



Zani

Book One

Chapter 1.01 [2.02]

A naked woman sits on the corner of what remains of a low table; beneath her lies a man. He has shattered glass all around him and three large shards stick out of his body, but the blood has not yet started to flow from the wounds. The man is dressed in the clothes of a poor workman. With the ugliest face imaginable, the woman is a whale, with enormous rolls of fat dragging at her body and limbs: her stomach hangs down low enough to hide her pubic hair. The woman's legs are tree trunks, with the skin dropping in great folds to her feet. Her breasts hang forwards as she leans over, straining: shit hangs from her arse, on the very point of entering the man's opened mouth. The man's face registers absolute ecstasy.

Twenty five years earlier, The Year 2038: "It's a girl!" the doctor laughs as he draws the baby from its mother's swollen belly. His assistant pushes down hard on her stomach and the compact bundle pops out in a rush, reluctantly giving in and entering the world with a healthy bellow.

"How I loved the sound of my own voice. Two ears and a mouth, but the ears didn't get a look in for a long time. All they ever heard was me being full of it." says Zani to her friend Bettina, as they share recollections of their childhoods.

The doctor hands the baby, a slippery pink eel, to Jed, her father, who cradles her like a piece of delicate china. "He never really changed, however hard he tried to conceal how much he cared for me. Now I understand why he hid his love behind that stern shell. So much confusion, so much wasted time. At least now there's no pretence; there's no need."

The baby girl's tiny body feels strong and hard; so full of life. A knotted bundle of muscle and surprisingly heavy for something so very small, as if a full sized body has been compressed into it. Rather wistfully, Zani tells Bettina, "It must have seemed to them a real crime to discard so healthy, so perfect a thing." The baby lies silently in

her father's arms, looking up at him with that old, wise face. The eyes black, penetrating, knowing. Questions already formed that as yet can't be articulated.

Her mother, Liv, with no words spoken, puts out her arms. Jed, smiling, proffers their baby, a peace offering, and for the first time she holds her child, snugly wedged against her neck. "We always did fit. Almost immediately mama started to cry. I completely understand: the bond, however close it might be, would be just that, whereas for nine months we'd been one. You see, at the worst times I have that same feeling, to be back inside her, once again two parts of a single whole. For that feeling of absolute safety. You know, I find it almost impossible to articulate the extent of the closeness I will always feel for her. Beyond love. She would freely admit to me how much she hated every minute of her pregnancy but then confess a secret wish to have me back within her. For that feeling of this living, moving and, absolutely crucial, this dependent, being inside her. Of course, part of her sadness also came from knowing she'll never be allowed to have a second child, though now of course, most of us don't even have the opportunity to have one at all. As I get older, and the natural urge in me gets stronger, I understand why those women fought like tigers, willing even to die for the right. How they were ridiculed by the scientists who showed, irrefutably, how much healthier the artificial womb is for a child. I don't believe it. The myriad threads that bind mother and child are proof that *there are some things you can't measure*. Mama was unequivocal, "Unless you've felt it you can't imagine the connection between a mother and her new born when you first hold them, still slick with your juices, in your arms." She'd laugh, "I'm told I'm too much a pragmatist, and lack imagination. But, though you'd already been delivered, I could still definitely feel the phantom movements of you inside me." It would be days before that feeling left mama.

I suppose it's for more than five minutes that she holds the little baby in her arms: wriggling, alive, snuggling into her, and looking up into her face, absolutely trusting. Then casually, quite matter of fact, the doctor tells Liv, "The baby appears

completely normal and healthy. We'll just take her through for surgery now, and we'll get on with the BPOD transplant."

"No! Not yet." I can imagine mama's cry. When she's connected to the earth she's something to behold. A woman of few words when it comes to her feelings, it's therefore all the more powerful when she does articulate them. Then again, what parent wouldn't feel it? The abandonment of this perfect, beyond language beautiful, miniature human form. Chubby legs and arms wave in the air, at their extremity the tiniest feet and hands, and each one perfectly formed. The soft down of hair upon her head. Liv told me, "In fact that's the thing overall I remember the most, the softness of you. This hard little body, but your skin, and your hair, the softest things I've ever felt."

Mama holds me, smiling; from me come small gurgling sounds that already have meaning, but only between us. And, the key, utterly trusting, not the possibility of a threat to her. But then the gut wrench, knowing this perfection will shortly be a still, headless corpse, shriveled and mottling and by tomorrow a handful of ash, mixed up with the remains of all the other newborns from the previous day, each of our bodies having been replaced by a complex bundle of man made fibres and electrical charge. It changes everything for mama.

I would die for her, yet I know she wouldn't for me. At times she might make it appear so, but it would always be for her own subtle ends. Never out of pure, unconditional love, for which I pity her. Mama feels deeply, often more than she can bear, but love was never hers to enjoy after that briefest encounter. There's an explanation I'm sure, but, no mama, there was never anything to forgive. You made up for it in ways no one else has ever been able to, however much they've loved me, or I tried to love them. And, surely, anyone that cannot love, they must be pitied, and forgiven whatever they do because of it. I know papa saw things differently, but where is the blame? I understand, but I could never justify what he's done.

It's a blistering day, and the high building facades in an unbroken line on both sides of the road like prison walls signal the futility of trying to escape the heat. The woman, tall and slim with a touse of short, mouse blonde hair, has on a thin, loose fitting outfit, but the sweat still pours off her. She carries in her arms a cardboard box half full of files, which contain the records of her current clients. She's just taken the box from the car boot and, with her hands now full, is having difficulty closing it. At this time, late morning, this side street off the main drag of one of Sydney's most thriving inner city suburbs would normally be a teeming throng. But at this moment there's not another soul about, which the woman has only just noticed as she looks around for help. Just then a man steps out of the shade of a doorway and goes over to the woman, calling to her as he does so to attract her attention, as at that moment she'd been looking in the other direction. She turns and throws him a dazzling smile; her beauty contrasts noticeably with the rather dowdy and conservative appearance of her clothes. She's about to follow up the smile with something practiced and trite, but her expression suddenly freezes as the man, now only a few metres from her, in a fluid practiced movement, draws a long nosed gun from a shoulder holster, puts the gun to her forehead, and pulls the trigger.

It happens so fast the woman had no instinct to scream out, and the gun makes only the slightest thudding sound, that could have been mistaken for so many other things, so there's nothing to draw anyone to the scene. The woman, the top half of her head spread over the rear of the car, is thrown back against it, landing in an awkward kneeling position. With the box she'd held in her arms upended, the contents, papers and folders, confetti around her. As the man walks casually away the woman's body very slowly slumps sideways until she's sprawled on the ground, her body ending up half under the car. With the gun now back in its holster, and the absence of anything to incite suspicion, the man could have easily been taken for an innocent witness coming up on a murder scene. But the street remains deserted, and remains so for several more minutes as the man makes good his escape: first on foot and then in a car, parked nearby with its engine left running. His accomplice

looks carefully in the wing mirror before slowly pulling out into the traffic. By the time they reach the highway the blood and gore have been dried out by the intense heat, so that only its stain, and the grotesque remains of a human form remain when someone eventually comes upon the crime scene.

Still lying on the operating table, holding me, something wrenches, deep within mama, as she visualizes the destruction of this tiny, flawless form. She holds me tight against her breasts, refusing to let them take me. "Its beautiful texture and colour: unblemished and so clean. You were like a small, pink piglet. And that pliant movement of your limbs, requiring such complexity to perform, but so natural." Of course, mama knows she has no choice, and would be doing the wrong thing by me by condemning me to live in a human body. Though I wonder sometimes if, for her own ends, did she ever harbor such a secret desire? Isn't it a paradox that it's at birth that it's most apparent that our natural bodies are in an immediate and constant process of decay. It's seventy or eighty year lifespan; really only good for forty or fifty years. After that we begin to seize up like an old car. "I don't mind. Old age isn't what it's cracked up to be," my old grandmother lamented when she was dying and I visited her in hospital. Logic tells us it's a simple choice. Enjoy hundreds of years of existence, all the while in a fit and healthy body, replaceable at any time, as yet only limited by how long our brains hold out: what's there to debate? And with the alternative, which is worse? The knowing we are dying, and there's nothing we can do to stop it. Or is it the uncertainty of when it's going to happen? But neatly tied up logic does not always placate us. Isn't this what dad was trying to say: that we exist on so many different, unconnected levels. So that it's not answers we should be searching for: rather what is it that we don't know, and what possibilities does that throw up?

Before my birth my body type was selected, determined somehow from the genetic records of forebears. Over the years I'd hear my parents wonder aloud what I'd actually have looked like, and what it's like to see a child grow and alter. Perhaps I

would have been a gangly kid, or a little ball of ferocious energy. And, the thing that intrigues me, that my body wouldn't have been perfect. Biology cannot match human ingenuity: I like the idea that we change in unpredictable, unexpected, throwback ways. And, how I crave it, the imperfection. You can't fake that, how ever hard they try. Of course there was a time when I took that misguided idea too far. No, let's not say misguided, rather that I lost my sense of balance. But I still feel, with as much certainty as I can be bothered to muster, that perfection is rarely beautiful. Is NOT the point.

When I'm returned to Jed a few hours later he holds me, in just the same way as he'd done before. "But, surreptitiously," he'd laugh, "I tried to pinpoint some minor difference, but I could absolutely discern nothing. I remember being overawed: *this is perfection*, a pure, faultless copy." At least that is, immediately after the transplant. Through the battle of life, the divergence from the original widens, as the biological body would have taken on life's battle scars – the medallions of its imperfection. Father added, perplexed, "I did feel something indefinably different, but I couldn't pinpoint it, and I've heard other parents say that. But, you know, almost immediately your memory of the original begins to fade."

Of course these are not my own memories but a patchwork of other people's recollections. It's funny to think that, so they say, if you reach old age, two or three hundred years, you'll forget your childhood and adolescence: you'll only remember yourself as an adult. I'm glad I wrote these recollections down, though I did at the time think it somewhat melodramatic and self indulgent! But it does matter, it gives context to adulthood, the progression of life: of what I have learned, and the mistakes I made, and how they hurt: how much they hurt. I think now we don't feel enough pain. There's a reason for it: without experiencing pain in all its degrees we become careless, for ourselves, and other people's feelings and concerns.

And why do I keep writing now? For my son, if he ever finds his way to reading it. I hope it will close the gap of misunderstanding between us a little. So much love, but not from the one that matters most. Perhaps, too, someone can learn

vicariously from the misprints that have littered my life. Can one? I hope so. Don't repeat, blunder down new alleyways children. Make your failures new from the generation before. Move on, move forward, after all aren't we a race in evolution? Not yet there! Devise new directions, unique, and original to you alone. Complacency has often been more destructive than overt evil, so please: learn that however wonderful your life seems, it can be better. If you think you're there, then your horizons are too limited. Spread those things dangling by your side, they're called wings.

Perhaps, also, I got the habit of writing from mama; how prolific she was with her secret diaries! I can only imagine she did it to ease her life. Oh, bother! Tears come so easily when I think of her. Let me wipe my eyes and indulge in self pity for a moment. No, of course they're not for her! We only ever cry for ourselves, though how we try to delude ourselves and others into thinking differently. Though I may repeat myself, on this and other bugbears, indulge this woman, still young yet finding her memories turning sepia colored.

Like all children I am an only child, but the playground of my childhood is filled to bursting with other kids. Then, I would say, our family was a little more organised than most: at its core having three children and four adults; Jed and mama and me, and then there's their partners, and their children. Papa would tell me that as a very young girl I was wiser - without all her distractions, that only came later. But I lost much of that wisdom, when mama confused me with her stories, which opened up a maze of contradictions for me. Really, throughout my adolescence I had no idea which way to turn, but even when I knew I had taken a wrong fork I refused to turn back. Why, I don't know. What was I hoping for, that I'd somehow stumble back onto the right one? Since then I've learned that it doesn't work like that. We must stop and reassess, because if we don't, after a while we wouldn't recognise it even if we did see it. I was on a raft on the high seas, clinging on, surviving. It took years before I had enough space to be able to step back and look objectively at my childhood,

and separate the truth from lies. But I'm glad I did, because of it I can love him again, and through that, myself.

Part of my fault was in taking myself too seriously, as I think I still do. I must get that aspect of me from him. Oh dear, how once I hated those traits I believed I'd inherited from him! Weaknesses, all of them! Unlike mama; strength and power, why would I NOT feel more drawn to her? But we should not deny ourselves, or we never find peace. Where, after all, could my art have come from, if not from him, and where would I be without it? It releases me, it repairs me: it reconciles me to this strange world. It unchains my heart and allows it to connect, and through love find the strength to step over my own pain, and care for others. Mostly we walk blindly; we shouldn't; we can't afford to. We ought to find a synchronicity of meaning between our heart and mind, whilst allowing instinct to guide us when there's doubt. Then might everyone make wise choices and more readily love than hurt. And when there is more love than hate, only then will my job be done. Not before then.

Chapter 1.02 [2.03]

Leaning forward so their heads are quite close, in a low voice the man tells the other, “I don’t care which one you kill, they can be from any practice in any city, so long as you’re sure they’re someone that specializes in child custody cases.” Sitting back, the whole time staring without emotion at the other man, he then takes a sip from a large mug of strongly aromatic coffee, and crosses his legs.

The other man, an assassin, replies in the language of his country. His voice rising, a little incredulous, he says. “You mean I just point my finger in the telephone book and that’s it? Anyone?”

The man nods, not responding to the other’s skepticism. In the same language, speaking rapidly, he says, “You need know nothing more than that; in fact, random is your best protection. However, there are now seven high profile unsolved murders in Australia, all committed in the last six months, and their only connection is that each victim worked in Child Services in some capacity or other. The police are getting their arses kicked by the media, so they’re desperate for a result. Save yourself some trouble by doing some research on those murders and make sure there’s no connection with your target.”

The Chinese looking assassin grimaces and leans very close to his companion, but the man doesn’t flinch, or appear in any way perturbed by the dangerous looking individual sitting across from him. They sit at an outside table at an almost deserted café, in an almost empty street. With a strong accent The Hit Man says in English, “It seems you know a lot about these other murders. Save me the trouble, my readings not so good.”

Smiling and shaking his head, the man slowly places the thin envelope in the other man’s hand. “I mean it: if you want to take this job, you need to know its context. If you don’t there’s a possibility, though it would be an extraordinary coincidence, of a connection between the person you kill and one of the others,

which will then set up a trail back to the both of us. Make it easy for yourself: Australia's a big country. You understand me?"

The Hit Man's expression hardens for a second, as if he's going to make something of the other man's apparent disdain, but then his face goes utterly blank. "All right, I'll check it out. And you want it quick, right? No information you want from them before I kill them?" The man shakes his head. The other nods, "Yeah, of course." Pauses, thinking for a moment, then continues, businesslike now, "Timeframe, we're looking at maximum one week. So, let's say this time next week, same time and place: the other half of the money. OK?" The man nods once. With the transaction complete the two men stare at each other for a moment and then, at the same moment, get up from the table on the wide sidewalk. The sun is setting, but the heat hasn't escaped the day yet. The Hit Man glances at the clock tower, just as it strikes six, and then, without looking at the man again, walks purposefully away. Looking to his right he then crosses the road and walks, in a manner designed to attract the least attention, along a well maintained footpath above a narrow mud brown river that meanders sluggishly, twisting and turning several times, as it passes through the small southern city famous for only one thing. The man remains at the table, observing The Hit Man for a minute, before also walking away, in the opposite direction. A one point he looks over his shoulder, as the road turns to follow a sharp bend in the river, but the other man has already disappeared.

Two days later the assassin is in Darwin, the nearest stopping off point from the main airports in Asia, and also the location of two previous "Child Custody" murders. For this reason the man doesn't stay long, taking an overnight train south east to Brisbane, where he changes to an airport shuttle bus, before boarding a flight to Perth.

"OK, I'll see the next couple," the woman calls out to her receptionist. Immediately the young man, behind a narrow desk, jumps to his feet and invites a young couple to go through to the consulting room. Though sat together, like all the couples present in the waiting room, each of them is tense and their

communication, which is kept to a minimum, is awkward, consisting of short, broken sentences. In the long narrow room, more a wide passageway, sat between the man and woman, is a boy of perhaps ten years of age. Throughout he's been careful to speak to both of his parents, but just before he ever speaks to his father, he glances quickly at his mother, who makes a deliberate show of ignoring him at these moments. The boy gets up with his parents, but when the receptionist, smiling a little awkwardly, asks him to wait, he nods and laughs a little self consciously, before sitting down. His father smiles and pats him on the shoulder, before walking rather ponderously towards the consulting room of the psychologist appointed by the courts to determine who should gain principal custody of his child. The woman, on the other hand, stares hard at the boy, who smiles back but appears a little frightened by her. She signals for him to read a magazine, which he immediately picks up and starts flicking through its pages. On seeing him so occupied she appears satisfied, turning abruptly then to follow her ex husband, the while staring fixedly at his back, a grim expression on her face. Looking at the two of them there's a sense that the man and woman, though both young, are thoroughly worn down by life, particularly so in the man.

As the woman enters the psychiatrist's consulting room she hesitates at the door for a moment, taking in her husband already seated in a chair to the right and in the furthest corner of the room, under the only window. The doctor, in a comfortable armchair in the centre of the room, smiles but doesn't get up. This leaves only one chair, to the left of the door. Ignoring her husband, the boy's mother gives the other woman a tight smile, then quickly sits down. Almost before she's even taken her seat she's launched into an attack on her husband, a detailed character assassination concerning his several infidelities. Mostly staring ahead, eyes unfocused, she occasionally turns to the doctor, as if seeking her approval or agreement, though the barrage of words, of vitriol and spitting hatred, never once lets up. Her language incorporates the most explicit imaginable, and she lays out the finest details of his sexual history with his lovers, who were all friends of hers. "She

told me he liked to fuck her up the arse, always the fucking arse! I mean, what was wrong with mine: he never did that once to me, never asked. And pissed on! He wanted her to piss in his..."

The psychiatrist holds up her hand and, in an authoritative voice tells the woman, "OK, I'm clear about the nature of your husband's sexual preferences, and that he had secretive relationships with close friends of yours. However, this has nothing, I repeat nothing, to do with why we are here today." There follows half an hour of discussion about the best interests of their child, which goes nowhere and achieves nothing. At the end of it the doctor says, "Mrs. Smith, I'd like you to leave and ask your son John to come in. Yes, later, but first I want to see your son with his father. Thank you." Turning to the man, the doctor immediately starts asking him about any concerns relating to his son, and makes several notes as he responds. The woman appears about to make a scene, but on seeing herself ignored she harrumphs, and then gets abruptly to her feet and marches noisily out of the room, slamming the door behind her. A few minutes later the boy walks in, his manner quietly confident, and smiles openly at the woman, before taking the vacant chair without needing to be invited. The man smiles as the boy walks in; there's a sadness in his eyes, as he hasn't seen his son for over two years. At first the boy doesn't look at his father, only doing so when the psychiatrist asks, "When would you like to visit your father?"

At this the boy looks directly at the man, and his expression switches from being quite open and relaxed to one almost blank, but with a hint of anger, or distaste: one which by now his father is familiar with. Feigning innocence, the boy asks, "What do you mean?"

The doctor smiles back, though her manner has a dispassionate air about it, and repeats, "Well, how often would you like to stay at your father's house? Once a week, a month?"

The boy nods, then glances down for a moment before looking up and staring his father unblinkingly in the eye, saying, "I'd like to see him on his birthdays, that's all."

The doctor looks down quickly, and writes a note, pointedly avoiding eye contact with either the man or the boy, who are now both staring at her. The silence hangs for a few moments before the boy breaks it. Looking at the doctor, the boy says, "Actually, I don't want to see him at all."

The man glances out the window. The doctor's surgery is on the ground floor in the back rooms of her home, a large mansion with stunning views over the gardens. These run interrupted down to The Swan River, which is invisible from the ground floor, and across the other side is a densely forested reserve. The extent of the greenery gives the man a sense of being suddenly transported to the Bush around his property, a place where he feels most at peace, because there one only finds native animals, and not a single human being within cooeeee. The feeling settles the racing of his pulse, but a movement at the periphery of his vision causes his heart to leap into his mouth.

A man suddenly appears around the corner with his arm raised and then almost immediately throws something at the window. The glass shatters, showering the boy's father with large, knife sharp shards, while a parcel, tied up in birthday wrapping paper, lands with a heavy thud in the centre of the room at the doctor's feet. Without thinking the man hurls himself to cover the package with his body; at the same moment the boy dives behind the woman's chair. A millisecond later there's a loud explosion which showers bits of the man's body all over the walls, and at the same time throws the woman back, leaving the top half of her body so pulped it's almost unrecognizable. The boy, protected by the two bodies, is completely unscathed.

The man says to The Hit Man, "I think that if you ever seriously consider killing someone, I mean actually how you're going to kill them, then you're never the same person again. It's one of those things you can't go back from. What happened was inevitable, I'm not concerned an innocent child was nearly killed and that his father died saving him. And it should be no concern of yours. Allright?"

The Hit Man nods, and smiles, “Good, I wasn’t sure how you’d react. Some people become unreliable when things don’t go exactly to plan.”

At the same table, at the same café, exactly one week after the psychiatrist and one of her patients was killed in a highly publicized explosion in one of Perth’s most exclusive suburbs, the man stares dispassionately at the assassin, and wonders what he might have done had his answer been different. A half empty cup of coffee in one hand, he slaps his thigh with the other, “Using a bomb was a good idea; no one else has done that before. Though I suppose, coming from Hat Yai, what else should I have expected.” The man chuckles, “It was also a smart move to leave on a container ship, what with the cops crawling all over the airports.”

The Hit Man smiles, “So, what next. You said you wanted me to take on another job.”

The man shrugs his shoulders, “You don’t stop for something like this. There’s still three years to catch up on. Three more, and then we’ll see if that’s enough, if it’s made any difference. They can’t be completely fucking stupid.” He hesitates, “Well, the cops maybe, but someone in Child Protection must have worked out someone’s not happy with how fucked up things are. I understand the frustration of men who kill themselves, or their kids and ex wife. But it’s not only wrong, it also achieves nothing. What does the State care? What does anyone care. Society just blames the man and nothing changes – for more men to be left out and their voices not heard. Getting buried beneath gender politics in which the child becomes the pawn in ANOTHER game. Not enough that the mother uses them to get at their ex, while the State takes the easiest, the One Shoe Fits All, solution. This way attention is drawn: people will speculate why the murders are happening. And that might lead to a debate that normally gets buried under emotion and fucked up logic every time it comes up. Well now they can’t cover it up, because everyone loves a good murder, and they can’t stop talking about it.” The man looks in exasperation at the Hit Man, “Do you care? Do I care you know the reasons I hired you to kill these people? Do I care anymore that I’ll never see my child again?” He looks down and mumbles,

more to himself, “Yes, that feeling never leaves you, not for a moment.” The Hit Man stares at him for a few seconds, and then gets up and leaves.

A Special Day: for a mixture of reasons, which we all took in different ways. I remember it most because it was the day after my fifteenth birthday.

Dad comes home from work late, which isn't unusual, and joins us at the dinner table, where we're already half way through the meal. After a few minutes, just out the corner of my eye, I notice something different about him: holding himself still and tight. Looking more closely at him, blinking slowly, occasionally shaking his head, it's as if he can't quite believe what's happened. Then he mumbles something which I don't catch, “What did you say dad,” I ask him.

Mama is in a silent, brooding mood, so the room is quiet, and my voice comes out louder than I'd intended. It seems to shake him out of his introspection, and he suddenly smiles, though he's still shaking his head. “I'll tell you later. What were you two talking about before I came in?”

Intrigued, wanting to know, I punch him on the arm, “What?”

But he refuses. “Later,” he repeats, patting me on the leg. “Come on, what were you two discussing: you both looked absorbed when I came in.”

Shrugging, I tell him, “Mama was about to tell me about when I was born, and what she was feeling about the transplant. Go on Ma.”

After smiling at him briefly when he first came in, mama has mostly ignored dad. Still doing so, she looks intently at me and says, “However sensible the reasons, in my heart I still longed for you to keep your biological body. As if in discarding it we were in some way discarding a part of you.” She turns to him at last, laughing freely, “Oh, how we argued that one, didn't it, Jed? I can't imagine anyone trying to suggest such an idea these days, now the BPOD has become more commonplace. But when you were born Zani, as one of the privileged few to get a BPOD, there was a lot of messy, ill informed debate whenever people talked about the effect of having a robotic body.”

Jed interrupts, "But have we really answered it yet?"

Liv smiles and takes his hand, "What do you mean?" There was a time when they used to like to play this game, to test each other, their ideas like balls being thrown back and forth to see who would drop it first. But Jed is serious.

Lifting her hand up and examining it, he says, "OK, no one imagines this hand, or any part of your BPOD, is "You". It's like a car, something separate to us that we sit in, our BPOD the vehicle we make our way through the world in." I nod at the familiar analogy. He smiles, "But you know, Zani, there were people that actually thought of the biological body that way too, the more enlightened."

I tell him I hadn't heard that, and Liv laughs, "Your father means, he did. I never knew anyone else that thought that." She looks at him, then tilts her chin up as she tells him, "And my friends thought you strange when you suggested it."

His eyes unfocused, Jed stares outside. His voice a little wistful, he says, "But I was right wasn't I?" Liv nods slightly, gives almost a bow of acknowledgement of his truth, but she doesn't say anything. I'm happy to see them like this, a reminder of how they were once bound by their ideas. He looks at me again, and says, "You wouldn't believe the trouble people used to take with their biological bodies. When you think now, with our perfect robotic body, most people don't worry so much about them, no more than you would a car." He laughs, at using the same analogy, something by now feeling a little worn. "Back then, people saw themselves defined by their body, girls especially. The money they wasted; businesses made a fortune out of them." He pauses, grimacing at an unpleasant thought, and his body stiffens, "Like me, a Suit for twenty years, pandering to just those insecurities. Funny thing though, despite the obsession, or maybe because of it, obesity was the biggest killer."

I ask him, "So, what did you do?"

They both laugh, he a little ruefully. Not so tense now, he says "Well, your mother didn't have to worry, she was one of the first to get a BPOD, while of course I'm still waiting. But some people were crazy, hating themselves if they loaded on

just a few kilos. It was sad to see it, though actually I was one of the people that caused them to feel that way. It was my job to make them hate themselves if they didn't look perfect." Liv tries to interject, but Jed won't have it. Shaking his head, he continues, "It's true, and because of me they'd fixate that they were disgustingly ugly. And conversely, you were something less than them if they had the pecks, the fake tan and the rest of the bullshit, and you didn't." He glances momentarily at mama. "It's something your mother was more aware of than me, being beautiful it meant more to her."

Liv answers cautiously, "Yes, and I don't think I would have handled it well having a biological body when my looks started to fade. You get used to it, you know, the advantages of being attractive: how it eases the way, and you get preferential treatment. But there's another side to it: for those friends of mine, they're full of insecurity, because for them beauty is still so fragile and fleeting. For them I'd say being beautiful is not an easy thing: trying to hold back the tide, make it last a little longer: the lengths they'll go to is extraordinary, but I've no doubt I'd be just the same if I didn't have a BPOD."

Jed laughs, "As if it's that important! That the only thing worth being measured by is your looks! What about brains, courage, abilities? And allure: attraction is more than just looks." Jed points to himself, "Look at me, I've never understood why any woman found me attractive. I never bothered to find out but I must have something," He laughs again, "It's definitely not looks." Liv looks at him, an expression of slight surprise on her face. He continues, "The custom car kit, the jacked up suspension, and the metallic paint job? Don't fall for that Zani, please. It's a sign that you don't value and respect yourself, and that you want to be judged by appearance. Which means that's how you'll only be judged, when you're so much more than that. And as time goes on, more and more it's about what you've done with your life, the character that you've become through your experiences, and how you've reacted, good or bad, to them. They don't realise that as that starts to shine through, physical beauty becomes more opaque." Jed nods, and smiles at me,

lightly pinching my arm, “Anyway, at least when everyone can have the BPOD that will change, you know?”

I question him, “Before you were talking about the concept of “I-ness”, as if there’s still some debate over it.”

Jed is about to say something, but Liv interjects, “Your father won’t accept that it’s in the brain somewhere.”

He laughs, at the same time pointing, as if her spoken words are written in the air in front of us. “Exactly, S-O-M-E-W-H-E-R-E., but where? Still no one’s pinned it down, have they?”

Liv shakes her head, chin up, defiant, “It’s enough for me to know that when my brain dies, I’ll be gone. And then, at last, I’ll be able to sleep in peace.” As things suddenly switch to the personal a look of sadness and guilt flits across my father’s face. I want to ask why, but there’s a sense of urgency about him, as if suddenly what they’re talking about is very important, though I don’t understand why.

Jed tries to return the conversation back to the impersonal, saying, “But what if our essence exists outside our body? Like the other reality constructs, of say what our eyes tells us the world looks like, when in reality it’s simply a continuum of matter. It’s a fabrication, something our ego needs, to define us as something separate from everything else in the universe. Perhaps it’s the same, forcing our I-ness to be confined within our physical boundary.”

Confused I ask, “What do you mean, it’s got to be inside us, hasn’t it?”

Mama laughs throatily, really for the first time since the conversation started, but then lies back, a heavy tiredness about her. By now we’ve moved to the sofas, I and Jed on one, and mama stretched out on the other. Earlier she was listening attentively to everything Jed had to say; you’d always know when she was interested because she has that furrowed brow expression, which makes me laugh, though I can’t really explain why. Looking slightly embarrassed, she blurts out, “Actually, I’ve had that, a feeling of expansiveness. My conscious being centred in my body, but stretching some way out of my head.”

Jed looks surprised, and then asks her, excitement in his voice, “You actually felt that? Wow. I can only picture it when I meditate: a vivid image of my presence being across the whole of existence, all of us an intermingled consciousness, and across all of time. This human form as just one state, but in fact omnipresence being the normal, the default, state. I can feel it even, but I’ve never sensed it as a physical thing: amazing.” He laughs, “I envy you that experience.”

Liv nods impassively, her manner by contrast cool, “Yes, I’ve heard that, but this was quite different. It made me feel giddy, light headed, actually I thought I was going to be sick.” While Jed appears excited by what she’s revealed, mama appears disinterested, irritated even. This is how it can sometimes get: life for one a still enthralling journey, and for the other a weary chore, finding little to stir her. “Nothing to justify staying in it,” she’ll say sometimes when we’re alone and she’s pissed off with me. Often it will be after she’s had a drink. Her voice has an edge to it when she responds to Jed’s enthusiasm, “So what? Wherever it is, when the brain dies, it’s over.” But then she looks a little worried and uncertain, “Isn’t it?”

Jed looks like he wants to end the conversation; He’s always the one to avoid a fight. Though I don’t think mama is one of those people that relishes it, she won’t go out of her way to evade one. He told me once, after he saw me cheering on a boy who was always getting into fights, “Conflict is the most primitive of all human responses, a sign of ignorance, inattention to what’s going on around them. And so they’re left with no choice. Or it’s just laziness. Why is a violent nature so admired by humans, and seen as the mark of a great leader?”

Jed, a blank expression on his face, gets up and goes over to the window and stares out. At these times I feel split in two, but my instinct always draws me to mama. Suddenly she smacks her hand hard on her thigh, which makes a loud crack, making us both jump. “Don’t stop now! What, you think somehow after death our conscious keeps going? Why should it; where’s the evidence?”

Jed turns around, his face suddenly expressive and full of enthusiasm again. He can’t help himself, never can, when he’s interested in something. And it always

makes me smile. Throwing his arm out, he replies, "Think about it. We've agreed that I-ness is independent of the brain, OK. Whether it's confined within the boundary of the body, that doesn't make any difference." He sounds so certain when talking about these topics; the few times he does. I like it; you don't often hear people talk so matter of factly about the metaphysical, but for him it's as concrete and real as the world which most people believe is the only one. He asks, genuinely wanting to know what we think, "But what is 'I.'"

I want to respond, want to share his enthusiasm, but I always feel sidelined when they're arguing like this. When mama is in this frame of mind she'll make no pretence of her disrespect for him and what he stands for, which I hate. Because so much of what defines him is his beliefs, and his strong commitment to live by them. She gets like that when she sinks into a Black Mood, can think of nothing except escaping the pain by ending her life. Which is something I've also had to get used to, as it's something I've inherited from her. Her voice dismissive, she says with finality, as something irrefutable, "Of course, we're only talking about our ideas, our thoughts and feelings, there's nothing else."

Jed shakes his head vehemently, staring at her for a moment, as if willing her to understand, before looking away. Suddenly he turns around, and with a voice full of emotion, he says, "You're not thinking. Look, really can you imagine them ever being able to develop an artificial brain that duplicates all the biological one is capable of? One that creates all the different elements of our conscious and sub-conscious. Which for me, The Observer makes up our I-ness." I shake my head, but he doesn't notice, having turned to look out of the window again, as if he might find someone there to agree with him. "No, of course not, they've got no idea what makes it operate this way, or why it should. And it's that which makes me suspect we might live beyond death."

Mama looks at me, pursing her lips, something she'll do when she thinks he's talking nonsense, "Metaphysical bullshit." She spits out.

But Jed is insistent, refusing to be put off by her manner. His voice cracks out, "Listen!" She looks at him sharply as if ready for a fight, but then leans back in her chair, suddenly far away, disinterested. I hate seeing them like this, and it makes me want to cry, so I go out onto the balcony, though I still keep half an ear on what they're saying. I start thinking of the times when we were happy, and as a result what they could have been together. And what they've become instead because of their fighting. Or was what I imagined just the wishful thinking of every child that wants their parents, the two physical representations of themselves, to be in harmony. I hear Jed telling her, a rare urgency in his voice, for some reason vehement she should agree with him. "Not bullshit. Listen, hear me out at least. You might... no, I'll let you decide for yourself." Liv says nothing, looking down into her lap, her face a mask now. "Sure we need some of the subconscious so we don't have to think to make our heart beat. But there's so much more to it that appears unnecessary, where thoughts and feelings come to us seemingly from nowhere and unbidden. Why does the brain need that function? Anyway, already we have two distinct and individual elements: two people inside us. And we can't explain why we have them. Then there's the conscious mind, the one you referred to. Thoughts and emotions: a continuous stream that only stops when we fail to take the inward breath: the one that most people think of as 'I'. And then the Wise Voice, with its stream of thoughts, though this is quieter in most people and easily drowned out by the other voice: sometimes called our soul. Ask a question of it (I'm talking Big Question, Meaning of Life stuff) and my Higher Being will have an answer. And it's never one that The Emotional Being would ever think of. But who is The Observer? The one that looks at what we're thinking and feeling, analyses it, and decides what we'll actually do. Why is all that necessary? And how is it linked to the rest? If you can't answer that, how can you be sure that it stops? Doesn't it even feel like something quite separate? At least more than one element, why would that be confined within a single body?"

Unwillingly Liv, after a moment's thought, slowly nods her head, but says nothing. Smiling a little, he goes on, "OK. Did you know, it's possible to have The Observer at the forefront of your conscious all the time, and the two voices in the background?" Liv, shakes her head, looking skeptical. "It's possible, if you have strong control over your mind: Buddhists call it Liberation. And if you can do it, you're not so caught and whirlpoiled by your emotions. As The Observer, it's like your watching a movie of yourself, a little removed from the other parts of your conscious. You're more objective, and less caught by your emotions. As if it's someone else's emotion's, you know?" He suddenly looks out at me. I give him a quick nod: understanding, though I can't ever imagine being able to be like that myself when it matters. I know myself: my emotions control me, I'm powerless. "I know it's true because I've learned to do it. For me I can hold it for most of the time, but the Tibetan Lamas, that's their normal state of conscious: The Observer / Emotional Being / The Soul, the three elements. Our spiritual journey is to let the stream pass us by and bring the Wise Voice to the forefront. Why isn't it our primary conscious in the first place, when it's so much smarter? That's what I've never understood"

Still outside, I call out, "So, you mean our I-ness is a combination of all of these elements?"

Jed smiles warmly at me. Getting up, he comes outside and gives me a bear hug. "Come inside." I go over and sit down on the floor, back to the wall, so I can see them both. Jed continues, "The brain, yeah: what is it, physically I mean? Just chemicals popping in the brain? No, somehow it's wired to The Observer: science will just have to catch up to that. Something like Jung's Universal Conscious, or is that another element of our I-ness? I-ness is pure energy, so there's no reason for it to be within the brain? Think remote control. And when the brain dies, only the connection is broken: the energy doesn't die, it's transferred. So, when we die, our I-ness energy moves on, either into expansive omnipresence, or into another form, maybe human, maybe not. The possibilities are endless because there are so many

unanswered questions.” Excited, pleased he’s been able to express himself how he wanted to, he looks to Liv for her reaction.

In her present black mood, he should have realised how she’d react: I already know what to expect. Distraught, her voice rising in panic, she says, “You’re telling me that this doesn’t end, never ends? That it’s never over?”

Jed tries a smile, but her emotions, the few times she releases them, are always too big for him. His voice drops almost to a whisper. “Who’s to say it couldn’t be better?”

Liv shakes her head angrily, determined to deny such possibilities. In a cold voice she asks, “Anyway, so what’s this news you’ve got for us.”

Jed jerks back and stares at mama for a moment, but then shrugs his shoulders, and his expression lightens as he tells us, “I don’t know how you’re going to feel about this, but I tell you, it’s the most sensible decision I’ve made in about ten years.” His voice rushing a little, he says, “I just quit as a Suit.”

To me it doesn’t seem that important, but Mama looks incredulous; her voice sharp, she asks, “What do you mean you quit?” But then her expression closes over, “I know we were talking about it, but I wasn’t expecting it so soon. What happened?”

Jed shakes his head, serious for a moment, “It doesn’t matter, the same as everyone else I suppose. Because of wanting to create the life I thought you wanted, I’ve wasted twenty years of my own – and I won’t do it any more. Devising slick advertising campaigns for kids to buy things they don’t need, and which make women obsess, about their looks and getting old. So they only saw the lines and sagging flesh: eventually that’s what they became. “ Taking my hand in his he rubs it gently with his fingers, then runs his hand down the side of my face, while looking at me with a concern I didn’t at the time understand, before telling me, “I’m not that physically attractive, so I was fortunate to learn an important lesson early on in life – it’s that those that care least for their appearance are the most truly beautiful. Zani, something of the soul shines through our eyes, and in the expressions on our faces.

An openness of spirit, of heart; these are visible, and everyone wants to be around someone with those qualities. I hope you learn that – can really feel it in your heart. It's harder for a woman to believe it, harder still to really take it to heart, but it's true nonetheless." Suddenly shaking himself, like a dog shaking the water off itself, he laughs, "Anyway, it's done! And, though a little late, I'm going to start doing something meaningful." I look at him questioningly, and he takes my hand, but for some reason I pull it away, not knowing why; not wanting to even. Fortunately he doesn't seem to notice, only smiling and ruffling my hair, "Let's say a reconnection with the past, before I met your mother – or more accurately, a continuation of it."

Chapter 1.03 [2.04]

The little guy has his pants half down, making like a drunk: or maybe he just is. Everyone at the front is pissing themselves, maybe at the back too, but beyond the stage lights it's a black hole into which stars of the past have been sucked, and lost all that bound them to reason. Blinded by the lights as he comes off he stumbles into me as I'm making my way up onto the stage. I grab him and hold him close to me for a moment, before taking a step back and holding him at arm's length. He looks still lost in the world he just painted so vividly with his words. But when I smile at him it brings him back, as close as he ever comes anyway. He smiles too, open, warm, no barriers at all: a vulnerable man, easily hurt, but not caring. There never was any bullshit with Andy. Then he's gone, sucked up by the black light, that emits only sounds of baying hounds and floating opaque heads that glimmer with an inner light. Eyeballs dance like strings of onions, as I peer into the gloom into which he disappeared. Someone calls my name; not my real name, it's the one I use when I'm here and at the other places.

Turning too quickly I stumble over a pair playing twinbacks on the little dancefloor off to the side, so I land on the stage on my knees: it's only the mic stand that stops me from head firsting. My first time: kinda how I expected it to pan out. The skinny jewish looking girl with the tight curled hair and the earnest expression grabs the mic and is about to intro me. I find my face an inch away from her leg, and I'm a dog so there's only one thing for it. Instead of a steady intro she lets out a yell as my teeth sink into the soft flesh of her calf. Bending down, with surprising strength she cuffs me round the head, enough to send me sprawling across the stage. I swear to god I haven't touched a drop for as long as. Maybe they think it's part of an act, cos the audience start laughing. I pay no heed, instead looking over my shoulder at the girl I was talking to a minute before. All eyes and fluttering hands, and now she's laughing just as loud as the rest, and when we lock eyes she

only holds them for a second before they slide off. Long straight jet hair, stretching all the way to her butt, and a dark angel's face. Whatever. Picking myself up I grab the mic and lick it; the sound of the slurping dog brings them round. Time to begin.

*You know my brother, nothing in this life matters,
While you're thinking all along how special you are...
In any fucking terms we're just a speck of dust,
But then we've no need to prove to anyone how fucking "IT" we are...
My life's a drifting loneliness across a timeless void,
Seeing planets, why universes, come and go,
And everything that happened in the History of Man...
Just light the fuse and then we're all just specks,
Maybe that's what they meant when someone said
There's times when only good can come from bad...
A speck upon her breast, that's my idea of heaven,
Hear her moanin, fingers roamin,
Baby, I'd go wherever, do whatever....
Turned into something new, I'm Life!*

Or something like that. Details don't matter: it's the mood. As soon as I get back she asks, "What was that about, anyway?" I'm going to say something flick but she's looking at me like she really wants to know. But I can't think of anything to say, my head still full and legs still shaking, so I just take her hand. "I'm not like that, yeah, but we can talk better in bed."

I make it sound like a question and she nods, meaning in her eyes clear. Then, "Oh, but I gotta go on stage first, you know." This hot chick, and I'm so hard I'd wait if it takes a fucking year for her to finish, but then she starts up on a thin suicide self pity. Shit. On the other hand. Better than The Love Story Wrong, but only by a whisker. At least you can laugh at her self obsession, wonder what was going on

around her when all she could see was her Pity Me. Stoic in the face of.... What? The Fuck, nothing! She rattles round her head for a while, then finishes to muted applause. Before she's even off I've grabbed her hand and pulling her towards the door. Outside I tell her, "I live in the Bush, so let's to your place." She nods and grabs my arm like I'm about to make a dash for it, but I ignore the warning.

Five minutes later and we're in her apartment, not bothering to turn the light on, and only make as far as the living room before we're going at it, tearing at each other's clothes. And then hard fucking on the floor, her legs spread wide: arms pinned above her head with one hand, holding myself up by the other arm, pumping hard. Her wet. Looks up face smiling, and then it disintegrates. Tears, screaming in a language I don't understand, and then in English, which is only worse. She starts to struggle, but I've still got her pinned at the hips and arms.

After a bit she stops thrashing, and the screams have stopped, and she's starting to make at least a kind of sense. "I'm going to kill myself as soon as you leave here, because I know you'll never come back." Silence then, as if she expects a fucking answer to that. More silence then, "Don't worry, if it wasn't you it would have been another man: I was always going to do it tonight, like I said back there." Silence. Then there's more of the same, grenades thrown at me or in my general direction about the ankle high struggles of her life: but they're all duds, cos I don't give a fuck what she does so long as I get the fuck out in one piece and she's still alive when the door's slammed on her fucked up world. "I'm too good for this existence.... I shouldn't be here...Why does everyone treat me this way?" Yeah, the tear taps have been turned on, but I'm nearly finished. Slow, she getting tighter; was that all just her idea of pillow talk, or is it the thought of death that turns her on? Either way, she's riding good now, and her hips are getting up a clipping pace as they thrust up at me. Perfect body: fucked up mind. Growling, giving a final pump, she turns her head away when I lean forward to kiss her. Her cheeks feel soft; stained by mascara tears.

Done, I pull out slow, feeling every inch of me in her as I slide out; she gasps and lets out a low moan, shuddering. Rolling off the bed I pull on my pants, while looking down at her white corpse, hands still above her head and legs spread, perfect framed by the street light through the window. Did she place herself just there? It's so centred, like a fucking movie set. Her face still turned away, letting out soft sobs to herself. But as soon as I turn to go she's on her feet and jumped on my back, holding on like a fucking monkey with ten arms and legs, and another five clawing at my face. Swinging round I slam her against the wall and she falls to the floor. She's straight back up, but I'm too quick for her, and I fend her off rugby style as I yank the front door open and slide out, pulling it too behind me. I jam a thin white arm in the door, but she makes no sound. Disembodied, her hand twists around and slowly unclenches a fist, letting her hand go limp. A final look over my shoulder, and then I'm bounding down the stairs, floor at a time, and then I'm on the street, clawing in the air, as if I'd held my breath the whole time. Fuck, maybe I was running on a tank up there.

The road's empty as this time of the morning. Suddenly I feel the thumping of my heart. Run, run, run, it begs me. And don't ever stop til you reach those stars just above the roof tops over there. Down the centre of the empty street, my big feet flapping on the concrete, the only sound over the muted back beat of the city. I stop at the end of the block and take a final look back: for reference. Embed the picture - this is a place you never want to see again: no fly zone, yeah. Slowing to a walk as I reach the corner, I make for where I think I parked the car, down more suburban roads walled in by terraces of solid, stone built houses. I scream for the black screen to tear and let the sunlight pour through. But then I sense it - only a feeling still - turning color, the dawn not far off, when the stars give up the good fight.

Staying in a fleapit when I could be slumming it in the swankiest hotel in town, but where would be the fun in that? Anyway, everything I need is here. The deadbeat café, but it's food, what more do you need? A bed; so what if it crawls, and you get lost in the mattress with every bedspring broken? A shower pisses water

over you like an old man shaking a wrinkled old dick; a lottery whether it comes out hot or cold. Lying on the tiled floor of the bathroom, looking up and watching the water trying to reach me. Crucifixion style. Mouth open, taking the piss in. Mind starting to stretch beyond the boundaries: it takes time and a certain place to fashion the key to there.

I lied. I'm not going back to the bush today: there's another night of shows before I head back north. And I lied again: I never drink, but who could live without some kinda livener? The colors come a little more vivid, and nothing as it should be. This is not a fucking Dream! No, no, no! Whatever I describe, this is as full as I see it, in every detail: understand? What my eyes see, my brain tells me I see, though sometimes a part of my mind knows otherwise.

Seven hours later and the day is as day as. Too much show and little to say except time filling small talk. Better the nights, less full of itself. The silence alone intrigues me, and then the secrets it can't help itself creating. So many I'd never work them all out, so why start? Just pick up what pieces you can, and watch them form, and hang, in the shadows or by the distortion of the light. Sounds that start by making sense, but then they turn their backs on you and only half built whispers reach out and tap on your shoulder. But the day is, so I must break it or follow. I've no desire for either, so let fate decide. I make for the door, but suddenly sleep grabs me by the throat and throws me on the bed. When I awake love has once again joined me in the darkening of the skies. I open the door gingerly, expecting as always the monsters of my past to be clamoring at the door. But most are patient, for they know they will have me, and victory will be more complete when I've given up running.

It is a place new to me, in a part of the city where anything is possible. The Last Bastion of Civilisation. An old building that claims that everything has already happened there, and we are merely there to recreate its glorious past. Though perhaps, it challenges us, we can do better second time around. A rickety lift invites me with a leery grin and a crooked finger, to join the parties that have fallen therein. I am for a moment tempted, but on entering I find the feeling more than empty: the

souls have departed. For old times I press the button and it gives a shudder, but makes no move to rise above itself. As I step out it suddenly starts to drop. Slowly tipping back it seems inevitable I will join it, and plunge into the dark void. I watch my hands clutch at the black air, as if the color itself might be solid enough to save me. Am about to let out the least stifled scream I can release against the dense air when out of nowhere a thin arm reaches out and clasps my hand in a viced grip. He / She makes no effort to pull me out: it takes every straining muscle to defy gravity and regain solid ground. I stand there wheezing like an old steam stain, staring up into the face of an old whore made years past her best by the chemicals that strip you of your youth.

Her eyes plead for something long forgotten, through a labyrinth of sorrows, and then gives a surly invitation to join her in a vaguely pointed at corner shrouded with the widest range of possibilities, so very well beyond the scope of my imagination. An image of unintended misadventure causes me, despite my best intentions, to cower back into the weak light of a flickering neon pinned loosely above the entrance to the cavern. I have the opportunity to escape, but that would be taking things too far. I hesitate, to allow fate to flip for me. She, with a glance into the corner, a furtive look tinged with fear and apology, then takes a step towards me, grabs my hand and makes instead for the stairs. I stand my ground, determined to assert my humanity to the small extent of its meaning, and she's forced to an abrupt halt. But then her arm detaches itself and she continues on her way, sauntering up the stairs, hips swaying, and occasionally looking over her shoulder and beckoning me with a finger and a toothless grin. Thus am I left to my own vice: the decision I had thought made, is not. But then I find it has, for there is no justifiable explanation for holding a woman's hand if she is unattached to it.

Five flights up I find her and return the purloined appendage just before she's to take to the brightly lit stage in a skirt so short you may spy, whenever she moves, the surprisingly full and pink lips, and the more predictable scrawniness of the cheeks. "Show me your breasts," I invite her, and without hesitation she pulls down a corner

of the flimsy top through which they were already visible. "Bese me," she whispers in my ear, before biting my lobe, hard enough to draw blood. I assume at that point she will stop, but she must have been hungry, so now you know why. In the epicenter that she becomes, she drapes herself over a high backed bar stool, drink in hand, and begins to groan out words of love that suck all the noise of the room into the open "O" of her mouth. Until there is complete silence, and every light has turned to shine itself upon her. Hands of the rainbow's colors slake down the long black stockinged legs that end in gash red stilettos. One pins a young man's hand to the sticky floor and he yells out in a silent ecstasy of pain. The sounds of Psychedelic trances form a thin blue haze that slowly fills the room until we, and she, are nothing more than shadows of outlines of reflections of who we would be in the next lifetime but two. From her lips float the bubbles of the meanings of Fogerty's words encrypted in a code only the fake and facile understand. Otherwise why would they have immediately begun to nod and smile with a dreamy knowingness? And halos form around their heads. I, wretch, become The Himalayas of a Gangean stream of vomit which cascades down the white front of the nearest of the Wise Men, and I am cut for the indiscretion of my presumption. Cut by a smile that extends to their hands, though their fingernails rally in my defence. To no avail.

And then the music stops, and the lights become shard edged, capturing each single, separate strand of her over dyed black hair that I'm certain (and of so few things am I ever sure) that if touched, even by a feather or a baby's curiosity, the head and brittle thorn's crown would shatter and turn to dust. At the very moment of this realization a broad shouldered man brushes, only very lightly, past her, and all of her beings start to shimmer in an overture to their collapse. I call out a warning, but she drops her hand languidly, allowing it to extend almost to the floor, and as she intended it comforts me. But complacency may be a prelude to defeat, and so she, where once she sat, is gone. And instead appears as a dream in the heads of all those present, warning us with Dransfield's words of her life spent in the tabacs and smaller clubs of Paris. Of an endless stream of loss and betrayal, and the

heavy foot tread of time, which sometimes slowed to cram more pain into her pregnant moments.

*Walls to be read as pages with, for their illustration,
A cobweb chandelier and the ghostly pacing through the tiptoe of a dying autumn.*

*Along the corridors of dusty marble deities,
A hard yearning for nothing, no more of worlds.
Walking past a suite of rooms - the endless months,
Insanity carpeted with the gentle moss, then lost
In an intricate maze of color mirrors to which you return upon.
Age a shadow and a hesitation: the last existence
A flower, no nearer for your patience and fearful prayer.
Soon death, not madness, calls you home.*

And then am I called by the voice of God himself. But I have seen the truth and it is not I. Buddha once peeled me bare, and so it's plain for me to see, but they insist, and so my hanging head takes to the floor and I draw all the honesty of my life into a concentrate of presence from which fall golden leaves that I can only wonder at. The peace of all the world's comforts envelops me in these words, from The Last Bastion of Civilisation.

*How fortunate are we, but there is a girl amongst us who dreads the night,
She dreads the night because she has no shelter,
She dreads the night because she has no food,
She dreads the night because one of them will fuck her.
At each days beginning she's nothing to her name,
And each day's end she still has nothing,
She fogs her mind so's to forget what happens to her body,
But she cannot forget, and so this she always has.*

*How fortunate are we, but there is a girl amongst us who lives in a land where
seas have turned to sand,
Bound by men's convention, she is a slave to every man,
And may be stoned to death, unclean pariah, men's weakness,
Cannot walk the street alone, nor gain the wisdom we take as a luxury's whim,
Nor wear the gaily colored clothes she weaves for all the markets of the world,
Bound by the walls of her home, they become a prison from the first she bleeds,
She was a prisoner from the day they found a cunt between her legs.*

The pin drops and the girl with the round face calls out my name. About to respond, a wave of sound bowls me over and presses my face into the sand. Flailing, I feel the air pressed from my lungs by the weight of adulation. It takes an effort of which I thought I was incapable to draw myself up and drag from the fresh winds that which my lungs crave. Then is it over, and the clouds thin and bodies reform, and I am back as much as I will ever be, or wish to be. Stumbling to the cast iron exit, my legs still trembling, two girls hover and I sense the urgent call of their cunts. Over my shoulder I advise, "We should call a taxi then," is followed by a tittered "yes" in a harmony so perfect I ask them to repeat it, and they oblige.

We join the street, wet and sparkling: deserted of those pesky flies of cars we saunter down its boulevard width, finding direction from the thin white line along its centre, that as it widens snakes into the night sky. Arms hooked we laugh at prospects already tentatively explored. Why we begin a goose step I've no idea, though it still makes perfect sense, to march with a certainty equal to that of the broad white line, that then becomes a staircase into a chaperoned, open sleigh, decked in furs that still breath and shift to find their own comfort whilst accommodating ours. Sighs, growled warnings to an imagined foe of their sleep, a yip, yip, as fields full of their boldest adventures become a carpet onto which they tumble. We all nod as I tell them, "How could I choose between you? ... "Why should we have to make choices anyway?" For once wisdom circumvents convention, and

then more laughter burbles from between our lips: tears and aching tummies follow.

One, the longer of the two, sages, "We should pause before playing: let's dance." The driver has our hearts as his guide {and so is already there, at the street where Experiment is the password. We pass encouraging suggestions before arresting at the gates that open upon The Heart of Darkness. We saunter boldly in, three abreast, my fingers already plying the lips of one, The Lush. We park at the bar, forming a corner. I've raised no more than a finger before a barman's face skids to a halt in front of mine. All smiles, and no more than a faint of heated breath in front of mine. Not insistent, for which I love him, feeling uncornered by his attention. We exchange pleasantries and orders for our pleasure while the girls suck on me and each other. We then attend the revelry, applauding its debauchery, which I will leave you, dear follower down this labyrinth path, to imagine at your leisure.

The Long One drapes herself down my body, sucking on my lips, which is all that holds her from sliding to the floor. Lush, with curved and flesh, has attached her purr to my leg and allowed it to leak over me. I encourage it with first one and then a handful of fingers. She twists her head in several revolutions before stationing on my neck, with alternate bites and apologetic kisses. The music draws attention to itself, by first tuning onto our rhythm but then goading us to follow its lead. Lush is content to ride my fingers at a slower pace, merely tilting her hips that I may gain a deeper entry into her warm swamp. I need no more than play her.

The Long One has alived and has me out, first pulling me before collapsing onto my penis with her soft, full lips as if it were the only thing that could save her. The room is mostly dark but we are not invisible, so a berth forms around us. The other revelers are only curious as to our means, for they have their own course mapped to the down. She sucks its length, which has taken on an unequal proportion. Her hands cup the hardness of my testicles, and she gives a slow cat lick along the line that runs a perfect divide between each one, before returning to the stalk that

jumps and jerks in the excitement of a first meeting which has no flaws or mishaps to discolor it or create an uncertainty of what might transpire.

She smiles at his purple upturned face, “Helloww,” she purrs, “I don’t think we’ve been introduced?” It responds, after nuzzling at her lips, which she parts in welcome, “I think we’ve always known each other, don’t you?” She smiles, allowing him to push a little deeper.

“I have ambitions,” he explains with a note of finality.

Though I was content to leer, two becomes three when the music taps her insistently on the shoulder. At first she pays no heed, resolved instead to inhale his wisdom: her tongue flutters like a bird over the purple head, which weeps a sigh of leased pleasure. At the salted taste of it she smiles up at me and releases my stiffened rod from the mantrap of her lips. A half length of it glistens in the strobing lights as she slides a comforting hand along it, before grasping it firm. A lifted leg snapshots a black forest (with a narrow river glittering silver running through it), before she wraps the length of soft, plump flesh around his waist, whilst guiding the purple head inside her. Bodies glued from lip to toe they allow the music to press them, its hands shifting their hips, raising arms above heads to twist and bend and dive in a kite / wind tango. With strong but delicate hands it takes their heads and molds them into one, and then swaying in a looping rhythm. At the hips it increases the pace, jerking them faster into a flamenco of ecstasy. They sink to their haunches, beneath the light, so I cannot say what they did there, but it must have pleased them because they emerge from the black water with heads thrown back, hair lank, and smiles that almost split their faces. Rising at the music’s insistence, their bodies extend to a plastic length then, as the music slows their bodies roll, while arms continue the kite / wind tango.

Suddenly she begins to shudder a release and her grip on him becomes desperate. Lush has held herself for this moment, and smiles at its recognition. She, The Long One, and The Lush, then slowly dissolve into a light of ecstasy, becoming more opaque as it takes a hold of them, until they are two pure, bright pulses of

energy, one a throbbing soft pink glow upon his hand, and the other a crimson velvet glove fisted around his penis.

“Give it me, Big Boy.” They start to giggle, and then can’t stop. “Y’all take what ewe can get, y’hear,” he reposts.

She, first dropping to her knees doubles over, body shaking, alternately laughing in such fits that tears stream down her face, and sucking him, holding him in prayerful hands begging it, “Please, please, please, over my face, Big Boy. Over ma face.” As he comes close his laughter dries on lips parched by passion, and the serious concentration all pleasure deserves. She, recognising the moment, sniggers knowingly, and lets her tongue, the snake’s tongue, take over: flicking the head so he can feel it, but is unsure exactly where. And then The Boys pump over her and she starts a laughing delight: the notes pure and sharp, where everything else is blurred. Each one a peeling bell. Over her face a stream forms that takes to running down her chest until she is the bed of a stream that bubbles over her; a slick opaque river through which he can see her lain back, hips still gently pulsing, as if in memory of every love she ever made. Her face registers Peace and Joy to All Men.

Thereon the night becomes theirs, and they dance until the morning, before rushing home through rain spilled streets, smearing the corners as they take them fast and hard. We awake the next morning and separate with the remaining words needed to complete the masterpiece that only the unexpected can paint. When one has nowhere further to go it’s unimportant how long it takes to get there, or by what means we travel, but I have other journeys before that last. On leaving once I look, though not for them, for I knew I would never see The Long One and The Lush again, but from that glance I knew the swan would not swim in the lake for me again.

Chapter 1.04 [2.05]

Fuck that, it ain't the same

*As seein' the bitch with the knickers down and panting for it,
The smell might be a blue turn on, but fuck, what I'd give to see
the abandon on her face.*

“What’s wrong with you, why are you talking like that,” she asks with irritation, “How do you expect me to understand you, what language is that?”

Jed, pleased that he’d finished a poem - one he particularly liked for the story it tells - had called his girlfriend Chanel, with nothing more in mind than to pass the time and share his happiness with her. But as soon as he hears her voice the sense of peace, that he gets whenever he writes verse, which he thinks of as a writing down of the communication of The Wise One’s thoughts and ideas, it vanishes in an instant. Confused he asks her, “What are you talking about? Speaking in another language? No.”

*Crank up the music boys, the party's getting tame on me,
The girls have all but left and the booze is getting dry,
The corks are popped and all who loved me hate me now,
Can't blame them, mind, given all I did,*

But hoped I'd get it right before running out of reasons, and someone to fuck over.

Still irritated she says, “You’re still doing it. Stop playing these stupid fucking games, you know exactly what I mean. What are you trying to do, impress me?”

*I smell it before I feel the bottle crack across my face,
A fucking waste of some good liquor,*

*Spills down my face, or is it blood? Who gives a shit,
The old one will sort me out, she will. She will.*

After six months of the constant puts downs (alone, or more shamefully in front of her friends), he's worn out by them. She makes his heart permanently raw by the constant attacks against his manhood and it's made him weak that, though he knows he should split, he's unable to escape her. She has an unerring aim, and seems to enjoy doing it, which he has a suspicion is because somehow it relieves her own pain. And that in a nutshell is how fucked things are: over the relentless months his self confidence plummets and he loses respect for himself, so that when she tells him, "Why don't you stand up for yourself more," or, "Why do you do it that way? It's dumb, you should do it like this," he has no answer, when with anyone else he'd have told her to fuck off or walked out the door without a backward glance. Now instead, his head drops and he makes no effort to defend himself.

*I'll never tell you what I'd do to see again,
That's me, fuck no use to anyone, least of all myself,
A blind peg leg, yeah the leaning Tower of fucking Pisa.*

His only escape is his writing. "I don't know why I was talking like that. The only thing I can think is I've been writing about a blind man, an old drunk, once a soldier." She laughs derisively, "What do you mean, pretending to be him, a soldier? My brother, maybe, but you, I can't see that." Through her he's even come to doubt the journey, which until he met her had made every sense. Nothing is concrete anymore, and he questions his entire purpose for existing. Yes, he admits to himself several times, suicide does seem at least one of the logical solutions.

A familiar argument ensues, which he initiates, "You talk as if violence is something to be proud of. It's the most primitive reaction of all, and your brother's a classic example." In his mind he's clear about this, but his heart is not there yet. And

as so often happens, she nails him to his weakness, “You don’t know what you believe in. And if you’re not prepared to stand up for what you believe in, well, it counts for nothing.”

He yells down the phone, “But if I did that I’d be just like you! I don’t want to be in your world - one endless fight, getting nowhere. You’re intelligent, but look at what you’ve achieved with your life, against what it could have been. Pulled down by your fucked up parents. Buying into their shit: I can see it, you’ll achieve nothing.” Jed catches his feeling - a desire for revenge, for all hurt she’s caused him. Hating himself, he tries to explain, “I’m saying this because you’re capable of so much more.” Expecting a rapid fire come back, the silence at the other end catches him by surprise. Continuing, he tells her, “You know, peace is the only way. Only by being strong in peace can we achieve anything meaningful.” The voice of the Wise One, which he instantly recognizes, calms him, “Imagine a world like that, can’t you? Just refusing violence, and overwhelming it with passive resistance, the weight of that would wear them down so they’d have to give up.”

Her voice comes down the line, light and wistful, “It’s what I first loved about you, that you could paint these pictures, and I could believe in them.” But then almost immediately her voice hardens, which catches him unprepared, “But now I see it’s just fairy stories. You’re outnumbered, that’s not how it is, your world will never exist.” Pauses, her voice softer again: “I used to think it could once.” He wants to go, knowing there’ll be no better moment to end the conversation: this is high tide, it can only go down hill from here. Sure enough, her voice harsh, cold, derisive, “Anyway, it’s all talk with you, you’ll never achieve anything because you’re not prepared to risk everything for what you believe in. When I first met you I thought you meant it, but you’re just like the rest.”

Jed feels angry with himself, letting her open the wound so easily with just a few words; and for the feeling of impotence. He wished he didn’t love her, but more he wishes he didn’t have an overwhelming sense of fate, of them being destined to be together for the rest of their lives. If it wasn’t for this conviction and wanting to trust

to fate, he would have left her months ago. He's never experienced such pain from a relationship: it's as if she were slowly dismantling him, and rebuilding him into someone he doesn't want to be. Trying one more time, he says, "Look, I've told you before, I don't know how it works, and the poems, I don't know where they come from. I was thinking about something else completely, and then I couldn't help myself, the words flowing through my head and through my hand on to the page: like always coming out in a rush, like I'm channeling the spirit of someone when I write, you know?" Silence at the other end, "Are you still there?" he asks. There's still no answer, but when he checks he sees she hasn't hung up. Shrugging to himself he says, "Look, I gotta go, there's a performance tomorrow and I've got to prepare for it: a big crowd at a festival. It's one I wrote thinking about you, and us."

Still nothing for a few seconds, and then a small voice comes down the line, "I'd like to hear that; read it to me please." But he doesn't hear her - he thought she'd gone and has already hung up. A few days later he calls her, but has to leave several messages before she calls back, the following day. "Hey, I'm at a new place, and it looks like it's going to go off. You wanna join me?"

Short with him, she says, "What? Why didn't you ring the other day, when you said you would?" Recalling, he tells her, "I didn't do that one about us, I decided to do the one about The Blind Man instead: that one I was reading to you the other day, when I was speaking with that accent that made you think I was speaking a foreign language. You know, something strange happened – an old guy - but I didn't think you'd be interested in hearing about it."

*Pissed myself, no worries there, I can do most anything,
I'm in a barrel no looking down, with nothing left to lose,
So free I am, no constraints on me,*

Lying in this spreading yellow stain, my world caught in a plastic bag.

The bar tent is busy and the waitresses, wearing masks and heels and nothing much else but painted on clothes, are struggling to keep up with the orders. The crowd, getting more raucous with each performance, shout friendly encouragement at Jed as he makes his way with difficulty between the tightly packed tables onto the stage. There's a lingering threads of the light mood from the last performance, but this snap disappears as soon as Jed starts up with The Blind Man; you could hear a pin drop. Even the waitresses stop and stare. He tells Chanel, "Looking out from the stage I start to see the smiles fade as I paint more and more detail of the old man's ugly world, and the reaction of his old whore of a wife. But down the front is an old fella, wrapped up like he was in the Antarctic, while every one else is in shorts and thongs. At first I can't make out his face beneath an old cloth cap, but then, as I'm moving through it he looks up and smiles. His eyes, penetrating, capture me, but then I notice he's mouthing the words along with me, like he knows it word for word. But there's no way, it's the first time I ever performed it. By now I'm oblivious to the rest of the audience, there's just him and me in the room, and it stays like that to the end of the performance. But then I have to walk back to my table – there's dead silence, and it's a barrier between me and everyone else. You know there wasn't a single applause, and their faces were hard, unfriendly, blocking me out."

Returning to his table after the performance, Jed finds a man and woman sitting there, the pair of them nursing half empty pints of beer. The MC is louding it for the next Slammer, but the crowd's still morose and unresponsive. In a way he feels glad, at least it's a reaction, not the usual bland, polite indifference most performers are rewarded with. As he sits down the woman puts her hand on his arm. Leaning forward, earnestly she tells him, "That was good, very Ken Loach." Then laughs and hands him a beer mat. Perplexed he looks at it, sees nothing, and then turns it over. On the other side there's a "10/10!" scrawled across it. He laughs and thanks her, but then, angry with the audience, he exclaims, "What the fuck do they know?" Waving his arm to encompass the entire audience then, deliberately staring at a few

he shouts, "Love Gone Shit, and Not Funny Comedy, is all you fucking want, hey." They blank him still, and he senses he's made no impact on them at all, and never possibly could, whatever he said. Changing the subject, Jed asks the pair at his table, "What do you think was going on with the old man?" They both shake their heads, "Sorry? What old man? We didn't see anyone."

Jed looks surprised, "But you must have, he was sat right in front, I could have reached out and touched him. He was saying the words, and he smiled and bowed when I finished. He was there..." Jed turns and points but the old man has gone. "Really, you didn't see him?"

"No, and we would have if he was there." They all three look at one another for a few seconds, and then she says, "Tell me, how did you come to write that story?" After Jed has told her, and of how he spoke in a strange accent to his girlfriend straight after writing it, she looks at her boyfriend, who immediately nods, and then she asks Jed, "When's your next performance, we might want to catch it?"

Laughing, Jed yells down the phone at Chanel, trying to be heard above the din of the audience, laughing and clapping at the two performers on the stage. They're dressed in layers of thick clothing, and one sports an impressive ancient leather helmet, complete with kid's plastic swimming goggles. It's the second time he's called her, "Hey, love, you've gotta come down, it's going off here; funny as. I really think you'd enjoy it." Silence at the other end, "Did you hear me? And I'm going to do that one about us I was telling you about, I'd like you to hear it live." After a few seconds there's a click as she hangs up. When he rings back he gets her message service.

For a moment he's hurt by her reaction, but almost immediately he's distracted by the further on stage antics: two performers who've managed to convince the audience, with a few cardboard boxes and paper cones, that they're two kids blasted off in a rocket and on their way to Mars. But now they've lost their bold nerve and want nothing more than to be back home having their tea and getting

ready for bed. By the end of it the audience are falling about on every word. Then counterpoint, a guy comes on that eats the mic with a voice full of gravel. To Jed it seems to scrape the paint off the walls of the bar. Looking around, it looks like he's having the same effect on the rest of the crowd - that's by now filled the place so there's literally no room for another body in there. Though enjoying the whole evening, there's been a tension rising in him, an apprehension: every performance so far has been in its own way exceptional, the best night ever, and he's got to go up there too. A part of him is terrified, but there's also a nugget of confidence, that he can pull it off and justly stand alongside the rest of the performers up there tonight.

The poem is something different to his usual rage. The opposite in fact: a spilling of his love. And however fucked up they might be, his love for her is genuine. And, he feels, courageous in the face of so much hostility from her. He's proud that, despite everything, he's more than willing to still love with abandon, when many in the same circumstances would have sealed their hearts up for good.

*You're the lorikeet that never leaves its dying partner,
The herd of horses roaming free across the broad savannah,
The gorgeous scent of flowers I never planted,
The open cage, with the sound of birdsong in the distance,
The wild animal that runs to me for safety; sometimes bites me when I pick her up,
An all day pass to the funfair that blows up into my hand,
When we're first on the best ride, and last on the one that never stops.
You're sailing when the wind blows lazy, then roars up to a storm,
The day I wished I'd lived forever, but only if you're there beside me,
And when I did everything bang on, and everybody noticed,
Because you're the best I'll ever be: the best I'll ever be.*

As soon as he's finished everyone is cheering and whooping, while his own heart is bursting, with love not only for her, but literally for everyone in the room. And just

then, the most extraordinary thing: from the crowd comes a wave of love, which causes a visible ripple as it surges towards and then over him. Until he feels completely filled with love. And then becomes and is Love. Stumbling from the stage, still overtaken with love, he makes his way back to his place where the rest of the performers are hanging out. While still being clapped on the back by them, two women come over and one of them throws her arms around his neck and plants a heavy kiss on his lips. At first, still cloud high, he doesn't respond, but then he feels his body react, and he takes her in his arms and they kiss passionately. But then, without knowing why, he suddenly pulls back and looks over her shoulder to the entrance to the bar.

Standing there, backlit so at first Chanel appears a silhouette: starkly alone. It's as if the entire bar is empty and there's just the two of them there. Her expression is blank, but her eyes blaze rage. She stares at him for a few seconds, before spinning on her heels and disappearing down the stairs. Freeing himself from the woman, he runs after her but by the time he gets outside she's already in her car, a street racer which is parked just outside the venue, and she's gunning the engine. Banging on the window he calls out to her, but she stares straight ahead, big blue eyes filled with hatred. Her face suddenly hardens, the engine roars, and then she's gone, accelerating at crazy speed down the narrow, empty and half lit street. A cat darts in front of the car and is caught for an instant in the spotlight. She jams on the brakes, tyres squealing. The back end snakes, but then she recovers it, taking the T-Junction in a sliding turn, and then she's gone, and the street is once again deserted and dead of the silent night.

Jed already has his phone out and is stabbing at the numbers, when the phone rings and a vaguely familiar voice asks for him. Already angry, at the sense of injustice and what he sees as her overreaction, when the voice purrs down the line immediately it grabs his attention: "I want to see you: I want you to make love to me. I'm tied down: you can do anything you want to me."

Adrenalin high, and still gorged with love, he doesn't hesitate, "Where are you?" When she tells him he's barely surprised, but when he sees her, the laughter and excitement of anticipation turns to shock. Girl Suicide: she's only gone and tied herself to a railway line, and has her thin white neck laid across one of the tracks. Immediately he's thinking she wouldn't have done a good job of it, but then he starts pulling at her and she doesn't budge. In the dark it's hard to see, but on closer inspection he finds she's used the thickest chains, thick enough to blunt bolt cutters, and a heavy padlock: it would be impossible to break her free. Kneeling down beside her he cradles her head in his arms, and asks her as calmly as he can, "Where's the keys, a train could come along any time, we need to get you out of here."

She smiles, her voice slow, slurring a little, "No, I want to do it here, always had a fantasy of doing it like this. And don't worry, there's no train due for hours yet. I'll give you the key, but first, make love to me." She writhes her hips, and for the first time he notices she's got nothing on under her dress, which has now ridden up her thighs. Pinned down, hair like a bed of moss under her head, Jed finds her invitation impossible to resist. Looking both ways and finding the track deserted, he quickly pulls off his pants. On his knees, fingering her, he's just lifted up her skirt to find her shaven and glistening, when she says, "you'd better put on one of these." He shakes his head, "I never use them; no feeling. I want to feel you tight on me, the heat of you, like last time." At first she looks at him quizzically, but then shrugs and gives an ambivalent smile. Soon they're lost in their love making, she moaning and dragging on his lips with her teeth until she draws blood, while he bites into the soft flesh of her shoulder, which makes her twist and groan. As she gets wetter and tighter she begins pulling on the chains, while he pounds into her faster and faster, his whole being oblivious except to sensation. Looking down on her beautiful, impassive face, she suddenly arches her back and pushes against him, and he feels her close to orgasm. But he notices that, as always, however her body might be lost to pleasure, the look of limitless sadness never leaves her eyes. But then suddenly a look of

intense joy fills her face, as if at last peace has found her, and her eyes sparkle with excitement. At that moment a boundless love passes between them, making them immune to everything except the purest joy. At the moment of climax he merges into her. Having reached the peak, still bucking and twisting against the chains, their rhythm slowing, all her feelings and thoughts run through his mind, and he cries out. About to tell her, the words catch in his throat as he hears the distant clanking of a train, and the vibration of it through the cold steel of the track. Lying back, legs and arms chained and spread, and he still embedded in her, she has a look of languid ecstasy, but then she catches the look of alarm in his eyes, and she snakes out and grabs his wrist in her hand. Breath smoking from her mouth in the cold night air, she tells him, "Don't worry, there's signals up there, it'll switch to another line. We still have an hour."

Jed smiles as he pulls himself free from her loosening grip, but out of the corner of his eye he sees the train: it looms enormous, and all lit up like a fire breathing dragon. Captured by her languid look, the ecstasy in her eyes, and looking the most beautiful he's ever seen her, it's moments before he's back in connection with reality and to his horror he sees the train barely a hundred metres away, bearing down on them at a slow, steady pace, and it's passed through the switch and is heading straight for them. Jumping to his feet, he yells at her, "You got it wrong! Quick, give me the keys and let me untie you. Quick! We don't have much time."

Girl Suicide smiles up at him, her expression one he caught a glimpse of moments earlier: absolute peace, released from all the pain and sorrow he normally sees in her eyes, and in its place a kind of recognition of all wisdom. Calmly, her voice more slurred now, she tells him, "I swallowed the key." Then, turning her head and looking down the track, she says, "There's nothing you can do for me, except let me be. This is everything I want. I understand the purpose of this life now: it was just a test, and it's almost over. But you be careful, it won't be long now." She looks deeply into his eyes: a pure love passes between them, without fear or misunderstanding to weaken its intensity.

But then something snaps in Jed: though the revelations of the metaphysical world intrigues him, the tension between the two worlds, with violence the delimiter, is tearing him apart, as if he's tied to two bolting horses. Suddenly he finds himself not looking down at Girl Suicide, but at both of them. She unchanged, exposed from the waist down, her thin legs splayed, and her arms tied beneath her head; he standing over her, alternately pleading frantically, hands wringing, and then glancing down the track at the steadily advancing train. By now it's almost upon them, in all its vastness, and dwarfing them into something like little dolls in a child's fantasy play. She moves slightly to position her long swan white neck more precisely across the cold, hard steel. A full moon slowly appears from behind heavy clouds, and the metal glimmers, and Girl emanates a dull luminescence. He sees Jed kneel down, and cover her body with his own as if to protect her, then takes her head in his hands and kisses her. Her lips are flames that sear him to her, and her hot breath pours into him like molten lava. She holds him in an iron grip, snaking her legs over his, and grasping his wrists, locking him to her. He makes no attempt to resist, watching from above as the train slowly closes the last few metres and then passes over them. Minutes go by as it clanks along, before the last car disappears into the darkness, and the clouds drop a curtain over the silver light of the moon. Then, left only is the still jerking torso, and her severed head, rolled some distance away, looking up with the expression of peace fixed now. Jed, standing in the shadow of a cart on a siding, turning and running from the scene, never looking back.

A week has passed since Girl's death, and though they don't know it yet, they're looking for me. Thinking it's a rape / murder, Plod is confident he has all the evidence he needs, and it's just a matter of time before they stick the culprit. "The Open and Shut Case," they're calling it. What else could it have been? Yeah, in their world, what else? I guess, give them enough time, they'll find me, they always seem to somehow, so what is there to do but play it out. This is fate too, a different kind,

but still there's an inevitability about it, the river current strong as ever. Then again, what do I have left, so does it really matter what happens? With Zani gone, as if dead, yeah the premonition was right in that respect, there's only Chanel: fucked up razor wire. I have a performance tonight, not the last, but one of them. Yeah, it feels that way: almost played out.

We head down to the beach for an early morning swim. She's always up with the birds, never able to sleep for more than a few hours, restless with her fucked up thoughts twisting everything that happens to her so she's never able to find peace with herself or anyone around her. So the sun's still coming up, the water at its coldest, its most refreshing, as we dive into the surf at Whale Beach. "Whales at Whale Beach, hey. Seems like there's only two today," I joke, and she laughs; always at her happiest when active and the adrenalin pumping. Enjoying the absence of people: the threat she's on a constant guard against. "I'm afraid of everyone," she confided once, at a vulnerable moment, "Terrified, in fact." And she looked pleadingly into my eyes, as if I could save her. But then I fucked up, and now she looks at me in the same way, as just another threat.

We haven't done it for a while, though when we're around each other I'm always on her, and I've already felt her and she's dripping. Having swum out just out of her depth, I sidle up behind her and press into her: she pushes back and cranes her neck around, nipples instantly hard through the flimsy top. Finding purchase in the sand, it's not long before she's riding me slow, in rhythm with the swell, dragging off my penis with the outgoing and then sliding back on, tight as a glove, with the incoming wave. How long we're at it I don't know, but I'm close to coming, and for the first time in a week the picture stuck in my head has a veil thrown over it: of the decapitated torso jerking, and her blood pumping out of her in a desultory fashion. All I hear now is Chanel moaning, mingling nice with the rippling, rhythmic sounds of the water, and the screeching of the gulls as they skim on the breeze, low over the waves and then soaring.

But then the needle jumps off the record: “Hey, hey, yeah you! Stop what you’re doing and get out the water right now!” comes blasting at us through a megaphone. I glance at Chanel as she, so ignoring the call it’s as if she never heard it, continues to ride me, her strong legs gripping me tight. But then she’s smirking, and I get the feeling she’s seen them for some time, and the last few minutes have been for show. She can’t ever get enough: wants every man panting for her, since she once got it in her head that she was ugly. She might be no classic beauty like Liv, but she’s got something that’s got nothing to do with the way she looks, and most men crave it. We take our time, enough that the cops start more hollering, making the kind of threats they’re never able to keep. There’s two of them, boys, standing like they own the beach and everything as far as. Of course, we’ve got no defence, if fucking on a deserted beach is a crime, which from the look on their faces it is. And I’m still hard oned when we finally emerge from the water, since Chanel had been coaxing it on the swim in. And she’s still got the smirk on, which has the effect on Plod that I assume she wanted.

One starts, ‘What the fuck...’ Anyone that has ever been stopped by a cop in Australia will know how the rest of it goes so I’m not going to waste the ink. Suffice to say, we’ve barely hit dry land and one of them has me pushed to the ground and cuffs on faster than Wyatt Earp. Why? It must have been to impress, because Chanel gets a nice escort up the beach with a towel wrapped around the shoulders. We’re still maybe a hundred metres from the car park, and the whole beach and everything deserted, when I hear what to me sounds like a car backfire. But then Plod ahead of me spins round, like he’s suddenly got it in his head to do a salsa, but then he goes down clutching at his chest and making ugly gurgling sounds in his throat like he can’t breathe. As he lies there, face down, wheezing still, the sand around him starts to turn a vivid red. What the fuck day is this? passes momentarily through my head, but then the cop tied to me is yelling at us, and dragging me towards the shelter of the rocks at a diagonal about fifty metres away. A few more shots ring out, pinging off the rocks as we near the cliff face, but we’re zig zagging,

movie style, and at such an angle that the chances of getting hit are way down. We've all make it, and already the cop's on the radio calling for backup. But while he's still on it a gang of surfers come sauntering onto the beach from where the shooter had been popping at us. They look no cares or worries, and we can hear the sirens, so Pig gets bold, chest thrown out. And he's got the whole beach surrounded by the time the other cops arrive, if you believed the account I heard him give later while we were being processed before getting banged up. At the local nick they're asking stupid questions about what we know, "Mate I was fucking my girlfriend, all right. All I knew was when your boys yelled at us for indecent exposure, and then your man goes spinning down like a nine pin in front of us. That's fucking it mate." That earns me one in the solar plexus, so's for several minutes I'm sucking on empty air trying to get my breath back. After that we're forgotten about until the Chanel's old man, who'd spotted her sports car on the news reports, comes down and bails us out. "Come with me, Chanel. You, fuck off, and don't ever come back. Make a laughing stock of her, you fucking moron."

She normally follows daddy's instructions to the letter, so I'm surprised when she turns on him, "Dad, you're drunk, go home before the cops get you for drink driving, or it'll be us bailing you out." He looks sheepish, and as always, putting up nothing of a fight when you stand up to him. True to form, there's plenty more hot air while he's working hard to keep a straight line on the way out of the Cop Shop. By now it's late afternoon and she wants to go home, but I figure we'll only end up fighting so I tell her I've got a performance on, "You wanna come, it's another one about us, but not so pretty this one." Surprisingly she agrees, but when we go to pick up her car the cop tells her they're keeping it for evidence for twenty four hours. There's no time for public transport so I'm resigning to heading back to her place when she walks purposefully up to a random car and next second she's inside it and pops open the passenger door. I'm about to ask her a dozen questions when a guy runs out from a shop the other side of the road, big fella with Popeye arms, and starts yelling at us. I play dumb and get in but he's having none of it, "Hey you, yeah

you, you know I'm talking to you. What you doing with my car, get the fuck out!" He yells and starts waving his hands, "Both of you, get the fuck out!"

Fortunately it's late afternoon rush hour - with him on the other side of the road he's no chance of crossing without killing himself, while our side is a clear run. It's a nice job, a fast low slung sports car not unlike hers, "Nothing else, baby, only the best," she tells me, by way of explanation, "I used to do this all the time when I was a teenager." Seconds later we're scoring down the beachfront main drag and then up the long rise which takes us to the freeway that mainlines straight into the city's heart. Looking behind there's an almost clear road behind us. Almost: Popeye is following us in someone else's motor, though still a good distance behind. For a while it's cops and robbers the whole way, but Chanel's got some Grand Prix moves: I don't know what speeds she hit but we're there in half the normal time, and somewhere along the way we lost the tail.

In the city now, close to the venue, she's easing off the gas looking for a park, when a door flies open and gives the getaway a streak half way down the side, before it pops off and jams under the rear wheel. So then we're caught up in explanations, and the whole time I'm knowing what's going to happen. The guy's still yabbering on when we give each other a look, but just as we're ready to high tail it, sure enough Popeye revs up and jams his mate's car across the front of us so we're boxed in all sides. In a heartbeat he's out and coming at me. I fend off, even land a few, but he's too big and too mad so it's only a matter of time before he catches me one and then it's all over, head spinning, and me the punch bag. It takes some passers by to pull him off. Turns out one of them's an Off Duty so, with a little help from the crowd, which he needs since Popeye is getting madder and stronger by the second, he manages to get the cuffs on. While he's preoccupied, fuck it, I take the opportunity to piss in Popeye's pocket, and then we're gone.

As we saunter up to the club, Chanel looks the whole part, black leather pants, and see through top, no bra. Me, I look like I've been through fifteen rounds, but it's that kind of place, so they let us both in. I clean up as best I can while Chanel gets

drinks and finds us a dark spot near the stage, where a mate of mine is already set up. Before long Chanel is gassing with Mick while I get ready. It's a quiet night, the ones where it's mostly girls talking broken love stories that never were, until you want to wring their necks. By now my head is pounding and I'm in no mood for anything but a drink and bed. But for the best fucked up reason I want to get this done: this is the best day of our time together, and what I have to say what we have, and I want her to know what I feel today, when she stuck with me, when she could have pissed off a few times and left me in the shit. Then again, nothing is ever right between us, and she likes the drama, so maybe that's all she was hanging out for: more of the same. Preoccupied getting ready, it's only just as I'm stepping on the stage I notice my mate with a look on his face, and she with her hand in his lap. Hard to see in the semi darkness, and the stage lights blazing, but as I start up I think I see her arm working a steady rhythm. Still not sure, but then the mate looks at me with a guilty one, and she's laughing, daring me to do something about it.

*I thought you're pissed, but no, you're stone cold sober,
Everyone thinking you're a fucking eejit, and you don't betray yourself,
Just raise up the middle finger, slow so we all know what's comin.
She sheds a flimsy shirt that's barely on her in the first place,
Then a few girls start to notice, is she the stripper no one ordered?
Black leather trousers, is all she's wearing now, skin on skin, live porn, no rush.*

I'm going hard at it, the words bullets gunned out fast and furious, aimed at her. Only see her, still working up the boy, hands down his pants, while she stares straight at me, no shred of guilt, all eyes for my reaction.

*Spread across the floor you writhe like a snake on heat,
Strobe flickers, so there's only action glimpses every other second,
Then the lights go on, just like your mother caught us,*

But you just laugh, get up and walk straight out the door, ass waving to the beat.

Taking up the mic, I go over to the side of the stage, and the boy pulls himself away. She tries to stop him, but he's had enough: the heat that surrounds her already too much for him. I yell at her:

*So why'd you have to kill yourself my love?
I promised I'd two heads of schemes to melt,
But there's weariness in your wide set eyes,
So now my heart leaps when I hear the sound of a voice like yours,
See a girl or boy with that fine hair, softer than it looks,
Who'd take you places they'd never have the nerve to go alone,
Yeah, with her at their side, he'd become the ruler of their unkempt dominion.*

Then I see she's got the boy back, with promises she'll more than likely keep, and he's laughing at me, brazen. Eyes still on me she twists her head and a tongue goes in his ear: a smile wide as on the pair of them. I take the mic and heave it with all I've got. Glancing off his face, it smashes against the wall, having opened up a nice gash on his cheek. What happens next doesn't matter, but in less than a minute I've a pack of Popeyes dragged me out of the place, throwing me to the ground, and then it's boots on balls. While I'm down, out of the corner of my eye I watch them meander slowly down the street, hands in each other's back pockets like they were made for each other.

A whole lot of pain later - the boys seemed to take their job more seriously than most - I'm staggering down the same street with the look of someone pissed, though I'm stone cold sober. Glad in my head I'm never going to see her again, and determined this time to follow through. Fuck fate, I figure it's been playing tricks on me all along, though that means I don't know anything: later, yeah a long time later, it made sense, and I realised Fate Was Allright. Anyway, I find me way to her place

and pick up my car, and somehow make it home. That was some fucking day. I remember thinking that, and smiling, before going under and not waking up until late the following afternoon, woken up by a knock on my front door.

I live in a small community on the edge of the bush, and everyone knows everyone and their business. When I stagger down I find standing on my balcony (which has a nice view over the street, which also means that everyone gets a good look see who's at my door) is my next door neighbor's daughter and a school friend I've never met before. Both of them are still in uniforms, but they've unbuttoned the fronts of their shirts and, no bras on, their breasts are there for an eyeful. Running to the door and yanking it open, I yell at them, "Come inside for fuck's sake before someone sees you." OK, it's not the first time she's been over, but it's never been more than a little too friendly banter. This is a whole new level that I want no part of.

"What happened to your face," Jessica says, looking a mite worried, and then running her hand down the side of it. When I wince, she steps inside, her friend following, and kisses my cheek before shutting the door behind her. Once inside no one can see us, and I'm just praying no one saw them come in. I've already started planning how I'm going to get them out the back incognito, but it turns out they've got other ideas. All of us milling around the sofa, laughing throatily, they push me back and I tumble back onto it. Out of it still I'm not much of a fighter, but then again two pretty girls, over age as far as I know, and after all I've been through, why the fuck not? The friend seems more the expert, and before long she's my penis in her mouth, taking it a fair way down. It doesn't take long: she has a nice thing going with her tongue. She takes some down before pulling me out and letting the rest over her face. Not wanting to leave her out I'd been fingering Jessica. She was already moaning before she sees me coming over her friend: straight away her legs buckle onto my hand and then she's on her knees, and then the pair of them exchange tongues and smear me over each other's faces, laughing as they do. After that there's nowhere to go but bed, and after an hour of fucking we all fall asleep. When I

wake the place is deserted, pitch black with the night rolled in over the mountain. I'm still lying in bed wondering what the fuck just happened, when there's a hammering on the front door, and it's then I catch a crowd of voices, sounding very, very pissed. I crawl on all fours onto the upstairs balcony and from what I see it doesn't take much to work out what's going on: ten to fifteen men, with Jessica's old man at the head of them. Now, the back of the place leads straight on to bush that goes for hundreds of kilometres without a break, so getting away is going to be easy, but only if they haven't staked out the back yet. But it would mean leaving everything, just going with what I'm standing up in.

I don't hesitate – fuck that mob looks ready to kill - and stories go round that the cops in these parts aren't against violence for a rough cause. Maybe she was under age after all, what the fuck do I know? I was starting to feel weighed down with everything anyway, so it's only a couple of minutes later, the boys still banging, I'm at the back door with a backpack lightly loaded with all that's important to me: a handful of clothes and a laptop with everything I've ever written. Sneaking out, I find it's pitch, pitch black: if they're here I'm screwed. I hold my breath as I tiptoe down the steps. Nothing: and then I'm onto the back yard, which is nothing more than dirt, and then into the Bush. Seems luck has finally turned, so I'm able to get clean away, skirt round the village on foot and, just as the sun is coming up catch a friendly truckie going all the way to Sydney. I've got some ideas of friends I might crash with, but on the way in the radio is on and a news report comes on of the cops looking for me, in connection with a suicide. Thank fuck at least they worked that out, but I'm not in the mood for an interrogation from Plod, and there's plenty of parks near where I need to be for the next few days. I've got clothes, and cash when I need it, so I won't be going without. "Yeah mate, I'll be slumming it, sure, but highlife style," I tell the truckie, who gives me a wry smile before handing me a beer, "One for the road mate," he says.

I'm still telling myself there's a lot lower I can go before hitting the bottom when the fella drops me off at Newtown. I remember a place, an empty block with a shed

on it, and that's where I head. It proves to be just what I need, enough for a day or so before I head north and find somewhere permanently warm, where it doesn't matter if you're in or out. There's places like that in Australia still; she's big, still a little room for a man to breathe, though, true enough it's getting harder.

Now, to anyone that doesn't get it, don't worry your head: if you don't get it straight up, you never will. I'm staying, whatever the risk, because I have one more performance, and I'm fucked if anyone is going to stop me. This is Art for Fuck's Sake. I might have been looking for enlightenment, but it looks like I'm not ready for that journey yet, a long way off it seems, so let it be art that guides me. One more performance and then, like everyone else, head north and keep going til I hit the water, and keep going, until the speak a different language.

Human existence, the norm, has ceased to have any meaning to me. By that I mean nothing YOU do makes any sense to ME. But I'm flying and my wooden shack is a palace, with courtiers attentive to my every whim. There may be cobweb chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and the walls bulging so that the wallpaper is the only thing keeping them from falling in on me. But I have Courland Penders and he takes my hand and kisses it as only gentlemen from a certain century are capable. A mouse scurries through the remnants of a once inspiring wig he wears, but from which tufts now fall at irregular intervals. Through corridors of dusty marble we wander, exchanging witticisms and kisses with equal abandon and passion. The months of rooms drift by until we reach June, the coolest and therefore the most alluring month. Our breaths form a single cloud, and begin a conversation as a counterpoint to our own: the determination of How, and Why?

It does seem one must lose oneself, and all purpose, to find the true objective. By that I mean the reason for existing. Because in knowing one is lost, one is fully mindful to all signals that might lead us to wisdom, peace, and love. If not, the same walk is merely an entertaining stroll. I feel this, rather than know it. The walls are pages, and each room a story. We, Courland and I, like them short, for our attention is easily diverted by the needles, as we lie in each other's arms upon the gentle

moss. A Jester teases thin streams of wisdom from the garland flowers and the vines that form walls where the stone has crumbled, no nearer for your patience or desperate prayers. Time stretches itself before the roaring fire, only occasionally shifting itself to find a position more comfortable, and in so doing lengthens the day beyond the regulation. We examine all he lays before us but, even with his aid, we remain still lost to the object of our being.

Courland posits that while we may be, upon our own axis, lost, it is only in this state of uncertainty that deities will reveal the secret door. Why, I ask him? Prior to answering he concurs, his manner exquisitely polite, that the question is not an unreasonable one, and is in fact one he has asked himself many times.

Confused though, I respond, “?”

His reply is not immediately satisfying: a shrug and an apologetic smile, and a brief lifting of his heavy lidded eyes to meet mine, before resuming the rumination of his pensive thoughts. I take his hand and he curls a finger and tickles the palm of it playfully, the quest for the Meaning of the Universe momentarily postponed for a month. “Dimension is a trick of sight. And several other senses,” he assures me on resuming and by way of re-introduction, adopting the manner of Sage which, in my present state of Lost Explorer, I find chillingly alluring. “A fugitive response to the reality you stand on the lip of discovery,” he wags an admonishing finger. “Release yourself from sanity, and all will become clear.” I had begun to wonder myself, and then, if so, How? In a manner productive. Anticipating my confusion he promises, “I will help you, but first let us walk beyond The Wall of Books.” Suddenly, in a Quantum Physic, I find myself at the end (or is it the beginning?) of a road straddled by two granite obelisks with a timber crossbar given meaning I fail to comprehend by hieroglyphics burned deeply into it. Present, but not, his Voice guides me with gentle prods in the small of my back and in this manner I make jerky strides upon an elm lined drive which winds through fields that roll and dip invitingly, so much so that I desire to impregnate their fertile soil and then reside and observe our spawn grow mighty and indestructible. My thoughts are interrupted, “A bias of green

clouds your judgement, young man.” Then a slight cough: decisive in its judgement. “Join me, pray,” with a tone impossible to resist.

Behind him the house, with twelve stained glass windows depicting the Triumph of Christ through the antics of his apostles. Once inside the same are hung as portraits, along with hunting scenes and minor nativities, all imbued with the faint hues of the colors in the ancient windows, that confess the first truth where no book was able. “This house lacks soul,” he apologizes, “But duty is upon us. I sometimes wonder....” His voice trails off as the rooms gape coldly at us, and the dust sheets smother feeling. Prising shutters rusty from misuse, the corridors screech a desperate appeal, but the brown shadows refrain. Outside the gale anthems The Dead: no wife or sons, heirs to his misfortune. Only a wild crop of brambles; only golden deer to be shot, his arm steadied by a verandah railing. We knew it to be a dream, but one we shared, and therefore it was not: a white stallion snorting streams of breath from pink, flared nostrils. Bared teeth and stamping hoof; rearing majestically in the knee deep snow, sending flurries around him, he floating on the thin air. I cling to his mane while Courland holds him, barely able to contain an extended lunge. Then are we gone, to sunset pastures, while he remains forever captured as a silhouette, upon the skyline of a lost century, as nameless builders of empires squander luxury on outlined memories; a morgue of anarchists testament to the bliss I stamp upon the revelation.

So here we are at last, The Final Supper, with Courland sitting unobserved in a dark corner, occasionally scribbling an intense note of warning that he has no desire I should heed. The Fat Boy on the stage dances to His Tune, and at home his mother claps, while his father turns away, caught in a dense cloud of embarrassment, mumbling an uncertain but familiar refrain. It only eggs Him on. Miles fights back against conformity that at once he craves: a duality. A girl impresses herself, though I’m unsure how The Bank took it. The audience waits until she’s finished before finding urgent meaning elsewhere. There is, after all, a certain protocol with The Headliner. I could count them now on a dismembered hand. But once on the stage,

lights blazing to form a wall of shimmering white that could be a mile thick for its effect. I stand in The Great Hall, and the entire community is pressing to join the entertainment.

*The same lips she kissed her daddy with on birthdays,
And with a curtsy to the queen, uttered Please and Thank You's,*

*Will this morning, painted a glistening blood red,
Be wrapped around a throbbing, purple headed cock.*

*The same lips she whispered secrets to her girlfriend,
Before taking boyfriend's dick between their parted seas:*

*Down on down until she gagged,
In her home, in her bed, between her pristine sheets.*

*The same lips that spoke of loyalty and trust,
As she sucked the life from parade grounds full of ardent boys,
As they jerked and spurted in her smiling, welcome mouth.*

*The same lips that formed promises only angels keep,
But angels don't pull, and suck, and run their tongue the length,
And smile a wistful yearning when he comes the last upon her face.*

*The same lips that vowed to honor and obey, for the life of her,
But seven years to some is several lifetimes, and so who is counting,*

Yet she could justify it all, as only women can:

How we love you / hate you / can't do without you.

*The same lips that one day crack their dying breath,
And a smile would pass them, as she recalled the boys she'd had,*

And could have had, but wants forlorn instead.

*As it throbbed, and jumped, and begged for more,
Before the alter of those lips that smiled, then parted,
And a tongue flicked across them, in anticipation.*

*She might now fly with spirits, who knows where,
Though never shall she feel the fire between her legs again,
Or see the look of ecstasy, his face as melting wax, and body shake to breaking.*

Sienna had called him to the stage as the last two audience leave. She cuts the lights to nothing but the blinking nobs, then settles back in a soft recliner by the stage. When reciting these lines, her own lips had plumped and become glistened:

*The same lips that vowed to honor and obey, for the life of her,
But seven years to some is several lifetimes, and so who is counting,
Yet she could justify it all, as only women can:
How we love you / hate you / can't do without you.*

He walks to the edge of the stage, mic dangling from one hand, while unzipping with the other. She looks up and their eyes lock. In the absent glow she leans forward onto knees and draws him from pants. They part in a dangerous smile, showing small teeth that could cut an edge on steel.

*The same lips that sucked life from parade grounds full of ardent boys,
The same lips that, painted red, wrap around his throbbing, purple headed cock.
The same lips that part, then flick a tongue across in anticipation.*

She sucks noisily, occasionally looking up and sniggering at his expression, vacated of indifference by a conflict of mind and feeling. Taking it down, slowing but reaching its base with a final thrust that gags a sword swallower, sliding the sheath of the blade out, to gorge on it again. Her lips soft, moist, a glove around his shaft.

*The same lips that formed promises only angels keep,
But angels don't pull, and suck, and run their tongue the length,*

And smile a wistful yearning when he comes the last upon her face.

The room is all but black, save for a dim glow released from the street that snakes down the narrow stairs, so he is mostly feeling. But then something glitters at the back of the club; the same moment a voice booms out command, "Stop wherever you are, boy." It says it once more then adds, for they must always have a reason, "You never seem to learn cunt."

Still in her mouth, she turns a dial which throws faint shadows across the back wall: two cops in formal blue, black glasses forming a deliberate cover to feeling. They advance cautiously, blundering water buffalos. He withdraws from her mouth reluctantly and then, pulling hard, when they come in range he unloads himself upon the pristine blue with a satisfying splat. "That was a fantasy I never expected to fulfil," he exclaims. Looks of supreme distaste from one, and surprised pleasure from the other are burned into his retina as she suddenly blasts on the spotlights, blinding the pursuers, while he launches for the stairs to make good his escape. A hand monetarily pulls on a come smeared penis, but releases it with a cry of disgust, and then he's gone, a phantom up the stairwell, as Plod stumbles over chairs and misplaced tables that crowd around them, making low groans, and jostling at their feet.

A week later he lies alone on the roof of the hotel: in the far distance are the snow capped mountain peaks of The Himalayas. He has spoken to no one in days, and has no plans in time forward. His way is discovered. As the sand mandala falls from his eyes, reality has been at last revealed. It cannot be explained, only found: but only by the lost.