness, a low-key grogginess defines my state but I am far from drowsy. I notice and remember everything well enough but I move slow and prefer to stay silent. I eat a goat's leg with spicy green rice and drink a Red Stripe lager. Good meat. I can taste it but I can't seem to be able to receive any of the usual satisfaction one derives from food. At length, the carnival winds down and we head home on a night bus. I slept tight that night like I hadn't in a long time.

Jerome gave me a book by Carlos Castaneda, about a witch doctor from Mexico called Don Juan who could talk to snakes and influence the elements. I spent long hours by the pool table playing eight ball with myself and reading about the shaman's peyote and mushroom trips. It seemed that the author was convinced Don Juan was supernatural. Intrigued, I looked up Castaneda and found on the internet that he was a cult leader in a dusty, remote town on the U.S. border with Mexico, with seven wives at once all living in a country mansion off the proceeds of the books he wrote about the old Don Juan. I found a website which claimed to belong to Castaneda and from my laptop in the pool room I wrote in:

“Hello Mr Castaneda. I am George and I am reading your book about Don Juan. I am wondering if you offered Don Juan any recompense from the profits you made off the book. Secondly, I am wondering, to what productive ends do you apply the teachings of Don Juan? I imagine that starting broken engines by mere touch, or lifting great weights with no effort, as you describe in your book, would make your friend very useful indeed on a construction site or in a

garage. Thirdly, Mr Castaneda, if I may, would you testify in a court of law that what you wrote in the books is true? Sceptical, unworldly readers with poor experience of the miraculous have difficulty getting their heads round some of the more supernatural passages and would be greatly reassured by your confirmation that in front of a judge and under oath you wouldn't change the account of what Don Juan, or yourself are capable of. Meanwhile, please know that I am following the instructions you laid out for becoming a man of knowledge. Some of my friends are on it too. Many thanks, Sir, and keep up the good work. Regards, G. Palan, Surrey, UK"

Reply came there none but I kept hope alive.

Of late a red-haired girl who seemed to know someone or other in the building, was to be found increasingly often in the pool room after dark. About thirty of us hostel dwellers congregated with some whisky and vodka one Friday night, watching horror films on TV, and there she was again.

"Rachel," she said to me.

"George. Are you Irish? I'm Romanian."

"No, I'm Scottish. From Glasgow. Came to try my luck in London as a comedian but so far I'm just waiting tables. What are you doing?"

"Also trying my luck in London I suppose. I am working in advertising."

"Oh, fascinating. On the creative side?" she asked.

"It's not that creative. I write blogs about curry paste for £50 a day. Not that I'm complaining. It's keeping me off the streets."

"Hmm, whereabouts is your office? I go out in the West End a lot, I might have walked past it."

"It's in the East End I'm afraid, only just. It's at the bottom of Brick Lane and behind Aldgate East somewhere."

"Oh, I see."

Then she drifted off in conversation with someone else. She spoke to everyone. She was striving to seem confident and at ease with all the people in the room, a daunting task which I admired her for attempting. I didn't mind she ended our conversation rather abruptly. I was mortified by what she would think about my accent, so I was somewhat relieved to see her suddenly turn to the next person. In most instances I preferred to listen to the conversation than take part in it. When Sven and Jim started a wager on which one of them could do more sit-ups while carrying the other one on his shoulders, Rachel told them at the top of her voice:

"Easy boys, you don't want to completely repress your latent homosexuality just yet tonight. Don't forget we're going to Soho tonight."

Everyone laughed. Soho was traditionally where they homosexuals liked to live and go out, but some colleagues at work was saying that Vauxhall was the new Soho now and that Soho was just full of tourists. In any case, Rachel was a brave woman. Her boss was having a party in a mansion in Cavendish Square and she was allowed to bring her friends as filler as long as we dressed up and kept down the noise. We put on shirts and blazers and off we went on the night bus to the lofty environs of London W1. By the time all of us got there it was past midnight and we were already drunk. The house was luxurious like nothing I'd ever seen. Immensely tall ceilings, dark wood panelling on all walls, oil portraits of eighteenth century industrialists and crystal candelabra in every room. Thick, intricately designed carpets in which my only pair of black leather shoes sank as in shallow quicksand. There were several upper floor with smoking rooms and salons for deserts, up corkscrew marble stairs, free cigars served by impeccably-dressed waiters, and a garden with discrete lighting and a fully-stocked bar that charged punters nothing for champagne. We punted ambitiously and took many photographs on our phones. The others were dancing to the stylish, haute-couture electronic music. I bobbed my head and drank. At one moment later I was alone with Rachel in a bus station as the night was turning slowly to day, and at another I woke up with her next to me in the top bunk at the hostel, both naked under my dirty sheets, at four o'clock in the afternoon. I looked around and my roommates were in their beds too. Rachel was still sleeping. I lifted the cover and looked at her. She had milkwhite skin and a tattoo of the old cartoon character Betty Boop on her arm. Her small breasts with pierced nipples rose slightly as she breathed in my ear. She smelled of cigarettes and coconut body lotion.

"George," she whispered. "Did we have sex?"

"I don't know Rachel," I said. "I'm sorry but I can't remember anything."

She lazily climbed out of bed, and not minding being stark nude in front of five other males, albeit presumably sleeping males, she put on her panties and one of my t-shirts and went downstairs. I put on a pair of underpants and went to the bathroom to throw away the used condom I found stuck to the mattress. I had toast and coffee with Rachel and we talked politics. She thanked me for being "sweet" and left. A week later she was in my roommate Rodrigo's bed. As I passed them in the kitchen that morning when they had toast together she winked at me. With Rodrigo she was also talking politics, and when she left she told him he was sweet.

Later, Sven, in his intractable South African accent, called me and Rodrigo "puss" and said that if he had got with Rachel first she would never have gone for us after. Don't be so sure, Rodrigo said.

"You might think you have a big dick but it's still only one dick," he told the macho Afrikaner.

I was indeed happy that Rachel was a thrill seeker, thinking that this kind of woman makes the world a much more interesting place. If only there were more of Rachel, I thought. That overcast day when the uninterrupted cloud ceiling hung low I put my hat on and went to Camden Town to sample the Chinese food and walk among the mercantile chaos of the tourist traps. I craved the anonymity of being just another badly-dressed dimwit in awe at everything around him, being fed bits of battered deep fried chicken by the stall keepers as you'd feed a goat in a petting zoo. Tourism degrades the faculties of judgement and encourages herd behaviour. Before you get angry at a tourist for tripping up and stumbling into you because he was dumbstruck by some building and forgot to watch his step, remember that that man is probably a gifted specialist in his natural surroundings back home. Forensic investigators of Tokyo are rendered dumber than an ox in a butcher's line if you hang a camera round their necks and fly them over to Sea World in London. The dormant tourist inside of you takes over your senses. I got off the Northern Line and the crowd swallowed me up immediately. I ate free Shanghai chicken tasters handed me from the stalls by vendors hoping I'd buy something, and they mumbled Vietnamese lullabies to put my brain to sleep. I walked in circles amid the shoppers and passers-by for an hour and more. I went down the canal when my belly was full, to find a place with mild music from some vagrant's guitar where I'd sit down to rest for a minute. A bunch of local kids with dollar signs engraved on their eyes were hustling ill-advised foreigners who walked along the water path feeling like they were living on the edge like Sid Vicious.

"Weed? Mdma? Hashish?" The smell of burning hemp was overpowering. "Come, come. Big offer," the kids barked in a phlegmatic sub-working class accent which, I overheard one old Englishman saying, rendered them unemployable.

Dishonest dope dealers belong somewhere deep in hell, according to my estimations in the same category as slumlords and crooked ministers of the church. I figure it's not the act of selling fake drugs or robbing customers blind that makes this occupation, above many others, such a dishonourable gig. It's the enormous difference between what they pretend to be and what they knowingly are. The duplicity of being a fraud drugs dealer is so large that it even surpasses the hypocrisy of being a corrupt cop, and is just a notch or two above bent politicians. It is such an enormity that very few people do it. It's by far the worst thing you can do for money, and it's more dangerous than other forms of thievery, but I suspect the excitement of the con, of cheating people not just simply out of money but out of a visceral need, a pleasure, is what drives dishonest dope dealers. You simply must be exceptionally parasitic in nature, or just dead inside, to be able to function in this line of work. No pride. You sell people bad stuff that they think they'll have fun with, they hope, envision getting wild and crazy, and because the operation is carried out entirely

outside the law, you sign an unwritten pact with the buyer – that you engage in mutually agreed crime together, for mutual benefit. And you betray that bond instantly, and repeatedly, over and over. Every time somebody on this planet gets burned with phony drugs a dolphin gets cancer and a child with the Down syndrome falls under a speeding bus. I have never seen women do that, although I don't doubt there are many, but men can more easily be so completely wrong and destructive. A man of uncertain origin stops by the youthful circle and says something. One boy of about 20 walks up to him and says hey, I'm Sam. Follow me. The boy climbs on a BMX bike and the prospective buyer follows. The stranger was thirsty for blood and depressed with the state of human civilisation. He walked on and Sam stopped by a bush strewn with litter. Sam did not suspect for a second what he was getting into, but the fury of the archangel Gabriel was about to descend upon him with the full weight of divine righteousness. But not yet. Presently he handed the stranger a wrapper he extracted from the bush and duly collected a crisp £20 from his hands.

The unassuming stranger opened the packet, smelled the content and crushed a little between his fingers, then appeared to tell Sam he wanted his money back. Sam refused and assumed a pose that emanated physical threat, squaring up close to the stranger with his chin pinned to his chest and his arms crossed. The stranger, smoothly, took a step back, discarded the forged merchandise and with a curt punch in the right cheek, knocked Sam out. Sam unraveled like butter in a hot pan, passing out sprawled all over the bush behind him. At once, the man picked him up in one hand and stood him up against the wall, slapping him about to wake him up. When Sam came to, the vigilante put his hand in the thief's pocket, removed a wad of money, held it up to Sam's eyes to make sure he registered what was being done to him, and left at brisk pace. Sam stared deflated and sad into the air above the stinky canal. Having witnessed this morsel of street justice – the more delicious thanks to its rarity – after all, a well-trained hero like the stranger, who by his studied moves could have been a member of the French foreign legion, is not your usual rank and file member of the drug-taking community. We are not exactly a demanding club, druggies, but we do know who fits in more than most. A broad church, except people most often try to leave that consciously want to join. I took the overground to Croydon and then a bus, which I disembarked on Mitcham Common, a vast piece of unfettered countryside even compared to other green spaces in South London, and nothing less than a Serengeti-on-Thames alongside anything to be found in a five-mile radius North of the river – Hampstead Heath notwithstanding, since that is more of a hilly forest than an open space. Indeed, being south of the river was being able to breathe more freely. Wider roads, bigger houses, more parking space, more pavement, more green. South London is less crowded.

In the night I arrived at Laings Corner with a back full of dry grass and leaves after reading my book about shamans in the common by the lake until falling asleep. I aimed for the fast food joint, went in, ordered the £2 meal with extra hot chili sauce and while the chips were cooking I stepped into the off license next door for a couple of beers. My surprise was not small, when I came back outside, to see that right in the middle of the concrete mound in the six-road roundabout intersection, were standing two young girls dressed in white cotton frocks, barefooted. When they saw me they walked up to me and asked me for directions to Mitcham Common. I pointed the way and asked about their parents, and asked why they were out that late, and asked about their shoes. The black-haired, big-eyed, long-eyelashed young things could not have been older than 13, and by the way they held hands and looked warily around I could tell they were not from those parts. In the same foreign accent which I couldn't quite identify the two said thank you mister, ignored my extraneous questions and walked slowly in the direction I showed. That night I dreamed intensely that I was standing motionless in the Regent's Park and watching women riding unbroken horses through the alleys, tearing down the floral arrangements and statues. I was powerless to stop them because they had paralysed me with their feral beauty. I woke up in a sweat and for the following five nights I had this very same dream all over again.

The following day was a lazy one, spent between the bed and the sofa on the terrace upstairs, reading newspapers and magazines, interspersed with the final pages of Castaneda's fantastic account. On the Road by Kerouac was waiting invitingly on the nightstand, almost throwing its special-edition hardback covers open on its own volition in front of me, when Jerome walked in.

"You're coming with me, George. I have got something we need to look into."

"Hi Jerome. Glad to help. What seems to be the problem?"

"No problem. Salvia divinorum, potency 20x."

"What is that? It rings a bell but I can't quite grasp what my role is here. I was doing some reading..."

Jerome interrupted me:

"We're going to smoke it together. It shouldn't be more than 20 minutes. Come on."

He showed me a colourful bag with the words "Salvia divinorum – not for human consumption" written on the side, next to a barcode.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"The headshop in Brixton. They have all kinds of crazy shit there, legal highs of all sorts," Jerome said, eagerly.

We went to his room and sat on the floor with our legs crossed like yogis. We commenced smoking a load of this green dried leaf, not altogether different from oregano, from a metal pipe. Jerome jumped up, laughing and yelping like a monster, kicking the chairs in the room and hollering with troubled eyes. He found a Harvey industrial-grade vacuum cleaner in a corner which had a smiley face drawn on it, and he kicked it like a football around the room, laughing harder and harder each time. There was no stopping the salvia demon. As Jerome did this, I was sitting on the floor, pinned down, hearing a drill or some kind of fast drip in the back of my head and amid roars of unalloyed, childish joy that I was producing I also experienced a sensation like saddling a comet, going to Nibiru and back inside ten seconds, without the faintest consciousness that all of this was the result of smoking the leaf. I had completely forgotten about the pipe, in fact. It was a shock dose of psilocybin but without any of the usual restraints. Never before had I used a drug which completely broke down my self-control. These urges to wreak havoc and laugh and breathe in all the air in the world in one breath seemed unstoppable under the influence of this innocuous plant which one could procure from a shop in any street. With Jerome kicking and shouting invectives, playing football with the vacuum cleaner, I decided I needed some peace and left the room in a mild drizzling rain. I found myself perched on the top of the roundabout where the girls were standing the night before, looking with some confusion at the cars whose headlights were blinding me through the nettle of raindrops. I realised I had no top on and no shoes, and cars were tooting their horns at me. Fierce rhythms pounded in the back of my head. I enjoyed the splendour of this chaos. My thoughts poured like a drip or like ants crawling under the bark of a tree. I started laughing like a toddler laughs on his first sunny day in his mother's fruit orchard.

Ten minutes later I was sipping a cup of tea in the kitchen with a perfectly serene Jerome.

“What'd I tell you? If this thing lasted more than 10 minutes it would kill anyone who smoked it. It's all got to have a balance in the world, George.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Indeed, every picosecond that passed while the plant's grip was strong seemed like a minute. Every minute, an hour. That something this potent – more potent than cocaine or amphetamine, I thought, could be freely available, was a frightening thought. What would someone less stable than me or Jerome do after smoking it? What would someone with violent urges do?

Laings Corner was by now my home. Cara gave me a blister pack of lorazepam, a very powerful downer she stole from the hospital, to take if I got anxious or restless. She also gave me

Vicodin, which she said I should take at work if my head hurt. I took the vicodin in the afternoon and the Lorazepam at night. Lorazepam enables you to feel very rested after 3-4 hours of sleep. On the flipside, it makes your reactions and thinking slow and puts a large distance between you and the world. To me, all this was good. I took to reading a lot at night and playing pool or watching television with the others in the evening. Days went by that summer like the pages of the books I read, silver trout down a stream through the bottom of the brain.

A public relations agency offered me a ticket to Global Gathering, “the largest electronic music event of the year” on an airfield near Birmingham. I went with some people the agency put me together with. The mud and the filth were overbearing. Next to crowded banners of otherwise respectable brands like Lucozade and Pepsi, suspiciously young people were sniffing white powders which made them lose control and look morbidly distraught. They danced badly and stumbled often under the stern gazes of private security guards from G4S. This was a corporatized, branded piss-up. I hardly moved but still managed to cover myself in mud. The next day at dawn after my companions dropped me off in Perivale I read in the paper that four teenagers died of overdoses at Global Gathering.

The people at the hostel were unimpressed by this statistic.

“At least they died having fun, bru,” said the dreadlocked Argentinian, in an attempt at imitating Sven’s South African accent.

There were two girls in the lounge, Maria, a Spanish girl, and Deborah, an Israeli-French girl from Morocco, who, upon hearing him jumped to my rescue. They both looked over from behind their cups of coffee and told me that they’d fix me breakfast while I took a shower.

“You look like you need both,” Deborah said in a low voice.

Deborah, over perfect overeasy eggs, toast, baked beans and strong black coffee, told me her father was Israeli, her mother Algerian, and they both lived in Marseille, where she was born. She spoke English interspersed with French words, like,

“Ah, putain, George (Jorge), you eat fast. Do you want more?”

Her eyes and long hair were black as cold pitch, as obsidian, and she had dark full lips and a voluptuous body well hid under thick jeans, black motorcycle jacket and high-heeled suede boots. Who dresses like this at 8am for coffee? I wondered, but did not ask her for fear of being inappropriate.

She said:

“I was in the Israeli military for three years after I finished high school.”

“Very interesting,” I said. “I’d like to join the military one day, too.”

This, I realised, was true, although I never knew it until that very moment.

“I have been in this hostel for two years,” she said. “My boyfriend is Suleyman, the guy from Madagascar. Do you know him?”

“I do.”

Suleyman was very good at pool and did not drink or take any drugs. He didn't go out late. I struggled to understand why he was staying in the hostel until Deborah said she was his lover. Despite knowing it was uncivilised I could not help being in thrall to Deborah. She smoked heavily. She always smoked and she always wore mascara and her black leather jacket. Every time she walked in the room I felt drawn to her. I always half-listened to her even when we were conversing with others, and always half-looked at her whenever I was aware of her presence. Sometimes we played cards together. One night she and Suleyman walked into the living room and started arguing in French, loudly, and I knew enough French to tell they were being very rude to each other. Suddenly, in the middle of this, she looked across the room at me, right into my eyes, as Suleyman was holding his head in his hands, and her lips moved but no sound came out:

“Save me, George.”

I was transfixed but could not bring myself to test whether this was an invitation to save her from that moment or from that whole life. No, she would have to come to me if she wanted it, I decided. I said:

“Please stop this, both of you. Calm down.”

They looked at me and Deborah gave me a smile.

She would still make me double espressos and later on she taught me backgammon one night when we were left together on the terrace. We were both covered in the same moth-eaten blanket, drinking coffee and red wine, playing backgammon, smoking and taking pictures of each other on our phones. For a brief second I held her hand, looked into her eyes and got imperceptibly near her. She said, smiling her disarming, hopelessly beautiful smile:

“Don't try, George...”

Again, I had doubts about her really meaning this, but the gentlemanly thing to do was to take the lady's word at face value and restrain myself. The warmth instantly left the blanket – it now was a layer of frost.

Thus the days of that Olympic summer flew into the ashen skies of Albion like florets of dandelion from Reformation pleasure grounds. One night in the bus to Croydon about thirty people from the hostel sang the Bohemian Rhapsody. We went to a place called the Black Sheep Bar, a rundown, smelly dive which kept us waiting for an hour in a queue despite it being empty. At length, the guards took our fingerprints, charged us £5 each, went through our bags and pockets and

let us in. The only distraction from the sticky floor and the bad music was the staff who seemed to follow customers around with a mop, persistently demanding space to clean up.

“This boozier should be called ‘the spontaneous abortion hall for people who smell like wet dogs’ I believe,” said Jerome. “I wrote this across the wall in the bathroom in permanent marker,” he added.

Unfortunately there are many places like this one in London. The city is overrun with them. I kept being given shots of cheap whisky and pints of flat beer by my rhapsodising peers. It was someone’s birthday. A blonde girl from Hungary was rubbing her groin against my leg, trying to follow the unconscionable rhythms of Skrillex’s dubstep. A group of crusty-looking vagabonds appeared at the other end of the room, and through the broken din I could hear one saying to another:

“Thanks for getting us in for free bro. What’s your tippie?”

Evidence of corruption at the Black Sheep. Sometimes black sheep deserve their outcast condition. We returned at five am and slept on the floor in the lounge huddled together like wildebeest.

Jim was telling war stories the next day:

“Last week I woke up after a party next to this fat girl and I had a massive boner. She was looking at me smiling and blinking fast. I took off.”

“What’s cool about girls is we never get a thing like that. It must be so hard,” said Sarah.

“Hard for sure,” interceded Rob, with a conspicuous grin.

Nobody said anything for a few seconds then Sarah broke the silence:

“Who wants Doritos?”

The publisher of a small magazine concerned with new music rejected an unsolicited article I sent, about the Global Gathering festival, on the grounds that none of it was news and that some of my descriptions of the security guards sounded racist. All I had said was that one of them looked at me cross-eyed and told me:

“Ho-spee-taaaal?” when I asked where were those kids getting looked after.

He was in fact making fun of my own accent but perhaps the article did not make that as clearly apparent as I had intended. I wrote back to the editor with explanations but received no reply. Secluded worlds are created by isolated groups of people, by design or circumstance, who suck each other in and remove each other from the course of the world.

Only a succubus with burning eyes can scare away the lesser imps and demonets at times of acrimonious reality, it turned out. At the hostel’s Halloween party I wore gray track bottoms, a hoodie and a death mask acquired from a toy shop. In front of me as I stood at the bar watching the

dancing appeared such a succubus, who I suspected before this rapture was merely Anita, a withdrawn Croatian girl with blonde hair and plump but sprightly body and short height. She asked me to dance and I got up. She danced and I swayed slowly, trying to avoid disappointing her. Her smile was so sweet I wondered how her teeth were not rotten. She wore a skirt, red lips, a green wig and horror film contact lenses. Her cleavage was deep and generous. She looked at me incessantly, right in my eyes, and smiled, for an uninterrupted half an hour. In the dark, noisy room she got close and closer, smelling me, licking my neck, and rubbing herself against my loins. All the while holding my gaze.

“I know you like me. Thanks. I like you too,” she whispered.

I felt her spittle on my ear. She touched my arm and tiptoed so she could reach. Her warm, alcoholic breath got close and she kissed me. Her mouth was wet and I could feel her pulse through her tongue. I kissed her and put my hand up her back, touching her bra under her tank top. I squeezed her against me. Her skin was cold and sweaty. She put her hand under my hoodie, found my hairy nipple and pinched it. This startled me and I flinched but she smiled and she kept kissing.

“We might as well go upstairs and do it,” she said.

She lead me by the hand to the terrace, where there was no-one, and she lied on the sofa. I lied on top of her and ripped up her stockings. We had sex with our clothes on, and I came in between the backrest and the seat of the sofa. Then we went to the bathroom and we did it again with me standing and her sitting on the top of the washing machine. Then she smoked a cigarette, naked. I went to bed and the next morning, remembering, I went to the same bathroom, locked myself in and masturbated like a teenage chimpanzee. Later when I ran into her she was very gracious, said hello shyly, asked how I was, but she was Anita again, not the same disguised, adventurous nymph. Give some people a carnival costume and an excuse to wear it and they will let out the animal spirits. In that same early November I came back late from work one night after spending the day polling homeless people who sold The Big Issue magazine for £3 about whether they would consider selling other products too, for our clients at the agency. One fo the bosses got the idea that it would be original and it would play well.

“We can fabricate some kind of new authenticity with the homeless. Get them to sell some things, ideally with the sale completed online so you don’t put too much value at risk. We can give them tablet computers.”

My findings weren’t encouraging. The homeless population has many problems to deal with that prevent it, by and large, from making good salesmen. Mostly men, very few homeless women in London. I asked one man with a dog about the idea and he said he’d do it if he got paid in cash. Couldn’t get a bank account. I said I’d pass it on. Some of the others thought they’d pawn the tablet

in a moment of weakness, or were mistrustful of my real motives. I passed all of this up the chain of command and went back to the hostel. Opening the door, I found Sara and Jerome crying in the sitting room together, snorting ketamine off the screen of her phone with a rolled-up banknote. I wanted to go in and ask what seemed to be the problem but what I did instead was sneak out stealthily, without a word, before they saw me, and go to my top bunk, where I sat in silence. I was getting restless and the hostel life was getting old. I wanted to either be alone or with Ileana. I wrote her another email.

As I lay daydreaming in the fat grass of Clapham Common one Saturday, the sun shone bright on my face forcing me to close my eyes. It shone still through my eyelids making me see a dark orange, and at one point it relented. When I peered up I saw three clouds gathering together in front of the star, forming the shape of the African continent in fluffy white with radiant beams shooting from behind it. Africa above me, unmistakably and undeniably, and a moment later it dispersed, making way for the powerful light again.

In Laings Corner the boys were in a huddle in front of a computer screen.

“And after you install Tor you start it up and go to the Silk Road market site through this address. Remember, you have to get a computer you never used before at all and you can’t use it for anything else, ever, except Tor. You cover up the microphone and the camera with duct tape. The Dark Net is crawling with police and they will catch you if you log onto Facebook or some shit,” Jerome explained. “Here we are.”

A list appeared on the screen, like any other classifieds site.

“You pull the list of what you’re interested in, yeah? Like this you can get drugs, guns, fake passports. Shit, you can even get someone killed if you have enough cash. But our business today is drugs, isn’t it? Yessir. So here we go, this one guy from Belgium has it all. Speed, six grammes, yellow hash, four grammes, cocaine 80% purity, four grammes, heroin, we skip that, opium, two grammes, morphine tablets, two packets, lsd tabs, sixteen, Ritalin, one bottle, Qaaludes, twelve. Grand total \$5,200 including fidelity discount. Are you sure you’re up for it fellas?” Jerome enquired with sincerity.

Everyone nodded.

“Now you get this guy’s Bitcoin address, you check how much a Bitcoin is today because it goes up and down all the time, and you send him the correct amount. Btcoin is encrypted and untraceable so unless the cops already know who is behind this address they won’t be able to prove

that he received bitcoin in exchange for drugs. And now we wait for the parcel, right? Safe and fucking sound, no more fucking hustling with the hoodrats, smoking fucking oregano. This is top shelf shit, straight from the producers. There guys are pros. You'll see, in a few days the mail is going to start trickling in. Anyway, you owe me \$350 each now. Welcome to the fucking future." When Jerome was very pleased with himself his Australian drawl was more pronounced.

Indeed in the next week they received what they had ordered and the result was unprecedented chaos in the hostel. Drama, nervous breakdowns, yelling, ceaseless partying in the rooms. Brian and Rodrigo were fired from the scaffolding company where they worked because they arrived high for their shift, but this didn't slow them down. For about ten days the mayhem lasted, and Gazza did not seem to notice anything. At the end of it the guys were all emaciated, dehydrated and with dark bags under their eyes, barely moving and barely being able to speak. The impression that they all had irretrievably lost something hung about them and made all their sober interlocutors sad. Maybe they had lost a part of their sanity, maybe self-seeking is an endless spiral, a nihilistic lie, an excuse to drop out of the world and run away from the responsibility you bear for your life. In any case, empty eyes spoke better than words could. Without uttering a sound we all knew the line had been crossed. Jerome and Sara wouldn't look at each other anymore. His visa was expiring and he needed to return to Australia to reapply. In a drugged, hysterical panic, he proposed her.

"I'll have to think about this Jerome, I wasn't expecting it. I love you but if we're getting married we can't live in a hostel. Are you sure you're not doing this for the visa?" she had asked him that night, in front of all the others.

Jerome visibly angered and went:

"Why can't we live here if we get married? Nothing will change, babe, we'll be just like now only closer. Right?" And sensing he was slipping, he looked around in search of friendly support. There was none. He changed tone: "You know, I gave you everything. If we don't do this, they will deport me. Will you really do this to me? I can't go back to Perth," he said in a brittle voice.

"I'm not saying we aren't doing it, I'm saying I can't say yes now. Just give me a little to think," she said.

"What's there to think about? It's yes or no now baby, don't keep me waiting..." he pled.

"Well, Jerome, you are in a bit of a state right now, how do I know you will feel the same tomorrow when you come to?"

“What? You think this is the drugs talking? How much did we fucking take together? And now all of a sudden I am the one who’s high and you are sober, are you? You know, Sara, sometimes you’re just a fucking bitch.”

And he stormed out. She burst into tears. I went upstairs and finished off the small 20cl bottle of Teachers whisky I had been sipping, then I threw it against the wall of the building in front. It broke with some noise. Then Gazza appeared.

“You threw a whisky bottle against the wall and smashed up the windshield on my motorbike,” he barked. “I saw it on the cameras.”

“Did I really break the windscreen on your bike? I’ll pay for it if I did,” I replied with forced calm.

“Did I say that? No. I didn’t say that.”

“OK then,” I said.

“The problem is you don’t want to play the game George. You are a motherfucker. I thought you were cool when you first moved in here, but now I’m starting to think you don’t belong and maybe you should find another place to stay. I saw you smashing up bottles, smoking in the lounge and putting your beers all over the pool table, not to mention fucking that girl on the terrace on Halloween night, right in front of the camera you know I am monitoring,” he blurted.

“Slow down please, Gazza. Thanks at least for telling me to my face you think I’m a motherfucker. Duly noted. But if you watch everything so closely on the camera don’t you know there are bigger things happening here? Some of us are losing our mind in this loony bin. And come to think of it, how was I supposed to know in the first place you monitor those cameras? I thought they were in case someone breaks in, not for you to watch us, your own tenants, like a voyeurist.”

“They are my cameras and I watch everything. You are disrespectful of my authority. You want to do your own thing, cool, but this is not the place for you to do it. I’m sorry.”

“Fine. Is this my notice?”

“Yes You have until Sunday.”

And so it came to pass that I had to pack up again. Nurturing revenge fantasies against Gazza I sought shelter in East London so as to be closer to work. A Brazilian couple who rented a six bedroom house in Leyton and sublet every room separately gave me a bed in a chamber upstairs that I had to share with another fellow. After the hostel, this seemed like a luxury. I took it at £200 a month, bills included, no deposit. In a pool of sweat I managed to transport my belongings across town, and I settled in in no time. Downstairs lived a fat Moroccan named Mohammed who was a chef in an Italian restaurant, sharing his room with a long-haired Greek, Athanassios, who was a scooter courier for a sushi restaurant. Both were about 30, I thought. We shook hands in a civilised

manner and moved on. They worked a lot, they said, and they were not too hot on conversation. Fine with me, I thought. I shared my room with Ruby, a student from Cameroon, and across the hall from us lived Vanya, a Bulgarian of 24 who worked as a waitress.

There will be a day, sooner or later, Gazza Hattingh, greedy peeping tom and son of Mammon, when you will be duly handed down the justice you deserve. You commit supreme whorings of the soul every night with your little cameras, Gazza, and you know it. You are addicted to it. We are all creatures in your lab maze, your perverse social experiment. On the day you suffer for your crimes, I shall be drinking a can of cold beer, as I normally do, but without knowing exactly why, a subtle peace shall enshroud my mood, and my pineal gland will perk up a little bit because you, Gazza, have been stopped. Until that day, I will nonetheless enjoy leafy High Road Leytonstone, the peace and quiet of my lonely new garden, and the short, comfortable commute to my office.

I bid you goodbye.

G.P.

It felt good sending this note to Gazza on a postcard showing the Tower of London. The Essex Express train zoomed midmorning from Maryland station, past the destitute high rise estates of Bow, abandoned warehouses, football pitches, parking lots and vegetable plots and into the tunnel under the shiny glass buildings that make up the City: I got off at Liverpool Street Station. Rusty leaves now, crispy air already foreshadowing the winter and I'm mulling things, searching for definitions. Busy white-collar workers scuttled by with headphones on and both hands deep in their pockets. The capitalist hive throbs with oatmeal-fed vitality.

“Dear Ileana,

The hostel life was too wild for me. Staying there this summer taught me I have grown older and, I like to think, wiser. I have little time for the tomfoolery I once gave myself up to with reckless abandon. Career is more important these days, and the precious little spare moment that I have I spend practising sports, going to museums or reading. I do all of it thinking of you, and how to make you happy one day.

We have influential clients at the agency, and we work with them to do important research for various projects which often end up on the main agenda of government departments. For instance we did a survey which showed that Hindi was the second-most spoken language in the UK. Hindi is the language of India, Sri Lanka and some parts of Pakistan. Together these countries count more than a billion and a half citizens. We found that there were about 2.3 million of them in the UK, who were either born in these countries or have parents who were born there. They are our main clients. One member of the British parliament who owns a company importing spice in London (for which we handle the advertising) has spoken about our research on television and now we get many more requests from companies who want to sign on.

I have moved in with some like-minded professionals in a quiet neighbourhood half an hour away from the office. I hope you will come over to visit and meet Ruby, a student at the postgraduate school of management, Mohammed, a top chef in an Italian restaurant in Mayfair, who cooks like an artist, and Athanassios, a former journalist in Greece who is now working his way to starting a deliveries business. We get along well together, although we don't have time to kill, except maybe for a few hours at the weekend when we talk politics over some food and a glass of wine in the garden.

It's a four-bedroom one-storey house with whitewashed walls on a street dotted with chestnut trees that look wonderful in the autumn when the leaves turn red and yellow. There are old-fashioned lamps made out of glass and corrugated iron on either side – it's like a classic film.

The neighbourhood is called Leyton Maryland – it's right next to the Olympic Village where they had the Games earlier this year. The changes the Olympics brought to the area are substantial, all the neighbours are saying that life has improved. They brought in more public transport, more street cleaners and they built an entirely new neighbourhood, called the Olympic Village, at the centre of which is the stadium, but there is also a theatre, a cinema and many pubs

and restaurants, plus a big shopping mall – all less than ten minutes from the house. I live in. As an architect I think you'll admire the inventiveness the builders showed.

To get to work I take a train or a bus every morning depending on traffic, but either way it's about half the time it took me before. The bus offers a better view of the city and it's cheaper, but the train is closer to home and it takes a quarter of an hour if it runs on time. I now am able to sleep an hour more than I did before I moved, due to being close to the centre. I feel much more rested and sometimes I believe I am thinking more effectively because of it. The amount I drink and smoke has also considerably reduced, which is good for the budget, as is the raise of salary my boss gave me after I passed the three months probation period. I feel I underestimated work before, it can on occasion be genuinely satisfying. My life feels like it is going somewhere now and there is something waiting for me, for us, beyond the immediate horizon of poverty and bleak choices that I have been used to all my life.

How are your studies going? Hopefully you will visit me in the spring break, I am longing to see you and am saving for your tickets. And please let me know if there is anything I can do for you.

*Ever yours lovingly,
George Palan*

P.S.: please let me know what you think of the pictures I included. One is the house from outside and another, as I hope you can still recognize, is your humble correspondent working diligently at his desk. I wouldn't explicitly say this normally but it has to be done because I can't risk someone opening the letter and stealing from you: I enclose also a hundred pound sterling to relieve your stress at least for a few days. I wish you all the best. G."

As this letter was finding its way to Ileana I was working on an expense report and an overtime invoice after I had spent the previous Saturday in the streets outside a Hindu temple in Wembley promoting a campaign and the weekend that just passed on a cricket ground in Slough for Diwali, a big national holiday in India. On the green I put up a tent, gave free pouches of tumeric to people and cleaned up after the thousands of attendees and their voracious children fled the Diwali Mela. Including the commute it took me 12 hours and the train cost £18 for the round trip. I made out a polite, even humble letter of explanation, to which I attached an invoice for £68 - £50 was my usual day rate for a day's work and the rest was for transport. I apologised a few times and I shrank the figures as much as possible, thinking about them as bitter pills I was feeding my bosses. The smaller and the more innocuous-looking the better the chance they won't spit them out.

“Here, Priti, is an invoice for Saturday. The Mela was a wonderful experience and I am looking forward to attending something like this again,” I told the boss’ wife who was also the event coordinator and in general our boss in his absence.

I slowly placed the paper on her desk facing down as if it was a diagnosis for leukaemia. She gave me the look you give someone who kicks you in the belly. Her face wasn’t naturally beautiful or calm even when she was happy, but when she was angry or upset she looked vicious. She hunched over, her eyes crooked up and her her eyebrows joined other as the final V in a series of three such marks that instantly took shape on her streaking forehead. She pursed her lips the better to soak them in poison, and said:

“£68 is not much money for me George to pay you for half a day’s work but I can’t do it because I thought you’d do it for free. If I knew you would come to me with this invoice on Monday I would have got one of my nieces to help with Diwali Mela. It’s nothing personal but I can’t do it you understand me?”

“But, Priti, with all due respect, it wasn’t a half day’s work. I had to wake up at 7 to be there by 9 and it was not easy standing around all day serving people who were there, plus carrying all the heavy stuff out of the van and putting it back in at the end of it. Plus the cleaning. I arrived home after 10pm and I was quite tired. Now, I never did have the honour of meeting any of your nieces, but unless they are roughly my size, weighing some 85 kilos, and about the same height, I doubt they would have been able to do it.” I said.

“Oh, trust me George, Namita would have beat you to it, ha ha ha. But really, apart from the carrying and the cleaning, how many hours of real work did you actually do? Or do you expect me to pay you for just sitting and drinking chai on the lovely Indian Gymkhana Cricket Ground? People usually pay us to do that, they don’t get paid for it, George, ha, ha, ha,” she croaked.

I stood silent, speechless and humiliated in front of her, hoping she’d come round if I simply did not leave. She continued:

“Tell you what. I’ll pay you for the transport this time but next time you must get my approval in advance before charging me for overtime, okay George?”

“Yes Madam. Thank you.”

Could have been worse. After the lunchbreak spent enjoying a Tesco’s meal deal of orange juice, small vinegar and salt crisps and a soggy chicken breast sandwich in the breeze of a parking lot behind the Royal London Hospital, I was sent out on the prowl by Sandeep, the man who bought newspaper space and radio or television air time for our adverts.

“George, we need you to distribute these invitations by hand to the people on this list. It’s about 30 of them, all VIPs, and we must make a good impression on them so they take time to come to the big event we are organising next Friday. OK?”

“Of course, Sandeep, but I hope you don’t mind me saying that I had a little trouble recovering transport money from the company on account on another event I worked last weekend. So do you think you could help me sort that out this time around?” I asked, hopeful.

“Listen, don’t worry about the expenses, just borrow my Oyster card. But I need you here by six. And here’s £10 for food. Tikke?”

“Thank you very much Sandeep, you’re very kind.”

“Don’t mention it. Now let’s go.”

In my leather jacket, jeans and rundown black jackboots I strutted out with a messenger bag full of 30 gold-leafed, black-envelope invitations and a list I had to tick off. The nearest prospective guest was Charleston Hinduji, one half of the half-Indian money, half-Old English money Hinduji brothers, of Hinduji Industries and Equity fame. Multibillionaires. They had an office at 30 St Mary Axe, the Gherkin building. I went in the reception on the ground floor, unfazed despite being the only one in the large, airy reception hall not wearing a suit.

“I’m here for Charleston Hinduji. He’s expecting me. I’m from Out&About247 advertising,” I told the receptionist.

“Very well sir, will you please tell me your full name?”

“George Palan. P-A-L-A-N.”

“Thank you. Please wait.”

He hunkered down behind the tall counter and whispered something in the phone that I couldn’t make out, then wrote something in a notebook, then picked up the phone and whispered some more. I was looking around as if in a museum. Everything was white, polished and grandiose but amorphous and indefinite. At length, the receptionist beckoned.

“Here is your visitor pass, sir. You will go through security and be escorted to the elevator and to the top floor where Mr Hinduji’s assistant will attend to you presently.”

“Thank you very much,” I said.

A burly, impeccably dressed security guard took me through an airport-style gate and put my bags through a conveyor belt with an x-ray monitor. Then he made me take my shoes off and scanned them with a small, manual machine not too different from a torch, but flat like it had been pounded with a hammer. It was a metal detector, I think. Seemingly satisfied he bid me put my boots back on and took me to the elevators on the other side of the gates. Inside the elevator was another aide, in a red velvet suit and with garters on both forearms.

“Top floor, sir? Come right in please.”

I stepped in carefully. The lift shot up, making my ears go pop. The top floor, 40 stories above ground, was a round glass room which served as a lounge, with a bar and tables from where one could see all of London. I was mesmerized and flustered by the spectacular view. The open sky and the foggy air gave the city a special allure of cold unsentimentality. How small the streets and the cars, even the buses, seemed. How important must one feel to see this every day at work. All business, but majestic and stylish nonetheless. As I pondered the greatness of London beneath, a tall, black man in a black smoking jacket and white gloves came up to me.

“May I be of assistance, sir?” he offered.

I looked him up and down. His shoes were so well-polished I could see my reflection in them more clearly than in the dirty mirror back home.

“Yes, sir. I’m here to give an invitation to the launch of Hindi TV London to Mr Hinduji, on behalf of Out&About247 advertising. It would be an honour for us and for Hindi TV if Mr Hinduji and his distinguished brother could grace us with his presence on Friday, at the Raj hotel in Mayfair. Hindi TV is the Indian BBC, sir,” I rapped nervously.

“Oh, pardon me sir, but I am not here on behalf of your appointment. I am simply wondering if I may give you something to drink. I work at the bar,” the man said, barely containing his amusement.

My shoulders sagged and shame rose up in me.

“No sir, thank you,” I mumbled.

After a little more waiting an unassuming young fellow in a blue suit tapped me on the shoulder and said:

“Sorry mate, I believe you have something for my boss Mr Hinduji,” the cheerful man said.

I stood up and shook his hand, which seemed to surprise him.

“I do. Thank you for having me up here. On behalf of Out&About247 and Hindi TV it is my honour to invite Mr Hinduji and his brother...”

“Sorry mate can I just have the thing? We already got an email from Ashish.”

I handed him the envelope and he turned and disappeared through the dark, upholstered hall. Most of the other deliveries were at offices around Covent Garden, Soho and around Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square. All kinds of bosses, from accountants and lawyers to flamboyant fashion types, politicians, heads of government departments, senior civil servants, journalists, television presenters, and some just obviously rich people of no evident occupation who did nothing for a living and did not know how to do anything. Fancy offices, some with the sleekest computers and most modern Scandinavian furniture, some with dark mahogany wall panels and thick rugs and

paintings of dead sea captains on the walls, some covered in marble and chandeliers. Some people on the list were not there but all of them who were, were forcibly polite but hasteful. And all were South Asian – Indian or Pakistani.

The final drop was in St. James' Park at Lord Spoon, a member of the House of Lords. Before knocking on his big oaken door at his elegant terraced house I spotted him coming from the other end of the street. Lord Spoon, the tumeric tycoon, was strolling up to his smart house with a bag carrier by his side. He was the kindest of all the invitees. He was tall, slender and very very old. I gave him the whole speech but did not dare look him in the eye. When I handed him the letter, he said:

“Thank you very much for taking the trouble to give this to me in person young man, tell Ashish I appreciate and I will certainly attend either myself or through a close assistant, alright? You have a good day.”

Then he shook my hand.

“Thank you milord. I was also present when you gave a most inspired speech in the House of Parliament for our whiskey launch.”

“Oh, is it? What is it that you do for Ashish young man?”

“I am a junior copywriter but I help out a lot with events, promotion, putting up banners. A bit of the heavy lifting.”

“I see. Where are you from then? I can tell you are not from this country.”

“Milord, I am from Romania. I came here to study and work.”

“Good for you. I can see it on you that you are not afraid to work. Don't give up working and stay ambitious, is my advice. They like it in this country. I came here with nothing from India when I was 21 and eventually I built up my own company and got into politics. I will die rich, and my kids will be rich and respected because I was lucky and I worked hard. Fate shines on those who dare. You can do the same. If I did it anyone can, alright son?”

“Yessire, thank you sir, you are most kind.”

Lord Noon gave me a knowing but friendly look and waved at me, allowing me to go. I bowed and retreated. Eventually he entered the house and I tripped on the kerb and fell on the grass. I was too tired to move and I lit a cigarette laying on my back. I had not realised how important India and the Indians were to Britain. They are some of the most important people in this country and I'm working with them now, I thought. I am working with some of the most important people in the country. How lucky I am, I thought.

The next day Washington Golembe, a Protestant reverend by trade who, having lost his congregation when emigrating from Nigeria, got a job with the agency as “faith and charity manager” told me how the party will be organised:

“You and I George will start transporting all the props there today, and we will have a rehearsal on Thursday. Then on Friday when everything will be ready I will greet everyone at the big elephant sculpture at the entrance and you will take their picture as they come in on the red carpet. You are also responsible for the online writeups, before and after the show.”

“Yessir.”

It took us countless trips back and forth from Shadwell to Mayfair to move all the stuff in the taxi we had hired for the day -- banners, carpets, decoration baskets, candles, speakers, cables, lights and tonnes of pamphlets and brochures, but we did it. After the last run was done we went to the hotel’s bar for a drink. Next to us at the bar was a fat man, with an evening suit and oiled white hair. He looked at us and said:

“Cyrus Prod. Businessman.”

“Washington Golembe. Also a businessman,” said the reverend.

Cyrus downed a glass of what looked like Scotch and said:

“Plebs. A clear order keeps their minds busy. The key in sales is to play hard on their insecurities, and now with all the technology of data and media it’s easier than ever to do that. Dirt cheap online. They’re drawn to it like flies to a fresh pile of cowdung. Problem is there’s not much reason to hire people like me to do this kind of work. They get in younger and younger. So does the audience. By the time they hit puberty we’ve messed with their brains so hard they don’t know which way is up anymore. Brands are a powerful thing. All we do is relentlessly bombard them with commercial messages that seek out their weaknesses and tell them they can buy something to make it better. In the end they don’t know what to believe anymore apart from getting more money to buy things. It’s the best contribution these people can make to society. Keep the wheels of commerce turning. Otherwise they’d be just deadbeats but like that they have a place in the world, as consumers. That’s all there is to it. Politicians are in over their heads, so it’s good that business is taking over. You learn how to do a job in uni and you work in the private sector your whole life, and you retire and you live a cozy life, you bother no-one. Before there’d be wars to keep people busy but now it’s all business, no more war. That’s a good thing, right Washington?”

“Yes, Cyrus, Couldn’t agree more. I do believe you are in the advertising business.”

“No. Marketing. Sales. I sell big data from the Internet. I saw the future and got into it from the ground up. My company collects it and packages it up for different clients and it’s my job to find the clients. Fascinating work. Some of it should be illegal. We get very shocking and personal

information about people sometimes but the law has not idea how far this thing is advanced. I mean nobody talks about it. Nobody's clued up to this industry. You pay some tax and get them to speak at some event and everyone's happy, nobody's asking questions. So we make money hand over fist and people can't understand why they get these animalistic urges to buy things all of a sudden. We're latched to their back brain like a tike on a cat's ear, lemme tell you. The Internet is the best thing ever happened to business."

"Indeed," Washington said. "I do believe you are here for the Hindi TV reception?"

Cyrus plod nodded. We finished our half pints of Guinness and moved off.

On the Friday in question I presented myself four hours early to the hotel in order to help with the heavy lifting. I wore black velvet trousers, Converse shoes, a red shirt with no tie and in the breast pocket of my gray jacket – the one I inherited from Larry – I put the only red rosebud I could salvage out of the 300 roses Washington made me rip the petals off of and "sprinkle around the yard". The murder of the roses was a more laborious and less enjoyable task than one would imagine the pointless destruction of something beautiful being. I always thought that I would enjoy burning Stanley Kubrick paintings just to watch the sparks, or take a cricket bat to a new Bentley just to hear the metal cracking up, but the rose experiment made me think twice. The open bar served free, expensive drinks such as Johnny Walker Black Label and Bollinger champagne. There were scantily-clad waitresses passing around intricately-prepared finger foods. Gymnasts, caricaturists and belly dancers were responsible for the entertainment. Soft, breezy elevator music and the tea lights everywhere were meant to create a mellow atmosphere, but as the hotel's yard darkened with the coming of the night, the guests got drunker and rowdier. One Indian marketing tycoon was groping two waitresses at a time while joking around with a TV anchor from prime-time British news, and nobody seemed to notice. People were drowning in booze. There was a speech by the director of Hindi TV at one point, but nobody noticed it – everyone had their back turned except some workers who were paid to applaud. At about 3am, drunk and tired, I was finishing up the packing with Washington.

"It can be a hands-on business, advertising, can't it?" he asked.

"Funny old business, I said. Do you ever think of going back to the lectern" I asked.

"No, there's no money in it in this country. In Nigeria I was rich and respected as a minister of the church. My flock would eat up every word I said and they would shower me in cash and presents and favours everywhere they saw me. But here I'm lucky if I catch an émigré parish in some poor South London neighbourhood and I'd have to live on grants from charities. No driver, no servants... At least in this job there's some perspective on things."

“That’s an interesting use of the word perspective. I would think in the faith and solving people’s problems, helping them walk in the righteous path and finding the light in their lives you could be more in perspective.”

In Hyde Park Corner the wind was wooshing through the underpasses and between the legs of the Wellington Arch and the columns of the Ionic Screen making a whistling sound that was most eerie in the heavy silence just before dawn. A lazy car coasted by now and then. We sought the night bus.

“From what you say it’s clear to me that you have never seen the practicalities of organised religion, George, my son. The Church, like everything else, is a bureaucratic organisation, and you don’t get to spend a lot of time with people to help them solve their problems. Also, most people will be too proud to bring you their problems. It’s mostly old ladies who get bored and ex-criminals trying to stay out of trouble, if you’re lucky. The rest of the time you spend counting up money and kicking much of it back upstairs to the superiors in the hierarchy. There are some priests who manage to look on the brightside and avoid cynicism but I’m not one of them. Now pass me those bags and let’s get outta here. By the way, I’m not coming in tomorrow until 12. You shouldn’t either.”

“I’m with you, father.”

The bus trudged and harrumphed at leisurely pace down the avenues and we dozed off with our necks crooked on the hard plastic chairs before we reached the Aldwych. Washington, at least, was sincere, if not honest, which is more than I could say for most of the other people who were in this business, or, I suspected, this city. Nobody was honest, but most of them were self-important, pretentious windbags who thought of themselves as geniuses or heroes in one way or another. Here’s the press release we put out the next day:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE TO ALL OUTLETS

Hindi TV holds lavish party to mark UK launch

24th November

Hindi TV, India’s premier news channel, hosted a gala evening to announce its newly-expanded presence in the UK at the fittingly glamorous Raj Hotel, London, Mayfair.

The evening was hosted by uber-stylish Vivika Anandur and the UK’s most prominent corporate executives, advertisers and celebrities were in attendance to celebrate. India National

Bank Regional Head Mr Shailesh Mahtapetra, Virgin Media Director of Content and Acquisition Jemma Stones, Vice President of the Somaliland Trade Mission to London, Mr Abdulrahman Ismail and the CEO of Honda England Mr Kunnijal Punar, were some of the distinguished guests.

An unannounced appearance by Bollywood's biggest music icon, gold-laden Lippi Bahiri, a LIVE cooking demonstration by Michelin-star Chef Manoj Seevaram – the host of the ground-breaking reality series, Munchistan, and a scintillating flash mob dance performance, were among the many unique surprises of the glamorous night.

Hindi TV was first broadcast in the UK on Virgin Satellite Networks to a great reception. However, last night was a chance for the team to reveal that a new bureau of the Indian media giant has been permanently opened in the plush London suburb of Slough on the same day. Hindi TV chairman Balaji Dhaliwal took the opportunity to thank and celebrate with all its supporters in the UK.

Continuing to spread the news, the channel has been engaging viewers in the UK with its award-winning coverage of world politics, sport, culture and lifestyle from a uniquely Indian perspective. Speaking on the occasion, Jameela Chakrabarti, CEO of Hindi TV News said, “We are delighted to see the affinity enjoyed by our channel in the short period of a few months. We endeavour to offer the best in news programming and transcend borders with innovative formats and offerings.”

Kobani Balema Khanna, Creative Head of Hindi TV Lifestyle, added: "Hindi TV presents a multitude of shows that touch upon different genres such as food, travel, fashion, music, technology and more. News sits at the heart of it all, bringing the brands together under a solid roof. The channel aims to offer world-class news and aspirational programming that advocates living the good life."

Key event sponsor of the gala was private equity firm PVK, which is making its foray into the entertainment industry. Peedak Haramwalla, CEO of PVK, participated in a Q&A with journalists at the event to discuss his forthcoming projects in partnership with the entertainment industry, which include the financing of two Hollywood blockbuster movies with the producer of Rocky 3 and an upcoming collaboration with the Hollywood legend Al Pacino.

Speaking at the occasion, Peedak said, “PVK has recently ventured into new and numerous projects and strategic alliances with the entertainment industry. We are extremely excited to be part of Hindi TV’s launch in the UK. This has been a very successful night.”

Hindi TV is now available to Virgin subscribers on Channel 923. It is also available across international markets such as US, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives and Africa.

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Note to editors: About Hindi TV – Mumbai & New Delhi TV

Hindi TV News is the flagship channel of Hindi TV Broadcasting, part of the Hindi TV Group.

Launched in 1988, Hindi TV quickly became India's top-ranked English-language news television channel – rapidly drawing in its target audience of accurately informed, socially upbeat, well travelled, cosmopolitan viewers who live in style, adore fashion, are adventurous about food and shopping and want more out of every moment in life with both back-packing and high-flying budgets.

Hindi TV presents world-class, aspirational lifestyle programming that advocates living large – giving its viewers affirmative mantras for how to enjoy food, find good health through salsa and yoga and fashion, on platforms both Indian and global, how to relish in luxury, present or future. The line-up of shows across our brand menu covers every aspect of life to portray and cater to an increasingly global India.

The programming offers fresh, original content while constantly working with new, engaging out-of-the-box formats such as social media and viral digital content.

Hindi TV has won several programming awards at the Indian Television Academy Awards, Indian Telly Awards & World Media Festival. The Channel is present across all major analogue cable markets & all six DTH platforms in India.”

Seeing this text splashed on a large piece of paper ready to be sent out to all major media triggered an automatic mental note to start seeking writing skills improvement elsewhere as a matter of pressing urgency. I hadn't written the whole thing, it had been a collaborative effort. I knew I wrote badly, but what really bothered me was that no-one else around me wrote well. No, my superiors, together, had written it with me, and they had noisily congratulated themselves for it all morning, while Prasant, the public relations manager, was chasing me through the kitchen like a streak of bad luck to give me more work.

“Peed phoned me and said to bring you into his account, George. He said he liked how you carried yourself at the launch. This can be a good opportunity to advance your career, you know. You know he is a millionaire, don't you?” Prasant said, in a most irritating perfect Oxford English

accent which was all the more ominous when he switched it at a second's notice to a deep, grizzly, Hindi sneer when he wanted to intimidate our colleagues.

He was young, thin, camp, two-faced, morally debased and voraciously ambitious. Some kids grow up wanting to be artists or politicians and they end up being PR agents, but Prasant, who graduated with a Master's degree from University College London and had been a member of Mensa, had always wanted to be a PR agent.

"Prasant, to be honest with you I don't know how I can help your client. I'm a junior copywriter here, officially. Unofficially I am a valet. I write blogs and do the heavy lifting at events. I have zero responsibility and experience. Tell Peedak Haramwalla that he's got me wrong. I can't see any way I can be useful to him, however much I'd want to, alright?" I said, calmly sipping black instant coffee.

"George, don't be silly. Peed told me he saw you at the party and he liked your calm under pressure. He saw something in you. Just put on a shirt tomorrow and bring a camera along to this meeting we're having. Peed is signing a deal with Johnny Rit from Mony Pictures. Just keep your mouth shut and take pictures."

"Sorry, Prasant, but although I might in a pinch be able to produce a shirt, I don't have a camera. Why don't you get Sam? He knows how to take pictures."

"OK, sod it. I'm done pleading with you. Tomorrow, at 11am you are coming with me to Mony in Golden Square. I'll get you a camera. Consider it an order from Ashish."

"We'll see what Ashish has to say about that," I protested. The basement kitchen had an echo because all its walls were made of plasterboard.

But sure enough, by the time I started up my computer a half hour later, a short and clearly expressed email from the managing director and owner of Out&About247, Mr Ashish Naikundlia, commanded my attention. "FOR TOMORROW: DIRECT ASSIGNMENT" read the subject line. "George, please do as Prasant says. You may collect the professional camera from my office, and I'm looking forward to seeing the snaps. Regards, Ashish." I was powerless.

Peedak Haramwalla is a short and portly man with incipient baldness and small, lively black eyes and unusually long lashes. His permanently wet lips give any interlocutor the unmistakable feeling that there are serpents in proximity when he speaks in his soft, lispy voice and when he is nervous he fiddles with his silk scarf – another permanent Haramwalla fixture. Despite leading an exceptionally unremarkable life, Haramwalla enjoys unexplainable links to the Conservative Party

of the UK, thanks to his father's colonial roots. During the final days of the British Indian Empire, just before Indian independence, Haramwalla senior used his local influence in the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra to help the fading rulers save face by exporting their arms and illegally confiscated gold and other riches through his trading company, as banal civil equipment, sugar and tea, back to Britain. He made out handsomely and was welcomed by the British establishment for it. The ink was not dry on India's statehood declaration when he moved to London, Prasant said, where he orchestrated arms trading for both India and newly-formed Pakistan. Now his whole clan lives in Surrey, spending millions through Peedak's private equity company, and climbing their way ever further through London towards anything smelling like high office. Peedak tried twice for Parliament and failed, and his father tried once. Democracy seemed to work against them, no matter how much help they got from their influential friends. We waited for him to arrive at the office, and fashionably late, he did.

When he shook my hand in the back of his chauffeur-driven black Mercedes S-class, his wet, cold clasp infected me with angst, and without directly wanting to follow Prasant's advice and be silent, I found myself unable to utter a sound. Prasant on the other hand, sitting in the front seat by the driver, was radiant, and couldn't stop talking.

"This could be big, Peed. We can have apps, games, merchandising, spinoff shows, you name it. You could be the next judge on *The Apprentice* if this works to our plan," Prasant said. "They'll be begging you to go into politics."

Haramwalla was thinking, he didn't talk at all, but that didn't stop Prasant powering on with the supplicant flattery. I looked out the dark-tinted window into a city I understood less and less the more I knew about it.

"That's right, Peed. I'm working on a digital business plan with George here, to launch a series of apps and games for smartphones based on the deal you're about to strike with Johnny Rit." Prasant said. "The reality show you are starring in will spark a whole industry."

"I've got the software developers on standby," he added.

His soliloquy was rudely interrupted by the radio, announcing the Bollywood to Battersea tour of the Libertines. "In other news, Prime Minister David Cameron is set to announce that if he gets re-elected he will put the UK's membership of the European Union to an in-out referendum, the BBC reported this morning, citing well-placed political sources," the radio said.

"Turn that off, driver," Prasant said. The driver obeyed.

At length we turned from Piccadilly Circus into the tranquillity of Golden Square and walked into the white stucco Mony Entertainment building, which like Ali Baba's cave turned out to be immensely larger on the inside than it appeared from out. Three cinemas, a conference room, a cafeteria, all on the ground floor, were littered with two metre-high rubber statues of comic book characters and a hive of workers and bodyguards patrolled around. We were escorted to the gold-plated lift and then to the top floor. Johnny Rit, a rugby player-sized Indian with a middle path through his ponytailed hair, greeted us in a grey suit almost as shiny and rigid as tinfoil.

"Peedak, it's a pleasure too see you. After knowing each other so long we finally do business together. Our late fathers would be proud of us," he boomed. "Siddown."

"Johnny, thank you, you are right. May God rest them in peace, our fathers would indeed be happy to see us walking together in the same friendship and business that they once had," Haramwalla slithered. "In that respect, and with consideration to our shared history, I come to you with a proposal."

"Let's get to it then. I'm a straight talker. An action man. I don't like mucking about, beating around the bush, so... I know you want me to put you together with my friends in the Tory party who have somewhat ignored you since your dad died. Correct?" said Rit.

"Well, er, John, if you put it that way, I wouldn't mind, of course if you could do that. I mean it's no secret that, er... but I'm here to talk about TV..."

"It's no secret you want to be a peer or at least an MP, is it Dee? If you sponsor this reality show for me through your private equity firm we'll go have dinner with my dead friend Chancellor of the Exchequer Ken Bordcorn tomorrow evening. He doesn't know what the hell he's talking about half the time, but he is a very powerful man and if you are seen with his hand around your neck you will instantly shoot upwards in life and in business." Rit was positively rhetorical by now, gesturing with his hand like at a speech.

I sat in a corner of the room awkwardly, wishing I had a way of recording this exchange. Suddenly the thick, broad and polished span of dark wood with slim stainless steel legs trembled under Rit's punch.

"If George likes you, we'll go see the PM at Chequers after that, okay? Then it'll only be a matter of time until you get nominated for what you want. I helped them get elected by the Indian community with my newspaper and Mony, so they owe me," he said. "And you get to be on television as well. Win-win, Peed."

“That would be great, Johnny, thanks. What I was thinking in terms of the show, was a five hundred thousand sponsorship, plus one of my hotels in India as a set for free, all comped, where you could get a number of Bollywood actors and celebrity friends of mine to come film with us. We’ll add my company’s name to the credits as co-producers and you’ll get to keep the ad revenue and connected income without any investment at all. That’s a win-win for you, my dear friend. But,” and here he took his thin voice even lower, almost to a whisper, “I have a friend from Yemen for whom it is also very important to meet Osborne soon, in order to leverage this relationship back home. He is in the defense and security business and as you know things have been heating up with the Saudis,” Peedak said.

“A million and you’re on. I’ll have to get the friend vetted by the security services first but if he clears it’s no problem,” Rit said. “We can’t risk getting someone from some watchlist somewhere in Jacksonville at the same table with the Chancellor. That would be bad for everyone, you understand.” Rit was now looking dead serious.

“Of course, John. I wouldn’t put you on the spot like that. He will clear,” Peedak said.

He took out a business card from his breast pocket and on the back of it with a Mont Blanc pen he scribbled something, then pushed the card over to Rit on the other side of the table.

“This is the name of my friend and the company he owns in the UK. Have him checked out. Meanwhile I’m putting the million in escrow for us, yes? My assistant, Prasant here, has the papers, and the initial concept outline for the first three episodes. On this, as you know, we are flexible.”

“Wonderful. You’re a plain dealer just like me, Dee. I love it.”

Rit took the papers from Prasant and looked at them.

“Oh, you naughty devil, you left a blank space next to the final sum here I can see. I wonder how much were you willing to pay in the end, huh?”

He laughed and signed. Haramwalla signed too. Now they sat up and got together and embraced at the far end of the table in front of a wall-sized picture of spread-out casino chips. They shook hands over the contract and had me take a picture. We then left. Rit showed us the door, Haramwalla took his car alone and Prasant and I went to the tube. He went towards his neighbourhood of St John’s Wood and I towards mine of Stratford, where I stopped at a pub for a double whisky before braving the rancid smog. I bought six cans of lager from the corner shop with the last of my money, fixed myself a ham sandwich and drank until numb. This was a different kind of wrong than in the old country, but not altogether too different to be recognized for what it was.

The crows gathered on the fence outside and crooned and flapped their wings in unsynchronised movements, now looking up, now down, now sideways. There is nothing that cannot be corrupted in this world of ours by a stray half-truth. The wind blew the raindrops like little bullets in the plastering and the windowglass, tat, tat, tat, millions of shots pulverized on impact.

We were also hired, meanwhile, by Rit, to do “opposition research” on Haramwalla. It had been Prasant’s idea. Despite Haramwalla being our client, this didn’t strike any of the bosses as a conflict of interest because on paper it was a Seychelles-based company owned by a cousin of the managing director who got paid. And there’s no legal privilege in advertising anyway. We just did the legwork and presented an unsigned report. The main findings of the report were that Haramwalla was at best a weak businessman and at worst a confident artist, who had disappointed many partners and left behind a trail of bankrupt firms and unpaid obligations on three continents.

In the Indian press, just before being awarded a 2.8 billion rupee contract to replenish some of the country’s military barracks, he was being hailed as a selfless hero who had personally and single-handedly saved a dozen children from the smouldering rubble of Hotel Mumbai on the night of the recent terrorist bombings. However, after the army contract expired, an intrepid journalist went and spoke to the parents of these children only to find out that they had been paid to hail Haramwalla as their hero. They were in reality recovered from the ashes by firefighters, but Peedak claimed the credit in order to ingratiate himself with the government. It worked.

This journalist was ruined by selling this story to a tabloid which didn’t pay and didn’t publish was now working as a restaurant manager in Kerala, Prasant and I found, simply by making phone calls. It was amazing how easy it was to find things out about people if you tried to. We tracked him down, flew him to London at Rit’s expense and recorded a testimony of the events described by the families of the children. Rit said he would keep this film in case Haramwalla does make it into elected office, “by some Satanic miracle”. Our firms name would be kept off the books on this one, he assured us. We had red wine to celebrate a job well done when it was over. We left the office late.

London nights can read your mind at times, or at least, following centuries of experience the city has with the feeble nature of humans, it can give a good hint. At eleven o’clock under a heavy sky in a black Bentley sat a man in a suit parked outside the Troxy ballet hall on Commercial Road in Limehouse. From a tinfoil through a straw he was sucking in thick sickly yellow smoke of heroin he burned up with a lighter underneath, with great dexterity and focus despite the distraction of me passing by. I stopped and looked directly at him. He looked back but showed no emotion. Slow

instrumental music rang from the speakers of his car. Getting off the light rail train in Stratford, I walked up Leytonstone High Road, as usual making a pitstop at the Turkish off license for some beer. Still breathing the rough air from outside which scratched my throat like sandpaper I entered and said hello. Hello, said the man behind the counter, slouching on a chair, watching Turkish soap operas on a portable television set. In a corner of the shop huddled between sacks of potatoes and crates of fizzy drink a bitonal slot machine rang optimistically, its flashing screen promising easy winnings “from players to players”. A dank smell drove me away from the meats section. A woman in a red dress walked in. I looked at this striking woman from the other side of the shop, behind the crisps section. Her companion, a stout and fat man with hair as long as his stubble, a thick neck and a leather jacket, followed in her steps. An old Skoda with loud electronic Turbofolk playing through the ajar door, mud all over the dark-tinted windows, waited for them outside with the engine still purring as steadily as any Skoda engine its age ever purred. She walked up to me and handed me a business card, then she went to the shopkeeper and gave him another. The chaperone put a stack of cards on the side of the counter.

“You don’t mind if we spread a bit of business, do you, brother?” asked the fellow.

A waning crescent moon on red silk background lured to fuzzy type saying: “Candy secret dreams, EXOTIC MASSAGE & DANCING,” on one side of the card, and on the reverse: “In call and out-call 24/7”. Below that, a phone number.

“This must be expensive,” I said, in the general direction of the three.

The knackered whore wrinkled up at me and said fiercely:

“Oh yes baby, I am expensive.”

She had a distinctly Balkanic accent, like the man’s, maybe even Romanian. She looked me in the eye for a second, I held her gaze, she had green eyes, then both her and her friend walked out.

“You gonna try boss?” the shopkeeper asked me. “I think I might try at the weekend.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll try,” I said. “I tried once before in Amsterdam and it’s not really my thing.”

“You shy?” He laughed.

“Apparently I am, I don’t know.”

At home, Ruby was watching loud Nigerian films on his computer in the room so I went downstairs. The TV in our living room couldn’t catch good reception. A mouse slowly traversed the

tiled floor, and the bulb in the kitchen went out before me. The shower had broken the week before and it was yet to be fixed. We took baths and the tub was now filthy. The Internet connection wasn't good either, because most everyone in the house was watching either pirated films, or football or foreign TV. Trying to ignore an encroaching headache, I opened a beer and got to work on my next assignment: a blog post about the positive effects of London Fashion Week on the city's 'sharing economy'. Sharing economy is a euphemism one bright spark in an ad agency invented to define workers that are treated as contractors to be shared between employers, but for whom nobody takes responsibility. Soldiers of fortune in the digital consumerist market. At night you deliver hot meals on your bicycle, in the afternoon you pick people up in your car from an app and drive them around and in the morning you translate travel reviews written by Brazilian students into English, on an outsourcing website. Inbetween you masturbate a lot and if you're lucky you pay rent. If not you live with your parents, in their council house. If you get sick it's the taxpayer's problem. You are barely a taxpayer at all so you don't worry. I yearned for a mellow anaesthesia that never came.

“As Somerset House gears up to host yet another flamboyant London fashion week, it's not only the style-conscious denizens of our capital who rejoice. Traders, taxi drivers, restaurateurs and retailers, among many others, are celebrating the coming windfall too, especially since the advent of the sharing economy – a digital blessing for all entrepreneurs. And most of the participants are from the ethnic community of our great city,” I began.

Good, solid lede. Now I have to think about putting the growing house maintenance problems gently to the landlord while not reminding him that my own rent was late for two weeks.

Othertimes the clients were more eccentric, as I thought was the case with The Heart Warriors. Two women who I suspected were secret lesbians obtained a contract for internet promotion from our agency by virtue of their knowing a few of my colleagues from a yoga class. So off I went on another glum rainy day to meet them for coffee in Cafe Nero in Bishopsgate. They were both Texans, originally, they explained, but since becoming Sikh Warriors they renounced their American roots and changed their names, embarking on a journey around the world together to teach yoga, do 'life coaching' and hold motivational lectures. In contrast with the basic, modest common decency that I believed, after a half-hour's Wikipedia reading, lay at the foundation of the Sikh faith, the two Warriors cut a more dramatic figure. Both wore turbans and pointy shoes, as well as swords like Jannisaries, and both had more hair in their armpits and on their legs than I'd ever before seen on a woman. In fact they were hairier than me. And I consider myself a hairy man.

Their names were Shakasan Amritap, which I misspelt initially as Armpita because of the openly bushy density she so proudly carried, and Babanat. Shakasan's specialty is 'life coaching' - which she defines as "taking people into success and into lives that they love" and she often speaks in schools and colleges (for pay) attempting to bestow the Sikh wisdom on the lost youths of London. She got into this work after seeing a woman one day in 1999 "who just looked like she had things together. She drove a sweet little car and was stylish and balanced. She had a really open heart," Shakasan said over water and espressos. She approached this woman and she eventually became Shakasan's mentor, introducing her to "a transformational process of self-analysis, goal-setting and planning."

"Essentially taking responsibility for your own life and who you are on this planet," Babanat cut in. Shakasan and I nodded.

"It was hard at first, but I forged ahead," Shakasan continued. "The next step was meditation, which brought out tremendous humility in me. I didn't have much experience in humility. My mentor introduced me to deeper and deeper layers of my own reality and showed me how to create my own life. After this self-exploration stage I was introduced to a guru who initiated me into the practice of Kundalini yoga, to awaken consciousness into my physical body. First the mind, then the body then the soul unlocked. The Sikh path came about."

Babanat met Shakasan three years before. Babanat was a lonely and secluded child, she said, who drew horses and made up songs about God, of the Christian variety, as a Roman Catholic.

"I had an unusual connection to nature and animals, especially horses, which I rode on the ranch I lived on in Texas since I was five. I suffered from depression in my childhood and this continued for most of my life," Babanat said.

She has shimmering, tender lips and big eyes wet with sadness.

She went on: "I didn't really know the difference between what everyone else felt and what I felt. Being put into special classes in school made me even more lonesome, but on the upside made me discover a creative side to myself which I developed over time."

At this, Shakasan coughed gently and scratched her nose while fixing her look on a distant point on the ceiling.

"My friends wondered why I went to different classes than them, classes with children suffering from Down syndrome and autism. It was because my introversion was taken for an affliction," she confessed. "Back in then they didn't know what to do with kids like me."

The pain kept coming for Babanat.

“When I was about 19 I had a near-death experience.”

I insisted she get over her reluctance to talk about this trauma.

“I was sure it was the end,” she said after a pause she took to gather her strength. “Let’s just say I had a stalker. It’s been difficult but it was in the end a life experience. I learned and grew from it. At the time though I didn’t know how to deal with it because I was having depression. They had me on antidepressants which I took for a month during which I was like a zombie. I couldn’t laugh, I couldn’t cry, I couldn’t do anything. So I followed my intuition and said to myself you don’t need this, you’ll be alright, and I gave up the medication. My mother gave me the greatest gift of my life, which is prayer.”

Embarrassed by the derailing, I interjected:

“How about that stalker though, Babanat?”

“I can’t talk about it. But when I was 20 I moved to New York to an artistic community where I finally felt like I belonged. I had found my people, my rat pack. But after a while this circle got into hard drugs and I didn’t want to do that so I didn’t belong with them anymore. I only had a glass of wine, just typical, normal things. They were taking heroin and cocaine,” she recalled.

“I see,” I said. “Must be difficult. How long after you moved in with them did they start taking heroin and cocaine?” I wondered.

“About two months. But my relationship with horses lasted through all of this and I became a horseriding instructor in Brooklyn. I did that for a while. The city boxed me in so I took up poetry to escape from it and then I moved on to a creative job in Los Angeles, California with the TV station Comedy Central.”

“How lovely,” I said. “That must have been wonderful.”

“Well, it was for a few weeks but then I started to awake from my sleep every night between two-thirty and four am for no apparent reason and that affected my work. Only after a while I realised this was Sikhi Amrit Vela, or the ambrosial time, the best time for meditation. I was already a vegetarian and growing my hair when this was happening. This set me on the Sikh path and then I became the warrior saint that I am today.”

Shakasan, overtaking, said: “I experienced the same kind of sleep disturbances but my reaction was inconsolable crying with no level of possible comfort from the outside world, like the

soul's yearning to be felt. Of my one thousand different jobs the one I held at the time was a barista role in a coffee shop next to a book store. I asked the man in the book store on my break about my predicament and he suggested I should look towards the East. It took a few more signals pointing me in that direction for me to finally align my thoughts completely with the East. Life does that, it's what we call spiritual alignment. When you align your thoughts, your words and your actions with money for example, there is a good chance that you might attract money in your life."

"Is that a fact?" I jumped. "How does one align with money?"

"Money is just energy, and especially the way that we use money is just a game that we play with a bunch of numbers. But this very game creates a void of upset and depression and lack inside of people, subconsciously feeling that they'll never get enough, like they're behind the ball. Basically the Sikh Dharma and this whole consciousness that we're working on is about stopping the chase, not just for money but for anything."

"Sorry, let me please get this right. So in order for one to start having money, as opposed to, say, being dirt poor and even having to shoplift sometimes for sustenance, one simply has to renounce trying to obtain money and instead wait in a dignified manner for money to arrive to him. Can you kindly elaborate on that?"

"It's something like that, except you don't just wait doing nothing," Shakasan graciously explained. "To these people who say they've got to find themselves or they're looking for themselves, we say, call off the search. Just be completely present inside of what is right now. The thing you're looking for is looking for the thing you're looking for. Like asking your keys to help you find your keys," she offered.

"It's an end in itself, is it?" I sought to clarify.

"There's this beautiful analogy we were talking about the other day – of an ocean, and scooping up a cup of water out of it then convincing ourselves those two waters are separate. We are in this physical body now, we are in form, we have an ego, but what we're trying to do is place the glass back into the ocean. You already are the ocean, so we are having you see that you are that."

"Is that the gratification you obtain from your work? Helping people come to these realisations?" I wondered. I need not have bothered.

“It is not about gratification or getting a reward or my emotions being fulfilled in some way. You have a lock and I have a key. Use the key to get in, I’m not doing anything personally, I just know which key to tell you to put in the lock. It’s mutual, it’s beautiful.”

Babanat, in a brief pause for breath on Shakasan’s part, picked up the baton: “It has to be selfless too. It’s an instant balance.”

Regaining her pace, Shakasan interrupted her with a sidelong glance: “Now you turned the question on me and asked what I am chasing. I have adopted children. I had to keep looking at that. Was I adopting kids because I wanted to pat myself on the back, oh you’re such a nice person, or can I really serve my children and grow these souls that I am taking into my life? It can’t be about filling some emotional gap of my own, but about whether I can really uplift and serve these human beings or not. My son is my greatest teacher in that respect. He is always asking for what he wants and is really straight about it, so he challenged me a lot. When he was a baby he looked up to me with his little eyes and was like, can I have some milk, and something instantly just turned on inside of me. And it went on from there. My body produced milk for him.”

I laid back with my third coffee, and noted down: instant breast milk. There was no more need to ask questions of the Soul Warriors. They were laying the world bare before my eyes without me having to make the slightest effort. The record picked it all up:

“We created this drama around ourselves, but we should look at it and see if it adds any value to our life? I asked myself where am I most valuable on this planet. It was fun being a party girl and having everyone cheer up around me, and there’s nothing wrong with being that girl, but I only have a limited amount of time on this planet. What I want is to be viable, useful.”

Babanat now: “We did this exercise where we had to write an obituary we wouldn’t like for ourselves, and I wrote it and it said that I had very much potential but didn’t fulfil it. She had so much potential, it said. Thinking about being given this precious breath of life, these amazing tools, I’ve got to become a master. Not just entertain people but become a master over my own mind, of my soul value.”

“Sorry, is that soul value?” I asked.

“Soul value,” replied Babanat. I wrote down: SOUL VALUE.

She went on: “Epiphanies continue to come through the people that you meet, that’s the gift of relating to people. As a teacher I am attracting different types of students than other teachers, because we have so many levels of our psyche going, and our minds work in loops, the past, the

present, the future and so on to infinity. It connects the dots and the soul wants that too, to attract people that you can relate to.”

Shakasan spoke: “It’s also about being conscious of your environment and what you put in your body. Being on this spiritual path keeps you responsible of that.”

Babanat: “It’s sort of like mirrors on a car. Life coaching is about asking the right questions, seeing your blind spots, parts about yourself that you weren’t able to see. It’s not a person telling you what to do or how to decide. We doubt ourselves because of something happened to us when we were six years old, instead of remembering that we are the ocean.”

Shakasan: “Life coaching is basically taking a person from where they are to where they want to be. It can either be a spiritual goal or simply doing more for the community. Or people wanting to have more freedom but don’t know how to get it, or they just feel stuck and they want to get unstuck. Having a life coacher can be a very valuable tool. The more intact your peace is when you come out of a situation, the better. You know how some people are stuck in marriages that go on for years but they are miserable? Why not be madly in love? We can shift that, the goal is to get through it with your integrity intact.”

“Or your own impression of your integrity at least,” I venture.

Without missing a beat or acknowledging what I said, she continued: “We have been to Birmingham, Leicester, Southampton. We are going to Coventry, maybe Wales, but tomorrow we are going to France.”

“Wales is wonderful, I gather” I interjected, “but Coventry is less so. Coventry is a bad place, it’s where chavs come from. There are lots of chavs there, and they carry knives too, like you, but I don’t think they care very much for their soul value or their integrity’s state of repair. They might take your teachings the wrong way.”

“This tour,” Shakasan smiled enigmatically, “is very Sikh-based, all about the Dharma and the warrior-saint path. We don’t get much attendance from non-Sikhs.”

“Right. Please tell me about the path of the warrior saint.” I requested.

“Now we’re talking,” said Shakasan, stirring and perching up on her soft chair, somewhat alarmingly. “This is a good conversation. We need to inspire people to be their saint selves and to be their warrior selves. Some think that is contradictory. But we can explain it. We are in fact two of the very few women on this journey, actively raising awareness of their warrior-saint selves.”

Babanat, looking concerned with her eyes peeled up all of a sudden, intervened correctively:

“And being highly feminine at the same time, because there is a fine line. We are not trying to be men. We are very feminine, the warrior is all in the mind. it’s not about swords on the battlefield, although we carry these swords,” she smiled with a bit of embarrassment, barely detectable, brandishing the ceremonial knife.

I asked: “So you, very femininely of course, travel the world to raise awareness of yourselves as saints who are also warriors?”

“Exactly,” Shakasan said confidently just as Babanat was preparing to say something which might have been quite contrary by the look of annoyance she put on when she head her associate once again interrupting her.

Shakasan, unfazed, and with patient tolerance towards her partner, told me that “being a warrior comes from an alertness and a readiness in your physical body to defend and protect yourself and those around you. The warrior has a strong ability to sacrifice. Because of the pressure of the times, because the world is moving so fast in both negative and positive ways there is turmoil everywhere. Like never before since the dawn of time people are able to communicate using technology. But you have more people than ever who are stressed out, depressed, angry and they can inflict that damage to others just as fast as they communicate. Unconsciously, consciously, subconsciously – all the time. We see people every day strapping bombs to themselves and being incredibly committed to negativity and darkness. We have the same level of commitment and dedication to the light and to peace. Somebody has to be able to meet that darkness with light. That is the warrior’s peace and we don’t see too many examples of people who are dedicated to it. Many are just like, I would show up to the rally to demonstrate for a few hours but I’ve got work at five. We appreciate very much the activity of Occupy Wall Street and the civil unrest all around the world. This is a warrior’s act – being willing to meet dark power with light power.”

“You are therefore thinking of stopping terrorism and abuse of political and financial power using life coaching.”

Again Shakasan ploughed ahead: “This tour is about encouraging people to step up and create resistance in the name of the light. Somebody’s gotta do it but it’s gotta be done the right way. There are many who jump into a fight just because everyone’s doing it and that isn’t right.”

Babanat: “This is where the consciousness comes in – you have your compassion and your charisma intact. On the Sikh path we defend everybody. The most valuable weapon we have is our mind and our meditation practice which also builds a strong mind and an ability to hold peace. The

sword that we carry represents a few different things. It's called the bringer of grace, the only weapon with which you can hold peace is humility, not the ego, it's really being on a basis of love. The sword represents force, commitment, readiness. When somebody draws a sword, you know that there's action about to take place. Being ready to act if somebody is being persecuted and dominated. Step in right away."

"There is probably a predatory instinct lurking in some form in everybody, so to use that aggressivity to protect people rather than enrich yourself is admirable," I said.

"Even before drawing the sword, we are trying to make sure people are clothed, people are fed, people have access to freedom. People have these angry outbursts looking for victims because of repression. People are less likely to rebel if they have clean water and all the bare necessities. I haven't seen any war starting because people have bought a cheeseburger and it didn't have cheese in it. When it starts it means that their needs aren't being met in a huge way."

"Have you seen many wars starting?"

Shakasan, ignoring me but talking to me at the same time:

"Like forced vaccinations for example. If we can go to battle with that fundamental stuff then it doesn't even escalate."

"If you prevent children from getting vaccinated peace will reign on the world? I guess the Huns and the Mongols were vaccinating their kids like crazy."

Babanat now: "We are now in a perfect place. When our banking systems shut down, when people are feeling their liberties taken away from them they see that this external world is an illusion, and you find more people wanting to meditate and do yoga. This razzle-dazzle and glitter in the world's eyes making us think everybody's been going on fine is disappearing. It's a good thing that people are being confronted with their problems that way, because it will force them to rethink life and find a way to live sustainably. There's already a war going on in people's hearts, you can see that the politicians are afraid. But many are working themselves overtime to see the light, we are getting back our access to seeds. We are creating a new project in Costa Rica teaching people how to feed their kids with the plants which grow around them. Teaching our sons how to build houses and start fires is a basic necessity for human life. Do we know how to keep ourselves warm? All we need to do is take notice of what's happening around us and then strengthen our minds to take in whatever happens next. It's a self-challenge to meditate through the madness and rise above it, creating something that is really going to work."

“The status quo is working fine for most people,” said I.

At this both gave me piercing looks, briefly, then Babanat continued unabated: “In Costa Rica we are creating a Dharmic, sustainable community, training ourselves to go back to the Earth and not freak out because we don’t have cable TV. We are going to remember our purity and radiance and the face that we have as our godly selves, that changes how you walk, how you look and how you relate to the world. People conform too quickly and easily, most of the time to fear, instead of conforming to your own soul. In America it’s a sign of weakness to bow, but humility is strength, not weakness. When you bow to the god inside you it changes the game.”

“Whether most of us were lucky enough to have a god inside of ourselves is debatable.”

“Use your anger, George, as fuel to help people around you, instead of creating victims. Use the fire and learn the lessons that fire teaches you, learn to be responsible with the power of fire.”

“Amen,” I said. “Thank you. I will get the coffee and when the media is ready I will have one of the guys get back to you.”

If they were doing this as a bandage for their scarred personalities, selling enlightenment like a product off a supermarket shelf I couldn’t know. I couldn’t know whether they ever doubted their teachings, or if they ever believed them to begin with. But for the purposes of the campaign it was beside the point. I, like Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness*, declined to join them, because “it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.”

Regardless, the posters and hoardings came out, the blogs and online banners were clicked on, and soon enough the Soul Warriors reached their crowdfunding target they needed to finish building a temple in Costa Rica and retire there as missionaries.

After the money came in they hopped on a plane which flew over dispersing clouds like a stork. And leafless branches fretted bashfully in the coronation of solemn pines.

Intrigue was afoot at the agency. Rafiq, who ran the printing section and handled all the physical deliveries for the agency’s clients, was staging his exit, preparing to take along with him a large supermarket, a wealthy charity, an Indian radio station and exclusive contracts with all the suppliers. He had fallen out with Ashish over pay and had secretly founded his own company to which he had started shifting business while still in role. Ashish found out from the Indian

grapevine in London and was furious. He threw a tantrum in the office, told Rafiq to “get the bloody hell out right now” and then he stormed out himself, leaving us bewildered.

Lawyer writs were exchanged, our salaries went unpaid for two weeks because of the interruption to the cashflow, and one morning when I went in, a mature, black rat laid dead outside the agency’s door.

“Rafiq has crippled this company, man, it’s not right,” Ishaan told me in a late-evening meeting at Lahore Kebab House, our usual greasy takeout on Commercial Road.

We had spent the day pretending to work but neither of us got anything done and we suspected the same was true for all the others. A thick layer of fear clouded our minds.

“Ashish has been talking about cutting the digital department,” Balaji said. “I am starting a separate company, 2B Digital, and I’ll bring you along if he kicks us out.”

“Well, Ishaan, thanks. Do you have any clients?” I asked.

“Not yet. But here’s what I need from you. You need to go to the India Property Fair at the Wembley conference centre this weekend, and take pictures, write blogs and tell everyone you are looking to get work done with our new company without the current agency. And be careful about it, as Ashish will also be there.”

“Right. You want me to do the exact thing that got Rafiq into trouble and left us unpaid for two weeks.”

“But Rafiq will also be there to set up a few big banners for his new clients, who used to be our old clients, so he has money now. And there’s likely to be another drama if Ashish and him meet. Hopefully they will. The more public the better for us, and I want you to film it. We will show the clients how unprofessional they are.”

I gasped: “What do you mean? haven’t we had enough conniving? Isn’t this endless trickery the reason why the company is not growing properly in the first place?”

“No. I want you to record the meeting with Rafiq on your dictaphone. Get everything they say to each other. And then with the dictaphone on but without telling them about it, you must talk to both of them separately and ask them about each other to get them to badmouth each other.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Ishaan’s hair was ruffled up and he was almost drooling. The prospect of this greatly excited him. He was speaking firmly but in a low voice, very ominously.

“I can’t do it Ishaan. This is too dark for me.”

“Hey, it’s no big deal. We use it to get leverage for our new agency and we will be successful with the clients. You will have a share of the new company, OK?”

“But isn’t it illegal?”

“It depends. Since when do you care about illegal? Remember when you faked my father in law’s signature on that lease? That was illegal and you were happy to do it, huh?”

“Ishaan, I don’t know. That was a game compared to this. I have a really bad feeling...” I trailed off.

“OK, here’s £50.” He handed me a new £50 note.

I took it. The fridge was empty, I had no credit on my phone and the landlord was hounding me for the bills. I hadn’t eaten hot food all week. I took it but did not consider it as an implicit consent to carry out the mission.

“This isn’t about me agreeing to do this, I just desperately need the money.”

“Good boy.”

Leaving the dilapidated eatery in a depressed anger turned as much towards myself as toward him, I entered another of the many rundown establishments of the East End, The Hungerford pub, an institution of unpretentious alcoholic outlaws, thieves, vagabonds, benefit cheats and Jack the Ripper Street Tour ticket touts. A triple Jameson and a pint of Carling, £7. My smouldering loathing gave way to bitter shame which became a deep melancholy as the sweet drink percolated through the membrane of my stomach and entered my blood, climbing to my brain. Pulsating memories of Ileana appeared in my mind. A wicked rain started when I went home which I let wash me hoping it’d baptise me again.

On Saturday I was at the Wembley conference centre with the agency team, assembling our stall, preparing flyers and guest photos, Olympus voice recorder in my breast pocket, new batteries fitted. The tape rolling, I went up to Ashish:

“Need any help, boss?”

“Yes, why don’t you grab that box of t-shirts and take it back to the prop room. Leave it there next to our banners and get me a case of water and one of wine, and some of the MoneyGram branded pens, OK?”

“Ok boss. By the way, is everything a little better now with the clients?”

“Don’t you worry about that George, we’ll get many more clients. Just a rough patch, eh? Thanks for asking.”

His grace made me even more ashamed. In the storage room, Rafiq was striving to control a lumbering roll of rubber hoarding, which nearly toppled him over as I grabbed it by the other end and steadied it up.

“I have this Rafiq,” I said.

“Thanks, George. I need to stretch this up on that aluminium frame leaning against the other wall. Care to help me?” Beads of sweat tumbled down both his temples.

“Let’s do it. I said.”

We dragged the thing over and unrolled it carefully, stretched out the wrinkles and clinched every side on the frame with tough iron springs put through eyeholes. A red-brick, nearly lifesize image of an American-style house on orange and green background appeared before us, the skyline of an unknown city vaguely shading the picture’s upper edge. “Your journey to the dream home in Mumbai’s thriving new suburbs starts here,” proclaimed the message. “Mortgages, conveyance, valuation and investment advice all in one place through Indobuffalos finance and development,” it added. “Visit our stall at the Indian Homes Fair – P33.”

“Looks good. Did you do this with your new firm?” I asked Rafiq.

“Yes,” he said.

Then nothing. He understandably didn’t want to talk about this with me.

“How is the new job,” I insisted.

“It’s okay.”

Nothing more. The expression of disappointment and scorn on his face made me give up. Rafiq had always treated me well. It was his right to compete in the market with Ashish if he wanted to. I went to the toilet and shut off the horrid device. Fuck this job, I thought, not for the first time. The rest of the day I spent photographing a hapless old lady who was apparently a member of the British parliament, inspecting the stalls and looking thoughtfully at the computer-generated pictures and scale models of mass-produced neighbourhoods for the expat middle classes, or NRIs – nonresident Indians, as the central government calls them. Outside of a more prominent stall which advertised a 20-odd floor block of flats with its own swimming pool and tennis court, “only” 30 miles from Central Mumbai, she stopped. Pointing at the tower she asked:

“Nice building, this one. I like it. How green is it?”

“Right now the walls are white, neutrally decorated throughout but you can put in any wallpaper you like,” promptly responded the attendant.

The old lady walked on, nodding.

“How did you get on with what I told you?” Ishaan asked me later.

“No luck. I tried but neither said anything. They seemed very calm, acting as if nothing had happened.”

“Alright, forget it.”

The thought that I was in fact a sociopath took seed in my mind. Who else would be capable of such things? Who would have such a numb conscience, such a straight face in lying and such little compunction in accepting these degrading, mercenary assignments, for little else than £50 per day as a self-employed hack? There must, I conceded that night, as the curs howled up and down the street in frenzied concert, something deeply wrong within me. This I took as a given from then on and it helped me sleep better. Sociopaths have no ability to put themselves in other people’s shoes and to feel compassion for them, scholarly definitions said. That, I thought, was wrong. While I could put myself in the next man’s shoes fine and occasionally surprise myself experiencing heartfelt compassion for many people, when my self-interest was in play, or when my superiors asked me to, I was capable of ruthlessness. That was, I suppose, a mild form of sociopathy at the very least, but nevertheless a real one. At home Athanassios was drinking wine in the living room, watching football on the old, grainy television.

“Want some wine?” he said.

He had just got out of the shower. He was wearing a bathrobe and a towel around his long hair.

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks. I have some Polish sausages. Who’s playing?”

“Portugal versus Greece. Neither of them well. It’s more a question of which one breaks first.”

“Like the financial crisis,” I said.

“Haha, yes. But in that Greece cracked long ago. Funny,” he said, “before that broke out I was a political reporter with a daily newspaper in Thessaloniki. I finished university, went to the

paper, got an apprenticeship, then a job. I worked there for 10 years, until I was 33. It was a great job, writing about politics. Everybody knew me and everybody ate from my hand.”

“Sounds like a good life. I always wondered what it is like to do journalism. I did a little bit of it myself, writing about music, but now I do advertising. I always wondered what it was like to work in a big daily paper.”

“Well George,” Athanassios said with a sigh, “the way things are going, your chances of finding that out are getting thinner, I’m sorry to say. Many papers everywhere are closing. Look at me. 35, philosophy degree, 10 years experience at the top of my profession, and now I’m delivering sushi to office workers on a scooter all day. I don’t know how it came to this. After the paper closed, it went online-only and they couldn’t afford to keep me full-time. Advertising dried up practically overnight.”

“Because of the crisis?”

“Yes, mainly. But also because of how we Greeks handled the crisis. We refused to accept any changes. The deeper the crisis got, the more stubborn we got in our ways. Eventually there was nothing left. I couldn’t get a job after that. I spent some time living with my parents but that was too depressing so I just left. Now I’m here.”

He started brushing his long hair, with his head tilted over to the side. He had a big brush and he did it like women do it, it was uncanny. He was brushing every lock, combing himself at the same time with his spare hand. I lit a cigarette and turned up the television.

“Now my hair is going to smell of cigarettes,” he complained, his head askew like the picture of nostalgia.

I looked at his hair again and it was very silky. I felt bad for spoiling it for him, he evidently cared a lot about it.

“Sorry,” I said.

I got up and went outside in the garden, leaving the door ajar.

“How’s this?”

“Better.”

“Tell me about your journalism. What did you write?”

“The editor told me what to write but I also decided for myself a lot of the time. Politics. Alliances. Mayors, members of parliament, ministers, big business. I had interviews all the time with them. I met them for lunch, for drinks. Top politicians, many of them from my city. I wrote about what was going on.”

“It must be satisfying to do that. You inform people, you spread the news. You find things out that nobody else knows then think of the best words to express it. Capture people’s imagination in the story.”

“No, no. It’s not like that,” Athanassious interjected. “It’s only about you. You are a star. There is no story, no action, just you saying who is good and who is bad. People worship you, and you tell them what to think. Trust me, you are a star.”

“But were you a columnist? I thought you were a political reporter.”

“I was. There were no political columnists on my paper. People already knew what the events were from the television news. I wrote about what the events meant, and what other insiders, whom I knew, thought about the events. People wrote back to me saying how impressed they were with my intellect all the time.”

“That must have been great. Maybe one day soon Greece recovers and you go back.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“Do you still try your hand at writing? You know, just for exercise?”

“Not much.”

“Do you read the press? What do you think about the crisis, and now the prime minister says that he will have a referendum about the UK leaving the Union. And the banks are getting worse and worse, but the politicians aren’t doing anything.”

“I don’t read much. To be honest with you I don’t like English press. Too stuck up. No emotion. I think Cameron is playing some bullshit about the referendum to excite right wing supporters. This is a mainly rightwing country, like America. In America even the Democrats are rightwing. So in the UK if you want to win big you have to at least talk rightwing if not act. But not too much. These are polite people. You can’t say to them ‘I think there are too many foreigners in our country and we need to find a way to reduce them some’. That would not do, and it would embarrass people even if they agree with it. What you say is, the European Union is sending all these foreigners here, and while that isn’t a problem for us, we think that the principle of them

deciding who lives in our country is unfair, so we will have a referendum on whether we like the European Union to decide for us.”

He was still brushing.

“I agree,” I said. “They are polite. Well explained.” I added. “What about the banks?”

“The banks control all the money. The banks are bureaucrats who create money out of nothing when companies and people are accepted for loans. They have limits by law on how much money they can create, but they stretch the limits. Because they are the chef, figuratively speaking, they are also the ones who eat best. Slowly-slowly, it’s become so that it is now inconceivable, it is heresy, to forgive someone’s debt or to have other priorities in life than paying your debt. If you have debt you must starve in order to pay it. This is what the Greeks are doing now. The Greek banks have been given money when they lent out too much and didn’t get enough back, but the people who became poor because the economy tanked were not given anything. On the contrary, through high taxes their property is being taken away by the state now in order to pay the state’s debt. This is a crisis. The crisis was created by lying, greedy politicians who spent more than they had and borrowed too much and then stole it through corrupt schemes.”

“I think here you might be wrong. I think the crisis started in America because the banks started giving mortgages out to everyone even if they couldn’t pay, so eventually there was too much unpaid debt and the banks went bankrupt so the politicians gave them money.”

“Yes but why did those American morons borrow so much? Why was it legal for them to borrow when they had nothing to pay it back with? Politicians encouraged it because they wanted every stupid American to feel rich and then the politicians could take credit for it. See your nice, fat, disgusting house? You have me to thank for that. Otherwise they’d have changed the law. The bankers knew what they were doing when they gave out the loans, the idiotic borrowers, the strippers with six mortgages and the illiterate crack dealers with three apartments did not know what they were getting themselves into. And by the way these people when they stop paying their mortgages they are stigmatised as bad debtors for life and they can never again get any credit, even a phone contract or sometimes a job because credit history, you see, supposedly speaks to their character.”

Athanasios said all this in his calm soft speech while he carefully brushed his hair.

“It was years in the making. Debt-fueled economy. We live on our great-grandchildren’s money now. Our own ran out a long time ago,” said he. “I think only a great war will stop this debt cycle.”

“Right, OK. So you don’t read any news at all here?”

“I read Private Eye magazine. That’s it.”

“Nothing else? I don’t know that one.”

“It’s the only one that has some zest. You should try it.”

Greece lost the football game. Later I picked up an issue of Private Eye magazine for £1.50 from the Turkish shop. It looked very strange, like a sleazy tabloid. There was no image on the front cover, just the title and below it a slogan: “Maggie, Maggie, Maggie! Out! Out! Out!” Apparently it was mocking and taunting the death of a particularly reviled ex-Prime Minister, the first woman to ever hold the job, Margaret Thatcher. She had died alone and demented in a hotel room that very week. Her body was being prepared for a state funeral. Yet try as I might I couldn’t see why anyone would find that Private Eye cover funny.

And the inside of the magazine looked like it had been put together by schoolchildren. The way it was typed was peculiar, like cut-outs and collages made by punk teens, and the way it was written no less so. Unusual words, that don’t as a rule belong in news articles as far as I knew, abounded. Word like, arse, oddly, bollocks, hilarious, all kinds of subjective and vulgar words were in there. And they repeated some of them twice or three times in the same short article, as if they didn’t bother to read the thing twice before printing. And they made liberal use of exclamation marks. There must have been more exclamation marks on one student notebook-sized page of Private Eye than on all 40-odd broadsheet pages of the Financial Times. And it was full of crass doodles with sarcastic messages underneath, scattered between short articles all in different typeset. I was bewildered. How extremely weird that an avowed star political columnist like my housemate Athanassios would admire this magazine, I thought. What does he see in it? And there were these indecipherable phrases that they used as punchlines. And virtually every article contained a reference to the magazine’s wit, foresight and perspicacity.

In the steady rustle of distant traffic I crushed my cigarette on the tiles of our front porch with the heel of my shoe. Inside the house there was a loud crack of twisted metal followed by a screamed curse, I assumed Ruby’s, by its timbre. A cat on the fence next to me emphatically shrilled. I entered to find steaming hot water flooding the kitchen and sitting room, smoke filling the

cupboard where the boiler was, and increasingly filling the landing, more water gushing out the cupboard, along with a smell of burnt plastic and a menacing hum of loose wires dancing in the wet air. I looked around. A mouse, his meal interrupted, took refuge under the sink. A curious fox peered over the overgrowth in the garden and then hopped carelessly through the busted fence.

“George, for God’s sake, I’m burned with scalding water. My back’s all blisters,” Ruby’s head full of soap called from the top of the stairs.

“Shall I call you an ambulance, Rube?” I asked.

“No, fuck it. I need water to get this soap off.”

“The boiler’s gone I’m afraid. There seems to have been an electrical fault. Why don’t you go back in the bathroom and I’ll throw you a pot you can use water from the sink to sort yourself out?” I offered.

“Good idea,” he said, shutting the bathroom door behind him and he cursed again in his own language. I took a medium-sized pot and threw it up the stairs. It fell against the door with a clang.

“Thanks,” said Ruby.

The water kept gushing out and the electrical humming was getting more intense. Smoke everywhere now. Pestilential smell. I once read somewhere these things are dealt with using sand.

“At least the fire alarms seem not to work either,” I said out loud to noone in particular.

Feet flapping in the 5-inch pool I went to the back door, opened it wide. Same with the front door and the windows to clear the smoke. At length I found the electricity and water mains and switched both off. Quiet. Another curse from upstairs. Ruby.

“I don’t speak Nigerian, what’s the problem?” shouted I.

“The light went off George. I was shaving.”

“Quit shaving, Rube. Short circuit in the cupboard. Do we have any sand?”

A groan.

It would be dark in a half hour. I called the Brazilian landlord, who answered with irritation.

“Hello sir, sorry to bother you... No, I don’t have the rent money yet... I know I’m a week late. I’ll have it tomorrow... OK. Three weeks? Time flies... I really am sorry. The reason I’m calling is the boiler malfunctioned quite badly, the house is flooded, there is a short-circuit out in the open, live wires, you understand, which need urgent fixing and the fire alarms don’t work... No,

just the ground floor. Both rooms... Yes sir. Ruby was home, not I. He was in the bath when it happened. He said water came on scalding, burnt him, then there was a small explosion and the boiler snapped, flooding the kitchen and the lounge... Yes sir he is slightly hurt... No hospital, no, he is recovering at home. Do you think you can send someone tonight? We are without heat, hot water and electricity... Yes, sir there is cold water running. Also, since we are talking, there are mice... Yes, sir quite a few of them... definitely not one... no, sir, I haven't seen them together yet. OK, I'll let the others know. Thank you."

"What did he say?" a startling voice demanded from very closely behind.

It was Ruby, looking dishevelled, with one cheek and upper lip clean shaven but random tufts covering the rest of his face, creating the impression he had suffered hair loss as a consequence of some chronic illness.

"He said not to worry, he's taking care of it tonight."

"Well then. I have some rum from Ghana. It came in a parcel from my cousin the other day. We can drink that to keep warm."

Ruby returned, rather unexpectedly fast, with a bag full of little plastic packets which contained a white liquid. There was a picture of a football, a horse and a couple dancing on each one. Each said: "Goal. Drink, Dance. 47% alcohol/ v. Goal cane spirit. 30 ml. 18+ Only. Blended and produced by Jesus Loves Allah Enterprise Industries Limited, plot number 23, Metalex Estate, Spintex Road, Accra, Ghana." By and by we settled down on chairs in the room upstairs, and lit some candles in gherkin jars.

I messaged Mohammed, Athanassios and the others to tell them what had happened and they all wisely said they would find shelter with friends for the night. Ruby very deftly ripped a corner of one packet, spilled the contents in a cup and poured a drop of Ribena blueberry concentrate on top.

"To take the edge off," he explained.

He handed me the mug. It tasted maybe like paracetamol mixed with sugar and muddy water from a river running through a populous city. We drank a considerable deal of that moonshine, about 25 envelopes, and some beer cans left in the fridge. We nipped out at 3am to buy gin, of which we had a significant amount more. Towards dawn we were each sleeping on a chair, under a blanket, with no sign yet of a repairman. We woke up in the chirping of early birds, stiff and freezing, the steam coming out our mouths when we spoke, or tried to speak, blending with the low,

dense fog which crept from the garden into the flooded living room through the open door. We washed up as best we could with cold water and made for work.

My rent was indeed in arrears and so were my bills, which made me feel slightly better in the circumstances. Pretending to work on an assignment for a Mango puree company, I searched instead for a new abode, and managed to reserve a viewing that very evening after work, in a council estate in Stepney, through a man named Prabhakar who said on the phone that he owned the place. No deposit, move next day, ad said. Neutral décor throughout. I walked down Commercial Road, turned on Sidney Street, then up Stepney way and passing the A&C Tadman Cockney funeral home I was there: on the corner with Jamaica Road. I entered Clichy Estate and rang the buzzer on a chipped red door on the ground floor. It opened.

“Hello. George?”

“Yes.”

“Prabhakar. Come in.”

A small hallway with beech panelling, wood stairs and a kitchen lined with wood. It looked not unlike a mountain cabin from Romania. Shah took me upstairs.

“Here it is, geez,” said Prabhakar. “Your room is upstairs. As discussed, taken as is, bills separate apart from council tax and internet, which Dad pays. Gas and electric on card. No deposit. Double-glazed, clean. You seen the kitchen and bathroom, right?”

“Yes,” I said, having just glanced in the general direction of the kitchen. I hadn’t looked at the bathroom except to check if there was a latch on the inside of the door. There was one.

“I like it. Still £360 I hope? I haven't got more...” I said with fear.

“Yes. Andrei, was it?” Prabhakar said.

I nodded. “George.”

“George, this is a good deal. Zone two. Good neighbourhood. Whitechapel station three minutes away. Stepney Green just up the road. When are you looking to move in?”

“I'd say tomorrow if that's good for you.”

“Tomorrow is fine, Andrei, but I need half the money tonight to know you're serious,” Prabhakar said.

“Oh, is it? Well, I'm not sure if I got it. But I'm serious, I promise you.” I pled.

“Well, mate, I've heard it bef...”

Prabhakar didn't need to finish his sentence because a knock on the door made his point for him.

"That's the next viewing, mate. Got three others. I'm letting this room out tonight. To you, or anyone else," he said.

I took a patiently-folded wad of notes amounting to £150 out of my pocket and handed it to him.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not rich. You know how it goes."

I smiled the same sad smile again. My landlord brightened up.

"Alright, mate, no worries. Dad will be here tomorrow and he'll give you the keys when you come. Cool?" he laughed as he took the bundle.

"Yes. Thanks," I said and turned to leave.

"Hey there," said a female voice from another room. "Are you going to live here?" she asked. "I'm Nadine."

"Hi Nadine. George. Yes, I think so," I said.

"See you tomorrow," she said.

I waved.

"Good lad," Prabhakar said and slapped me on the back. "Now let's go."

I left not knowing whether Prabhakar would keep his word or was just looking to rip off desperate people. He said there would be no contract and no telling the council I lived there. It wouldn't be the first time someone got ripped off online. Rooms with no deposit required don't come round too often and I'd already asked my mother for money again to survive the month. I told her I had to pay some taxes but everything else was fine. I wasn't even eligible for a payday loan because I wasn't directly employed. Freelancers don't get payday loans.

I walked to the bus stop as I drew in the crisp December air filled with curry and marijuana fumes coming out of the estate's windows. I hadn't washed or shaved in two days and was squalid but the sky was starry and the lights of that neighbourhood whispered new promises. One duffel bag, one wheeled trolley with a telescopic handle and two canvas bags full of books. That was the extent of my worldly possession. More that last year though. I was carrying the most valuable asset, the laptop, in my backpack.

Things, I thought as I staggered with all this baggage down Leytonstone High Road at 7am the next morning, have a way of working themselves out.

The hot shower I took washed away any and all small residue of compunction that I might have harboured for bailing on Ruby and the former landlord without notice. My skin turned red from the water and steam filled up the bathroom. I relished in it. I basted myself with hot water and soap like a Christmas Turkey.

The second hand furniture shop was all the way in Cambridge Heath Road, about a mile from Clichy Estate. I got up early to get there and back before nine. Tense negotiations with the ruthless seller in the railway arch yielded me a £2 discount. I had got myself a small desk for £10 and now I had to carry it. I did, proudly, on my back, stoically, like a postman carries his sack. Renewal needs winter to kill off the bacteria. A smattering of frost coated Jamaica Street on that winter day when I walked down it in the blurry light. It was foggy, but sunny and mighty cold. This kept me from sweating too profusely. The desk fit just right between the bed and the wall, leaving barely enough room for a sideways beer crate which I used as a nightstand. The generous landlord gave me the chair. I sat for a moment and powered up the computer. Looked out the window, in front of the desk into Stepney Way. Puled the curtain. Lit a cigarette. Pulled back the curtain, opened the window, took a big whiff and looked around. Finally, after so many years, my own room. Two shelves, a bed, a wardrobe, a chair and now a desk. There was no space for anything else in there, but it was perfect. Two steps window to door and across about the same length as my arms outstretched. It still seemed big now it was empty. I finished the cigarette and sat down again. Text messages poured in from the Brazilian: “You still owe me £300. When are you going to pay? You know I’m happy you left. What goes around comes around.”

I replied: “Please clarify where in our tenancy agreement was the sum of £300 stipulated. Agreed on both latter points. Ceasing communication – busy.”

Of course, there was no tenancy agreement. I savoured this little triumph.

There was a lot more luggage to bring over from the storage room at the office where I hid it on the sly but I could only recover it late in the evening after everyone was gone. I had half an hour to kill before a quarter to nine. Fifteen minutes were now more than enough to arrive at work. More sleep, later mornings, later nights were awaiting. I locked myself on the inside of the room. Finally, alone. Loneliness can be beautiful.

I felt like I had received a substantial inheritance from a relative I never knew I had. I sat down typing:

“Dear Ileana,

I hope with all my heart this letter of mine finds you in successful studies and high spirits. I, for one, am writing it from such favourable circumstances, as my life has sizeably improved since I last wrote to you. I have received a salary increase from the advertising agency, as well as more responsibility. I am now the only copywriter in the digital department and no piece of written work leaves this arm of the company without my prior approval. Given this lucky break, I saw it fit I move closer to the office, so as to not spent precious time commuting when I could spent it in productive work. The new apartment is in a historic area of cultural riches known as the East End. I have a room in a maisonette that I share with an English woman and two Italians. We are all in work. As I get to know them and the new neighbourhood I will write more, but on first impression both seem very welcoming and attractive.

I am thinking about you constantly, you are never away from my mind, my dear beloved. I am making savings every day to return to Romania to see you and to buy you tickets to London (round trip, don't worry) in the New Year. There will be no obligation for you to come visit me in my home, of course we can get you a hotel if you want, but there would be no greater pleasure and joy for me if you chose to stay with me in my home. I would take care of everything for you and see to it that you are returned safely whenever you choose, so as to not let your studies lag.

Yes, I said my home. London is my home now. I feel more alive, happy and familiar with this vast, strange metropolis that I barely know a quarter of a quarter of than I ever felt in the little town I knew like the back of my own hand. I cannot explain why it is so but I promise you it is the plain truth without any exaggeration. All that I'm missing to be happy now is you.

I sometimes wake in the night thinking you are next to me, smeling you perfume which I could distinguish out of a thousand different scents, brought on by a too distant memory. This is all wishful thinking, I know, but it need not be wishful for long. You are my mirrored soul. I hope you feel the same as I do – that we must be together. If you do not, please tell me at once, do not prolong the agony, for I am rising, soaring on the wings of the love I bear you, higher every day, and the higher the climb, the harder the fall. So please, do not delay your answer.

I enclose a postcard of a landmark of the East End – the architectural prank of the Wickhams Department Store building. Please take note that there is a chunk of the building missing to the right of the clock tower. This is by design. Now the building is split into a supermarket, sports equipment shop, mosque, concert hall and the Legation of Somaliland, a territory inside the official state of Somalia which is fighting to gain independence. But the story goes that when this oddity was built in the nineteenth century by the original owners, it was envisaged as a large, sumptuous

department store to rival Harrods. The owners, a family of brash, macho tradesmen called the Wickhams, came into money quick and were eager to display it. They bought up all the buildings on that side of the road, with a view to erecting their early shopping mall, and got the plans ready in a hurry. However, Mr Spiegelhalter, a hard-headed watchmaker and fine mechanic and jeweller, who owned the little white building that you can see in the middle of the big one, would not budge. He wouldn't sell at any price because he wanted to show the Wickhams that money was not all-powerful. The Wickhams, wishing to intimidate him, commenced construction, still thinking he would compromise with them. Needless to say, he didn't despite various forms of persistence and pressure and the big palace was inaugurated with a gap tooth. Both the Wickhams and Spiegelhalter died angry with one another, and future owners decided to keep the buildings as they are as a testament to the hardiness and quiet resolve of the East London Britisher. Now the place is a protected cultural asset, a magnet for tourists and architects such as yourself.

There is hardly one corner or pile of stone in this wonderful neighbourhood that doesn't have an extraordinary tale behind it. I am keen to tell you all. There are a great many Somali, Bengali, Pakistani and Indian people here, who have marvellous customs, food, music and are generally very accommodating with us newcomers. Before they came in the fifties from the former colonies to help rebuild the war-torn London, Russians, Romanians, Bessarabians like us and Jews from everywhere were the more recent immigrants. Now it's come full circle, our people are once again the rookies. I could spend a hundred pages telling you all there is to tell about it. In short, it is a dazzling adventure living here. It is the most fascinating, welcoming, friendly and unpretentious neighbourhood of London, if not Europe or the world.

This is from their official brochure: The East End is home to the river Thames with romantic paths, to bushy parks with alleys and trees, to a canal on which you can sail 300 miles up to Liverpool, mighty skyscrapers for the world's most shrewd bankers, to a most advanced university called Queen Mary, the best restaurants and bars and music halls... it has an airport and a wealth of train and tube stations for commuting and you can walk in a half hour right up to Trafalgar Square along the banks of the river.

It has everything a man could want, and at not a great deal of cost. There are jobs (now I walk to work in 10 minutes), theatres, cinemas, fashion companies, football clubs, newspapers in all languages on God's Earth and much more, I am certain, waiting to be known. Only one vital denizen is missing: you, Ileana.

We could be happy here together. We could make a life of beauty and colour such as we barely dared to dream of when we were children. You are sorely missed.

*Lovingly yours,
George.*”

Saleem, Prbhakar's father, and the actual owner of the apartment, turned out to be a sweet old man. He came by almost every day for tea. He cleaned up the kitchen after us and told stories.

“I came in this country forty years ago from Sylhet with £10 in my pocket. I didn't speak English. I swept floors at the Royal London Hospital in Whitechapel and sold shoes in the market at the weekend. The council gave me this flat to live in and I bought it for my wife and my kids from the council 20 years later and I lived my whole life in it. I don't like to see it dirty,” he explained with his half Bengali, half Cockney accent.

Saleem moved slow when indoors. He smoked slim, elegant little bidi leaf cigarettes one after another, and drank powerful black tea with lots of sugar and no milk.

“Why did you move out?”

“I moved with my brother last year when his wife died. His kids all live on their own, he was alone and he is ill. My wife and I are taking care of him. I brought him over from Bangladesh five years after I came. He was a bus driver.”

“Why didn't you sell? It must be worth a fortune compared to what you paid.”

“It is but I'm not allowed to sell it because it's been given to me as a special deal from the council. I'm not even supposed to move out, or rent it, so if you go to the council and they ask you something please tell them I still live here. You're my lodger.”

“But what if they find out Saleem? Won't you lose the flat?”

“They'll not find out. It's an open secret. Many people do this in the neighbourhood. In this country they teach you how to get on. You work hard and look after yourself and you will make progress, alright George?”

“Yessir.”

“Now pass me one of your cigarettes, these bidis are too flavoursome for this time of day,” he said with authority and stroked his white beard.

I handed him my packet of Polish Marlboro Reds, acquired under the table at discount price from the store in Alyward Street.

“How long did it take you to learn English Saleem?”

“Oh, ages, but we didn't have all the stuff that you have now. No TV, no internet, no mobile phones... With those I reckon I could have learned it in half the time but as it was it took me about four-five years. Some people that came with me don't even speak it now, mind you.”

“How about work? How did you get the job without speaking? And the flat?”

“It was a different time, George. Back then the UK was much poorer and nobody wanted to come here. Everyone wanted America. Back then they were begging us to come over and work. The government made it so I got my job and my house from them without me even having to ask for it. They never complained about my English. They had a city to build, we had families to raise. But now everyone come here, too much competition between people and the government don’t give you nothing,” he said and clicked his tongue as if to say he didn’t envy us new immigrants.

“Alright, well, I suppose we have it easier anyway because of no war and lots of technology, more education...” I offered.

“Maybe, maybe, depends from case to case. For us country boys it’s different cos we can appreciate the greatness of the city and we know how to be with people outside of it as well. You have to have country gumption to survive,” he said, rising. “We two, we have it. Remember, no talking to the council. If someone come over you say you are lodger and I am out to see a relative. You call my mobile straight away.”

From the inside pocket of his linen shirt cut in the Muslim fashion he pulled a brick of a phone with big buttons and a small screen. He dangled it proudly in my face and put it back in, then put on his jacket and flat cap and darted out, his walking stick under his arm, more an accessory than a necessity. He always wore a flat cap and his cheeks and upper lip were clean shaven in the Asian Muslim style and his beard flowed from around and below his chin. His beard was combed and he always had polished shoes and a clean linen shirt that reached to his knees. He was snappy in the outdoors, surprising you with nimble and quick movements, a brisk walk and lively, clever eyes. He had an old wristwatch with silver bracelet, which he checked regularly. The old man, all in all, had marvellous flair. Finishing my tea and thinking about Saleem’s long life (he must have been 60), Luca walked in and sat at the round, elbow-worn kitchen table where Saleem sat just before.

Luca was a gypsy-hearted Italian, short and stocky, who worked as a chef in a steakhouse. He lived in the big room downstairs, and claimed a monopoly on the garden. He chain-smoked and Nadine and her friends would use his room as a living room. There was no smoking in Nadine’s bedroom. One night the three of us were having tea on the deep leather sofas in Luca’s room and he said he was for five years atoning for a criminal past – transporting cocaine from Girona to Stansted in condoms which he swallowed.

“Italians are big on this ting,” he said. “But I’m 35 now, it became too much. I realised it when I went once as usual and as I was sitting on the toilet waiting to get a few hundred grams out there was a loud, loud knock on the door as if the police were coming. It turned out to be the landlord but it scared me so bad I quit doing the business.”

“Almost scared the shit out of you didn’t it?” chuckled Nadine.

Luca laughed a big, open-mouthed belly laugh. It satisfied him greatly that he was able to grasp finer notions of the English language such as jokes with a double meaning.

“We’re getting closer to a mistake every day we do this and the monsters will be walking their lice-ridden dogs on our graves when we finally slip,” he said.

Hearing this, Nadine turned sullen, and Luca offered us a joint to cheer us up. The smoke took me away. Turgid thoughts passed through me like ghosts pass through walls. I understood Luca, doing what he said he did, even if it all may well have been a fantasy of his. My whole life was spent in awed observance of poverty and the corruption and treachery that comes with the promise of a little wealth. I nurtured both a fear of becoming greedy and an equal apprehension of dying poor. I remembered my uncle, who got so rich, greedy and pleased with himself that, caught up in the daily routine, he lost his wits and forgot how to steal. I thought of all the boys who went to jail before they were men, for half-ounces of hash and half-dreams of being somebody. I thought of my parents who were always envious of other people’s money and utterly unable to hold onto theirs, wasting it while simultaneously complaining about not having it. I thought of the millions who worked hard in communism for the same kind of life afforded to those other millions who didn’t work hard at all. They just coasted, knowing that the basic tenants of the system would operate in their favour. All of us wanted the same thing, I thought. But for me to achieve anything I had to try something new. I would do what I liked and as long as I had enough to pay the bills with and a bit more besides, I would be happy. Then I thought of Athanassios, withering on his scooter after so many years at the top of his trade back in Greece. This is a Donald Trump world, I thought. You’re fired. One has to dart through a closing door as fast as one can before it’s all taken over by the PR apparatus of the corporation. The European Way of Life isn’t what they said it was. The generation of the doomed seekers was ours. Saints with eyes charred from staring straight into an eclipse, thinking it was another sunset. In Europe it’s our nature to work against each other, even when we are in an alliance. We are a selfish kind. Centuries of history are coursing through our veins. Maybe the Africans would have a better shot at a good union. The high winds carried us for a while. Solace never comes today, it’s always for tomorrow. Nadine took a drag from the joint. A studied, ritualistic inhalation that made her voluptuous body quiver under the airy canvas of her clothes. She tensed up when exhaling, joint still between her lips, then she pulled her hair back and smoked again. It struck both Luca (his face said so) and I at that moment that Nadine was surprisingly attractive.

“I just love Jake Bugg,” she said. “Especially this song called Lightning Bolt.”

She played it on her phone. It was a classic rock and roll song. Sounded like Bob Dylan in his youth.

“Leather jacket, shades, blue jeans and cigarettes,” said Nadine. “Vegan but edgy. You can just imagine this guy in his little Nottingham bedsit. His life is a complete disaster of beer, vodka, repressed childhood memories and depraved sexual instincts,” she added.

We laughed.

“Sometimes the only sensible thing to look at is hardcore porno,” said Luca.

He rolled a blunt and lit it. I skipped my turn.

“He’s new,” Nadine said, with warm condescension. “Let him adjust.”

The two were smoking at the blunt like it was their last day on Earth. Their eyes were red as cherries and their voices hoarse from the thick smog. Nadine wet her lips before smoking and looked us both in the eye when she sucked from the thick baton. Luca, obviously flustered but not backing down, took the wet tip into his mouth and smoked some more, fully aware he was in a strange way sharing an intimate moment with her, because her lips had been just a moment ago where his are now, and her saliva is in his mouth. Nadine felt good to see his horny, boyish discomfort.

“This atmosphere is highly charged,” I said, breaking the spell of the blunt. “I thought sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

Both laughed. Satisfied that I was making myself accepted in the new house, I busied with another copy of *Private Eye* magazine. I had been told the British loved it and considered it a form of concentrated Britishness, so I resolved to study it and work to understand it perfectly.

“My father reads that all the time,” said Nadine.

I wanted to take this as a compliment but something told me she didn’t mean it as one. At the office I was tasked with writing the content for a mockup website which was to make blood and bone marrow donations attractive to British Indians. I took this very seriously, threw myself into it and took advantage of the new surroundings at home, where there was no shortage of South Asians, if not Indians exactly, to do ground research. Saleem gave me the story of one of his acquaintances who died because no marrow donor could be found in time. I wrote it up as best I could to extract emotion out of readers, and it being too good to verify, I filed it as is to the charity that was paying us £30,000 for this project, on top of expenses.

“Good work,” the email from their manager came back. “Add this right at the end: you are 70% more likely to find a suitable marrow donor among your own ethnic group.”

What an impressive statistic. Advertising work can be a force for good in the world, I thought. It was my job now to convince 3,000 people to sign up as potential donors through the website, and to do it I was told that five more stories, or case studies, were needed. Each new donor could save a life. I had a week to get this done and then the website would be published. If the

target was reached within a month, they would renew our contract for the same amount. At last I was a valued employee, albeit only in spirit. I was still officially a freelancer who was self-employed and paid his own taxes, paid by the agency as a contractor with £50 per day, but at least now my colleagues would ask me how things were going when I came in in the morning.

“Do you still need case studies?” Washington would ask. “I can put you in touch with a neighbour of mine. He donated for his brother-in-law a few years back.”

“Yes please. When can I meet him?”

“You just give me a list of questions and I’ll get the answers for you. I’ll take a picture as well.”

Second-hand research was still research, I thought. It was all for the greater good. The trouble was that my writing was not getting much better in the agency. I tried as best I could to use vivacious, expressive words and craft my phrasings, but when returned from approval by Sakshi, my copy would be littered with cliches, which she said she put in there to make it sound “more quirky and less pretentious.”

Stuff like “at the end of the day,” or “nine times out of ten,” “literally,” “amid fears,” “plunge into darkness,” “think outside the box,” “leave no stone unturned” became habitual. I ceased drawing my attention. Decidedly I was becoming a worse writer than when I set out, but at least my work helped save lives. I now lived for the grand scheme. The big picture, as my copy editor would have put it. “Grinding to a halt,” “leading lights,” and “going forward” stopped bothering me.

“God loves you more than we do,” a black street preacher told me outside Whitechapel station one night when I was going to buy a £2 aloo tikki chaat from the street vendor.

This, too, I took to heart. He wore black suit, fedora and big sunglasses, black and white lacquer shoes. He might well be Jake Bugg’s father, I thought. There was a new bounce in my gait as I strutted up and down Mile End Road, Whitechapel Road, Commercial Road, New Road and Cannon Street Road. I got my piping hot food from the corner and sat down on an empty fruit stall to eat it. The sun was shining far up in the sky, ashen and opaque. This eerie light gave the city a new aura of ruthless communion. Aloo tikki chaat is just a couple of potato fritters with baked chickpeas in tomato sauce, yoghurt and chopped fresh chilli and onion on top. It’s cheap downmarket Indian street food, but it’s also one of the heartiest and most filling things you’ll ever eat out of a street stall. Amazing how these Indians managed to do so much without meat. For me, since I was raised to believe nothing had any taste if it didn’t involve a hunk of meat, this seemed as paranormal as culinary work can get. I took to coming to the Bombay Grill stall every other day to get a fix.

A convoy of police cars rolled up with blue lights but no sirens and blocked the intersection. People gathered quickly around to watch what was happening. New Road and Vallance Road were blocked up both ways and the cops seemed to have halted traffic one way coming from Mile End because the road was empty all of a sudden.

“It’s the marathon,” said an agent in uniform.

A pack of people, skinny like war refugees, were slowly approaching in the distance. I squinted the better to catch a gander of them. They were in shorts and tank tops and all were breathing steam out their nostrils like Alaskan malamutes pulling a sled together over a great iceberg. It was so cold. They came up slowly, rhythmically. All middle-aged and hard as the handle of an axe. Their feet pattered quietly on the tarmac which was contracted from the low temperature.

“Endurance event,” I heard someone saying. “Marathon.”

God bless these poor bastards, I thought. The silhouettes of the runners called to mind sacramental routines back in the old country. On Easter night worshippers go to church and they walk round it three times behind the priest in special gold-laced garb, holding a massive cross, to symbolise the path of Jesus up the hill where they killed him. You walk with your head down and concentrate on making as little noise as possible. You focus on your steps, your movement. Conscious, endless walking in God’s name, the Orthodox faith demands from you on Easter, and these runners here would ace it, I thought. They weren’t going fast, maybe no faster than one walks when one’s late for something, but you can call it running because of the way they do it, not the speed. Heavy breathing, heaving, high blood pressure and sweat. They move as if they’re running, so they’re running. What can move one to subject oneself to something like this, I thought, I hope I never have to find out. What a joyless sport. Unlike making advertising.

Out&About247 wasted no time getting the word around that we were working for one of the most famous and reputable charities in the country, and so it came to pass that the Indian High Commission in London signed us on to promote a Gujarati verse, language and culture festival it was running. It rained down rupees for the next few weeks. We opened a second car service tab, and we used it to exhaustion. In fact I quickly got in the habit of calling a car to take me home from Cannon Street Road in Stepney to Stepney Way, also in Stepney; the twenty-minute walk took ten or fifteen by car, depending on our luck at the stoplights. It cost about £10 one way, which was more than I spent on food in a week sometimes, but that’s how my colleagues were behaving as well. That is mankind for you. Craven beings. I figured since they don’t pay me enough money to live well, it was my duty to milk the firm for every possible advantage I could get, however useless. It got to the point of us considering it immoral to decline anything so long as it cost the agency or, more likely, the agency’s clients, money. The more it cost the better.

One night after I'd stayed an hour late in the office I took a bottle of wine from the boss' enclosure and told the car to drive down to the Embankment and then across Waterloo Bridge and back up again over Tower Bridge to Stepney, for the kicks. I sipped wine from the bottle and I looked at nighttime London. Whatever shred of decency resided inside me slipped away as soon as I had any money or material resource at my disposal. The more skint I was, the better I behaved. Any opportunity to spend turned me into a monster. Any resource burned a hole in my pocket and needed using urgently.

The only surviving diary page of a barren-headed angler on the day his hog got stabbed in the ribs by gypsy thieves – a precious artefact I bought for £20 from a man claiming to be the angler's nephew, whom I met at a genetically-modified organisms conference at the London Excel. It said:

“God, I fucked up bad today. I loved Diamond. He was the only friend I had in this world. You know I was never big on people, God, by that pig, he understood me and now he's dead as a goddamn dodo cos I went fishing and forgot to lock him up in his cage while I was gone. Lord, why did he have to go up that field where them gypsies play, and sniff around their caravans? On my way back I heard him. I had this small catfish in a bucket and I dropped the bucket when I heard the deathly howl, Lordy, of Diamond getting stabbed. I recognised his voice and ran up but by the time I got there Diamond was dead and them little gypsies were hopping around him like a tribe of savages. I yelled at them stawwwwwp, wotcha did to my precious Diamond... but they didn't pay me no never mind.

“He bled to death right there, drowning in his own blood and when I got back to the path the catfish was gone as well. I went straight back to the house and got my twelve bore and climbed back up silent-like among them caravans and Sweet Geezus that ginger dawg belonging to that gypsy kid who stabbed my Diamond walked by and I cut him right down. But the gypsies heard the noise and they came after me and I ran away fast as I could but some of them had revolvers and they shot at me and some of them hit me and I was bleeding hard. None of them was saying nothing but they kept chasing and I kept running. By the time I arrived at my house they stopped chasing but I was so cold and drained out that I knew I didn't have much longer till I could see old Diamond again.

“Twice in the back and once in the fleshy thigh them scoundrels got me. I lived a good life, God and you should know it. I never hurt no-one but that deadbeat dog that day, to make up for Diamond, and you know I was right as right to do that. Now have mercy, 'cos I'm going away.”

On the back: “This man’s name was Salman Pike and the whole misadventure happened on the bank of a river up in Shropshire. He was born in Arkansas and moved to England, Salman, when he inherited a patch of land in 1988.”

Luca took me and two of his friends to a warehouse on the edge of East London, in Barking, near the motorway, one night. It was an illegal rave. Thousands of people roamed, stupefied. Parked vans made walls to keep out the sound, and three large sets of concert-grade speakers blared a devilish kind of electronic music which I hadn’t quite heard before. Luca gave me a small rock of MDMA wrapped in a bit of cigarette rolling paper and then he cut me two lines of ketamine on his phone. The music became more and more aggressive and while the MDMA was trying to break me into euphoria the ketamine held me back in a state of limbo, but the two did not exactly cancel each other out. The idea was, Luca said, to enjoy the gentleness of the ketamine until the Mandy peaks and then as the horse tranquilizer wears off the ecstasy will catch you on the way up and bounce you back with a thirst for life you’ve never known before. Although I found this to be somewhat of an overstatement, the sensation of cobwebs being lifted from your eyes when the ket wears off is an experience worth taking ketamine for even without the MDMA. Ketamine is such an uncomfortable and schizoid drug that it is one of the few, besides alcohol, that will really make you appreciate being sober. Its best virtue is how good it makes sobriety feel by comparison. The MDMA is just pleasant and fuzzy, if taken in very small quantities. If not, it can turn one into a drooling, delirious toddler. A woman with her pink hair in a mohawk came up to me and caressed my shirt.

“What lovely fabric,” she said. “That’s a really nice shirt man.”

I nodded. Luca, his friends and I stayed there until 10 am the next day. As we came into the flat drained of energy, strange noises filtered through the walls from upstairs. It sounded like two women were either in serious pain or in rare pleasure. At first I thought that it must be the neighbours watching porn but then Luca shot me a sly grin and said:

“It’s Nadine, mate. She’s a lesbo. No big deal, no?”

I shrugged. Later I saw both Nadine and her gorgeous Chinese girlfriend having tea and cigarettes in the garden, soaking in the sun in their nightrobes at about 2pm.

“This is Loi,” Nadine trilled at me as I watched them from my open window.

I waved.

“George.”

Loi waved back. They’d met, it later emerged, on an Internet dating site called plenty of fish. Every night after that, for a while, their moans behind the thin separation wall between my room and Nadine’s would keep me awake. I never figured out why I and many other men were so viscerally repulsed by homosexuals but so fantastically aroused by pneumatic lesbians.

Nadine's lesbianity (or is it lesbianship?) only made her more desirable and attractive in my eyes, and I suspected in Luca's too. Her squawks and groans during those sex sessions with her new girlfriend were working like fuel to the passion with which I wanted to sleep with this red-headed, devious-eyed, intelligent, big-breasted woman. Why would I feel that way knowing she'd never sleep with me? She bore all the signs of an ideal embodiment of the legendary Scarlet Woman, or Babalon, a goddess of sex, according to my Internet research. One night when her girlfriend was not in she brought a bottle of Kraken rum to my room and asked me to play some of my favourite music for her. I played her all the Libertines songs and she rolled up a joint which we smoked as we listened and sipped the black, spicy liqueur. She cozied up next to me in my bed with her fine legs rubbing against the inside of my groin through her leggings. I tried touching her and she said:

"No, not unless you get these legging off of me without using your hands. Or teeth."

I thought for a minute, drunkenly enjoying the tease and provocation and I picked up a large, purple, razor-sharp, butcher's knife I kept on top of my wardrobe. She did not flinch when I brandished the knife, which surprised me. On the contrary, her eyes opened a little and so did her mouth. I could see her pierced tongue just waiting to say something, but deciding against it. I ever so cautiously inserted the tip of the knife in the fabric of her leggings without scratching her milky skin, and I pulled it up like a fishhook, tearing away most of one side of the garment. She blushed.

"It seems I am up to your challenge thanks to this nice little tool." I said.

She got up, kissed me on the cheek and walked out, her leggings torn up.

"You're such a boy," she said.

Another night I walked with her to Brick Lane, to Maraz Cafe, and we had a big curry dinner together, which I paid for. She obviously enjoyed herself. She even climbed on my back and asked me to carry her home like a horse, but thankfully she climbed down after a few steps although I didn't tell her to despite the pain. She was voluptuous. I dreamt of fever-sick dogs, lost children and saw heads of lambs and stern ancient Greek faces in the creases of the bedsheet when I woke. Nadine that morning came into my room wearing tight shorts and a t-shirt and sat on the bed next to me. She said she wanted to talk.

"I have so many beautiful friends," she said nasally, rolling her eyes as she flicked through her phone.

She then booked coach tickets to go see her parents in Bicester using her bank card. Then, she called the ticket office and told them she would like the date changed on the return trip. They demanded the bank card details to take a £5 charge and although her card was in plain sight she said she couldn't find it. She started pacing through the rooms to make noise that would suggest to the person on the other line that she was searching.

“I’m searching, I’m searching,” she said. “It’s nowhere. George, have you seen my card?” she asked ostentatiously.

Eventually the person agreed to change her ticket for free. This made Nadine very proud and happy. She radiated cleverness as she picked up her bank card from my bed and went back to her room. Every time there were people present she strived to appear affable and easy-going, full of charm and humour, but once you knew her when she let her guard down she was instead tense and unsure of what she was thinking or feeling. Nothing she ever said was what she really thought and this was noticeable. She had told me once that she always wanted to go to UCL but was rejected. She must have forgot about it later, when she came home with a French-Canadian boy with an Arab name – Rashad.

“He’s at UCL, I’ll tell you before he does, he’s such a braggart,” she introduced him. And aside, theatrically, though still in front of him: “The people who go there think that school is the toast of academia. Overrated.”

“Very true,” Rashad laughed.

Nadine's friends came over more often for drinks and cards in the small garden. She invited me to join them. We sat on a blanket in the grass among the unfettered rosebushes, enjoying the breeze and the diffuse light from the street lamp on the pavement behind the fence. Rashad told us his mother lived in Paris and he was in London “to have fun and meet girls”.

Tamsin, whom I never saw before, was a slim English woman with blue eyes and freckled skin who studied a Master's in psychiatry at UCL. She was soft-spoken like a daisy, a fay with a shy smile. We had wine and cigarettes and played cards, making small talk. Rashad lit a joint and passed it around. Tipsy, Nadine remarked that the pink English roses looked melancholy. She wondered why. I said I thought the flowers didn't know they were flowers, so they couldn't be melancholy. They just appeared so. It was only people who had awareness of their surroundings and of their emotions. Maybe Nadine assigned her own emotions unknowingly to the environment around her, I postulated. They all burst into laughter. I caught Tamsin's eyes in mine for a second after which she turned away quickly. Rashad suggested we went out. We should take an Overground train from Whitechapel and go to Camden Town for a concert he knew of, he said. On the way to the station, I remembered that I got an email earlier saying I would be paid back £16 on my Oyster travel card on account of last year’s overcharging if I swiped it at Stepney Green station. I only had £5 on me so there would be no money for the concert unless I did this. I thought I'd go by myself and meet the others after, but then decided to take a chance.

“I’ll get paid £16 on my Oyster if I touch it in at Stepney. They overcharged me by mistake. Could we please take our train from there instead?” I asked.

“Your self-interest is showing, George,” Tamsin said, feigning a shocked look as if she’d seen me doing something unsightly. “Why should we indulge you?” she added.

“Well, I guess I have something to win and you have got nothing to lose.” I said.

She giggled. We went to Stepney and then to Camden. We drank and listened to a number of eager new rock bands who played very well the songs of well known bands and less so their own. On the bus back early in the morning, with Nadine, I received a text from a number I didn't recognise. “What is your email?” it said. “T.”

I replied dryly, avoiding any suggestion that we might go out again. I had no money left at all after paying rent and my share of the bills. I wanted to tell her to go to the park at least, but I feared she’d get thirsty. Broke again, I went to the Cash Converters to try and sell an external hard drive I had found idling about in a cupboard at work, and my old sunglasses. The clerk offered me £10 for both.

“Take it or leave it mate. Sorry.”

I took it. Why is it that the air gets heavy when there is no money? I remembered those Human Resources classes where they taught us how to recognize employees who were stressed because of work pressures: taking risks, smoking and drinking excessively, not being able to rest, behaving erratically, always feeling like running out of time. Three quarters of the world’s population is living like that, because of poverty. Poverty is a full-time job. When you don’t have money you have to make an effort even to be able to take the bus to see the benefits office. How will you score that £1.60? What will you sell, where will you borrow it from? What will you give up on eating to spend it, if you do have it? Good luck getting all of the poor people to take up yoga and meditation every Thursday evening to balance out their lives. One day at work they had me write 40 Youtube descriptions for all the commercials we had on the website. Then they told me to create 20 Gmail addresses with Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani-sounding names and give them the passwords to all of them.

Ishaan told me that Ashish had asked him if he really needed me around.

“I told him yes. Try to look busier when you’re working,” he said. “They’s thinking of firing you.”

“Sure Ishaan. Thanks for telling me.” I said.

I wasn’t sure if he had made that up to make me forget his prior mendacity or if he was genuine. I said nothing but decided to keep an open mid to both possibilities for the moment. Nevertheless, I falsified industriousness with a lot more zeal after that. Ishaan said we are living in the age of Kali Yaga when everything is the reverse of what it should reasonably be. I suppose that was another way of saying we weren’t really supposed to sell cheap retail relief to the unsuspecting

and put-upon immigrant classes, but rather we had been destined to write highfaultin lyrics and make art house films at the expense of the vast endowments left us by our landed forefathers. Humans these days are like the April sky. Look away once and its hue already changed. I picked up a book by Dostoyevsky in the big, green glass library in Whitechapel. Crime and Punishment. We are all just about crazy, it said, but those who don't bother hiding it and are visibly unwell get locked up because we have to draw the line somewhere.

The European Union got the Nobel Peace prize that year. Through its wilful paralysis it also let tens of thousands of innocent people drown in the sea, and let Greece's financial crisis metastasise, destroying millions of lives. French bees turned out toxic blue honey. Rabid foxes bit a child in London and an Internet petition to have necro-bestiality recognized as a sexual orientation garnered 20,000 signatures.

At home, Saleem's other son, Shah, was speaking with Luca and Nadine.

"Last night, my friends, in my brother in law's flat, I'm see a big mouse in the living room. I'm look at him and it was not gray like normal mouse. Exactly," he said when Nadine gasped audibly. "He was black, like cola. I'm take out my shoe, to throw, and two more mice run in the room. They seek warm from outside. Be vigilant."

Koshi crossed my path outside 53 Feet East one day on Brick Lane.

"Yo! Georgie. Long time."

"Hi, Kosh. Indeed. How are you?"

"Good, you know. Still working on changing the world."

We went in a bar. Koshi ordered a beer and a packet of crisps and I ordered a double Wild Turkey, no ice. He paid.

"Still not paying your interns?"

"They're all Erasmus now. The European Union pays them."

"That must be why it got the peace prize."

"Well, maybe. They didn't get it for the kind of disloyalty you showed me, that's for sure."

"I have loyalty to my family and friends, Koshi, and to myself inasmuch as I have to prevent being homeless again, which is what I was when I worked for you. My people are all deeply disappointed with me being utterly penniless all the time. That's my loyalty. These days I'm writing for an advertising agency. I'm just looking to work and get paid."

"Simple things. But it's not easy out there. Everyone can write."

"Well, not everyone thinks so."

"All the devils in hell be roaming and stomping on the Terra before I start paying people to write articles on my website."

“Whatever’s right, Kosh. What you are doing seems to be legal so God bless. You do what you do, I have to do what I have to do. I bear you no grudge.”

“And nor I you, my friend. I told the hypers you were on a sabbatical, by the way. When are you coming back?”

“Hypers?”

“The staff.”

“I am not coming back.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like to grovel for food. I just want to go my own way. I’ve got a half-decent job now. I’m getting by.”

“Good to hear,” he said, and got up from the tall barstool.

But his eyes went mean and he didn’t look like he felt good to hear I was even barely surviving. We shook hands half-heartedly and he went. I ordered another bourbon just before he paid and I stayed to drink it in the dark musty room. The firewater started me up. Koshi was a bad omen, after what Ishaan had said.

In the office the next day I had a defiantly large grapefruit and a jug of black coffee for breakfast, after which I set to work. My job was to submit 50 applications to the charity website using the list of names and email addresses I had wrought up the other day.

“Do it from this computer, George. I installed a special software on it so it doesn’t appear as our office. I routes though Leicester.”

“Right.”

“Take the supplementary data from these papers and write it into the forms on the site and then give me back the papers. Do you think we could be done by 12?”

I did as I was told but before I handed in the papers I took a picture of a couple of them next to a wall in the office which showed the firm’s logo. I figured if I got the chance I would report this to the police, or at least to the clients.

“This will definitely take us beyond the target,” the boss said with self-satisfaction when I reported the job was done.

In front of me he tore up the documents and put the pieces in his coat pocket.

“Why don’t you gather up all the commercials we’ve done this year, including the easy cooking with Tapak paste animation series, and upload it to our Youtube account, with a nice description for each? Set them to private viewing first before I check, alright?”

“Sure thing.”

Finally, a task that did not involve connivance or fraud. I gladly threw myself into it. Working with two computers I managed to upload more 14 of our excruciatingly banal videos in less than two hours. I churned out gibb descriptions as I went on.

“Ishaan, shall I do the High Commission clip as well?” I shouted over my desk in the roomful of people.

There was no answer, so I looked up. Ishaan was holding his phone to his ear. He raised a hand and nodded his head affirmatively, in the Indian way, which is to nod sideways, the same way Europeans nod negatively. I sought confirmation:

“Is that a yes?”

He put a hand over his phone and whispered:

“Yes, George. Go ahead.”

So I did. I double-checked the descriptions and the privacy settings and I went outside for a break. I strolled down Cannon Street Road and chomped down some salty pork scrotchings with a can of lager. Muslim men and women in full garb walked past me, looking at me drinking alcohol and eating the pig in broad daylight, and not making the slightest gesture of disapproval. It always bothered me how people were calling our neighbourhood Londonistan and were saying it was ruled by sharia law. No neighbourhood in London was as welcoming to strangers and no other people as warm with those who were different from them as these Muslims. Most of these Muslims would take a three-headed octopus in their house as long as it took off its shoes, but because they didn't like to brag about it and kept to themselves they got painted as backwards fundamentalists. Maybe some of them were, especially some of these young ones, but the older ones were all right in my book. When I went back to the office I found an email from Ashish:

“Please see me in my office now.”

I got up and went. In the office Ashish, Sakshi, Ishaan and Priti – the seniorest people in the firm, were waiting for me aligned behind the desk like a parole commission. Something wasn't right.

“Hello,” I said. “How may I help?”

“Why did you upload those videos?” Ashish snapped. “I had five clients complain today – some of the videos were yet to be released officially, George.”

I paled, probably visibly. I felt the blood rush out of my head, numbing my extremities.

“What do you mean?” I stuttered. “Ishaan had me do it. And they are set to private anyway, nobody can see them...”

They all threw looks at each other as if to say “there you go, I told you he'd say that...”

Ishaan spoke:

“I only told you to upload the cooking animations, George, not all the films.”

“What? Ishaan...”

“Yes, yes, George. We are in big trouble because of you now. None of it was set to private either, it was all public.”

He now openly admonished me and the others looked like they were eager for their turn.

“No way, you told me to upload everything...”

“Come on George, you must have misunderstood. You know the High Commission commercial is not due to come out until next week. Why would I ask you to upload it? I was only talking about the cooking animations Ashish told me to upload.”

“That’s right,” said the burly one.

“No, no way,” I barked.

I got angry, feeling the blood rushing in the other direction. Now my head was light and I was clenching my fists. My ears were burning now.

“I can’t take responsibility for this, you’re setting me up...”

“It’s a misunderstanding,” Ishaan intervened as Sakshi was preparing to spit some of her own venom in my eyes. “English is not his first language. He’s also not very good with computers.”

“What? Ashish, Sakshi, please understand: I did exactly as I was told. I simply carried out instructions. I can use a computer fine and I understand English fine. If there was a mistake the mistake was in the instructions.” I stamped my foot. “With all due respect.” I added.

“I can see you are a bit recalcitrant,” Ashish said. “Let’s end this meeting and I’ll get back to you later today.”

“OK,” I said. I got up and left, shutting the door behind me.

Sure enough, an hour later, the verdict came through the inbox:

“George,

In view of what happened with the HC video, I want you to take responsibility. I do understand that this might be someone else who failed to inform you but the video couldn’t have been left on You Tube without Priti knowing this as she heads that department.

I would like you to take time off now, maybe the whole month as unpaid. Please discuss whenever you want.

[Also I was more taken aback by your reaction; this is not the way I expect you to come into a discussion when you are party to something which has gone wrong. There was a lot of misplaced

arrogance and no reflection of the fact that I am senior to you and have overlooked lot of small mistakes from time to time. I didn't find your behaviour respectful.]

Ashish”

I wrote back: *“I think we must be operating under vastly different systems of reasoning. I will be off indefinitely – you have not employed me formally anyway, so no workplace tribunal to worry about – and if you want me to come back you know where to find me. Good luck, G.”*

I packed up my things and left, in a hurry. A month later I went to a dodgy Internet café in Peckham and used the company credit card data I had written down before, as a precaution, to order £3,000 worth of dildos and other sex toys to the office's address, to be delivered to Ishaan personally. I never worked up the courage to write to the clients about how they got deceived. All of a sudden I had a lot of time on my hands.

The Hopi legend of the Koyaanisqatsi, purification day, was coming true. Nobody beat the Hopi in apocalyptic visions. It was their forte. No Hopi is around today. Somewhere at the wrong end of this unspooling continent a woman in a white dress with flowers in her hair, Ileana, was waiting for me with a heart full of love. It was this thought that kept me going. The first time I went to Waitrose the sandwich I bought there had a dead fly stuck on the inside of its triangular box. I gently pared the insect away from the food, and ate the food. It tasted the same as if a fly had never been there. The new press, Koshi's press, smells of sulphur and rotten eggs and it's not afraid of anything. It wouldn't know news if it bugged it but it does a good job at sucking the income out of the real press, the one that does supply the news. Eventually the new will eat the old and then when there is nothing left to be eaten it will die and a new, better press, will be born once again to fill a void of real news. You'd sooner make a living writing homosexual romance books or furniture product descriptions than news these days. Three women who played in a band called Pussy Riot were arrested and jailed for two years in Russia for upsetting the church and the Kremlin. Putin has been around the corridors of rarefied power since Kennedy and Gorbachev. Now, he is also a piece of the search engine optimisation machine, along with Obama, Damien Hirst, and feminism. Our most personal thoughts, which we'd never dare voice but have no reluctance at all in typing in the all-sucking Google machine, are being harvested, diced up and sold back to us piecemeal via individually-targeted advertising. Soon enough reality won't exist, we'll all just sleepwalk through our own private, personalised, automatically-curated, graphically enhanced media narrative. All things to all men. Music, maths, poetry, war, death and sex are the same thing now. Where's the

role of the press in that? Four hours of haunted sleep is all I could get at one time. Again, I had to appeal to my parents for rent. They grudgingly obliged. For all their faults, I had pretty dependable parents, I admitted to myself. Days got long again now. Rain fell profusely, although it didn't pour as much as it did in Denmark, and I spent more time in the library looking for work and reading with the pensioners and the homeless people of Tower Hamlets looking to keep warm and to have some society when everyone who was worth anything was busy. I took long walks and got to know the streets of Whitechapel and Stepney by heart. I thought of becoming a bicycle courier but I needed an insured bicycle and I couldn't afford the policy. I got five nights work in a fruit warehouse in Streatham putting fruit in baskets to be delivered fresh to office workers the next morning. I stood in front of a conveyor belt all night and counted pears, oranges, bananas, all kinds of ordinary fruit, nothing exotic. I packed the baskets up into wheelie shelves and loaded them into vans. Almost everyone there, about 50 people, was Portuguese. Good, family people, who grafted for others not for themselves. You can always tell people who work for the sake of others if you look carefully. They double-check and they are always attentive not to blunder, else the wife or the husband or the kids might go hungry. They are the ones who never take their full breaks and only eat half the reduced triangle sandwich from Morrisons, keep the other half for later. Real good people but full of fear. They've been learned like that through years of getting paid by the hour. These jobs are all the same. Count the hours, £6.5 times ten minus a half hour for the break and £3 for the bus and that's what you're making before tax. End up with £800, maybe £900 a month in a city where many people spend that on a bottle of wine to go with dinner. You work, you go home, and you're happy you're still alive. I took two buses to get there at 1am. Left home at 11 and just watched the city pass me from the top deck, front seat, legs spread out over the yellow rail like the king cowboy. A Hungarian girl made the eyes at me but when I asked her her name she said she didn't want to tell me. After 5 nights they told me I was a good worker and they'd call me back if they needed me again for filling shifts. I made £280 all told. They didn't call me back.

I picked up a book called *Chaos* by James Gleick. It talked about clouds and weather and how things work in nature and it seemed to me it was pretty much a book about how things worked among people as well. Driven by forces we can't control but condemned to repeat forever smaller and bigger patterns of behaviour while thinking of ourselves as unique, and being so, in a certain pedantic way. I didn't get much sleep anymore. I walked up to King Edward Memorial Park every morning at 6:30 to see the sun rising over London. Old Chinese men were doing Tai Chi on the lawn between the trees and statues. The sun blazed the dew and pierced powerful through the glass totems. I read the book and at about 8 I went back home and slept through the day. One eats less, drinks less and smokes less if he sleeps through the day. I walked about, read, thought of Ileana, and

lost weight for two months. I wasn't eligible for unemployment cheques and too proud to insist. People were holding Jack the Ripper tours and Suffragette tours in the East End. Every night there were 4 or five tours competing at once. The Suffragettes got the richer, more intellectual crowds, walking through Bethnal Green, looking at pieces of pavement where women died to get their right to vote, slabs of asphalt where the honour blood had long washed off but plaques consigned their heroism to permanence. The tourists paid £5 a pop for the tour and the guides got rich. There was a lot of embellishment and I doubt if there was a lot of tax-paying. But the Jack the Ripper tours were the real money makers. They drew in hundreds of punters and they were all eager for gore, no matter if historically factual or entirely made up. Big violence on Middlesex Street, big rape on Wentworth Street. They'd meet outside the White Hart in Aldgate East and sometimes I'd tag along to hear the improvisation. I would recognise some punters from previous tours, they could hear the considerable variations in the account of how and how many of these women got murdered and raped but they seemed to enjoy it anyway. Some of the more ambitious tour guides were dressed in those old leather raincoats with the big lapels and they carried a Victorian gas lantern which they would raise and shake around for added effect. Next to the White Hart, between a KFC and a Burger King, was London's oldest anarchist newspaper and print shop. They somehow owned an entire building and they housed all sorts of nutty charities, but they also had good books and magazines that you couldn't find anywhere else. I went sometimes to listen to the anarchists talk and to look through the books. Sometimes they brought sacks of food from supermarkets and they distributed it around. I went for that too. They also had another building around the corner in Fieldgate Street, a sort of anarchist smoking club, where they would have parties. One day the bookshop burned partially. When I went I was stopped by Fletcher, one of the managers of the shop, who said the place had been firebombed by the National Fascist Front and they couldn't let me in because it was a crime scene. Everything looked wet and charred inside the room on the ground floor, with lots of burnt paper floating in puddles from the fire engine but the rest of the place was fine. There was a big black mark on their red steel door too, and a broken window round the back. Fletcher gave me a half-burned copy of a rare book called *Beating the Fascists* as a consolation prize.

“You keep this well, there aren't many around. It's a collector's item,” he said.

I later read in the paper that the author of the attack hadn't been found but that the shop used the insurance money to buy a larger collection of books, which they sold at profit and with the proceeds they hired lawyers to get some of their comrades out of jail for squatting, which had recently become a crime in the UK. They also started a website called IsJamesWindlyDeadYet.com,

which simply said, “Today, (the day’s date) James Windly, the erstwhile Conservative MP who was the main sponsor of the disastrous UK Squatting Bill, has unfortunately not died.”

Simple, cut-throat freemarket capitalism and radical, utopian progressive politics make good bedfellows in London.

“Funny how people always complain about the crowded tube but never about equally crowded nightclubs,” Nadine said.

We sat in the kitchen drinking tea and beer and rolling cigarettes.

“Listen to this: hebephrenia is a form of chronic schizophrenia involving disordered thought, inappropriate emotions, hallucinations, and bizarre behaviour,” she continued, reading off her phone.

“I think my former boss had this,” I said. “He’d be relieved to find out it probably comes with a tax cut.”

“I hate people who don’t pay their taxes,” she said. “Gush, my shop, always makes a point of paying tax in full and paying all employees the living wage although they could be paying us minimum wage like other shops.”

“You are lucky.”

“Yeah, and they let us volunteer on the clock as well, and they also give us free life coaching lessons and debate classes. Like, last week, we joined an animal rights protest in Westminster, and the week before that we went to a protest calling for a complete ban on oil and plastic.”

“Really, so they pay you to protest?”

“Well, yeah, sort of, but it sounds a bit dodgy when *you* say it. You don’t really have to go to the protests but they put up this calendar in the staff room in the shop with all the upcoming protests and all the shop managers go so it’s a bit like team building. It’s optional but encouraged, you know?”

“Right, yeah. So what do they talk about at these life coaching sessions?”

“Oh, those are really cool too. They bring in very enlightened and experienced people, and they tell us about lucid dreaming, going vegan and exploring our sexuality. That’s why I’ve gone vegan. Can you lucid dream?”

“Not on purpose I guess, but it has happened.”

“Oh. How about sexuality? Ever had sex with a guy?”

“No, can’t say that I have.”

“So what, you aren’t attracted to your own kind at all?” she asked with not a little incredulity.

“Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I am a little bit but not in a sexual way. More in a friendly way, the same way I’m attracted to dogs.”

“I see. So you are attracted to men only not enough to be gay.”

“Yes. You sound like you have an intriguing job. It’s unusual that they mix politics and personal lifestyle with the job like that. Most places they go out of their way to keep them apart.”

“It is weird at first but then you get used to it. We hold debate workshops where we talk about how the Tory scum need to be stopped and how Guantanamo must be closed, like, ASAP. We are one big family together. The CEO of the company is this guy who looks a bit like Mr Castevet from Rosemary’s Baby, which is a bit creepy because he is also a bit partial to wizardry and concoctions, right? I mean he works in a lab all day.”

“That was a disturbing movie. Were I in your place I don’t know if I’d be comfortable around Mr Castevet.”

“I know, right? But you get used to it. I mean, before I joined Gush I was just an ignorant hippie chick with a lit degree who hadn’t a clue. Now I feel like I have things going on.”

“Right. That’s good.”

“Yeah, and they teach us also about utilitarianism as well. Like, this philosophy that’s all about making decisions according to what makes the most number of people happy or hurts the least number of people. Which, I guess, is kind of the same thing.”

“Hmm. The absence of pain can be equal with the presence of happiness, I suppose,” I said, “especially if you’ve been in pain for a long time. That’s why some people cut themselves, they like the feeling they get after the pain goes away. The relief of not feeling it anymore.”

“Right, exactly.”

“You end up thinking you are spending your life helping others but if you look at the second and third-order effect of what you’ve been doing it could be that you’ve helped a couple of people and hurt more unintentionally. The reverse of this is to only do what pleases you, but then you get to hedonism, ill health and eventually nihilism, and anti-social thinking because you are nothing without other people. So you just try to find the best balance between what makes you happy and what is morally the right thing to do, or if you’re lucky enough to naturally like people, if you’re the kind of person who gets a little chemical kick in the brain every time someone smiles at you, then it’s a bit easier.”

“Wait a minute there, what do you mean by second and third-order effects?”

“So this is a thing they taught us in engineering school in Denmark. You’re at a football game, at the stadium, OK? A player scores a goal. The goal is the first-order effect of his action of hitting the ball how it ought to be hit. The goal is an effect, a reaction, rather than the action. Then,

the guy next to you, who likes that player's team, gets up and cheers and applauds. Many others do the same, causing commotion. That's the second-order effect of the player hitting the ball with his foot. But in the commotion caused you look and you see someone spilled your glass of beer. A third-order effect which also can be traced back to the kick of the ball and the goal. Philosophically, I reckon if football players were utilitarians, they'd only try to score if their team had the most fans, but you never know exactly how many fans a team has, so in the end there wouldn't be much football played. And how was the player to even know that directly resulting from the happiness of one fan would be the grief of another? One drives the car and listens to the game on the radio. Whoops happily when his team scores but loses sight of the road and causes an accident. Utilitarianism is a hard thing when you are one of eight billion humans around."

"So what do you suggest instead?"

"I don't know. I reckon just find something you are good at and do it for a living while respecting other people doing the same. If you can."

"Right, OK. But you can only respect other people if they are worthy of it, otherwise they should be shut down and educated. What if they are racist or homophobic? How can you respect that which is just the worst thing in the world? And if some people get hurt maybe they have it coming, so that's utilitarian too. If you learn a lesson to guard your beer better next time then the pain was worth it, wasn't it? Every night when I go to bed I ask myself, what did I learn today. You should too, and that way you'll never waste another day."

And she went off to meet friends from work. That night I told myself I learnt philosophy is quite a nebulous thing and much better was to consider every decision on its own instead of thinking hypothetically what you'd do if this and that were happening. We all say we'd jump in the water to save the kitten but would we if it really happened?

Nadine had a hard job to do as far as I was concerned. To have to put up this act and live, and think and talk a certain way just in order to be allowed to sell soap is more difficult than anything I'd ever done for money in my life. I respected her resolve.

"Some like living with the paranoia," is how Luca explains Nadine.

Always trying to prove something, always on high alert to suss out someone else's errors. Luca, when he was not working, locked himself in his room with the television and drank and made sports bets with his phone on the internet. He watched horse and dog races mainly – I could hear the commentary from outside – and he only left briefly to go to the shop for beer and takeout food. He worked four days a week and stayed home three and was paid £30,000 a year which to me seemed an astronomical amount but to him it seemed at the low end of acceptable.

Luca was a vagrant deep down. His clothes fitted him poorly because they were too big, but that's how he liked them. He always looked snug and moved in brisk, nervous lunges, and his eyes glistened curiously like marbles especially in the evening. He left his home in rural Sardinia at 21 out of boredom and thirst for adventure and first landed in Barcelona, which was a boat trip away. By the time he was 23 he became a mule, a drug transporter, for a gang of Nigerians and Mexicans who paid him 5,000 euros to carry cocaine in his innards from Girona airport to Stansted. He did this every weekend amidst the holidaymaker crowd. One week, he said, he arrived in Stansted as usual, took a taxi to the house where he was sent to, went in and unpacked. He fixed himself a large cup of laxatives to release his payload when a violent knock started at the door. Thinking it was the police, he got scared, but thought he'd better open now rather than after the drugs came out of him, two kilos of uncut Bolivian cocaine. He did his best to stop his shaking and opened. An old man with white hair and a plain jumper stood out there, awfully cross. The man started cussing and gesticulating at Luca, demanding his money. It turned out to be the landlord, who had no idea what was going on, he thought he rented his house to a group of foreign workers, same as there are everywhere in the UK. Luca immediately paid the £350 in cash the man demanded for the week and locked himself in again. He was relieved – so relieved in fact, that he didn't make it to the bathroom. This was his moment of awakening, he said. He called his handler, a man he knew as Muslim Jim and told him to come down at once. The man came, took the merchandise and left. After that night Luca decided to never return to Barcelona. He had his things shipped to London and stayed there, living off his savings and retraining as a chef. But Luca, I learned, did not leave everything he did in those days behind him. That's why his eyes took on the appearance of shellac in the late afternoon.

“Come on in George, I have some stuff here. Have you smoked roca before?”

“No,” I said.

“Well, you can try now.”

He showed me a bag of white powder.

“Isn't that cocaine? Aren't you suppose to snort it?” I said, signalling my expertise.

“Not suppose to. We wash them, it's much better,” he said.

And he set to work. He pricked holes in the flattened side of an empty beer can with his pocket knife and sprinkled cigarette ash over the holes so as to make sure nothing passed through. Then he poured some of the cocaine in a spoon and added a bit of soda bicarbonate, the same way you'd add salt to a meal, carefully, just enough. The way you like it. Then, with the tip of a napkin he dipped in a glass of water and squeezed a few drops in the spoon, which he proceeded to heat up underneath with a lighter. The thing came to a boil and then he added a bit more bicarbonate until it

turned to a paste which he let dry into crumbs. This, he explained, was the rock. The crumbs looked a faded yellow, not unlike the residue one finds at the bottom of the electric kettle after a few months of usage, and they gave off a smell of gasoline.

He put a couple of these crumbs on the ash on the beer can pipe and smoked them through the hole where you drink the beer. It made a crackling sound under the unforgiving flame, which explains the name of the drug. Then he passed it to me. And told me to put a couple more crumbs on the ash and smoke them. I smoked and it was different from cocaine snorting, I didn't feel a shock to the heart, just an instant elation followed by a serenity that I'd never known before, but also an energy and vitality which had thus far eluded me. It was as if I was travelling at a thousand miles an hour through void – a peaceful rush. Five minutes later, it vanished as quickly as it appeared. Luca was watching me.

“First time, eh? Did you like it?”

“I guess, yes.”

“Well, just don't be fool enough to hope it will ever happen again because it won't,” he said, with bitterness.

“Alright, good to know,” I replied. “Thanks.”

An email popped in on my phone inviting me to an interview for a part-time blogging job for “a consumer data startup”. I accepted. An executive at a large Swiss bank with offices in London had got the idea that he could make good money on the side if he harvested personal information off of people who read his website, so he set about organizing for it. Kumar, an obese but impeccably-dressed fellow with a receding hairline, met me in the underground strip mall beneath Canary Wharf after he left work. We went to Starbucks and he told me to solve a basic maths problem, which I did.

Satisfied, he told me my job would be to write “opinionated” articles for his website, called Samsara, which he will launch in a few months. It will be a news commentary site with a forum, which he hoped would become a lively discussion arena for British current affairs, consumer issues, lifestyle and entertainment, as he put it.

The idea was that you could only post your comment on the site if you had registered with your name, date of birth and address, and after that the website would discreetly collect every revealing piece of personal information you reveal in your comments – preferences for food, drink, clothes, political leanings, cultural affinities – and use it to build a dossier on you. This dossier would be the intellectual property of the company that owned the website, patented stuff, and it would be up for sale to the highest bidder. Manly, Kumar explained, advertisers, but also anyone else.

“Why would anyone agree to let you do that?”

“It’s in the terms and conditions you accept to sign in All websites do that because nobody ever reads the terms and conditions.”

My job was to write the articles in a way that would get as many people as possible to register and leave their comment. Later, he said, I would have to write quizzes for the registrees as well, because he would limit the number of comments they would be allowed to leave without filling out our quizzes, which would also be sources of valuable personal information.

“Are we a bit like voyeurs?” I asked.

“No, it’s science.”

“How is it science?”

“It’s data science, behavioural science.”

“Right.”

It all hinged on the articles being attractive enough to inspire people to spend time registering on the website and commenting on them. One way to inspire people to do such a thing was to make them angry, Kumar suggested, citing reputable scientific research. I took the job. My pay was to be £60 a day, two days a week. That was rent, bills and food taken care of. I was happy. I went to work researching what made people most angry on the internet straight away. It turned out there is a constellation of topics that people out there found infuriating. The trick, I thought, was to not use the same name in signing these stories, use something like Laser Tazer or Razor Key, or both, and to make sure no articles made Laser or Razor appear to contradict himself, otherwise people would smell a rat. Lazer would write about how much he hates the rich and how unfair the world is, and how much a revolution was needed. Basically he would be a member of Occupy Wall Street. Razor would be complaining about the loss of national pride and identity, and how multiculturalism and political correctness were ruining everything. Kumar said this would be perfect. Hypocrisy, it seemed, was the only capital crime on the internet. Anything else you could get away with.

So I started typing up short, fiery hot takes on major news events. 3-400 words each, and saved them up on my computer in documents labelled “government freezes student loans for Romanians” and “Arab spring falters as old regime changes tack” and “tories cut benefits as they give big business tax breaks”; after a couple of days of this I had set my brain just so that as the news was coming on TV I was writing the comments on my laptop and sending them through.

Every Saturday we had a meeting in an office space rented by the hour above the Canadian consulate in Haymarket, by Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus. I felt wonderful getting off the bus at Piccadilly Circus at 9 o’clock in the morning on a Saturday, the air still wet from a rough

night and looking at those marvellous lights all around me, then walking down Haymarket and entering the Canada House building as if I mattered. We talked about the design of the site and the way we'll try to get people to buy the data, and then at about 2pm we left. There was Kumar, John – a computer programmer who didn't speak much, Jane, the sales manager, and I, the content provider, as they called me. It struck me that none of them seemed to be there for the money apart from myself. It was almost as if they were happy to be there instead of home with their families for breakfast and silly television on a Saturday morning. All I wanted was the money and I think it showed. I took notes on what they said and when Kumar adjourned the meeting I was the first out the door. Funny thing, of course, was that I was also the only one who didn't have a family waiting. Homeward, I walked through Trafalgar Square, stopped for a minute, smoked a cigarette and admired the landscape, the tourists, the buildings, looked at Nelson's column and Big Ben, and thought to myself, this is home now. I belong here now, don't I? And then I crushed the cigarette and took bus number 15 down to Commercial Road.

Luca was also a prolific and shameless shoplifter. He took me to the big Sainsbury's in Whitechapel and before my eyes he filled his backpack with a large bottle of whisky, two sirloin steaks, a sixpack of Heineken, and then grabbed a random item off the shelf – a battery set as it happens, and took it to the cashier. She asked him for £5, he offered to pay by card. The card was rejected. He said he was sorry, would she wait until he went to the cash machine outside and came back? She said of course. Out we went.

"The main thing is to hide the things where the cameras don't see you," he said. "And to not be nervous."

"Right."

We feasted like pirates that night, with bloody steak and baked potatoes and beer, and then we got drunk on vodka and smoked some more cocaine that Luca washed up. It somehow didn't seem serious, life appeared easy and quaint to me at that moment despite all the dangerous and unusual things I had done that day. It was so strange and so different that I simply did not acknowledge it was my real life, I just took it as an act, as a pretending game that bore no consequences. Starting with the mornings in Canada House and ending with the nights on the leather sofa searching for fallen bits of rock on the floor so Luca and I could have another smoke, it felt like a figment of a strange piece of imagination that I just happened to walk through.

Funny how easy the unthinkable is when you look at it that way. A couple of weeks later I started to look a bit too much forward to Luca returning from work so we could smoke together, so I decided it was time for a break. Firstly, the money wasn't there to support this new habit and secondly I knew how easily one can get hooked. The difference between just having fun and going

in too deep is more often than not small. I had seen this in others around me and knew how to recognize it. The day I set aside all work and paced the house restlessly telling myself I wasn't really thinking how to give myself an excuse to smoke some crack is the day I quit. I decided for every one time I smoked there would be two weeks when I didn't. Being far gone was not really why I left the Romanian homeland. Lots of sweating and anxiety just at the thought that I wouldn't be smoking crack again for a few weeks. Lots of bargaining with myself inside my head, a devilish little voice appearing saying how it's all quite easy and simple and there is no problem if I just smoked it once again for fun. Hours this voice went on and I sweat. How petty a man's soul can be. How the craziness is always just an inch away somewhere, close to taking over regardless how much one thinks he evolved, or moved on, or left behind, if he makes just a wrong turning. The coffee machine Saleem got us made some kind of repulsive hogwash unfit for consumption, so, thirsty for a hot drink I put my sunglasses on and walked out to Watney Market. The sun was up alright but at such a great distance that the light it gave off was closer to shade than brightness. Still, it was a beautiful cold day. I bought a tall paper cup of coffee from a deli in the market and admired the steam rising from it and blurring the crisp air, mellowing it out. Coffee is best drunk outside in the winter. I held the cup to my eyes and looked at the almost frozen City through the heat. Like a desert illusion at one end of Commercial Road stood the tall buildings of the financial district. Between the busy people who occupied the pavement and the market in their passing, most of them going somewhere, there were the losers, the people who were in no hurry, like me. We had nowhere to be that day so there was no point moving fast. You move so slow that you take a step a few seconds, let the Earth spin under you a little, share the effort. You could clock a drug habit quite easily – there is no need for a junkie to fall asleep on his feet for you to know he's a junkie. Tell-tale signs, twitchy limbs, yellow cloudy globes instead of eyes with red or blue or black circles around them and fallen teeth at a young age tell the same. Junkies are always cagey and guilty, ashamed. Gloomy. Blinking but the focus isn't there. Scatterbrain. I watch them watch me. I realised it would be very easy to fall among them from where I was. I gave a younger one a coin and got to talking to him. He was living in the homeless shelter but he needed money so he begged in the street during the day. He was addicted to crack and heroin and he started it with his mates who were squatting in a house in Limehouse. He was 24.

“I'm kind of lost now, I can't really kick it but I take no more pleasure in it either, you know. Been at it seven years... Hey, got a fag?”

I gave him one and wished him good luck.

I stopped at the off-license and bought another packet of Marlboro lights. Ukrainian. £5. Since the revolution and civil war started in Ukraine these cigarettes flooded London. They were

busy overthrowing the government back in Kiev but while everyone in and out the country was watching the Maidan others took advantage to get into business. I walk down to Wapping and along the river to Tower Bridge. The vulgar dart of glass which is now the pride of London, the Shard, owned by a faraway sheikh, dominated the sight. It is a menacing look, it robs you of the ability to look at the bridge and the fortress. It doesn't just command attention, it sucks it in, shining and intimidating relentlessly. There must be something in this idea that the Shard has been left deliberately unfinished at the top so as to blend into the skies like the tower of Babylon. That was a city like London where people spoke all the languages of the world but didn't understand each other. They couldn't finish the tower. The Shard was some biblical portent. Maybe we were doing it right this time. We did understand each other. Harmony reigned in London, in the scheme of things. London for its size was one of the safest places in Europe. A megacity where people got along. The Shard maybe was Babel in the good version.

I walked back to the East End through Salmon Lane and to my estate. Stepney was the last cheap neighbourhood in Central London, where you could live within walking distance of Charing Cross for less than £500 a month. There were many young renters on the estate, looking for cheap parties and easy access. The old Bengalis were very welcoming. A room was two phone calls away if you needed one for a friend, and they never asked too many questions. No-one else in London would let you move in without a deposit except a Bengali in the East End. They knew the hardship and in their own way they helped us get along.

But I sensed that there was a new, worrying current sweeping through the place. There were more and more new bars and coffee shops playing old rock and blues, tattooed bar staff, walls all scraped and raggedy, bathrooms full of graffiti and oddball skateboard stickers, and in general trying hard to pretend they were unpretentious dive joints but nevertheless serving drinks that were more expensive than most places in Soho. These places were mushrooming around Shoreditch proper, in Bethnal Green, Limehouse, Bow and now down Stepney's Commercial Road. A new generation of extremely mercantile people was taking over, crowding out the poor locals with their sense of powerful contrived spontaneity, thin skin and self-consciousness. For police and real estate agents this was probably no bad thing, but it spelt doom for those guttersnipes who took to calling the place home for so many years.

Kumar's wife started coming into our weekly editorial meetings and she had big thoughts about where I should take my articles. So far I'd been writing fairly digestible warmongering insurgent anarchist propaganda, laced with defensive small-town whiteman nostalgia, thinking that if that was bottom then I'd had a pretty smooth landing and I was wallowing in my unpleasant corner of the media industry in relative contentment and occasional bliss.

It was when Masuma wanted me to get into critiquing government welfare policy and write indignantly that they should cut unemployed benefits and supplement childcare aids with the spare cash I realised there was ample space still between me and rockface.

“Not least because you have two young children of your own, Masuma, with all due respect, I believe you might be confusing your own immediate interests with those of the general public here,” I argued with her over burgers in Piccadilly Circus.

“Well George that may well be the case but I’m also looking at The Daily Slimetrail and they seem to thrive on these kinds of topics. I mean it’s the most-read English language news website in the whole world.”

“Yes but still, do you think we should go after their readership?”

“I’m saying let’s start trying George. Can you send me some samples on childcare, benefits cheating, property taxes and football hooliganism?”

I nodded faintly and she got up and left, leaving most of her fishburger on the plate and half her chips, which she drenched in ketchup. I finished my meal and I finished hers and I brooded under the annoyed looks of the waiters in this ‘gourmet burger kitchen’. My employers wanted me to fuel the terrors of the neo-bourgeois middle classes. If I wanted to do that I would never have given up on petty crime. It felt like high time Samsara and I should part ways over creative differences.

A few emails back and forth and I got my wish. Kumar set me a meeting for 4pm the next day in the sprawling shopping mall beneath Canary Wharf. He gave me a monotone speech, blood-curdling in its highfalutin assurance and unprintable in its blandness and deliberate misconception of the truth. The gist: I was dismissed for gross misconduct because I dared contradict his wife, and I was duly reminded that the non-disclosure agreement and exclusivity contract I signed with Samsara were enforceable in court, should I get the idea to republish the work I did for him. I would also be paid two weeks’ wages as a severance, though Kumar was at pains to point out that he was under no obligation to compensate me further. The fat man produced a constipated grimace and a lock-jawed “good luck” without looking at me. We shook hands and I left.

Walking homeward I was gripped by satisfaction, an unexplainable upliftment that I attributed to being released from having to produce any more drivel, inconsequential word vomit, to satisfy the greed of these snakeoil salesmen. That way lay madness, and self-loathing. Further down, leaving the polycarbonate maze of Canary Wharf, the prospect of homelessness and hunger resulting from lack of financial turnover was still refusing to drive me to a panic.

Luca was waiting with two grammes of cocaine, Nadine and her girlfriend on the sofa fondling each other and snorting lines.

“Glorious day, George. We’re going to Victoria Park. Care to join?”

I did.

Luca licked the side of a cigarette and stuck a line of cocaine on it, then lit the cigarette. I did the same. I didn’t feel like snorting, it was too much fun watching the women do it.

In the park we sat down with beers and wine on the side of the lake. A gentle breeze caressed our contorted faces. With cocaine you feel at your most lucid the more you take. You make the worst decisions while being unflinchingly assured they are the best. You feel eloquent and steady but you spout erratic, nonsensical phrases and your eyes bounce like balls at a ping-pong tournament.

Few drugs show up the base ignoble animal instincts of humankind as candidly as coke does it. All your egotistical tendencies amplified, and all your self-awareness muted. It turns you into a grotesque parody of the elegant, glamorous being you sometimes imagine yourself to be, and that’s why you love it. Naomi and her lover were now almost having sex on the lawn. Naomi looked more pneumatic and her girlfriend more elastic than usual. Their flaming lips ate each other with voracious lust and their suave and delicate embraces ceaselessly electrified their bodies. They started panting. Luca and I were now embarrassed in spite of the coke.

“Sit here while we go over there and pray,” Luca told them, and he told me we should leave with a stealth beckoning.

We walked away and sat down in a pub around the corner, with the girls not even taking notice of our absence. We drank a beer each in silence to settle our minds then we went home sorrowful and troubled. We walked down Roman Road and Globe Road at the end of the business day among shutters clattering down, shoppers climbing in buses and cars and Luca and I looking at each other and wordlessly agreeing that beyond this point we could feel nothing but a healthy disdain for the white powder. It was once more time to find a new hobby.

“It’s not the first time I’m quitting this,” Luca said a few minutes later unprompted. “But you make sure it’s your last.”

In the tender state of my invisible implosion I took these words to heart. It was a quiet Christmas without a tree and without a lot of cheer, just some drinking and television watching, and sleeping late. I walked in the cold, wet weather all the way from Tower Hill to the London City Airport one day, following the suspended trainline which spawned a yuppie ghetto on its margins, a string of wealth running through the real ghetto of hardship and relative destitution that was the rest of the Docklands. The DLR and its passengers ploughed through it like a vein of gold filament cuts through rock, without much consequence to either side. City workers bought apartments in these newly-built modern-shaped high-rises, modern in the amorphous, corporate sense, comfortable in

their meaninglessness and confident in their impersonality, and they used the DLR to travel to and from work. For them there were also taxi services, upmarket Italian takeouts and gastro-pubs peppered around the DLR line, but I doubt any rich yuppie ever stood in the queue to apply for a council scheme or rubbed shoulders with the peasants who live deeper on these estates, who would never get a job in any shiny tower except maybe as security guards. The only thing that bound the yuppies with us peasants in London it seemed to me was the drugs. The drugs traffic is an alternative, privatized welfare system, a direct transfer of wealth from the middle to the lower classes, seamless and quiet with zero interference or expenditure from the state. Police let it go on except on the occasions when one hoodrat or other got too bold and made too much money. But otherwise, every other child above the age of 15 who lived in a Tower Hamlets council estate sold drugs at least part time.

I surveyed the waterfront and the Excel conference centre, the ambitious construction projects all around it and looked at the passing cars, trains and planes. Cranes circling. Time had come to take a trip. I bought a City Airport ticket to Romania, with a 12-hour stop in Paris right before New Year's Eve. I missed my parents.

"A friend of mine would like to rent your room when you're gone. Get paid to go on holiday, innit?" Luca offered.

That friend was a tall, muscular Bengali man who sat on the sofa while Luca made this proposition. He wore a Ralph Lauren jumper, jeans, Timberland boots and a large gold chain on the outside. He had an American-style crew cut.

"Hello mate. Zachary," he introduced himself in a crisp Cockney accent. "Call me Zack."

"George. What do you need my room for?"

"Oh, just to keep some of my stuff while I'm moving. I won't make a mess."

"OK then. I suppose if Luca knows you and you are alright you can have it. You know it's pretty small right?"

"Yes. I've used it before you moved in too. I move around a lot."

I gave Luca a penetrating look as if to say: are you sure about this? Luca was sure.

"I'm paying £350 a month for it. I'll be gone about two weeks so let's say £175?" I said.

"Let's just say £250 instead, mate. I don't like to haggle."

"OK, great. I'll see you tomorrow and give you the key then? I'm leaving tomorrow night."

"Cool."

We exchanged numbers. Zack had the latest MePhone Platinum, which costs £800 brand new, as much as a good used car.

He pulled out a fat stack of notes from his front pocket and plucked off off £260, slowly counting.

“I’ll get you a tenner,” I said, seeing he didn’t have change.

“Sorry, can’t wait. We’ll catch up later alright? Got to get back to the game.”

And he left swaggering. I was happy for the money. I put half on my account at the bank to have when I returned and kept half to spend on gifts for people in the old country. I wanted to get my mother a brooch, I remembered she loved brooches. I also wanted something for Ileana.

That evening Zack called to ask if I was home, then he came over and gave me a red duffel bag that seemed half-empty.

“Hold onto this for me, I’ll pick it up tomorrow with the keys.”

“OK, no worries Zack,” I said with gratitude still alive in my voice from his erstwhile generosity.

I didn’t care to look in the bag and returned it untouched the next morning. He asked if I had looked, I said no and that seemed to please him because he said:

“It’s all good. Thanks, gotta run.”

He left with his phone ringing.

Before I left I had a coffee with Luca in the living room.

“What does Zack do?”

“Why don’t you ask him? I don’t know what he does.”

“Is he a drug dealer?” I asked.

“I suppose he is. But he doesn’t take drugs.”

“Really?”

“Doesn’t need to. Selling them is more addictive than taking them.”

XII

Immediately Paris rubbed me the wrong way. The place looked like the outskirts of Birmingham and Charles de Gaulle airport was the most unnecessarily labyrinthine piece of public transport infrastructure I had ever seen. I heard the Americans had some bad airports, but this one could not have been much off. It took navigating several interwoven flyovers to get to the bus to the city centre and then it took the bus another half hour to drive through narrow paths dug under a motorway which ran right through the airport. I'd like to meet the engineer who decided it was a bright idea to put an airport and a motorway on top of each other. I guess if they built that contraption and they kept their job I must be in with half a chance at not dying poor.

Only in the inner circle of historic Paris does it look like anything resembling the pictures on television, and only if you're looking from a window. The street is uneven and dirty and the metro is full of homeless people and drug addicts who piss themselves. The metro smells heavily of urine on the platforms and in the trains. The trains are old and the chairs are hard plastic. The river stinks and drinking beside it is more expensive than London. All the museums charge extortionate fees to get in and all the best works are replicas. You pay 20 euros to see a copy of the Gioconda that's no better than the ones they sell on the kerb outside the museum for the same amount – and those you get to take home.

The cheese and wine were good. I munched on a lump of stinky cheese and sipped fragrant, powerful deep red wine from a plastic cup in the Spartan park under the Eiffel Tower in daylight, reading *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I got in the habit of carrying big books with me when I went somewhere because in a pinch you can wrap them in a dirty shirt and use them for a pillow. Except for the Bible, that one always made for rough sleep. I stood up to look for a place to piss – after all, I wasn't about to do it in my pants like the locals – and a bushel attracted my fancy. I approached it. A low-key intense ruffle came from it. I went over cautiously. About a hundred rats clamouring in an orgy in the bushes, fighting for food, fucking, fighting, killing each other and just ratting about like they owned the place. Right under the Eiffel Tower. I had to travel to Paris to see a rat king. Never before or after then had I seen so many of the callous beasts in one place. I cancelled the pee and felt bad for the Parisians now: maybe peeing yourself in such circumstances is not just the only option but could even be a good idea since it might keep away the pests. Have these people learnt nothing from the plague? I picked up my cheese and wine in a hurry and walked up to the concrete blocks of the Trocadero where I'd be safe. I finished up the food and drink, smoked a French

cigarette and went over to a bar on the foothills of the Montmartre. I sipped coffee and whisky and looked at the white marble walls of the Sacre Coeur on the pinnacle. A lonesome black rat scuttled along the edge of the ramp.

In the banlieue they keep the workers, the poor people and the immigrants, but Central Paris feels like a city of rich people who normally live somewhere else but are somehow in a state of permanent holiday in the city of lights, with their drivers steering expensive rental cars along the old streets and the boulevards. It's the perfect continental capital of an ageing land that can find no use for its youth. A hollowed city of socialist art history researchers, small-fry cafe owners and kinick-knack street peddlers who cater to Chinese industrialists and Brussels politicians. Bureaucrats in ill-fitting suits with bald heads but, mysteriously, middle paths of sparse hair on the top. Many writers came here to work a century ago but now it seems unfriendly to foreigners and rude to its guests. You walk through Montmartre and you think of Hemingway, Villon and Baudelaire, tormented hustlers who wrote out of desperation, loneliness, narcissism and pride. You think you can get in with the locals and furrow an inside track and you're probably not wrong. I took a long walk through the 19eme arrondissement and I talked to the Nigerians who stood under bridges waiting for something to happen.

I smoked a joint with a portly Moroccan who gazed at the city from the steps of the Sacre Coeur, and I took directions in broken French from an old Algerian who sat on a bench. I walked in a hotel and asked for a tea, but the nondescript keep asked me where I was from and when I said Romania he told me to get out.

"Can I have some food to go at least? And I'll move outside on the bench and eat it," I asked.

"No you can't."

A pestilent hole of decadent fervour, pedestrians in constant states of horrified rush alternating with tipsy affability and superficial kindness, the kind that does the giver more good than the receiver. The streets are soaked, buildings mouldy, trains narrow, cars battered, trucks painted with graffiti, this is certainly a city no poor man can love. I spied people not much different that I was, taking pains to make small glasses of wine last for an hour on the heated riverside terrace of the restaurant to postpone going back out in the virulent wind again.

Too many scooters with their exhaust ripped out ridden at great speed by purse-snatchers, rushing hustlers.

My Paris would be living on 10 euros a day, the loathed tenant of a hateful landlord, and the lowly employee of a stingy mobile phone shopkeeper, selling and cataloguing plastic dragon

dildoes of dubious origin for minimum wages. No bright prospects for those without a faultless grip on the language and its regional dialects. Ma ville de lumiere.

Another Paris, another London, another Europe will emerge from these, but not now. Another time. Yellow moon in waxing crescent to the left of the skyline. I take another fast walk up the hill to the Basilique. On the crest I am interrupted by nightmares of my room in London being ransacked by police.

Two hours later I board my connection flight. Paris, I never knew you. I land in Bucharest on a coat of fluffy new snow, and the cold air sting my nostrils from the inside like a blowfish.

It had been long since I'd been in Romania but it still didn't feel foreign enough, and I guess even if I spend twenty years away it still won't. This sort of thing sticks with you and you can't help it. I felt just as natural waving the maxi-taxi, the private, decrepit minivan, on the side of the road as I had in highschool when I did it every other day, paying the fare, receiving no ticket nor expecting one, and kindly asking to driver to drop me at my junction although there was no scheduled stop there. There were more roadside commercials now and the cars that drove along looked more expensive but it was still the same thing it always was. Maybe more stonefaced diplomatic attaches in the airport cafes, and a few less baggage thieves posing as valets in the smoking area trying to exchange your currency or get you accommodation and entertainment, but in the main it was still all there. And I doubt it would ever be any different.

Up the winding mountain road, the same four storey concrete block, not a day older than I had left it, the same screechy iron door downstairs with the same broken intercom that stopped working the same month it was installed at significant cost, and the same torn up mailboxes which never had locks. I knocked on the same door I knew my whole childhood, the same one Dad broke with his foot when he lost his key and got home drunk early one afternoon. The crack in the door was still there looking as fresh as if he made it yesterday instead of almost 20 years ago; These things are frozen in time. Ma opened.

She started crying immediately, kissed me, embraced me and through pouring tears told me how much she missed me and how happy she was I was home. For a moment in that embrace I closed my eyes and time and the universe vanished. I looked at her and my heart sank realising she had got old. She was shorter, fatter, and her face was saggier. Her eyes looked wilder. There were more creases on her forehead and around her mouth. She was missing a few side teeth. Her hair was whiter. The colossal, overwhelming sadness of merciless time.

"Oh, Ma, I haven't seen you in so long." I said and gave her another hug and a kiss on the cheek.

She kept crying.

“Are you hungry, George? Ma’s made some meatballs and schnitzels.”

Her voice was much older.

“Sure, Ma, I was hoping you had. I could smell them from round the corner. Got any milk?”

“Sure I have, son. Saw the milkwoman yesterday. The old milkwoman died and now her daughter’s serving us. Cosana, you remember her.”

“I do, Ma, thank you. Let me get rid of this baggage and let’s sit down.”

“I quit smoking a year ago. Didn’t I tell you I quit smoking?”

“You never tell me anything, Ma. But I’m glad for you, congratulations.”

I didn’t remember the milkwoman but I felt it inappropriate to admit it. I laid down my bag and took off my coat and sat down at the kitchen table, the very same one we had all my life, and the same chairs, but now they felt small, like they were made for midgets. In the bathroom I got the same weird sensation from the sink and the toilet – both felt undersized when I used them. They were low and I had to take extra care when urinating and washing my hands; I had to hunker down as in a large dollhouse or a kid’s treehouse. There was still no latch on the inside of the bathroom door. To this day my parents never gave each other any privacy, not even to defecate. Dad would walk in the bathroom to smoke while Mum would sit on the toilet, and she would have a complete conversation with him while he shat. Often, when he was on the toilet, she would casually open the door and give him the phone to talk to this or that relative who called. Once someone called for me years ago when I was on the toilet and my mother simply opened the door and slid the phone through. I pushed it back against the phone so hard its screen cracked. What a scandal that was. She cried for hours. Since then I used the big wicker laundry basket to block the door, and after I moved out the first thing I always did before deciding to live anywhere was check for a latch on the bathroom door. How uncivilised and inhumane to have to live with the constant fear that your spouse or one of your parents might at any time walk in the bathroom while you are using it.

I sat down in the kitchen and necked a big glass of fat cow’s milk. I swallowed the cream from the bottom of the glass and poured another. I looked at my old mother again and for a second I felt like crying, thinking how she stopped matching my memory of her. She was over fifty now.

“Where’s Pa?” I asked her.

“He’s here, I’ll go get him.”

She got up and disappeared into the living room. I heard her whispering not too softly, petitioning my father to come see me, an idea to which he seemed resistant for no reason I could immediately identify. From this I inferred he was upset with me. Why, I didn’t know. In the end I heard him slowly and with considerable difficulty rising from the sofa.

He appeared in front of me also older and more degraded. Now his hair was almost entirely white. He was thinner and his back was more crooked, and he had a cannonball belly and many of his teeth were missing. There was no vigor in him.

“Hello, Pa,” I rose and extended a hand to him.

He grabbed it with one hand as if to shake it but used his other hand to unroll my sleeve and ostensibly, theatrically check it for marks.

“Let me see your other hand,” he said.

“What? Why? Pa, what’s the problem?” I asked.

“I’ve been hearing things about you. You think I don’t know what you’re getting up to up there in Scandinavia. You come here like Che Guevara with your fancy ideas but people have been talking to me, and they told me you’re not much more than a junky.”

He spat when he talked now. He didn’t use to do this before.

Mum looked dumbfounded at us and said nothing. I said nothing except

“Ok Pa if that’s how you want it, you can have it. Whatever you heard I’m sure is true. How have you been?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he made a dismissive gesture flicking with his hand as if he were too tired to argue and at length he turned his back to me and left. I sat back down and continued eating.

“So, ma, how’s work, everything alright?”

“Yes, George, you know, as usual. We have a new boss now but otherwise it’s all the same.”

“OK. Great schnitzels.”

“They’re all yours. Listen, George, I just want you to hear one thing from me,” she said.

She sounded grave.

“Whatever happens to you, and whatever you do, and however big your problems seem to be, you always have a home here with us, I want you to know that. You can always come back home and we’ll always love you. There’s no shame in coming back home, son.”

“What? Ma, I’m not in trouble, I told you. I live in London now, I have a job, I’m making money and I’m going places in the advertising business. I’m making a name for myself. Sure, sometimes it’s a bit hard because I’m still getting started but there’s no problem. What’s this talk Dad was throwing at me? Doesn’t he know I moved out of Denmark a few years ago?”

“Well, there were some people who were gossiping that you took up hard drugs in Denmark and that you left for the UK because the drugs are cheaper. They told your Dad that.”

“Did they? Ma, that’s not true. Whoever said that to you they are lying and they want to make you upset. None of it is true, ma.”

“If it isn’t true son then why did you quit university?”

“Ma, I quit it to work. It was the wrong university for me anyway. I wasn’t cut out to be an engineer, that’s why I quit. And when I’m ready maybe I’ll study something else, but that doesn’t matter. University is not as important for your career as experience is. Now I’m trying to get a portfolio of creative work together. Come on, Ma, cheer up,” I said, halfheartedly.

She gave me a wry smile.

“In any case, you just remember, we are your parents and we will always love you and take care of you. You can always come back and live here.”

“Ok, mum, thanks.”

Bats wailed frantically in the forest nearby, the edge of which I could see from the window. The next day I went out in the neighbourhood looking for familiar faces. Before long I was in a roadside restaurant with four schoolmates, all grown up now. We were drinking wine by the jug and talking big, world-conquering theories like we always used to. Danny and the others were all released from prison, it transpired, and it should be no surprise if they showed up there, at Trilibici’s petrol station and late night rustic restaurant. I had my Caterpillar heavy duty shirt on, a thick nylon motocross vest on top with racy orange streaks, and green rubber-sole Pirelli boots on my feet. I felt ready for anything except the awkwardness of reminiscing sentimentally about days gone by, mainly because I was still ashamed of my behaviour towards Danny. With the conscience of this fully upon me I proceeded to get Gabi, Remus and Cipi, with whom I was previously only tangentially acquainted, to speak entirely about themselves whilst I listened.

We ordered sausages, bread and a round of moonshine. Given the hot summer past and damn cold winter outside we all expected and prepared for a strong dram, and we were not disappointed.

“I’d say this batch came out at about 47% pure alcohol boys. Enjoy,” the waitress advised.

We drank up and enlivened ourselves, then ate. We talked politics, football. Gabi told a story about how his dad filled in for his boss’ shift one time at the cable car base, up the mountain proper, and because he fell on the shift with an old mechanic who hated him and who reported him to human resources a few times, causing him to miss out on wage increases, he hatched a plan in the long weekend they had ahead of them. A shift up the mountain is Thursday night to Monday morning, you see. Engineers oversee the cable car’s guts and make sure nothing freezes up there so that the tourists can ride and take pictures of the beautiful peaks. But what these caretakers mostly do, if nothing goes wrong, is sit in the cabin by the engine room and make small talk, drink and smoke and have barbecues gazing over the ridges.

Gabi's dad knew the staff kept a coffee bean sackful of hot Naga Naga peppers from Thailand in the cupboard to spice up their meat, so he went and he boiled about a kilo of them for about two hours until all the juice was drained out and the water looked like tea. He put the pot in the snow and let it cool for a bit and then he got an empty bottle of cognac from the rubbish, cleaned it up nice and filled it with the concoction. Put a bit of sugar in as well. He sealed it up with his lighter to make it look new so when anyone looked at it it looked just like cognac. Then he waited. He sucked up to Nea Gelu, the old man, talked to him like there was never a bad word between them. Nea Gelu was surprised at first but he played along out of boredom. By the end of the shift he had Nea Gelu eating out the palm of his hand, and then, as they were waiting for the last cable car of the night to bring their replacements and take them home, he said, hey Nea Gelu, he said.

"It's awful cold out there Nea Gelu, d'you want a bit of cognac to warm up before we step out? I sure as hell wouldn't mind a taste."

"I could do with a snifter to keep me warm on the way home, if you have something."

"Come'ere, I've got this bottle ready Nea Gelu."

Knowing Nea Gelu was a greedy one especially when it came to other people's booze, not his own, Gabi's dad tightened up his lips as much as he could and held up the bottle to his mouth playing like he was drinking hard.

"God damn, Nea Gelu," he said after a couple of seconds of makebelieve. "That's some real strong stuff. You sure you can handle it?" he asked, turning all red, but not because of the drink but because of the hotness of the peppers burning the skin off his lips.

"Never you mind what I can handle, son, just give that bottle over here and I show you."

And he drank like there was no tomorrow. He drank and swallowed and wouldn't set the bottle down, and then Gabi's dad, seeing Nea Gelu wasn't giving up, he started to fret and worry he might do more damage than he wanted to. Almost half the bottle was gone. He said:

"Nea Gelu, listen, better stop now, I'm'a need some of that a bit later too. That's not all for drinking today, you hear?"

But that only served to encourage avaricious Nea Gelu to drink more. And more he drank until more than half the bottle was gone. He paused slightly one moment, and that was enough for Gabi's dad to snatch the bottle away. But it was too late. Old Gelu had lost the power of speech and he turned a sickly grey purple, like spoiled beef. Then he fainted.

"They took him down with the cable and called an ambulance. He was in a coma for two days and when he woke up he couldn't talk," said Gabi. "They had to operate him and give him artificial vocal chords, because the greedy old bastard had drank so much hot pepper tea to burn

through half his larynx and all his vocal chords. He was on medical for three months, rebuilt his shed. My dad was next in line for a raise and he got it. But Nea Gelu never shared a drink again since,” Gabi said.

We all cracked up laughing. It got late. We kept drinking moonshine and white wine.

We knew each other from school since we were three and despite there being so many years of experience apart between us we still felt as natural in each other’s presence as we had in early childhood. We were never friends but we always said hello to each other and our parents knew each other more or less on the same basis. We all had our own friends. To most of us having friends meant more than having a family, mostly because our families were not altogether that good an influence on our lives. Boys from our parts tended to look upon mum and dad as folks to hide money from and keep at a distance. It was a friend who you really could count on, if lucky enough to count on anyone. Most times you just were on your own.

We were talking about Gandhi now. How love and peaceful dissent can overthrow a government and how everyone should have done that in 89 instead of pick a fight with the men with guns, and how if they had done it Romania would be something like Australia now. But hey hadn’t, so it wasn’t. And we laughed some more. The speaker was playing Hajduk music, brigand folk, when the door swung open and two bald, fat men who looked Arabic walked in accompanied by two fit, short-skirted, high-heeled women who were a third their age. They sat two table across from us, by the door. All of a sudden my buddies went silent and I couldn’t understand why.

“These two are the Lebanese big dogs who bring the hash over from Morocco,” whispered Remus. “It’s because of them the guys went to jail,” he added, between his gritted teeth.

The two Arabs and their whores were having a good time. When the cops broke down doors in our town arresting people with automatic weapons pointing at their heads it wasn’t these two who they went after. No, our fellow patrons had the air of a comfortable and luxurious lifestyle about them. They were fat and relaxed, carrying none of that permanent tension in the shoulders that prevents any current or former jailbird from sitting up normally at a table. They were not protective of their food or their vital organs in their movements, like long-time prisoners learn to be until it becomes an unshakeable reflex. On the contrary, the two cotton shirt-wearing revellers were having the time of their lives, drinking whisky and eating roast chicken and lamb chops, throwing the bone on the floor of the rustic like they were in the field. They laughed and swore in their own language and once in a while they turned to the whores and smiled meanly, pinching their cheeks and grabbing their breasts and their thighs with hands full fo grease from the food.

We went back to talking about Gandhi and karma but in ever shriller, drunker and louder tones. We talked and talked and the two traffickers did the same. After so many years, here I was,

sitting right next to these two people, learning they are responsible for irreversibly altering my perspective on life, friendship, the law, the police and myself and we didn't even know each other. They owed me something, I felt, and they didn't even know me. One of them threw another bone on the floor. I had another chug of white wine.

"That's not right," I said in an inadvertent loud and raspy voice I barely recognized as my own. "You pick up that bone, mister, this is a classy parlour. Please, come on."

I looked at them. They looked back at me, in my eyes, surprised I was talking to them.

"Why don't you pick up that rubbish? You aren't alone out here," I said, still looking at their tired faces.

They seemed to not understand me. One eventually broke the tension and kept eating, pretending he didn't hear anything. Gabi tapped me on the shoulder:

"Hey, leave it out, we don't want any problems here. You'll go away soon but we are staying, These aren't guys we want to mess with," he said.

"Don't you worry, Gabi, you haven't got anything to do with me. I'm all peaceful resistance," I replied.

The gold on the fingers of the Arabs twinkled from the chicken grease it got coated in as they disregarding the cutlery. Twenty minutes later there were bones scattered everywhere around their table and they sat back patting their bellies. I got up to go to the toilet and walking past their table, I stopped and said in their general direction, "Will you clean up that mess, please, guys?"

They did not look up so I walked on.

I got back and ordered more wine. We drank it and we changed the subject again, forgetting that we ever had a moment of discomfort. We talked some more and before we knew it daylight broke, a beautiful sunrise above the creek in the valley that the eastern side of the joint oversaw, going across the road and the bridge. The selfsame creek which bordered the football pitch of the highschool I went to and the selfsame bridge under which I'd sneak and go past the rail lines to be at peace. We rose to leave, settled up and put our coats on. Some left before the others, we said our goodbyes in the steam of alcohol. In the parking lot with Gabi the two of us sat waiting for a taxi the waitress called.

"God it's cold," I said, blinded by the fresh sun and lighting a cigarette, my eyes closing automatically.

"Don't smoke in here, it's a petrol station," Gabi said. "Our taxi will arrive any minute."

Someone behind us opened and closed the door of a car. Then someone grabbed my hair from the back and turned me around. I felt a sting in the eye and a hit in the stomach. There was hot cigarette ash in my eye. One of the Arabs was upon me and his fat brethren was attacking Gabi. The

bastard had punched me and I was dizzy. He kept punching but I put my arms forward so he was pounding my arms.

I stepped back a few times. I was still half-blind. He had a tight grip on my collar and was trying to punch me again but I kept taking steps back so he'd miss. His grip loosened a bit when he tried to pull me to him and I ran in Gabi's direction. I pushed the other Arab away from him but he too was holding with one hand and punching with another. Gabi protected his face better than I could but he still took a few shots and his lip bled. I heard the brute yell at Gabi:

“De je vorbeji cacat la masa?” (“Why you talk shit at the table?”)

I took advantage of the hiatus to grab Gabi by the sleeve and pull him towards our taxi, which was waiting. The driver seemed at best slightly distracted by the scene, although his fuller attention was given to his phone. A jumped in. A police car, presumably called by the waitress, was entering the petrol station as we left. Before we cornered we saw the cops going towards the two fat men.

“What're'ye tampering with those kids for, eh Bashar?” said a cop.

Then we drove out of earshot.

“Gabi, are you alright?”

“Yes I am George, that guy didn't break my nose, just shook it a bit. But I'm a bit worried about you, look at yourself.”

Blood soaked my face, neck and shirt coming from nose and my collar was ripped up, looking something like an errant bowtie. My face was so sore it hurt when I spoke.

“Oh dear,” I said. I spat blood out the window.

After I took stock of the damage the knives of pain got worse.

After a shower and a 12-hour sleep I woke up feeling slightly less wretched and tender. I called Ileana:

“Hello, Ileana. How happy I am to hear your voice. Are you here for the holidays or are you still in Bucharest?”

“Hello George. Yes, I am here at my Mum's. And I am also happy to hear from you. When did you arrive?”

“Yesterday. Do you have plans for tonight? It would be a pleasure to see you.”

“As it happens I don't. Pick me up at 9?”

Indeed, her voice was angelic. She had grown into a complete woman, with femininity and warmth in the sound of her voice, which, as it is widely known, is an echo of the soul as much as the eyes are windows into it.

Ileana was radiant with the same blameless felicity and unassuming beauty I always admired in her, only now she was fully formed and it was all the more striking. It shone through her silky hair and her fleshy pink lips, and her prominent cheeks. Her walk was still light and easy. Her manner delicate and subtle and her eyes always wide open and full of love for the world, not a trace of resentment in them.

She took both my hands and kissed me on the mouth when I arrived outside her mother's house in the falling snow. Happiness washed over me and nearly made my head whirl, but I got a grip just in time. I squeezed her soft small white hands a little and kissed her back again. It was cold outside and the wind carried the snow about. The beginning of a blizzard.

"Thank you. I am very happy you did it because I very much wanted to do it myself but I was afraid I wouldn't find the courage to do it first. Now that I know you want it I will barely be able to stop doing it."

"Do what George?"

I didn't answer. She laughed. What pretty white teeth she had and what round, full lips. We stood there looking at each other for a few minutes.

"Shall we go somewhere? It's a little chilly," she said.

We went to a newly-opened steakhouse with glass walls overlooking the main road. We skipped the food and ordered a pot of tea, a tall beer with two glasses and biscuits.

"Very tacky place but I suppose it's good for looking outside at the snow and the cold while sipping something hot," I said.

"Yes it is. This name steakhouse always made me laugh. I can't help but imagine a house built out of different cuts of meat. Steaks for bricks, chicken wings as tiles on the roof and turkey legs in the corners, holding the foundation. Diced pork for gravel on the driveway, doors made of breasts and bacon for windowframes. Black pudding plastering," she chuckled.

I laughed too.

"You architects sure have some imagination. Or are you really studying to be a butcher?"

"As a matter of fact I have given up eating meat, except fish, three months ago, and I feel much better. Meat is strictly a construction material for me now. I thought it's the wise decision, given how much fat and antibiotics there are in it. But anyway, the Americans are crazy about steakhouses. That's why they named this place a steakhouse, to make it sound American, I guess."

"I guess. There's many of them everywhere in Europe now. They're all the same. At least here its surroundings are nice."

"It is much worse in Bucharest. Now there are only three kinds of restaurants in our capital – either the rustic Romanian ones, you know, with the sheepskin on the wall and serving stew out of

clay pots and playing that annoying folklore music, or American-style diners, steak houses and so on. The third kind is ethnic Chinese, Italian, and so on. Come to think about it, it's actually one kind, ethnic, be it Romanian or Chinese or Lebanese, or American. In any case, I exaggerate... the point is people are too concerned with style over substance these days, I guess. Too much care for the name and the decoration and too little for the food in a restaurant."

"I agree. Which is why I suggest we avoid the food entirely for tonight, to protest their shallow ways."

We talked and talked. I told her she was my mirrored heart and that I wanted to live with her. I told her she should move to London as soon as possible. She said she would, as soon as she finished university next summer. We went to my parents' house and spent the night together. I took off her clothes and looked at her wonderful, ivory white and supple body for about an hour, caressing her soft creamy skin as gently as I could, in a trance that was the closest I ever got to having a religious epiphany. Then we made love. We woke up next to each other and smiled. We had coffee and toast and I walked her to a bus back to her mother's place, but not before setting another date.

"Your friend Danny is out of prison, George, I heard it on the grapevine. I can get you his number if you want to see him," Ma said over cake when I returned home.

"Sure, Ma, I'd be happy to."

I took the number and went out to see Ileana again. We spent blissful hours together that winter, Ileana and I, and before I went back we exchanged heartfelt promises to see each other again soon. She promised me she would give London a try with an internship and I promised her I would come back to visit her in Bucharest long before that. For the first time I flew away from Romania feeling I was leaving something good behind.

Back in London Zack was settled in nicely. He got himself a copy of the keys and our arrangement took on a more permanent nature. He would sell about two ounces of weed a day, keeping the day's supply in my room and only leaving with the few bags he heeded to deliver. His main stash was somewhere else, and when he ran out he would call various guys who would simply deliver more in plastic carrier bags in the parking lot of the estate. He or I collected and brought it back to my room for processing. He paid about £200 for an ounce and sold it for about £440.

Sometimes he would pay me £5 to do a delivery. Once he paid me £40 to deliver two ounces to a friend of his in Mile End. It's a strange feeling walking past police on patrol with an amount of drugs on you that would almost certainly see you imprisoned. You transcend the world of immediate facts when something like this happens. Everything becomes abstract and warped. The slow music starts and the edges of your eyes get blurry. All the dealers in the neighbourhood except

us were acting with impunity, unbothered by police or passers-by, speaking loudly about drops and scores on the same phones they used to talk to their mothers and fathers. They would always use their real legal names as well, which baffled me. Every other young man of Asian descent who grew up on Clichy Estate sold weed full time and pills and coke at the weekend. It was a free-for-all. The system we devised took advantage of the necessity for cops to obtain a warrant to search one's house: most of the stuff, but never more than two days' worth, was kept in a small red purse in my cupboard and we only left the house with four or five baggies so as to be able to credibly pass for mere consumers if misfortune led any police to search our person in the public realm. We also got a new phone and a new number for the clients and we got street names too: Zed and Harry. One day as the early cockles of spring opened up mid-March I was sitting with Zack in my room smoking a joint and talking about his time in Bangladesh, "where land costs a pound a acre, and it's good land." A call comes in for a £20 bag and Zack says,

"Listen, this drop is down the corner on Jamaica Street. Why don't you make it while I bag up the rest of this stuff?"

He was carefully weighing up 1.3 grammes of weed on a medical scale and putting it in small zip bags ready to sell. So I went out to Jamaica Street to make the drop. One young man was on the other side of the pavement moving slowly in an oversized T-shirt and pellucid designer sunglasses, the kind worn by rappers who avoid swearing in their songs in order to have a better chance at radio play.

I looked pointedly at this fellow and he looked pointedly back. We seemed to be in mutual agreement that we were each other's reason to stand in that particular slice of Jamaica Street at that particular time in the long history of human kind. We walked toward each other and shook hands.

"Are you here for...?" I asked in a complicit whisper.

"Yes. Are you...?" he retorted.

Then we both smiled. I put my hand in my pocket and grasped the bag, which I placed discreetly in this chap's outstretched hand, as he did the same, placing what I expected would be a Government-approved copy of the £20 legal tender. But what he put in my palm had an impersonal, slippery and elastic feel to it, features which the handsome paper banknotes of the United Kingdom do not share. My counterpart gasped, appearing more than slightly surprised. So did I. We both, reflexively, looked in the palms of our hands, only to discover with stupefaction that we both held identical bags of weed, which we had passed to each other.

"Mmmm," the now-puzzled man said.

"Mmm?" I asked.

We were both selling weed. I looked around and another young man was checking his watch impatiently a bit further up the road. I reversed the exchange with my unannounced colleague and walked up firmly to this new guy:

“Did you talk to Zed?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there you are.”

And I handed him his purchase and he handed me the money. Then I went back up in the room again, £5 richer.

Zack and I then invented a system by which neither of us would ever be in touch with the customer directly, while out delivering in the street, in case we were arrested at a drop and the police checked our phones. Instead we would have two phones: one for the punters and one for the delivery. The punters would call for their order, and it would be registered in the safety of a defined domicile, my room, where police cannot enter without a warrant. Then it would be passed to the delivery man through an online SMS service.

“Thank God for judges and warrants.”

“Praise Allah,” Zack said.

Our orders were always in the neighbourhood, from Shadwell to Victoria Park and Brick Lane to Bow Church, so with a good bicycle we could refill on bags from the room on the way to the next delivery. It worked famously.

I started by taking the orders and Zack delivered but then he offered me £280 a week plus £5 a day for lunch to do the deliveries myself, on top of the £80 a week I got paid to keep the weed at my place. He also gave me a helmet and a bicycle, and a new phone.

“You start at 12 and finish at 12, OK?” he said.

“OK. But nothing beyond weed.”

“Sure thing Harry.”

And like that the next few months blended into fast days of cycling and delivering weed. I only ever spoke to Zack on the phone and no-one else, which made me feel safe. I got fit from all the pedalling and I always carried a book with me to read in the park between orders. I lived on fried chicken and chips boxes, bootleg Ukrainian cigarettes, Red Bull, and made in excess of £1,500 a month, all told. I rose at 11, brushed my teeth, had a coffee, and started up the phone. At 12 I would do my first order and I wouldn't return until midnight.

London is awash with chancers, fashion victims, agents, thugs, venture capitalists, lawyers, desperados, landlords, marauders, waiters, artists, middlemen, whores, buccaneers, politicians, fixers, informers, consultants, promoters, hangers-on, impresarios, backpackers and con artists of

every imaginable stripe from any armpit of the world, the UK and London itself that you never knew existed. They come over and setup shop, rent houses or even buy them, and abuse the robust set of rights, legal system, civic society, infrastructure, honest wealth, reputation, low tax, ease of doing business and cultural cachet, for their own selfish gain. That is why the city works, it's a finely self-tuning machine of chaotic self interests in competition, running according to a loose set of rules. Little if any of the grave sums of money pumped in and out of London from abroad and the provinces has not been tainted by some crime along the way, and it is almost never put to genuinely productive means. But a considerable chunk on it is spent on drugs, especially weed, which is where Zack and I came in.

With our newly-established fame for seriousness and timeliness, the customer base expanded and changed face. Zack and I now saw less of the guttersnipes we used to when I got started – waiters, mechanics, unemployed on benefits and so on, and more of the middle and global classes. We saw people in the back offices of nightclubs, lawfirms, hedge funds, Michelin-star restaurants, you name it. A certain carefreeness overtook us as our clientele changed. We spent time with the punters now, making chitchat and having tea. We borrowed their mannerisms.

“Oh don't worry old boy, I'll be there in a jiffy,” I'd tell Zack on the phone in a mock Churchillian accent.

We were strivers. As a sideline, we started supplying copious amounts of hashish to Somali shop basements along Mile End Road. There are a lot of Somali families in Stepney and the men in these families generally gather in the basements of these shops to get away from their wives every day after work until evening. They would lie down on blankets, suck on sugar cubes, smoke cigarettes, talk politics and football like everyone else and chew Khat, an African plant which if chewed conscientiously can give you a feeling not much different than Adderall, or amphetamine. The UK allowed this practice until recently, so the Somalis simply had all the Khat they needed shipped over from the old country to the basement of the shops. But by and by the government caught wind of their unwholesome pastime and banned the plant. Finding themselves without a social lubricant and too afraid to drink vodka in what was still a quasi-public space (observant Muslims only drink at home), the Somalis of Stepney resorted to cannabis, to Zack and mine's overjoyment. We would sell about a half ounce in one go at full retail price to the Somalis in four or five shops about twice a week. For the smallest possible effort – we just shifted the weed from the distributor to the customer without even spending time and money on baggies – we made the profit of two days' work.

My clothes stank and I was sweaty but satisfied, probably from the serotonin they say gets released in your brain by physical effort. I started the day with two ounces of weed and ended it

with a neat lump of cash. On good days we would take in £800, even £1000. On the worst ones never less than £300, but these were rare. Mostly it was somewhere close to £700.

Living like this had naturally eliminated all my expenses. I had no time for clubs, restaurants or drinking of any sort. I even cut down on the smoking. My spending was limited to bills, a little food and a packet of cigarettes every three days. The rest I could save. My savings account was taking shape and I felt an odd maturity and sense of duty in this job. Every pound I saved up I hoped to provide for Ileana. I felt like a professional, like we had a legitimate business which was running smoothly seven days a week. I owed respect and punctuality to the customers. I always tried to be polite with them and at night when I jumped in the shower I felt like an ethical man, a man with a backbone who isn't ashamed of his work. We were doing this thing right, I felt, and if done right it could make us rich. Just a delivery business, ran efficiently and professionally, I kept telling myself, and Zack. I calculated that if I kept doing this without problems for about three years I could save myself £30,000 and start a legitimate business. I would say I inherited it from a distant aunt in Romania if anyone asked.

"You're the best worker I ever had," Zack said. "The brilliant thing is you're a white boy with glasses, nobody would ever suspect you. These hoodrats round here with their man bags and their £150 trainers stink from a mile. Not you, George. We are onto something good," he said.

I agreed.

We went out to Lahore Kebab House, the best Pakistani restaurant in the world, on Commercial Road, to celebrate.

"I am still haunted by those lost years," I confessed after my fourth glass of red wine.

I had another lamb chop.

"I really only ever went to university out of some deep-seated, dull, laziness and complacency, some toxic genes I inherited from my father," I added. "All of that lost time when I could have done this and got rich. But not going into higher education was unheard of. Any degree was better than no degree," I complained.

Zack laughed.

"And now you have no degree anyway. And no money."

"I slipped out the iron door to the other side just before they weld it shut for good. Had I graduated I would be in some lowly admin job now passing spreadsheets from one department to another. Hell on earth," I kept going.

In the sweet reverie of drink, food and the masturbatory afterglow of my self-pity, I forgot to mention my past attempts at drug dealing, which ended so badly I vowed never to do it again. In any case, we now had money and business was going smoothly. Not that I ever let on anything like

that to anyone. The only links I had with the external world now were Ileana, and Tamsin, with whom I stayed in touch.

I saw more and more of Tamsin in the evenings but gave her no inkling of my rising star on the streets of the East End. Far as she was concerned I was a budding poet with nothing to live off but the hope in my heart. Strangely, although I didn't let on that I had some money now, it was only after acquiring it that I worked up the nerve to respond to her messages. She often had me over to her house in Hampstead, gave me whisky and drugs and read me stories about Allen Ginsberg. She was the daughter of a fallen nobleman who had a habit of cross-dressing and cheating people out of their money. Once he was jailed for mortgage fraud, but before that he had three Rolls-Royces, two butlers, a town and a country house, and had won a reality TV show called "Political Big Brother" on the promise that he would expel all foreigners and take the UK out of the European Union and NATO. Even the conservative tabloids were calling him "a swivel-eyed right-wing lunatic."

I suspected Tamsin, who did not disguise her hatred of her father, was spending time with me partly because she knew it would greatly upset him. Knowing this, I still kept seeing her. She had slim hands and a slim waist and clear grey eyes. She also read me from the French symbolists in a flawless French of the kind only taughts at expensive girl-only boarding school, the kind that not even most of the the French can afford to learn. I looked at her auburn hair waving in the lovely moonlight while she intonated Baudelaire by candlelight in Belsize Park and Hampstead village. She gave me money some times and let me sleep on the sofa. It was a nonsexual sort of friendship, but there was no question that deeper feelings were growing between us. I took to calling her my tasty muse and my fay. She promised she would teach me manners one night when I took my shirt off and walked on the South bank bare-chested in the rain.

"That simply won't do. It's not English," she protested. "I'll have to teach you how to behave."

I regarded her as my keeper, a sponsor of sorts, like painters of other generations used to have in royal courts. She once left me a note:

"If one writes the truth in an aesthetically pleasing but straightforward way about the times she lives in, she will become a leper to her kin for showing them up in their lifetime, but after she dies she will be elevated, for the world of her and her companions would have died and the posterity will be more inclined to examine it with sincerity. If you appeal to the painful truth people hold within them they will hate you but if you employ symbol and metaphor to gently smoke it out they will eventually love you."

It came to a point where every night at one I would knock gently on Tamsin's window and sleep there on the sofa while Zack was passed out on my bed in Stepney. In the mornings Tamsin

kept me in cigarettes, drink and pubs. She gave me pocket money and took me in her warm heart and warm house. She bought me clothes. Sometimes I would go to Whitechapel public library to read the papers. On the fifth floor there is a wonderful view of the City and Whitechapel market. For £1.20 you can have a big cup of tea to sip while reading all the day's papers. Life got so good that at one point I became genuinely grateful to Ashish and the others at the erstwhile advertising agency for liberating me from the constraints of gainful employment. I came to esteem the cold-blooded harpies who orchestrated my downfall as fateful apostles who set me on the path to success. Success, in turn, bred paranoia. I invested in the security of my room, in order to prevent the greedy Nadine and Luca from seizing my livelihood. I installed a large garage-style lock on the door which I kept locked at all times. One morning after spending the night on Tamsin's sofa I found a bit of tobacco and a rolling paper on her kitchen table, but no filters. I walked out to go back home and right there on the pavement lay a gorgeous straw full of brand new unused filters. I smiled and took one, then left the rest there for the next lucky smoker. It turned out to be a menthol. Double lucky, I thought. I had forgotten my toothbrush home.

Tamsin was turning into a bookworm since she quit modelling, but she enjoyed it, she said. She wasn't close to either of her parents and she only had a few friends, mostly from her neuroscience class at university. She spent a lot of time on her own, daydreaming and writing poetry, a habit she picked up at boarding school. She was studying psychiatry because she was interested in the mystery that is the human mind. I went to see her again and again. When I got in one night, carrying wine and flowers, she greeted me in a robe and slippers.

"These are my special Freudian slippers," she said.

Next thing I knew she asked me to move in.

"Live with me for a while. My flatmate, Archie, is a bit of a rent boy, but he's ok," she said.

"I'll stay for a few hours," I said.

"Life is a game," she told me.

One evening she took me to Hampstead Heath, where we sat on a bench and played one of her word games. One would write a sentence on a single line of the notebook, with the last word on the next line. Then the top would be folded so that the other couldn't see what the sentence was – except the last word which fell on the subsequent line, left open. The partner would continue the sentence without knowing what it said before, leaving one word on the next line and folding the top again. And so on, until the paper was filled. We did it until we filled five pages. She read out the nonsense result to me with a straight face and a rhetorical voice like she was toasting at a state dinner.

"You can't make this up," I said.

“Come with me,” she said, taking my hand. I followed her down a steep slope and into a street until we reached a black corrugated iron fence. She climbed over and beckoned me. I climbed too. We were at the bottom of another hill which we climbed hand in hand as night fell. London's skyline appeared glistening in front of us, the skyscrapers lined up on the horizon in a splendid contour of lights.

“William Blake came here and conversed with the spiritual sun,” Tamsin said.

We were at the top of Primrose Hill.

“These white supremacist, red-eyed, gong-beating, incestuous penguins want to convince us that we can't be happy and successful here, George. But look around. The city is ours,” she added. “Your burden is having too little possession and mine is having too much. Life is short, but London's been here for thousands of years.”

“Life is so short you remember when it began,” I said.

And that is how it seemed that spring. While more and more terrorist attacks were happening in Europe, killing hundreds, more and more Europeans were moving to London, working and smoking weed. I had not met one Spaniard or Italian or Portuguese in London who didn't smoke. In Romania, a fight against corruption by a new government agency had nailed the former prime minister, who shot himself in the head and missed in order to be put in the mental hospital rather than the prison. It worked. His 12 year sentence was commuted. Ileana told me she had got sick of all the Romanians ripping each other off. Her professors were ripping off the university and the students, her landlord was ripping off the state and the tenants, the students were ripping off the student aid bureau, their parents and the unemployment benefits schemes, and their parents were ripping off the state and their employers in the private sector. Thousands of Romanians moved to London, many of them smokers of weed.

“I want to come to London to you, she said.”

She was to graduate the coming summer.

“Yes, I want you to come as well. I will get you tickets.”

And I got her a one-way plane ticket for the following July. I figured I would have at least £10,000 by then and I would be able to leave Zack, get a nice place to live alone with Ileana and look for a steady job while we lived off the savings. Or perhaps open a business. I was thinking a wine shop would do nicely, but wasn't impartial to a bar or a music studio either. These thoughts were woolly and incoherent, more hopes than plans. It was time I came clean to Tamsin:

“I love Ileana, Tamsin,” I said to her. “I like spending time with you and I wish us to stay close friends but I think that will not be possible. You are my dope fairy and I can't deceive you. Ileana owns my heart, it isn't mine to give. If I could give it to anyone, it would be you.”

She said nothing. She smiled beautifully and radiantly but her eyes welled up with tears. We were sitting on a bench in Hampstead at 2 am when I said this to her and then she got up and left. I drank by myself for another while and took a red bus home. The same Nigerian preacher stood in front of Whitechapel Station that morning and he said to me:

“He, the Lord, loves you more than we do, son, remember that.”

I gave the preacher a coin.

I started reading *Crime and Punishment* and poems by Sylvia Plath. Dostoyevsky was attempting to justify poverty through religion, and he did it very well. He was the best writer that ever lived, maybe. Plath, I thought, was trying to build up the courage to kill herself through poetry, which is a very useful way of going about it if you are any good at writing. Many of her poems gave me erections, so I stopped reading her on the tube. I just couldn't help imagining her reading that depraved, sophisticated and narcissistic stuff to me in her underwear and a sultry voice. It was too much. Maybe that meant I was a sexist. There is, after all, a thin line between making a fool of yourself and making a jerk of yourself, and it's not always easy to tell which is which. I would lock myself in the room, pull the curtains, play some loud music, jazz, get naked and read Plath. Since I was a kid I had got used to wearing slightly large shoes so that my toe never touched the top of the shoe. The disturbing agenda of a corrupt gust of fate brought me there. Too drunk for the road and too fast for the pavement. We were poised for disaster, fishing for scallops in a storm with a burlap thread. The world raged at spies that morning, because one spy copied many secret documents which showed the Americans were spying on everyone through the Internet, and gave them to journalists, then he ran away to Russia for him political asylum in exchange for more secret documents.

“Anyone who seriously thought the Internet, emails and mobiles weren't completely monitored by the feds is a fucking sucker,” Zack said, “and I want nothing to do with them.”

“Oh, really?” I said.

We were in Stepney Green park drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, waiting for the supplier to come.

“Then how come there's no knock on our door then?” I asked.

“You think they don't know about us? The law, for now, only allows them to use spying against terrorists, so even if they tape our conversations selling food, and they probably do, the law doesn't allow them yet to bring it to court. I pray to God none of these terrorists is financed by a drug dealer or our business will be over. But don't worry, they know what we're doing, they just let us alone because we are small boys and they don't want us to apply for benefits.”

“Come on. How about Snowden?”

“Snowden is all bullshit, man, don’t you believe it.”

Later that night Zack asked me to join him for dinner, at Perfect Fried Chicken and Kebab, a standard-issue Halal greasy spoon in Limehouse. As we entered the kids who were eating there slowly dispersed outside and we were left with the cook. I ordered a £4 kebab meat with chips and hot sauce. Zack got himself a chicken burger, and we got six chicken wings to share, and two cold cans of coke.

“So, listen,” he said loudly, obviously on purpose, “are you going to bag up that shit tonight and count it for me? How many drops did we do today by the way?” he asked with a sly grimace.

“Er...” I flustered.

“Come on, man, I haven’t got all night. How’s the dope game working for you?”

“Are you crazy? What are you doing?” I asked. I thought he was trying to set me up for the police. “What are you talking about? Why here?”

Now he was yelling.

“Relax, George, man. You sit there in your leather jacket and just because you’re a white boy you think my brother Aziz behind the counter doesn’t know what you’re up to. Who the fuck are you kidding? Are you in or out?”

There was more and more steam in that fast food joint and the air became unbreathable and hot.

“What are you saying, what is this?” I muttered.

Zack calmly plucked the meat from the wings and ate it. Looking up, I saw that indeed Aziz, if that was his name, was pretending to be busy with some plates, trying hard not to laugh, a cigarette dangling in his mouth.

“Listen Zack if you’re the fucking police you’re a lot worse off than I fucking am OK?” I said. “So cut the acting.”

Then Zack started laughing hard and he banged his fist on the table.

“Just playing with you man. Listen, Aziz there is my partner. Our partner. I am a shareholder in this here business, you understand?” He tapped the table with his forefinger. “Most of my profits from our business go through here in the form of takeout fried chicken, and show up as my cut from owning half of the restaurant. Legitimate, full tax paid, I am a humble servant of Her Majesty, you get me? A cog in the dynamic British economy.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. Do you think some fucker from the tax office comes here every week to count the chicken wings? It’s a cash business. What I don’t spend on myself or my family I put here. I’ve

been doing it for years and no-one's said anything. I have £50,000 in a bank account right now, gathering interest, all tax paid. I can retire with that money man, you know what I'm saying?"

"Shit, man, good for you. Why don't you retire then? I know I would. Aren't you sick of the streets all the time? Being a slave to a phone every day?"

"You're not wrong, George man, but I have family, I have little brothers and cousins, and grandparents to look after. I pay all of these people's way. If I stop now this money's gonna last me for about a year and a half and then what? No, man, I need a lot more before I retire."

"Why don't you open up a legitimate business with it?"

"You show me a legitimate business that makes as much as we make from that investment and I'm in. There is none. The only cash business that beats drugs is a casino, but you need million to get started. You imagine how much my man Aziz over there endures every day and he doesn't make anywhere near us. No, man, our game is king. I'm showing you the game here so you know the steps."

"Why do you need me to know the steps?"

"Because I want you to come in with me and Aziz. You'll take 10% of the shop and we go 60-40 on the profit from our thing. You give Aziz your end, after expenses, plus his commission, and he'll give you a legit income so you can one day get a mortgage."

"Really? Shit, man."

"Yeah, man. For every £1,000 you put in here you get £700 of clean money, after tax, as a shareholder of the company. And you sleep well. No more salary for you, you become a business man. What do you say?"

"Really. But why though? Why should I give up the salary?"

"Because since you started I had my best run ever. Profits up about 20%. You don't smoke the weed, you don't fuck up the count. These boys round here are a mess. I think you have a talent for this. I want to make it worth for you to keep doing it."

"Oh really. Wow, Zack, I don't know. Thank you, but I need to think about it, you know?"

I was shocked and uneasy. Becoming a drug dealer for life. What would Ileana think? Zack's expression changed. The friendliness vanished from his face suddenly and he turned deadpan.

"You take your time and think man. But tomorrow at 11:30 I want you up regardless. Now let's go."

He handed Aziz a sheaf of money tied with a rubber band. Out we went into the balmy night of Commercial Road. This kind of offer you can turn down only once, I knew, so the plan now was to postpone the refusal for as long as possible. We had mice at the flat of late. You would enter the

kitchen, especially after it had been empty for a few hours, and see one pattering over the floor with a crumb of bread in its mouth, running to safety. You'd hear them chewing the wooden joinery at night, and you'd find excrement on the table, putting you off from eating. We took turns soaking the kitchen in chlorine and we even set a trap but it didn't work. We resolved to refrain from leaving food or crumbs out but the beasts were persistent. At night they would thrive. I would come down the stairs to get a beer from the fridge and the mouse would retreat from me, hovering on the floorboard until just behind the cooker, where it thought I couldn't see it. It wouldn't go into total hiding, merely strategically retreat until I left. Given how much time each of us spent in the kitchen, I suppose he came to feel at home there. I could see its craven little muzzle shivering down there and I came to accept it after awhile. To hell with it, I thought. I'll just try to eat out more. One night I was drunk and I put a biscuit in the crevice between the cooker and the cupboard. It was gone the next morning. You learn to adapt and accept any situation. The mouse was one of us now. It toiled and survived as best it could in this hostile environment, as did we. The Italian and I had more in common with the mouse than with, say, the Royal family, in that regard. Suppose if we accepted that the royals were simply our betters by birth, and they accepted their superiority over us but tolerated our existence, petty as it was, why should we not extend the same courtesy to the poor mouse.

"It must've come from the park," Saleem said. "In a lifetime of living here this is only the third time there is a mouse. We never had rats. The foxes eat them, you know, but they can't catch the mice. It must be because of the heavy rain these past few days."

"How did you get rid of it the last time?" I asked.

"The first time I set a trap. The second time I got a cat."

"Oh. We tried a trap but it didn't work. The mouse is smart, he avoids it."

"They say they get smarter every generation. Shall I get you a cat then?"

"I don't know. I'd say yes but let me ask Luca first."

"OK. Meanwhile I have a special thing from Bangladesh. Illegal in this country but it's bound to work -- I'll bring it tomorrow."

The special thing was a piece of light-brown, band aid-coloured, extremely sticky cardboard. Saleem uncovered it and set it on the floor.

"Now be careful not to step on this barefooted. It is the stickiest thing possible, you'll have to surgically remove it. I think you shouldn't go around barefoot at all while this thing is here. Happened to my brother in law once, terrible thing. Skin graft."

"Yessir," I said. I left a note on the fridge for the others. ("Avoid stepping on the brown mousetrap paper, and generally being barefooted in the kitchen. Sticky hazard. Thanks")

The following night, an awkward rustle. I put the light on and the mouse had got its face, the right side of its head, stuck on the paper. The cardboard was too heavy for it to move so it struggled in vain. All four of its legs were trying frantically to get away, scratching with the little impotent claws on the paper and the floor. It thrashed about with death terror in its eyes. The amount of energy this animal had amazed me. How long had it been like this and it was still going like a fly on a string. Its dark grey fur and short tail trembled as if electrocuted. It was fighting for its life and it knew it. The cursed beast would die of thirst and hunger on that paper, or of exhaustion, which is probably why they had it banned in this country. The cruelty of it. I imagined myself stuck to that paper. I wanted to call Saleem and tell him to go fuck himself with his quack Bangladeshi paper but it was 3am. I didn't know what to do I sat down and lit a cigarette to calm my nerves and I looked at the creature, I waited for it to die. But it didn't die. It kept trying and trying. It wasn't giving up. Its beady eyes were darting about the room trying to find a sensible explanation for why it couldn't move. Traps had been around for a while, but the marvels of industrial grade glues only came about recently in the scheme of history. Better living through chemistry.

I sighed. What a fate. I went outside to the rubbish bins and looked around. There was a defective chair there, made of wood. I broke off a leg and returned. My hands were shaking. I feared if I didn't strike it properly, I'd make its suffering even worse. I had to deliver a one decisive blow. I took aim, but I was shaking almost as hard as the mouse was shaking. I sat down, thought of other solutions. Another cigarette. I took a drink of cognac from the pantry. I took my head in my hands in exasperation. Now I pitied myself instead of the mouse. The mouse was oblivious of me, it grappled hopeless with futility. I took a breath, stood up, grabbed the club in both hands, took aim, did a mock shot like I saw on television they did at golf and then I hit. I bashed the animal so hard with that chairleg the wood went through its body and hit the floor. It was now dead, at rest, and there was gore on the sticky cardboard. I covered it in a piece of newspaper, picked it up and went out with it, threw it in the bin. None of the blood and guts made it to the floor. Once, here, there lived a sentient mouse. In the dark I climbed the stairs, the steps creaking under my feet. Insects buzzed at the window banging against the glass. Wandering days when I saw God in every flame. The fanciful, robustly speculative notions of wealth and success we entertain. Citizens of the world. Enlightened individualists.

Few Brixtonians or East Enders would describe themselves as citizens of the world, and none less so than Zack, who decided on a whim to visit Saudi Arabia for a month to reconnect with his Muslim heritage. I handled the entire operation myself, and took orders directly and often in public while I delivered other orders. This made me paranoid and erratic. Picking up new supplies was gruelling, walking around with baggies, phones containing clear evidence of crime and more

than two ounces of weed in my backpack. If any lucky police picked me up then it would mean prison or at least a suspended sentence, and with a criminal record I would practically be locked in the underworld for life. This is the perversity of the law: slip up once in your youth and thanks to the criminal conviction you'll forever be precluded from any good job. You won't make manager, you won't be a banker, lawyer, accountant, whatever. You either start yourself in business as your own boss, build something from the ground up, or you stay a criminal. Most people find it easier to stay criminals. Jail becomes an acceptable, inevitable part of life. And so I carried on, wild with a beady sweating forehead while Zack found his soul in Medina, walking barefooted and solemn through the Arabian desert, eating candy and smoking cigarillos, not worrying about fatal mousepaper, dusting off his thick cotton traditional outfit and combing his new beard. Asalaam alaikum brother, he'd tell me sardonic like when he called to check up. All will be well.

"But peace is not within me and I even doubt you are my brother," I said to him. "I'm thinking of taking a break. Just stopping the work until you come back."

"No way. You'll kill the business. There's no loyalty among these people. They'll go to the next man and it'll be very hard to get them back."

"I'm getting tired and paranoid, Zack. I see danger everywhere. Consider cutting your holiday short or I don't know what I'm liable to do."

"Just hand tough, alright mate? I'll pray to Allah for you."

"Pray for yourself. Not even Allah and Mohamed can help me, unless they start taking orders and supplies from home."

"Hey, careful, don't talk that shit. You didn't mean that, it's a deadly sin to talk like that."

He was touchy about religion all of a sudden. I hung up the phone.

Meantime Nadine moved out with her girlfriend and in her place came another Italian, Mirko, half Albanian. He'd been there three weeks and he already struck up a close friendship with Luca, who I sensed started enjoying talking and drinking with me less and less. Nothing can come between Italians from the South, it seems.

"What's Georgio doing all day?" I'd hear Mirko ask Luca half in Italian, in a thick Neapolitan accent, in the back garden, unaware I heard through my window ajar. "If he's doing stuff, weed, we should get a cut. After all if the police come they hold us all responsible."

"Shut up Mirko, if the police come they'll hold no-one but George responsible. Don't start anything," Luca said.

On another occasion Mirko said to Luca:

"Fuck that Romanian gypsy. He should give us free stuff if we're going to tolerate him in this house."

“Mirko, shut the fuck up,” Luca said.

But there was no shutting Mirko up. At 8 in the morning he would start talking on the phone with his relatives in Naples, and he would yell at them in Italian with all his might. The thin walls quaked with sounds of cazzo, culo, madonna, merda and misericordia. Before long I became deeply nostalgic for the lesbians. In the evening, Mirko would generally have friends over in his room, drinking, taking drugs and listening to loud techno music. Techno is a type of computer-generated sound which might not be instantly recognizable as music except to those rare few who appreciate it, among whom Mirko and his friends were clearly the most ardent. Imagine an aligator chewing on a copper pipe, or a horizontal freezer tumbling down a flight of stairs in a basement. The jerky pounding was dotted with the sound of my charming housemates snorting what I imagined would be ketamine or speed, or both mixed together, which is in general the drug of choice for techno aficionados. Through this and the fear of arrest, I carried on. Depression enveloped me like its wings an upside down bat. I started thinking about seeking honest work again. Mirko was emboldened by my reluctance to confront him. Now when I met him in the kitchen he'd ask with a slightly aggressive voice disguised as humorous chatter:

“How's it going, George? When are you going to let us have a little bit of the stuff you're hiding upstairs?”

“Oh, sorry, mate, it's not mine, really...” I'd say with embarrassment and head out, cutting the conversation short.

One night after partying particularly hard, Mirko yelled at me through the wall:

“George,” he screamed, pounding the wall with his fist, or foot.

I quaked in my bed. He went on:

“George, mate, I know you are awake. Come here for a minute? I want to talk to you.”

At length, I got up, left my sanctuary and opened his door ever so slightly, and through it, without actually crossing the threshold, I said,

“Yes Mirko?”

“Come on in, eeee! Why are you being so rude! Come in, George!”

So I went in just barely. Mirko's room, which I hadn't seen before, was comprised of a large television, an Indian tapestry depicting a multi-limbed god with the sun painted behind it, covering the window, a teeming wardrobe which overspilled on the floor, a table with a glass top which held an ashtray, a packet of cigarettes, a torch-style lighter, a glass pipe, several packets and wrappers containing tobacco, marijuana, pills and at least two types of white powder, and then in the middle of the room right in front of the television there was a king-sized waterbed on which Mirko lay in the middle. A blonde, worryingly thin woman with a nose piercing and dark eye shading laid to his

right, and a thin, dark-skinned boy with a moustache and a neck tattoo to his left. They were covered in a blanket. I looked upon them and then at my wrist as if I had a watch but I didn't.

"It's late. Mirko, listen, I need to go. What do you want?"

"This fucking homosexual boy here, Romeo, wants some weed. In Portugal they grow it in the garden, he's from Portugal and he misses home. So I told him we have George the gardener, who can give us some, okay?"

"I don't know about that, Mirko, I told you already it isn't my weed."

"This Swedish exchange student as well, wants weed. What are we to do George but be generous to our guests?"

"Sorry but they are not my guests Mirko."

Romeo was looking at me earnestly from the bed as if he was at a bar and I was the barman. Where's my drink? He seemed to be telling me. The Swedish girl also looked on with eagerness. Mirko looked irritated. Without another word I left. I went to my room, picked up the last remaining seven baggies of weed, put them in my pocket and went out to have coffee and wait for the morning orders. I went to the Islamic cake shop in Mile End Road and ordered a large black coffee. There were multicoloured deserts, cakes, biscuits and marshmallows in the showcases, and leaflets urging young muslims to purify themselves, give money for the ummah and fight the kuffars, on the counter. Despite there being no more product in my room I locked it anyway before I left just to see if Mirko'd have the courage to break in. By the time I got back with a refill the house was empty, everyone was at work. Mirko was an engineering graduate who couldn't find work in Naples and was waiting tables in a London pizzeria. Delivery by delivery, bag by bag, call by call, day by day, Zack finally returned from his pilgrimage, wearing a thick beard and a white cotton fez. His eyes bulged with self-satisfaction.

"Stop drinking beer in front of me," he said with a straight face as I was diligently imbibing a can of Carling. "It's haram."

I ignored his obvious provocation as a joke.

"I'm serious, man, put that away," he insisted.

"Zack get a fucking life man. Are you serious? You were smoking cocaine and drinking fucking vodka with cranberry juice every night before you went to Saudi Arabia a few days ago. Mohammed himself wasn't so self-righteous after less than a month in the desert."

"Don't talk about the prophet, I'm warning you George, this is serious."

"YOU ought to get fucking serious Zack. You sell drugs for a living."

I kept drinking ostentatiously. Defiantly. Was this genuine zeal of the convert or was Zack just a two-faced, conceited Pharisee? Even odds, I thought, privately.

“Not for long, man. I’m leaving the game. Now how much did you make in my absence?”

“Bar the supplies and my wages we netted about four grand. You netted, I mean. It’s in the drawer.”

I opened the drawer and out I took a pair of socks, inside of which lay a neat roll of about £500 tightly bound together. Same with other socks, until Zack was looking at a small mound of banknotes on the bed.

“Good work.”

“No doubt. But we’re having problems with my new housemate. He is a bit agitated and he keeps talking about the police. He also keeps asking me to give him free weed.”

“Really? The cheeky bastard,” Zack quipped in his usual cockney twang, briefly forgetting his new self. “Who is this guy?” he asked after a pause in which he caught himself in the old role and resumed the smug, forcibly dignified piety. “Did he say he’d call the cops on us?”

“He’s an Italian named Mirko. He lives in the next room, where Nadine was staying. He asked me to give him weed for free and I overheard him complaining about what would happen to him if the cops did come. He didn’t say he’d call them but said he would like us to pay him for letting me keep your weed in my room.”

Without notice Zack got up and went to Mirko’s room opening the door wide without knocking. I heard him pushing the door open and then followed a groan from Mirko.

“Listen Mirko, I’m only going to tell you this once.,” spoke Zack calmly. “You be a good boy and keep your nose out of my business otherwise I will punish you. If you bother George again with your stupid questions I’ll hurt you, alright?”

“Alright,” I heard Mirko saying, choking back trepidation.

Zack turned and we went back to my room, had cigarettes and took a few orders.

As soon as Zack left the house to pick up an ounce from his supplier in Shadwell Mirko started hysterically yelling and cursing in Italian, kicking and punching the walls hard, and, by the sound of it, his furniture. I picked up a few bags and stepped out. When I returned that evening, Mirko was in the kitchen drinking the last of a bottle of Captain Morgan, his face bloodshot and mean.

“Oh, George. Welcome home, master,” he snarled. “Big boss,” he added. “Can I serve you somehow? Can I give you a blowjob?”

Then he laughed bitterly. I ignored him and went upstairs. Sleep came with difficulty because I kept wondering if Mirko had murderous tendencies. That night he thankfully did not. The next morning, a Saturday, Zack woke me at ten with coffee, fried chicken, kebab rolls and curry chips, as well as two ounces of weed in need of weighing and bagging up.

“Now that’s doing god’s real work my friend. Wake me like this more often and I might even see the light and go to Mecca myself,” I told my towering associate, garbed in a clean, pristine-white Muslim wear.

“Let’s eat George. It’s sunny and warm today, and you know what that means. The heads will be out in Victoria Park like mushrooms.”

“Inshallah,” I said. “Is the food from our own restaurant?”

“Where else?”

“Not bad. I might invest just on the basis of the kebab, never mind the dodgy accounting. Delivering hot takeout should be less stressful than the current job.”

“You’re not fast enough to do that, mate.”

We stuffed our faces. As we prepared to eat the coffee and apple tarts, loud music flooded the house from Mirko’s room.

“I like that tune,” Zack said.

“You’re just in a good mood.”

Without talking and with the blaring noise in the background we got to packaging our marijuana. About halfway through, Mirko busted in the room wearing but a T-shirt and drawers.

“You give me some of that weed, or you both have to leave now,” he said, frantic like a squirrel fallen from a tree. “This is my house too.”

Then Mirko raise his phone and took a picture of the weed, the scales and the zip bags spread on the table with Zack and I attending to it. Zack stood up and stepped in front of Mirko, his thobe unfurling as he moved up.

“Give me that phone,” Zack said, his voice shaking, his saliva spraying on Mirko’s face.

Mirko stepped back and hit him in the face with a fist clenching the said phone. I jumped and tackled Mirko, propping my shoulder in his gut and throwing him out of the room and against the rail in the hall. He groaned and elbowed me in the back. I moaned with pain and rose a bit, blocked his right hand turned and gave him a short punch to his left kidney, which made him reel and drop the phone. Zack picked it, wiping blood from his lower lip with the brand new shirt. I felt bad for the shirt.

“OK, lets all calm down,” I said, holding Mirko tight by the throat and squeezing as he tried to struggle.

Zack threw the phone down and stamped over it repeatedly with his foot, destroying it. Then he turned round and gathered all the weed and the bags, put them in a black plastic sack and stormed down the stairs.

“I’m no small boy Mirko,” Zack said, stomping furiously. “You better get the fuck out of this house,” he said, slamming the door behind him.

I released Mirko, who was breathing heavy. Out came his Portuguese friend, screaming at very high pitch.

“Aaaaaa, aaaaaa, heeeeelp...”

“Please, for the love of God, stop it,” I said. “This is out of control.”

“No shit it’s out of control,” said Luca, sarcastically, from the kitchen.

He had been watching the whole thing.

“Luca, fuck’s sake,” I said.

“Don’t even bother George, I’m going to work. It’s your mess.”

“Listen, Mirko...” I said.

Mirko, held now by his pal around the waist like an invalid, descended to the kitchen.

“You must not call the police,” I told him down the hall.

I heard Mirko sitting and his carer opening the fridge and saying something about *ghiaccio*, and the next sound was a thunderous knock on the door. An imperative, police-style knock, a bang. I heard Mirko opening and then a thud. I descended. Three masked Asian men, as I could tell by the visible skin around their eyes, scrambled inside and shut the door behind them. One of them unsheathed a hunting knife and went towards the Portuguese boy, pointing the blade at his face. Another had a cricket bat, and he swung it sideways at Mirko’s head, aiming to bash it in, but missing, and yelling,

“You’re Mirko, blood? Your’re Mirko?”

Mirko was in shock. Then the attacker swung again and hit him over the side of the head and ricocheted in the shoulder, knocking him down in moans of pain. I closed my eyes and interceded between the bat and Mirko but as I held the top of his bat he punched me in the ear and pushed me back. Then he swung again and I thought I heard Mirko’s head or collar bone crack. The Albanian was frozen in front of the knife. The third thug came towards me, agitated, sweat pouring behind his mask and he pulled a sawnoff shotgun from his trousers and aimed it at my temple. I wondered if it was real. I felt as though I was watching this unravelling from somewhere inside the ceiling. I saw the top of my own head and the tip of the shotgun aimed at it.

“We’ll stab all of you up, rape you up and shoot you, you pussyholes. Today you all die. You know who you just fucked with? Are you Mirko? Are you fucking Mirko?” he howled at me, pointing the shotgun more closely at my face now. I was paralysed. All doubts over whether the gun was real or not vanished from my head. It was real. When someone points a gun at you you don’t go mad or panic, what you do is you turn to stone, I learned. Fear ossifies every cell in your body like

Medusa's gaze and you are incapable of movement or thought. The imminence of death does not make you cry, not immediately, what it does is make you stupid and catatonic. An overwhelming, insurmountable stillness of time and thought and feeling is the reaction to having a gun pointed at you. As your heart surges, pumping adrenaline in your bloodstream trying to jack up your brain into thinking of a way out of it, your next move could be one of several. You may break down and cry, you may lose command of your bowels, you may make a sudden movement, like a ducking or a plunge or you may start breathing and talking. I started talking fast as though on cocaine.

"Listen listen mate, listen. There's a misunderstanding. I'm sure it shouldn't have come to this, now, listen to me why don't you calm down and..."

He smacked me in the jaw with the handle of the gun and blood came out of my mouth.

"Shut up you cunt or I will murder you right now," he said. "You think you're a big boy?"

No-one said a word after that. We all stood there looking at one another in Saleem's kitchen. I supposed all six of us were wishing we were not there. I could tell these gangsters were young, not fully-formed men, and it made me all the more fearful because they seemed eager to prove how mean they were. They were probably around 17 or 18. The one with the knife retreated, went upstairs, thrashed Mirko's room, smashed his television and speakers then he came back to the kitchen with the Playstation under his arm, and opened the cupboards and threw all the plates and glasses on the floor. He broke the glass doors of the microwave and the oven and then as his friends were getting increasingly restless, he said:

"One more thing. I have to piss, innit."

At this the one who had his gun pointed toward me lowered it.

"Wot you say fam?" he asked his comrade.

The boy opened his fly, opened the fridge, and then pissed in the fridge, urine dripping and splattering all over the food and pouring down the floor in a lazy streak. He finished and zipped himself up.

"Alright, let's go."

They left casually, hiding the weapons under their clothes and closing the door behind them.

“Dear George,

The night is darkest just before the dawn. The time that divides us may seem short to you but that, I imagine, is because you are not spending it going through tedious assignments, seminars, freehand building sketches and book essays.

I am, so it invariably seems much longer to me, which could go some way to explaining why I seem to anticipate our upcoming reunion much more anxiously than you do. I have no doubt that you are perceiving the seven weeks that are left of our separation as short and brisk, otherwise, by reason, you would write more often professing your longing as I do mine. No matter.

It is I suppose, in the end, comforting to think that this wonderful but entirely new future does not phase you. Your silence is reassuring, telling me it should not phase me either, and that I should almost accept it as a given, as a destiny carved in the marble of our future life long before we were born and much beyond our means to influence it. Therefore much beyond our worst defects’ power to interrupt it or delay it through any possible mistaken act or gesture. But, feeble as I am, I fear that each one of these academic chores, if not paid sufficient attention to, might keep me from you, and so from us, for longer than necessary – and that is what I am trying, at the expense of my rest, to avoid. I fear a wayward yawn or rambling thought in class might prompt the lecturer to assign me an extraordinary task that I might not be able to fulfil and thus by some implacable cruelty of the gods, prolong my studies. I am, in short, paranoid, my love. But I comfort myself that paranoia comes from too much internal desire and not from any external, objective reality. Otherwise it wouldn’t be paranoia.

You will be pleased then to learn that this forbearance has inspired me to attend to my course more thoroughly than ever before, because for the first time since starting it I have something outside of myself driving me to overcome it.

My grades are my best yet and I am entering the final period of examinations and tests in the good graces of most teachers and seminar colleagues. Please pray for me nevertheless, so that I may keep it up. In the meantime I am also looking into junior posts at London architecture studios... What a city I will soon be living in... What wonderful buildings I will have to live up to... And all of this together with you.

I cannot be happier, George. Please write soon.

*Lovingly yours,
Ileana”*

Putting in a mail forwarding order at the post office after I left Saleem’s proved a good idea, pretty the first one I got in many months. How stupid I had been and how badly it all ended. All the money that I had saved up went to fixing up the damage in Saleem’s house and paying for Mirko’s medical bills and then some more to keep him from going to the police. Everything but £1,500, which I spent on moving to a standalone room with a bathroom and a kitchen, behind the giant East London Mosque in Fieldgate Street. A studio, it was called. Luck smiled on me as soon as I decided to leave. Through an ex-client of Zack’s and mine I found this puny accommodation on the first floor of a terraced house. I illegally sublet it from Alamin, a young man who was given it for free by the council but lived with his parents in order to save money. I paid him double than what he paid the council, which was still about half what it was worth on the open market. There was no furniture in it at all though, and for the first weeks I slept on an air mattress. With the remainder of the cash I bought an old Skoda Felicia station wagon. I scoured the internet and local papers for cheap or free furniture and bring it back home with the car. Within a month I got a sofa, a table, chairs, a bed, \ wardrobe and a carpet, all from the kindness of strangers. When it came together a little I took pictures and sent them to Ileana, to show her that I was putting together a home for us. I omitted the other adventures though, not wanting to spoil her optimism.

Zack stopped answering his phone and pretended to not recognize my voice when I called him on the client number. One day when we accidentally crossed paths on Stepney Way he looked at me as if he didn’t know me. I suppose he hoped my fear of his thugs would prevent me from turning him over. Or maybe he didn’t care. I was glad to have gotten out. By now either way it didn’t matter.

The quietness of being utterly alone after so many years of sharing houses behooved me. I would bask in the endless, unwavering and perfunctory silence, emptiness and stillness of my new home, and spend my evenings reading the newspapers, looking out the window and talking with Ileana over the Internet. I had seven weeks to rebuild my life, and so I started by looking for a low-level job, the lower, the better, one to do on automatic pilot while my mind dwelt on far-flung, unfinished sympathies, healing itself. I walked around the old neighbourhood as if it were a new place entirely and I made effort to forget I ever knew it in another way. I went from pub to pub with a stack of resumes emphasizing my extensive knowledge of customer services and ability to relate to people in a commercial setting. It was a mild summer with violet skies and the song Common

People was back in vogue. Like the shy, mottled flame of a small but infinite candle time flicked by.

One day a sweet latin-sounding girl called asking if I was still interested in working as a barkeep at The George Tavern. Of course I was, I said.

“Are you able to keep flexible hours?”

“Flexible hours? I am a gymnast.”

“Very well, then please come in tomorrow evening and we’ll get you started.”

The George Tavern is something of an institution in the East End. To me, a namesake, getting the chance to work there seemed like nothing less than a sign from above, even before I set foot inside. It was a protected building of historical significance on Commercial Road on the corner with Jubilee Street. There had been a pub there for a thousand years, legend had it, with an inn first opened by an intrepid farmer who happened to find himself at a favourable spot on the dirt road between the Eastern ports of Tilbury and the City of London. Merchants from Holland and France would rest overnight at this establishment, known at the time as The Halfway House, before putting on a better, more rested appearance before the money lenders and the grand Worshipful Societies of the autonomous City. Stakes were high, as the traders needed financing for their expeditions to the far-flung corners of the world, buying ships, men, gear and supplies, and the City often provided or cut off the funds on a whim. An unclean face or crimped shirt could spoil vital deals. Later, Chaucer, Dickens and other literary figures wrote about and patronised the tavern, and sometime in the modern age, having escaped the Nazi bombardment, it was bought by an eccentric sculptress from the provinces who rebranded it The George in shiny new gold leaf, restored the building and launched it as a classic pub with an affinity for cutting-edge rock and roll. The Libertines were frequent features on Friday nights, before lead singer Peter Doherty was suspected of pushing a friend of the landlady over a neighbouring balcony, to his untimely death. More superstitious gossips around Whitechapel have it that death by defenestration was inevitable for the young player ever since he accepted the leading role in a controversial Italian theatrical drama called *Death of a Radical* – which, as seasoned observers of the stage know, is a cursed work. Barely a month passed between the aspirant protagonist’s signature on the dotted line and his earthly doom. But none of it would move Madam Froststep, who by nature was disinclined to take myths seriously. The Libertines never again crossed her threshold even after Pete Doherty’s seventeenth overdose caused the group to renounce his service.

“You must be George,” the curly-haired Madam said as I walked into the dimly lit room, rays of sunshine poking irregularly through the stained glass of the thick oaken door.

“Yes madam, I am. Thank you for having me.”

I wore my best plaid shirt, brown leather boots and blue jeans. Clean-shaven.

“Ever worked in a pub before?”

“Yes, both meals and drinks ma’am.”

“So you can pull a pint and open a can of baked beans.”

“In a pinch I can do both at the same time, madam.”

“Very well then. You’re hired. Morena will take it from here. I have to run.” She put on oversized sunglasses and dotted out.

Morena, a petite Portuguese woman with the longest hair I’ve ever seen, showed me the pantry, the bathroom, roughly how to use the till, how to change beer kegs in the basement and bid me good luck as the first clients arrived.

“It’s a party tonight,” she said.

The first customer was a shaven-headed, thirty-looking man with a short moustache, tight jeans tucked into tall, bulky platform boots, a bomber jacket and a nose ring. His arm and hand, covered in tattoos, pointed towards the Carling tap.

“With a top,” he said, meaning he wanted a bit of lemon syrup in his beer.

The room filled with people whose appearance was much in the same mould, be they men or women. While their dress and hair slightly varied – and not all the women had moustaches – absolutely everyone wore the nose ring through the middle lower cartilage of the nose, like African tribes, not through the side nostril like Indians. Why so I couldn’t tell and I thought it wiser not to ask. The more they drank the more they danced and by midnight a DJ came who played them disco music and projected old-looking videos of men kissing each other with their tongues. The punters kissed each other as well, very much indiscriminately.

“What’s our drinking allowance,” I asked Morena.

“Well, officially, zero, but you can have a pint and a shot to cool off you you feel you need it,” she said. “You do look like you need it. First queer party?”

“I suppose. What’s queer?”

“These people,” she laughed.

I poured myself a Guinness and let it settle. Layers upon layers of nutritious black beer sedimented on the bottom of my glass, like days of my life raising foam. I stepped out to enjoy the pint. I didn’t want the clients to see my wistful drinking and get any ideas. It went on until about three in the morning. When we cleaned up and locked daylight was breaking. Heartened by the first £85 I had earned legally in a long time, I walked home through the side streets, urged on by birdsong and the odd snoring from ground-floor flats, and crashed in my own bed like a rock at the bottom of a water.

The next day I returned to The George at four pm. It was much quieter and by midnight I finished. The work was three days a week, paying about £700 a month. A dream – except that after the first month I was let go without explanation beyond the cursory “we feel that you did not gel with the team.” Probably I took to the Carling and the Jameson a bit more than I should have. A few hours later I was back on the prowl for work.

The city hummed along regardless of my renewed insecurity. Not even a slow stir did London show towards me in all its majestic icy-veined objectivism – on the contrary – with less than three weeks until Ileana’s arrival it was now displaying a barely concealed satisfaction at my anguish. That year had a particularly warm and sunny summer, with a little too much frolicking in the parks and pubs, too much rustling in the trees, and too many trees altogether, come to think about it, given I was in no position to take any sort of pleasure in it apart from the bitter admission that it was nevertheless preferable to dreary rain because in this weather I had an easier time going out and applying for jobs. One day only it rained, and it made an awful large puddle outside the Tesco Metro at the end of Fieldgate street where I went every night, feverish with curiosity to find out what would be on the menu, which was determined by the lottery of expiration dates on the groceries. The ones that expired that day would have their price reduced, sometimes drastically, and thus I managed to stave off malnutrition on £10 a week.

Outside the shop, between the automatic door and the puddle, I stood ready to enter, dragging a couple of final tokens out of my cigarette before throwing away the butt. In the cool of that evening – cool and satisfying the air certainly is on a summer’s night after a good rain washes away the dust – life seemed bearable despite the hardship. An engine roared behind me and as I turned a monstrous white van with a Welsh red dragon flag dangling on the radio antenna lunged towards me, veered at speed through the deep puddle in front, and generated a tidal wave of muddy swill which hit me frontally, head to toe, drenching me and extinguishing my cigarette. Before I let out a cuss the van was gone. Stoically, I went home, changed, came back to shop and then, with a belly full of discounted party sausages and taramasalata, I contemplated the power, the glory and the irrepressible freedom of driving the white van. In awe of this wild spirit, I understood I wanted the same. The rest of the night I spent applying for jobs as a van driver – and to my surprise there were plenty available. I had a clean license and a fairly passable use of English, so all I really had to do in the event of an interview was exaggerate my experience driving vans. In fact, I had to invent entirely my experience driving vans, because I had never done it. How hard could it be though? I’d get the hang of it in a few hours, I told myself.

Squirrels jostled over figs and cold toast on the cobbles in the magnanimous light of the streetlamp.

Imagine Ileana's surprise when three weeks later I picked her up at the airport in a brand new ivory van.

"You didn't tell me you were driving a Mercedes," she said as I threw her bags in the back of the Sprinter.

I was working for a food company that let me have the transport off-duty. Driving down smoothly on the M24 from Stansted to East London, the big buildings of the city foreshadowed a new world of optimism for Ileana, whose doe eyes got bigger and bigger at the sight.

Our days from thereon out were spent in quiet, industrious contentment. I drove every other night until midday and she shortly found a job as an architect's apprentice with the promise to promote to a fully-fledged post within two years. At weekends we took the van to Stonehenge, Oxford, Cambridge, The Cotswolds, Southend, Bristol, Wales, Cornwall and every other place we could think of. We saw the real England, of restrained but determined willpower, proud of its modesty and calm, warm, discreet in its friendship and before long we started loving the place with a convert's zeal.

We paid taxes, drank wine and started making plans for marriage.

A year later we had enough money to move out of the clandestine rental and into a legal tenancy just around the corner in Wapping. We had a small garden and a Jack Russell. I got a second job in a news agency as a copy editor.

For Christmas we bought a real Norwegian pine tree from Brick Lane and roasted a fat turkey in the oven.

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EPILOGUE

George later became a reporter with a small publisher that dealt with news about a small part of the financial industry – large, short-term loans to property speculators – and the company also helped create publicity and advertising for the people making these loans. In this arrangement the subject of the news was the clients of the publisher and they had a say over what went in the articles. Stories written or directed by the clients were published as news in magazines, newsletters and websites controlled by this publisher. George was required to polish the words and the grammar, add some colour and style and send the articles forward to the editor. It was an office job, he would get in at 9 and leave at 6, with not infrequent outings to restaurants and bars, hotels and private clubs, paid for by the clients. Sometimes some stories attacked members of the clients' competition, or companies and people who were not yet clients, accusing them of incompetence, malpractice or hinting at legal problems they might encounter. George was required to work over an article per hour. He tried to make sure everything he wrote, boring as it was, was at least accurate, grammatically correct and pleasant, or at least not terrible to read. After the editor and the senior reporter – both his superiors – parsed his work, he often found it contained more inaccuracies, grammatical errors, typos and unfinished sentences. The owner of the company once told George's woman colleagues during a lunch break that he wanted to see them wearing more braless tops and high heels. Another time he bragged that he told a man in the shop he was a terrorist-looking motherfucker and the man left upon hearing this. The owner of the company often said he hated Jews and that Israel shouldn't exist. During an editorial meeting he showed George a phone video of a man having his hand cut off with a sword in Saudi Arabia. This was unrelated to the meeting, and George asked why the owner showed him the film since their publications never covered news in the Arab countries. The owner told George that, "It is to show you how bad the world can be my boy". There was sometimes a tension between colleagues, for reasons that George did not fully understand. When George asked whether the snark and sniping happened because of concerns over possible conflict of interest, he was told that the conflict of interest arose when the publication was about to run something that was less than flattering to the reputation of a client. "We have to protect the commercial interest of the client," he was told. Fact-checking, as per the firm's code of conduct, would be carried out on all articles, the publisher told its readers in the small print. It didn't say that when the articles relied largely on the what the clients said, the checking would be deferred to the

public relations agents of the clients. This selective fact-checking, it appeared, was employed more to discount serious work than to be ethical. George was put through a disciplinary meeting for wanting to write into a story the fact that a client had been reportedly treating customers unfairly, according to the Reflection newspaper. This, George's bosses said, was libellous, and against the company's principles. George had also once refused to allow a client to make changes to articles before publication. The editor said that this was unacceptable and could not happen again because it is something the firm always does for clients. In the disciplinary meeting the managing director told George he should get off his high horse if he wanted to continue working there. George said he would try.

...THE END...