

A photograph of a factory floor. In the foreground, a white robotic arm is visible, with the text 'NEXTAGE' and an American flag sticker on its side. The sticker also features the text '\$ 1.6 Tr'. In the background, several workers are seen working at their stations. The entire image is framed by a yellow border with rounded corners.

*The
Useless
Class
ferggus*

Book

One

Chapter 1.01

The Year 2063: For some reason that no one ever worked out the driver of the runaway truck was dressed only in white underpants; the colour exaggerated by the dark tan of the man's skin.

It's a Saturday, around midday, and the construction shift is about to switch. The truck had been parked up at the top of a short embankment, at the bottom of which is a dried out river bed made up of several metres of thick, red laterite sediment. Shortly it will be dredged and reclaimed, to allow for further expansion of the BPOD Deluxe factory at Bathurst. A few hundred metres upstream, where the river funnels into a narrow gorge, a fifteen metre high dam has been erected to enable this operation. The lake formed by the damming of the river will provide a reliable, year round water source for the factory, and recreation for the future inhabitants of 346185 Block 27th, a large Consumer Grade high rise housing estate. With its expansion, which is taking place at the same time, it will provide housing for close to a million people, the bulk of whom will be Consumers.

With their shift over, most of the construction gangs have formed small groups along the river bank, eating lunch and making plans for the evening, most of which centre around getting drunk at a nearby club. The man, who is not part of the construction crew, releases the handbrake of the truck, a yellow single tonne front loader, before trying to start the engine. Unfamiliar with the machine he doesn't know that without power the foot brake doesn't function, and any one that's tried will know that it's impossible to engage the gears once these trucks have picked up any speed. The man ineffectually pumps the brake, but the dump truck continues to gather momentum. Quickly realising the danger the man shouts a warning to the construction workers but they, at the end of their shift and therefore weary and inattentive, do not immediately respond to the danger. At the same time the man turns the vehicle up a shallow rise, and in fact at first this strategy appears successful. The truck, forced uphill, draws to a natural stop. However almost immediately it begins to roll backwards, and again rapidly increases its speed. With everyone now alert to the runaway vehicle, the crews, a moment before comfortably warming themselves in the early afternoon sun, can be seen diving out of its path, hurling abuse after the driver as he flies past. Unfortunately one of the construction workers, groggy from working a double shift, is a little too slow, and the dumper catches his leg a glancing blow, shattering it instantly. As the out of control truck nears the foot of the embankment the driver spins the steering wheel wildly. The truck responds by swerving sharply,

tipping up onto two wheels, ejecting the man, and then somersaulting over to finish up buried in the mud with the wheels still spinning madly. The man, face down and barely visible in the thick mud, shows no signs of life.

One of the construction foremen orders his crew, who've shown little interest in helping the runaway driver, "Go see if the fucking clown is alive." A handful reluctantly respond. On reaching him they try to pull him out of the mud, but without success – the man is huge and they also have to fight against the suction of the clay which is holding him fast. "Hurry the fuck up. Hey! More of you help them, or the cunt will drown for fuck's sake," yells the foreman, already anticipating the volume of paperwork he's required to complete in the event of a death on site during his shift. Helped by a handful more, there's a loud pop as the construction boys finally manage to extricate the man from the mud. Then, after dragging him from the swampy riverbed, they dump him roughly on the bank. Someone throws a full bucket of water over him and the man comes to spluttering and gasping for air, then immediately begins swearing at everyone, blaming them for the accident. You might have expected the idiot's behaviour to draw a stronger reaction, but there is little beyond muttered expletives from his friends who'd warned him against joy riding the truck, and a kick in the ribs from one or two of his rescuers, amongst whom are mates of the lad whose leg he'd broken. Unfortunately, through no fault of the doctor, something goes wrong with the operation and the construction worker's broken leg refuses to heal. A few weeks later he has to have it amputated, and after that he loses his job and is forced to become a Consumer.

Later at the club, very drunk by now and having completely forgotten about the events of the afternoon, the factory worker is regaling his mates with his latest sexual exploits. "... So there's a contest, right, for the best looking bloke at the club. There's five of us in the finals...." Dale is one of the lads; good enough worker, and he can stand up for himself in a fight. Likes a drink, and according to Ellen his missus, he's drinking too much. Most of the boys are laughing; they don't take him too seriously. "OK, so I only second place. Do I give a fuck? No mate. Why? The first prize is only another fucking competition. Mate, you win, you want it there and then, right?" Grins, and rubs his hands together like the kid that just got the keys to the candy shop. "What's the second prize? Tonight, a free ride with any of the girls at Crazy Horse. Fucking A."

When he's on a roll there's no stopping him. Dale's on a roll. "It's been a busy week, boys. Got another date lined up with Bluey's Ex. Taking her to one of them Swing Parties. I was supposed to root her last night but she's on the blob. Boys,

you should never shag girls when she's ragging. Mate, it tastes fucking disgusting. Take my word for it."

Some of the younger lads gag, but the others know better. It's all fucking talk. "So you haven't actually fucked anyone, is that right Stretch?" Brendan Fuller, the smartarse Union Rep, likes to dig. It's an ongoing battle. "Jesus mate, you're all fucking talk." A few of the men snigger - brown nose cunts - so Fuller's all top dog. "Don't forget lads it's an early shift tomorrow, gotta get production up to cover the meeting in the arvo."

We all want to know what the meeting is about, but I don't ask. There's always someone. On cue This time it's Dale, after payback. The boy doesn't get it, and never will. In the long run it doesn't pay to stand out, and that's especially right about now. Dale doesn't understand but he has his uses, and he's loyal. Fuller taps his nose; he's only after the power. "Big secret, boys, no-one saying anything. But I've heard from a few of the other branches that new performance targets are being set, and we might be the first to get them."

Dale, seeing his opening, motor mouths his way in. "Well they better take into account Monday mornings and Fridays when they do their calculations. I mean, what's my priority going to be on a Friday arvo? It's not going to be work, now is it boys? Am I right? We work hard enough Tuesday through Thursday, and some on Monday. That's been good enough before, and fair enough I say. Work to live mate, there's no medals for this fucking job, brother. Though you'd think there were the way you lick their fucking arses, Fuller." Again, a few sniggers. Dale's not afraid to speak his mind, even to management. Big lad, naturally strong. Was in the Army a few years. We saw action together in Greece, and the tail end of a brief war over an empire outpost. He lost his best mate during that one. Head blown clean off by a stray rocket. Him? Not a scratch. After five years of active service, all his close mates are dead, so a few fuckwit officers started questioning his courage. We all know that's bullshit, but who's going to listen to an NCO over an officer? Like with his mate, they were stood next to each other: it could just as easily have been Dale instead. I was there right when it happened; Ronnie as well. I felt the heat of the fucking rocket as it went past. Luck. Sometimes it's nothing more.

We're sitting in the meeting along with the rest of the shift crews. As the Union Rep, Fuller has just given us a big speech about solidarity, and not allowing management to steamroll us into a new roster. They never have before, so why should they now? After all, we were the first, and still are the most productive

factory in the whole state; minimal disruption. Why would they want to rock the boat? But then again, with some management it's like they want you to fuck up, so maybe the cunt knows something.

Then comes the bombshell. "Men, you're going to be replaced by a fully automated work force" I'm glad it's Mr. Minkun, the Production Manager, that gives us the news, not the cunt Fuller. At least the old bastard has the decency to tell us face to face and with no bullshit to sugar coat it. "It'll start with the labourers next month, and two months later with Trades. After that, all the rest of you." Minkun goes on to explain why we've pulled the short straw. "... Why have our squads been chosen? Because you're the most productive BPOD factory in the whole of Australia. If a fully automated unit can perform better than we do then no-one can argue with replacing the workforce on the other sites. Boys, we're the guinea pigs. Ten years and more of fairly loyal service by most of you, and now this. And there's fuck all we can do about it."

"Fuck we can't. We'll go get pissed at the Club!" Some comedian; but no-one's laughing. I look across at Ronnie. No reaction. That's what I need to see. Dale looks like he's going to start something, but he's next to Ronnie who pulls him down and says the right thing. Right thing, right time. You can rely on Ronnie for that. Dale gives Ronnie a look, frightened, confused, but he doesn't move a muscle, looks straight ahead at Minkun, who continues to give it to the lads, not sparing any of the ugly details. Later, down the club. As you'd expect, the place is packed, spending hard earned like there's no tomorrow. And they just got told they lost their jobs: some people you just can't fucking help. Then again, it's not every day you get told you're redundant. And not your job. You. And if it's happening here at Gargon BPOD, then it's gonna happen everywhere. Dominoes, right? With us gonna be the first to tumble. Everyone except the dumbest fucks can read the writing on the wall: most of them will never work again. Like I said, not the job, You. Lucky I got fallback. While there's humans on this planet someone will always need the likes of me. But my mates are here and we got to stick together. What to do? What the fuck is there to do? Everyone knows the new robots can outperform any human. And that's just during a six hour shift, when those bastards can keep cranking it out twenty four hours a fucking day.

The assembly line keeps moving, slowly, steadily, without interruption, twenty four hours a day, week to week, month to month, year on year. Into this unbroken cycle of production, so smoothly orchestrated you can almost hear the symphony it seems to be accompanying, intrudes the awkward, unpredictable and

discordant contribution of the factory's workers. Labor: quite why they're there seems difficult to answer when you see automation's precision manufacturing.

The shell of the torso, an outer layer of skin like material over a high impact, lightweight frame, is held firmly by a pair of suction pads. Into this a robot inserts several components that duplicate, or in some cases re-engineer, the function of human organs. After each part has been firmly pushed into place and silicon sealed by a robotic arm, the torso jerks forward to where a human worker stands ready to perform their short task: taking a spaghetti of wiring from a constantly replenished rack, she carefully connects the wiring to the dozens of components installed by the line of robotic machines that precede her in the production cycle.

Contained by the loud metallic click and hum of the factory noise, the human worker is silent. This is the World of the Machine and the human, without having to be told, is aware of his status as an immigrant into it. The assembly line is a new and different kind of life force: the Technotrons gives birth to a new Technotron. The human factory worker has an inconsequential role in this operation. And, like most humans, will become increasingly irrelevant to planet Earth's future. The majority of humanity will be sidelined by evolution, most likely will be made extinct by it.

In another area, the Automaton peels open the flexible, skin like material that on its own takes up the form of a human leg. With its interior now exposed the robotic worker inserts, and then spends some minutes carefully aligning, the several components of a lightweight frame (the skeleton) for the limb. Following this they overlay the skeleton with lengths of transparent tubing down which will pass fluid necessary to regulate the robotic body's temperature. For some reason the fluid has been designed to resemble human blood, in both color and texture. With the wiring then added and the limb capped so that it now comprises a complete, discrete component, the robot allows the cover of the limb to revert to its natural form. In this case it's a leg, with foot attached; the process is identical for the manufacture of the BPOD's other limbs.

The occasional intrusion of a human voice into this Cathedral is unexpected, and feels out of place. His normally silent preoccupation with his task is taken from the robot's cue. From its example he passes through his existence as an automaton himself, ground hogging his life again and again without variation, without creation, without imagination. But he finds a certain pride in his necessity, though permanently the question hangs above his head, a sign punched out in metal, which reads, "Yes, but for how long?"

The 'head' of the BPOD is the most complex and intricate component to construct as it is required to co-join with a biological organ, unlike all the other

parts of the BPOD, which only connect to other artificial modules. Like some mad scientist / doctor, a worker, sat on a low stool, hovers over the oval shape, hands working mechanically in a precise, exact manner. Without a covering it in no way resembles its final appearance, consisting presently of a plastic orb with numerous holes punched into its front and back. At its base is a universal joint, which incorporates a bank of male and female protrusions and sockets. Into its hollowed out interior the worker pushes into place an exactly fitting shell formed of several layers of pressed metal, which incorporate a series of retractable probes. When, in the transplant operation, the brain is lowered into this repository, the probes will automatically insert into precise locations deep inside the recipient's brain. To complete their task, before allowing it to proceed along the assembly line, the worker checks the probes are functioning correctly. Further along eyes and audio devices are inserted, and the lower jaw bone attached. Finally a plastic scalp, hinged on one side, is attached to the globe to complete its manufacture.

Communication between workers on the production floor is limited to a changed facial expression or exaggerated body movements, either of which would signal their overall mood or a momentary feeling. There's nothing new to inform regarding the goings on of the production floor, because always it's an exact repetition. Millions by now probably, though exactly how many no one's ever calculated. It is only in the space between production, the short breaks allowed the workers, that any variation occurs in their lives – a discordant, unpredictable jazz cycle scratched between the grooves of a perfect rendition of a timelessly monotonous Musak.

In the final stages of the production process robots and workers clamor around the unrecognizable torso. In the space of less than ten metres the BPOD is suddenly transformed (by the attachment of legs, arms and head) into something resembling the human form, though it still lacks the singularity of a face. That feature will be laid over the skull in a separate operation in a high security section of the factory, once the BPOD's recipient has been allocated. After the attachment of limbs and head the BPOD shunts along to a checking point, where a worker tests the function of the organs, along with the flexibility of its movement and degree of response to stimulants (such as heat and cold) to various parts of the frame. Another worker, who's labor is double checked by a robot, ensures the functionality of the eyes, ears and mouth. Finally, an artificial brain simulator is used to test the BPOD's full functionality. First of all, a basic capability for brain and BPOD to communicate, and then testing specific functions – causing it to walk, run, perform its sexual function, communicate verbally and through facial expression – before finally testing all its senses.

In the earliest days of BPOD production the workers on the assembly line, along with the highly skilled technicians and automaton maintenance crews, found little to divert their attention from simply performing their allotted task to the standard demanded of them. More recently however, Dale and his mates have been distracted by the increasing number of highly unusual BPODs they're tasked with producing. With little to occupy themselves, in their lunch breaks when management aren't around, the workers at the BPOD factory will hook up completed robot forms to the simulators, mainly for the opportunity to gain the unusual sexual experiences normally only the privilege of the Elite.

To the annoyance of Brendan Fuller, who happens to be passing by the testing section just at that moment - who countless times has told the workers not to mess around with the ruinously expensive luxury BPODs - he finds Dale yelling to be heard above the din of the machinery, "What do you think of this one, mate!" Astride an oversized dog, Dale simulates fucking it until one of his friends points out, "Mate, it's a fucking dog, you fucking homo." Without shame Dale feels between its back legs, but on touching its erect penis he jumps back with a strangled yelp. The boys fall about; Dale is always good for a laugh, clowning it, breaking the monotony of our work. Fuller scowls menacingly and shouts at Dale, "Get back to work you fucking idiot! Break that and you'll be in debt to Gargon for the rest of your life on your pittance of wages." Dale, already about to return to work, instead once again mounts the dog, stare daring back at Fuller. Unusually Fuller doesn't react and starts walking away. Dale looks surprised and shrugs his shoulders, but then he sees the smile on Fuller's face, a sly, knowing expression. "Wonder what the cunt is up to," he says to the worker next to him, but a moment later something distracts him and it's forgotten.

With Fuller gone Dale dismounts from the dog, but then another of the workers, only recently started at the factory, strips naked from the waist down and places herself beneath the huge form of an exact replica of a stag, down to an enormous set of antlers, which give the appearance of an intricate, towering crown adorning its head. Egged on by a group of workers who've formed a circle around her, she's spread her legs wide and allowed the beast to pound itself into her. One of the men grumbles to his friend, "Mate, look at the antlers on it. Something fucking majestic about it. How can you fucking compete with that? In every fucking way we're being replaced, aren't we mate?" The other worker, mesmerized as well, agrees, "Strange the way he calls out to her, like she's a fucking animal too. Like, more one of them than us." Then he smacks his mate on the back and laughs, "Don't worry mate, it's only the rich cunts that get to use these, hey. Yours and mine will never get the chance to ride one of these cunts."

He pauses before going on, more reflectively now, "Not in our lifetime anyway mate." The other smiles ruefully, "Right there, brother. Mate, I wouldn't have believed that story in the news the other day. Na, until I came to work here I wouldn't have believed it, mate."

Chapter 1.02

The Year 2063: The two women walk along the river bank, holding hands as they've always done since their earliest childhood recollection. For so long it feels like it's not only in this lifetime they've done so, but have been lovers through all their existences. Pointing, one of them, Ariel, remarks, "My god, that's a beautiful dog, look at its eyes, cobalt blue; they pierce through you." She laughs, "In a person they'd make your legs go weak just looking at you." Her friend looks at her a little askance, "What, and you'll be wanting to run your fingers through its fur next?" Coming towards them along the path is a very attractive young woman in a white dress of such flimsy material that her legs and the outline of her figure are easily visible. Beside her is a large Husky dog, with eyes exactly as described by Ariel, a lean body which reaches above the height of the woman's waist, and covered by an impressive pelt of thick grey, wolf like fur.

The two friends, on a rare day off, soon forget the woman and continue their walk alongside the river. Ariel, laughing, jumps in the air a few times, "I feel like we've won the lotto, the weather's been so shit all week and now look at it today." She points up at the clear blue sky and then turns to face the sun, closing her eyes and throwing wide her arms. "Worship it while you can darling, you can be sure of only one thing, it won't last." Her friend reminds her. Ariel grimaces, "Hey, don't spoil it, let's enjoy our good luck," and then, without warning, tries to push her friend into the river alongside which they're still walking. Skipping out of the way, Brigitte laughs, "OK, OK! To the max!" Then, taking Ariel's hand she asks, "If it stays like this, you wanna go skinny dipping? I mean, between the two of us we've paid a week of my wages for the privilege of coming here. So we should make the most of it."

Ariel disbelieving, yells at her, "Are you insane! I don't care how much we've paid, it must be freezing in there!" Pointing further along she says, "Come on, let's see how far we can get. Hey, do you remember those cows the last time!" They both look at each other with a tinge of fear and then laugh, so loudly a middle aged couple with surly expressions that are coming the other way give them a hard stare then shake their heads at each other and give a disapproving, "Tsk, tsk." Which only makes the lovers laugh even louder as they continue their walk through the idyllic countryside. On one side of them is the slow moving river, with its deceptively strong current, narrow enough the girls could easily toss a stone across it. Along its bank, at regular intervals, are dotted a variety of trees which are dominated by huge, wide canopied Weeping Willows that bend their branches

almost down into the water. On the other side of the meandering path the meadows, knee deep in grass, rise quite steeply up to a thick hedge a few hundred metres distant, that runs for several kilometres along a ridge. The far side of the river, the gently undulating fields have already been ploughed in readiness for planting. For it's now late May, the beginning of the European summer, and the temperature has risen from the depths of the cold and dark winter months that always seem as if they'll never end.

The girls continue their walk, passing through fields sectioned off by a variety of gates and contraptions designed to contain the cows. They, on this hot day, offer no threat to the girls, being more interested in finding the coolest shade under the trees. Eventually, after walking for half an hour, their way is barred by a tributary off the river and, despite making short recesses, they can find no point of crossing and so turn back and retrace their steps. After passing through one of the paddocks, Ariel suddenly asks, "I still can't believe that woman was really talking to the Husky." A short discussion follows, concluded by the friends agreeing a plan of action. Then, sometimes laughing so much they're in tears, they continue on their way back, though at a quickened pace than on their more leisurely stroll out.

Throughout their walk the two girls had kept coming back to discussing the extraordinary spectacle of the elegantly dressed woman (it was a simple enough outfit but quite obviously extravagantly expensive) talking to the Husky dog in hushed but animated tones, while occasionally glancing around to make sure no one was listening. At first the girls had exchanged knowing glances and raised eyebrows, laughingly assuming she must be mad. But had jumped out of their skins and stared in amazement when, in response to a question about the state of the stock market, the dog, with a deep voice and censorious, intelligent tone, at first warned her to be quiet but when she'd ignored his advice had responded, "Darling, you can't expect your investments to make an immediate return; it's all about patience, and nerve." The dog had glanced at the two girls as he said this, which had only heightened their shock, for there was something quite terrifying in the cold blue of the dog's eyes which made the girls flinch and hurry on. In the well bred accent and rich, authoritative tone of voice there was an immediate impression of considerable wealth and power. "By the way, I have to go into the office later, "There's a complex merger we've been trying to engineer for several months. Something's come up at the last minute: enough that the wheels could fall off."

The woman, noticing his interest in the girls, had nodded distractedly and then responded crossly, letting her voice rise above a whisper, "Remember you're not my fucking broker any more, you can save that bullshit for your clients." Grabbing

some fur and tugging hard she'd gone on, "You know quite as well as I do that unless you've got a healthy return within a month it was a dud and always will be. So, what do you suggest I do..."

By now, despite their initial alarm, the two girls were intrigued and, pretending to be undecided in which direction to walk, had stopped to listen to the outcome of the conversation. As the woman and the dog got further away, the dog, somehow giving the impression of exasperation, had shaken its head and then growled. Despite her obvious annoyance, the well dressed woman had smiled on hearing the sound, and moved closer to the dog, which stopped and looked up at her with its piercing eyes, "Sometimes, but if you don't include the real Blue Chips....." At this point the conversation had become inaudible to the girls and so they'd begun walking again, continuing in the opposite direction.

If they had remained the girls would at this moment have heard the woman make a sudden change in the topic of conversation and observed her look surreptitiously around, before running daintily across the paddock to a point where a depression had over time been formed by the flow of water during the wet season. Quickly lying down on its bank, dry in the height of summer, she becomes immediately invisible until almost upon her. She calls out to the dog, "Henry, do come here, darling." Her tone of voice expresses a number of unmistakable emotions. The dog, distracted by a pair of ducks with a trail of offspring drifting along behind them on the current, and then by the sparkling reflection of the sun on the water, does not at first respond. The woman repeats the request a little louder and, this time hearing her, the dog lets out another low growl, which causes her to giggle and put her hands up to cover her mouth. The dog can then be seen bounding quite effortlessly over the high grass, before leaping into the dry riverbed. She, lying back, legs slightly apart, has lifted her dress above her waist to reveal herself quite naked beneath. The dog, now erect, stands proudly over her, looking down at her with lustful eyes, before slowly surveying the landscape in all directions. Satisfied, he looks down at the woman's nakedness again, and licks his lips as she, his penis in her hand, slowly pulls at him.

An hour or so later, when it's nearly midnight and the riverside walk is otherwise completely deserted, the two girls by chance pass close by the lovers (but remain unnoticed). In the light of the full moon they have a clear view of the woman now completely naked and the dog, howling, embedded in her. The girls both let out an exclamation of apparent distaste, but one at least is in fact excited by what they've just witnessed. Ducking down so as not to be seen, they make their way around the other side of a hedge which runs along one side of the depression, and so, despite being almost on top of them, remain concealed from

the lovers. As they'd earlier agreed they begin taking video and photos of the pair's lovemaking. A little while later, legs dangling over the river bank, their feet just dipped into the icy cold water, as they review the footage they've captured Ariel casts a disapproving look over it and tells her friend, "It's like they said on TV, but they never showed any pictures. We should be able to make a lot of money out of this." Brigitte on the other hand, makes no attempt to conceal her desire to share the woman's obvious pleasure, only responding distractedly, her hand scratching at her neck, "How much do you think we'll be able to screw out of them?"

The dog, its hearing acute, overhears the girls' conversation. The next day, Brigitte and Ariel having not returned from the walk, their parents, having scoured the area, ring the police and tell them of their disappearance. No trace is ever found of them.

Six months later things have changed considerably.

One of the most fashionable streets in Sydney runs for several kilometres in a straight line at right angles from Circular Quay. It extends to the edge of the CBD, though it's only for the first kilometre from the wharfs that one finds it lined with expensive shops, and graced by the beautiful people they're intended to provide custom for. Wobbling down the middle of a pedestrian only section of the road, on this balmy, early summer afternoon, two extravagantly attired young women stand out from the rest of the Super Rich crowd. They are dressed completely differently from one another - one in a draftily short electric pink skirt, while the other has melded herself into metallic sheen hotpants. And yet there's something about their couture that lends a uniformity to it. They wear no tops, but where should have been breasts, though the twin mounds remain, the flesh of their BPODs has been replaced by a translucent membrane which reveals the internal mechanisms and wiring of their robotic bodies. The girl in the hotpants has the same effect on one leg, which would allow a close observer to see the internal movement of the artificial limb. Both wear outrageously platformed heels, nearly a foot in height. The most significant divergence in their attire is in their choice of headgear. One sports a hat in lush crimson velvet with a broad, flopping brim topped by a pink boa which arcs high over her head to trail behind her almost to the ground. The other stands beneath what can only be described as a bonsai zoo, formed by a box of a hat, within its interior cavort a variety of living creatures in miniature form. Accompanying the Hotpants Women is a Shetland sized horse dressed in a full morning suit, replete with top hat and tails, sauntering casually at

her side. Frequently, and in an annoyingly persistent manner, as they proceed along the road it rears onto its hind legs and throws one of his front legs over his lover's shoulder and plants a heavy kiss on her cheek. Less frequently the woman will be heard to screech in pain as the small horse bites her on the tenderer parts of her anatomy, before smiling and sighing with unfeigned pleasure.

The other woman (to clarify, if one had not already so surmised they are both models by profession and instinct) is accompanied by a half elephant, with its lower portion being in the likeness of a man, thus enabling it to walk constantly erect. The four are engaged in continuous, animated conversation, fully aware of the attention they draw from the people they pass by. These, who are normally accustomed to having attention trained on themselves, glance surreptitiously in their direction, with turned down mouths and surly expressions. Of course the raucous quartet, though delighted, make the pretence of ignorance of all notice. This somewhat disingenuously, considering that for the entire length of their sojourn a full media crew, with their express permission, has been hovering up their every move.

At an intersection approximately half way along the haute shopping precinct, an enclosed park has been set aside for exhibition and sport. The pairs of lovers make a bee line for this facility, immediately appearing to abandon to one another, but being careful to ensure nothing of their antics goes unrecorded. Their ostentation draws the ire of the other "boringly sapiens" beneficiaries of the park's amenities who, daringly in their view, had been quite openly copulating. However, with the arrival of the animals and their lovers, even they would not be game to deny to having been utterly eclipsed by the repertoire of antics our heroes are able to draw upon. Being used to having their desires immediately satisfied without demur, for as we have said this street is the exclusive preserve of the elite's Elite, several of the Offended waste no time in making their feelings known. "How could you fuck an animal, in broad daylight (as if the time of day could exacerbate the offence)? You're revolting." But someone, used to being in the know, rejoins, "Don't be a fool, they're not real, they're just BPODs." To which the other responds, "What's the difference if it looks like a fucking animal?" To which the Know All quips, "What's the difference? I would have thought that was obvious: you can't get a conversation out of a fucking horse. Or smoke a cigarette with it after it's done you. That's the fucking difference." Rather cryptically, which gains them some ground, the other responds, "And if you could?"

Know All harrumphs, as he's prone to when upstaged in the sphere of knowledge of a certain kind, "Well then, there's the difference isn't it?" Voice rising now that he feels on sturdier ground, "What are you fucking talking about! If

it's a fucking horse of course you can't talk to it!" But the ground is not as solid as he had imagined, the other responding with a rather elegant check mate, " Well, what does that say about the bimbo chick you're fucking that you've had nothing to say to for the last hour except, 'Turn over and spread your legs wider?'"

Sensing that the tables have by some sleight of hand been reversed, the Know All exclaims, "Exactly my point!" Upon which both depart in opposite directions, both convinced of their victory in the argument.

But there are others present in the park, and the debate continues. Though the laws of the land remain as yet unaltered with regard to allowing sexual acts between consenting species, with the ubiquity of the luxury BPOD amongst the world's beautiful and powerful, through this familiarity society has generally come to accept it. But not it would seem in all quarters. One Bastion of Social Propriety, who himself habitually travels to impoverished countries to secretly indulge in sickening sexual deviances, attempts to pull the Elephant Man off his lover. Unfortunately, at that instant Elephant has his trunk lodged a considerable distance up his lover's vagina, and so in yanking them roughly apart, the Killjoy causes the girl with the boa considerable injury - for which he quite rightly receives a sound thrashing from all and sundry. But he will not be put off. Blood pouring from several deep wounds to his body, he angrily informs them, "Fucking an animal, horse, elephant I don't give a fuck, is against the law. I'm calling the cops." Poor Plod. When one is found and, with a good degree of prodding, reluctantly agrees to attend the Weight of the Law upon the fracas, he of course is so far out of his depth he has drowned prior to even entering the sporting park. But prevailed upon with considerable financial inducement by the film crew, and with promises of undisclosed pleasures of an entirely confidential nature, he agrees to withdraw his influence from the love scene being enjoyed by the two couples. This of course leaves rather high and dry the Splutterer of Complaint. However, not willing to give in, despite Plod's heavy handed encouragement to desist, he continues from outside the park in loud voice to decry the public display of copulation Entre Species. They being joined in such elegant and inventive fashion, he in fact gains few supporters to his cause, and eventually shuffles away, comforted only by ponderings on when he might take his next overseas jaunt.

The love making of the Shetland and Elephant Man was the first record of such activity every broadcast on the public media. One night while watching a rerun of this show Brigitte's father, with an undisclosed agenda unfolding as he speaks, asks his customarily incurious wife, "If conversation WAS possible, would you have been attracted to the dog with the blue eyes we saw the woman walking with at the river the other day?" This is the same dog that only six months earlier had

ripped the throat of his daughter and her lover, devoured their flesh and organs with some relish, and then disposed of their few remains in an incinerator. And by these thorough means of removal denied the police a single clue as to the cause of Brigitte and Ariel's disappearance.

Bernadette, a little dreamily, responds without hesitation, "Of course, he was incredibly attractive, don't you think? If you have that, why there's a million species you could be attracted to enough to want to fuck them."

Pleasantly surprised but somewhat distracted by her unexpected response, her husband replies a little hesitatingly, "Yes, I suppose so. And they say it's stopped some of their worst excesses."

Bernadette continues to surprise her husband by nodding knowingly as she tells him in a confidential tone, "Yes, but not all of them. Some are just too far gone. The rich, they've had too much for too long. Boredom, when you can have anything you want, can be a dangerous thing." She nods her head emphatically, "Yes, dear, a very dangerous thing."

Though later kicking himself for the missed opportunity to satisfy a fantasy upon his wife which hitherto he'd been too wary to broach with her, the man had found himself diverted from this original intention by her original and unexpected comments. Instead he'd allowed to develop an unusually animated discussion, one which, in fact, has had far more strengthening effect on their relationship than his rather unimaginative fantasy ever could have done.

Chapter 1.03

A year earlier: 2062. The cunt Fuller must have had wet dreams when he heard about it. And of course the news is round the factory before you could pull a wad. Dale would not be the first tested, and he wouldn't be the last, but with them always gnarling at each other, yeah it was different from the other workers forced to participate in the performance measures.

Fuller comes over the speaker, "Swanson, report to HR at the end of Yellow Shift." Like usual there's not much talk during the shift itself; apart from it being frowned upon, the noise of the machines makes it hard to be heard if you're more than a few metres apart. A few of the lads do look over, smiling, wondering what's the latest shit he's got himself into. But Dale shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders, like he's got no more idea about it than anyone else.

What I don't see for myself I hear from Dale later down the pub. HR's office is on a mezz floor with big glass floor to ceiling panels on all four sides, so of course them up there are all known as the Gold Fish. So at the end of his shift, as Dale attitudes it over to The Bowl everyone's locked on to see what's gonna happen. Along with the Gold Fish there's Fuller, all smiles and joking with the shift HR manager. But as soon as Dale appears at the door (fuck, it's at times like these you remember what a cunt he is) Fuller's expression changes to like the Cat that got the fucking milk. He bides his time allright, patient like, let's HR crap on to Dale with the legals, leaning back on one of the desks, still smiling like a cunt. HR says something and Dale turns to him and says, "What is it then, Fuller?" pointing at HR like he's on another language, "I don't understand a fucking word of what he just said," but Fuller still keeps the smart arse expression and says nothing. Dale's voice sounds loud in the office, in fact all over he feels out of place. When Dale, angry and wary now, asks again, Fuller looks at him for a bit more without replying, then comes on strong like he's rehearsed it (and you can be 100% fucking sure he has), "Efficiency, Swanson, that's what this is about, making things smarter, faster, better." He lets the words sink in. Or maybe he was expecting Dale to bite at that, with enough rope laid out to maybe hang his self. Dale, still clueless, looks blank and says nothing. Exasperated, Fuller explains, "Like some of the other jobs around here, management think the newest generation of robots can handle them. One of your jobs is janitor, right?" As if the cunt didn't know. At this Dale suddenly gets it, and looks very pissed. Instinct tells him he's being set up.

Now, Janitor might be one of the lowest jobs there is on paper but it has its perks, so there isn't a shortage of lads that weren't envious of Dale when he managed to snaffle it. You get to roam around and about the factory for a start, instead of being stuck in the same five square metres all day every day. Outside even.

"Finders fucking keepers mate!" Dale tells the truckie who arrives just at the moment Dale has pulled out a computer from the dumpster. "The daughter can use it for her studies," which they both know is bullshit: it would end up as beer money, same as all the scraps Dale trades. Beer to piss away, that's all some of them are good for. Already half way to being a Consumer they are, and Dale is one of those. But he doesn't see it, "Consumers! Fucking dregs of society, good for nothings. Why don't they get a job? Or start a fucking business, there's always plenty of franchises advertised." Yeah, Dale as the next fucking Buzz Kid Entrepreneur. What a fucking joke.

Just then one of the Binny's mates comes over, and on the back of that he tries again to make a grab for the computer off Dale. Never one to step back from a fight he pushes the fella hard, so's he slams into the Offsider then cannons off him like a snooker ball. Neither of them are anywhere near Dale's size, and the mate never looked that interested in a scrap, and Dale immediately senses this. First carefully putting the computer behind him, Dale squares up to them and, breathing hard, he steams, "Come on, I can take the pair of you cunts on single handed." They don't move, just stare at him, the Offsider already starting to look unsure of himself. Dale keeps going, "And there's another three in there with my fucking name on it, so back the fuck off." Another of them by the truck glances over, but then quickly turns away and makes himself busy. Dale's all smiles now, thinking it's all over, but the smaller of the two Binnies suddenly gets a surge of spunk: turning as if to walk away he suddenly spins round and lets fly with a kick that catches Dale on the knee. He grunts and staggers a bit, but then he's coming on, ready to all out. It might have been a good one, it has the signs of it, but just then Fuller's voice rings out, "Swanson, what the fuck are you doing out here? Jantor is cleaning up Sector A, you're supposed to be on B... Don't fucking tell me that, you've got the schedule, just fucking work to it. Even you should be able to do that, dipshit." Fuller's walking over as he's talking, staring at the truckies as he passes them. The Binny, who'd started to move off, hesitates, thinking there might still be something to get out of the situation. Meanwhile Dale, ignoring everyone, goes over to the dumpster and pulls out the rest of the computers, puts them under his arm and then strolls casually back towards the factory.

Fuller, only metres from him now, stands in his way. Looking him up and down with an expression of contempt, he barks, "Where's your scheduler, Swanson?" Dale grunts something inaudible. "What's that?" Fuller shouts in his face. Dale, blood up already, goes red in the face and his arms go rigid. "In my fucking locker!" he shouts back. Fuller explodes, "What the fuck's it doing there?" Emphasising every word, he goes on, "HR told you, I told you: you're supposed to be following a schedule so we can compare your productivity against Jantor. How fucking hard is that?" Staring at him with such a look that, despite himself, Fuller takes a step back, Dale doesn't respond. Then, shoulders slumped and muttering to himself, he storms off.

For the next week, when not working on the assembly line, Dale's normally free ranging janitorial job has been broken down into a programme of tasks to be performed at times specified down to the minute. At the meeting HR had handed him a Time Manager, and informed him, "This will tell you what to do, and when to do it." The HR officer had then smiled oilily at Dale, "Don't worry Swanson, it's not a competition, you're just doing what you normally do." But checking the Scheduler Dale had soon realised that unless he's able to somehow make up time he won't be able to take advantage of the perks of the job, the ones that make it worthwhile, like emptying the recycle bins, the down time, being able to wander around, chatting with the lads on different sections of the production line. Though there's nothing particularly special about it, Dale likes it that he also has access to the storage bay, a secure area where the completed BPODs are stored before being shipped. With the younger lads he'll joke, "Every fucking BPOD has been tested by me boys." Simulating fucking he jeers, "Tested to fucking breaking." Now, I doubt he's allowed near them, but you never know with Dale. He can twist some people and he's brazen. He doesn't give a shit about rank, which is what got him offside with the officers. So, who knows, maybe he fucking does!

With Fuller's words still ringing in his ears, the next morning Dale makes his way to the locker room without clocking in. Two hours before the shift is due to start, he's half out on his feet from only a few hours interrupted sleep, but on a rush of nervous energy that's replaced the dead weight feeling he'd experienced the night before at home. Slamming doors wherever he goes, a few minutes later Dale's in the janitor's storage room, like a bear in a china shop, throwing containers off shelves and kicking them aside. Occasionally he'll select one and throw it, along with a few maintenance tools, into a trolley outside the door. "Where the fuck is everything!" He yells to no one in particular, "Everything's been fucking moved, I can't find a fucking thing, nothing's where it should be."

Just then a voice behind him, in a flat monotone with a Chinese accent, says, "I've reorganized the materials and equipment, buddy. Put them back in their default locations. You'll be able to find everything faster now, and you could go to another factory and find everything in the exact same place. All the cleaning material.... Oh!" Jantor breaks off as Dale swivels round. Pointing at the shelf Dale has just swept on to the floor, he says, "I'll have to put all that back before I start cleaning." Hearing this a smile spreads across Dale's face, and he responds, "Everything was in its place before cunt. And I'm not your fucking buddy, mate. And another thing, I don't give a fuck if it is the same, I'm not going to work at another Gargon factory, see!" Pointing to the now empty shelf Dale demands, "Where's the fucking hose testing kit? It should be there." Jantor slowly shakes his head and then smiles and points to a rack of bucket shelves at the back of the storage room, "No buddy, its default is over there with the other testing gear. Let me get it for you, buddy."

Dale throws an arm out, blocking the robot's way, and yells, "Don't fucking move, cunt. And stop fucking shifting things around." Going to the bucket rack he quickly finds the equipment he's looking for and throws it onto the trolley. Kicking containers to left and right, so that by the time he reaches the door the place looks like it's been done over in a drug raid, when he reaches Jantor, who's standing in the doorway staring at the mess and shaking his head and tut tutting, Dale shoves past him, pushing him so hard the robot stumbles and falls over. On seeing this instinctively Dale spins around so he's standing over the machine, and raises a boot. Jantor's been given a humanoid form, with head, torso, legs and a face, but its arms can take many different forms, depending on the task it's performing. On this occasion it looks particularly human as it has on its hands attachments. Filled with an uncontrollable rage Dale starts kicking Jantor, holding nothing back. The robot makes no attempt to defend itself, only keeps trying to get to its feet, but every time falls over as a heavy boot slams into it. This goes on for perhaps thirty seconds, and Dale, though breathing hard now, isn't letting up. But then, in a blur of movement, Jantor's arm shoots out and grabs Dale by the ankle and slams his foot hard onto the ground and holds it down. Losing his balance Dale, crying out as his leg twists awkwardly, knocks a stack of boxes over and some break open and spill their contents over the floor. Immediately Jantor releases Dale, jumps to his feet and tries to help him up. Dale shrugs him off and, still enraged, is about to go at the machine again. But instead he checks himself and, still breathing hard, yells at it, "Clean the fucking mess up, cunt, and don't start any other job until you've put everything back in place." He smirks, "That should keep you busy for a bit.... buddy." Jantor smiles and dusts itself down and

then, in the same flat monotone with the faint Chinese accent, says, “No problem, buddy, see you out there shortly.”

For two days Dale works like a lunatic, rushing through each of his tasks, then at the end slowing down so he finishes only just ahead of the machine. The place has never been so spotless, and the machine maintenance and his other tasks never done so thoroughly: all the day’s tasks are completed so that no one could fault him. Dale’s feeling pleased with himself - *Beating the machine wasn’t so hard after all*, he thinks to himself – but then, on a break on the third day, in the toilet he finds Jantor there, testing the plumbing. He yells at him, “What the fuck are you doing here? That’s not your fucking job.” Jantor, as always, just smiles back politely and responds in his flat voice, so blank of emotion it makes Dale feel like he’s over reacting, so as he’ll think to himself, *Fuck what? I’m coming on like a fucking girl!*

The robot responds, “I don’t need a break buddy, so they gave me extra tasks to do in your down time.”

On hearing this Dale storms over to Fuller’s office, who he finds with his feet on the desk idly flicking through a handful of papers. Dale shouts at Fuller, “I wanna know how I’m going against the robot.” Fuller says nothing, just smiles condescendingly and waves some of the papers in the air and says, “Funny thing mate, I was just reading the report. It’s all here. Not bad now, after the first few days were a fucking shambles. You showed us right up then mate.” Smiles knowingly, and in an almost friendly tone says “Yeah keep it up mate, you’re doing alright.” Dale grimaces, “What about the extra duties it has in my down time. How does that stack it?” Fuller leafs through a few pages and then, following the words with his fingers, reads out, “Well, with the regular jobs you’re just ahead.” Looking up and staring at Dale he continues, “But with the extra duties that puts Jantor 15% up on you mate.” Dale says nothing and then, face blank, he turns around and walks stiffly out of the office. At the door he takes a hold of it and slams it behind him so hard that the one of the panes of glass shatters. Fuller yells, “That’ll come out of your wages, mate.”

The next day is the same, except this time Dale makes sure he finishes each task well ahead of the robot. By now everyone’s noticed Dale’s efforts to keep up with Jantor, and a few have started taking the piss. At the end of the second shift, when the boys are changing, one of them calls out, “Dale, mate, you got no chance. Give it up mate, you can’t beat a fucking machine. Better watch out mate - next he’ll be taking over fucking the missus. Cunt can probably keep it up for twelve hours, and happy to lick her out for as long as she wants it.” Any other time Dale would have bitten, and for a second it looks like he will, but then he checks

himself, pulls out the scheduler, grimaces, then snarls and storms out. Everyone looks after him, and a few, looking concerned, shake their heads. A few minutes later Dale comes back in. Looking terrible, having worked like a dog and, without clocking in, worked an additional half shift, Dale is almost out on his feet. Ronnie comes up to him and puts an arm on his shoulder. He shrugs it off and spins round, but when he sees who it is his head drops. Ronnie says, "Mate, there's a few of the lads going to the club tonight, you should join us mate." Dale shakes his head and is about to say something, but Ronnie gives his shoulder a hard squeeze, "Mate, we'll see you there, alright?" Dale nods but says nothing, then closes his locker and leaves without acknowledging anyone.

A few hours later when Dale gets to the club he finds a group of around ten of the boys standing around two bar tables. He looks around for Ronnie but someone tells him he got called away, something at home. Immediately Dale flares up, nearly knocking one of the drinks tables over, "What the fuck, why didn't he fucking call me, he said he'd be here. If I'd known I wouldn't have fucking bothered!" Morose and silent he ignores the others at first, but then the drinks, shorts which he's been knocking back in fast order, start to kick in and he gets belligerent and starts mouthing off, "Fucking hate that fucking machine. How can you compete with that fucking thing." Someone tries to calm him down, telling him to forget about trying to compete with it, but he waves them aside angrily, "What, give in without a fucking fight? Don't you worry mate I've got the schedule worked out, I can keep ahead of the cunt. But that thing can keep at it 24/7, that's the fucking difference between them and us mate. Turning to the person standing the other side of him, he prods him in the chest and, looking deadly serious, says, "I tell you, mate, that thing never fucking stops. They've got it doing shit I've never had to do, and it goes over cleaning jobs I dunno how many more times than I do." Looking over everyone's heads, his voice raised but talking more to himself than anyone in particular, he says, "The fucking thing decides for itself when it's gonna do the job. Fuck knows how it works it out: depending on production rate, the fucking weather, some shit like that Fuller said." Dale's eyes suddenly come into focus. Face red and looking as though he going to burst with the frustration of this futile competition Fuller's managed to egg him into, he says to those still listening, "You've fucking seen it, hey? Worming its way around, clearing, fixing shit up. And when there's a spill the fucking thing has cleaned it up before I even get to hear of it. Connected directly to the machine and CCTV. It fucking knows before I do, how the fuck can I compete with that?"

A few of the lads laugh, at the picture of Dale running around trying to keep up with the robot cleaner, but a few others look concerned and one of the older

workers says reflectively, "Well, mate, what else can you do? It's either you or it, and they'll go for whoever's fastest and best at the job. That's all they give a shit about. They don't get it that at some point you have to say that efficiency shouldn't be the goal any more." A few of the lads open their mouths to say something, but then a look of confusion comes to their faces, and instead they pick up their drinks and take long pulls at them.

Dale, already on edge, is quick to find any excuse for argument. Interrupted, and not liking having the limelight taken, he responds jeeringly, "What are you going on about, Socrates? This is my job, your job, our fucking jobs, we're talking about. Not one of your fucking philosophies."

Dale stares belligerently at the old man, who just pulls meditatively on his beard and a few times glances at Dale with a look of concern. Then, non committal, not wanting to argue, Socrates says, "I get it brother, it's a factory, it's got to be as efficient as the next one, but that machine will never be able to do what I do." The old fella, known as Socrates for his philosophical approach to life, and his occasional homilies which go straight to the heart of a matter and find immediate resolution to something the men have been arguing about for hours or days even, goes on. "I'm not specifically talking about your job, mate. But think about it," His voice is slow and quiet, and one by one, as he goes on, the men become silent, drawing a little closer around him and listening more attentively. "I have a mate who used to mow lawns for a living. He loved the job. He didn't care about the money, it wasn't much but it was enough." Often when speaking he'll be drawn off on a tangent. Wagging a finger, he says, "It's a true thing, brothers, it's not how much money you *make*, it's how much you *need*. Don't let anyone tell you any different." Looking around and then smiling at some recollection, he says, "As I was saying, he liked being out in the sun, using his body, working the different properties, meeting the folks there. Then the robot mowers came along, that cost next to nothing and could work 24/7." He nods at Dale, and then carefully draws the connections so Dale can follow his arguments. "Parks itself and recharges, decides when to go out according to the time of year, what the weather's been like for the last week, and this other shit my mate knew nothing about." His voice drops a little, "Electric so it's silent: a fucking ghost, it works night and day, so of course there's no way he can compete with that." Socrates spreads his arms out, "So what is he now? A fucking Consumer, same as all the other landscapers. Sits at home, gone to fat in less than a couple of months. Nothing to do, or at least nothing worthwhile."

Dale jumps in, "What do you mean? Fucking lazy cunts, sitting at home or down the club all day downing pints. On my fucking taxes!" Dale looks around

looking for support, and a good few of the men nod sharply in agreement. "Get out and find a fucking job I say, they're still out there. So what if it's a shit job, that's how it is. Fucking whingeing fucking scroungers." Socrates shakes his head, "On the money they get, all they can do is pay the bills and for the basics mate. Don't believe the government propaganda mate." Socrates waves his arm around, "Look, you don't see them down here, do you mate? No, the telly, filling their heads with shit, that's all they've got." Widening his attention to include the others, keeping his voice low, he says, "I'll introduce you to another mate of mine, Jed Simpson is his name. He'll tell you how things are really going, and what we can do about it. Anyway," Socrates suddenly stops and, getting to his feet slowly, he gives a nod which takes in everyone and says, his voice fatherly, "I'd better be getting along boys, I've got some teaching to do."

Dale waits until Socrates is out of earshot, then scoffs, "What's the point of fucking learning? Once we lose our jobs, which is only a matter of time, right? Then we'll be fucking Consumers too. Minimum wage, who can live a life on that?" One of the lads goes to interrupt, but Dale holds up his hand, "I know what you're gonna say. That's different. They're fucking scroungers that don't have a fucking right to air. They've never worked a day so why should they get a handout from our taxes?" In a sudden, intense rage that comes out of nowhere, face red and snarling, Dale shouts, "Get out and get a fucking job! At least start out on your own if there's no work to be had. What kind of fucking man lives on fucking handouts? While we're working our arses off. We might wanna go down the pub every day and get pissed, but we can't! We got responsibilities. Even if it is a shit job, no better than a fucking robot yourself, you don't have a choice. Am I fucking right boys?"

Dale looks around, chin stuck out, half expecting a put down. But most of the men nod in agreement and give him a friendly smile. Normally regarded as something of a joke, there's a lot of sympathy for Dale at present. Most of them sense that in his shoes they'd have probably reacted in a similar way; maybe not to the extent Dale has, taking it so personally and getting so emotional. What's the point? Most of them can see the writing on the wall and already have resigned themselves to what seems impossible to prevent from happening. "Somehow it's a comfort it's hitting everyone in the same way," one of them tells his wife when recounting the evening's discussion with her later. "I know that doesn't make sense, love, but that's the feeling, I can't explain it."

The woman shakes her head, a look of intense sadness and confusion on her face. "Nothing makes any sense any more, love. I worry for our daughter, what the future holds for her. Everyone talks about how terrible it's going to be, and the

way the media report it, and movies, everywhere it's the same. Why does it have to be that way, inevitable like that? Technology should work for us, not against us."

"For the good of some," the man points out. She nods, a sudden forcefulness coming into her voice, "You're right there. But it should be for all of us, there's plenty enough for all of us," she says insistently. He chuckles ruefully, and then, looking resigned, says, "There's been enough for a very long time, but that's not the way they want it." But then suddenly his voice too becomes urgent and full of feeling, "We need someone sharp to lead us, someone like Socrates. Fuck it, I'd take them on, we've got nothing to lose, love."

The woman smiles at her husband, love and concern in her eyes, "Yes, but be careful, love, it never seems to come our way. Even if we do win a few battles, they always seem to win the war."

Back at the club earlier, one of the lads asks Dale, "So how will it be different, mate?" Young, a lot smarter than Dale, in the past he might have got a job that tested him, but now there's only low level blue collar jobs going, once that as yet can't be automated. He stares at Dale, challenging him, smiling a little, with an expression of condescension.

By now many of the men have drifted off, home, or looking for different company, leaving only four of them standing around a high circular table covered in empty glasses. Each of them holds a beer in their hand. Dale leans across the table and stabs the smaller man in the chest with his finger. "Smart arse, hey!" Looks at the others, "Think he's got the answers, does he?" Staring at him again, "Mate, you're in the same shit as the rest of us, don't matter how smart you are."

The boy nods slowly then, refusing to back down, responds sarcastically, "First thing you said I agree with mate. That's how it will be. Not long now I'd say, though they've been saying it for so long that no one's listening any more. Yeah, not long and all our jobs will be gone. The driving jobs, it will be like that mate, but way worse. Forget about unemployment rates, all of a sudden it's gonna be the majority of us out of work and Consumers. And no chance of a fucking job anywhere, any kind. Start on your own? Mate that's bullshit! That's a fucking smokescreen. Most people can't do it, but it means they can put the blame on you for not having a job. Your fault. Got what you deserved. You're only good enough to be a Consumer, so why should you get anything more than survival money? While the Fat Cats are making the biggest profits ever, because a robot is always gonna be able to do our job better than us, and for less..."

Dale, face red and eyes now bulging, slams down his glass on the table top and shouts, "The fuck it will." A few of the glasses fall off the table and shatter noisily

on the floor, but already heads had swiveled round and the hum of conversation ceased. Expecting a fight, when they see it's only Dale a few look disappointed, while a few others laugh. With his reputation for being a clown, they assume it's nothing serious and attention almost immediately turns back to their conversation. One of the lads in the group points to Dale's hand: in his anger he'd crushed the beer glass and a shard of glass has pierced right through. For a few seconds he just stares, as if it were someone else's hand, but then he looks alarmed: at the sight of the blood mixed with spilt beer, making it look like there's more than there really is. Pulling the shard out, at the same time looking slowly around at the other men, he whispers, his voice full of menace, "Fucking robot's not gonna fucking beat me." Then, head up and shoulders thrown back, he storms out of the club without looking back.

After walking at a brisk pace a few hundred metres along the built up streets around the club Dale, not caring if there's anyone around to see him, suddenly throws himself against a wall and bursts into tears, cursing and slamming his fists into the concrete until the skin on his knuckles is a mash of blood. Gulping back tears he shouts drunkenly, "A fucking Consumer, the scum of the fucking earth, that's what I'm gonna be, a fucking scrounger taking money off of other people." Laughing hysterically he shouts, "At least I'll be able to go on the piss whenever I want. All the time in the world I'll have. For what? For fucking what?" The question echoes back at him. "That's not a life for a man." Looking up into the dark sky he yells, "What the fuck am I gonna do?" Thinking he heard something he looks around in the direction of where he thought it came from, but there's nothing there. Jerkily he looks up at the uniform rows of high rise blocks that line the streets in every direction. The road he's in seems suddenly narrow and confining, and he has a sudden sense of being crowded in, by these buildings but also by something less tangible. It makes him want to run, but like the streets, it would be the same anywhere he thinks to himself, *That's the fucking thing, there's nowhere to run anymore. No escape now, they've got it so as it's the fucking same the world over.*

But then something takes a hold of him and, lurching unsteadily, he begins running. But after covering only a short distance he staggers and leans up against a wall, struggling to breath. Again he thinks, "What's the point, it's all the fucking same." A sudden insight, a series of stark images of what the future will be like, burst in his mind. They're things he's never thought of before, nothing remotely like it. He cries out. Though the images and the feeling of profound realization that went with them have now gone, the accompanying feeling of dread, a heavy, heavy weight, remains. It's so real that he feels his legs start to ache, then begin to

shake and buckle. He reels along the sidewalk barely able to hold himself upright, appearing so drunk that passers by stare at him or cross the street. A couple of friends go by, and one slaps him on the back and says, "Too many tonight, hey Dale mate? You got an early mark mate if you wanna get ahead of that fucking robot," he jokes, "It's all on you mate." The pair laugh and carry on their way as Dale, unable to speak, his mind drowning in a rush of thoughts and emotions, stumbles homeward.

The next morning, despite a pounding headache and still finding it sometimes hard to breathe, Dale comes in just the same, two hours before the shift is due to start, and gets straight into his chores. By mid morning he's a good half an hour ahead of time, which allows him to go around looking for recycling material. Fuller, somewhat reluctantly, had agreed that since Jantor could make no use of it, Dale could keep material from both sectors of the factory. So, looking like the worst kind of Bad Santa, he goes roaming over the factory with several black plastic sacks thrown over his shoulder, hunting for glass and plastic bottles the workers might have left lying around. On a good day, and this is one of them, with plastic at such a premium these days, he's able to make up the equivalent of two or three hours of his wages.

For both Dale and Jantor, the second half of their shift has been assigned to maintenance tasks. Pleased with the amount of recycling he's collected, and having managed to finish ahead of the robot again, Dale's in a good mood, smiling and cracking jokes with the other workers as he makes his way over to the first machine. Just then an alarm goes off, indicating a pneumatic hose has broken on one of the machines on the production line, which means it immediately shuts down. This is a major headache. While assembly can continue - the line has several replicated runs and multi functioned machines - it will mean production is slowed until the hose has been replaced and checked. And the mess cleaned up from it pissing out oil for as long as it took before the machine was shut down. For the workers it means they'll have to do an extended shift, until the required quota has been achieved. In fact it's something that rarely happens and if the daily testing of the hoses is carried out correctly, really should never happen.

Muted cheers go up when it's learned that the fail took place in sector A, which become even louder when Fuller orders Dale, who'd been sauntering over to the start of the production line in Sector B, "What the fuck are you doing Swanson? Fix up the broken hose in A first, for fuck's sake." A pause then, seeming embarrassed, he adds angrily, "And test the whole run." Dale turns round and yells across to Fuller, "Why the fuck should I? The fucking robot fucked up, why should I

have to clear up his fucking mess? If it was another worker they'd have to, why should the robot get preferential treatment?"

Fuller, striding towards him, face a mask of rage, yells back, "I said, fix the fucking machine. The robot will clean up the oil spill." Just then ribald laughter can be heard coming from the direction of the broken machine. Someone yells out, "You better come and see this Fuller." With Dale close behind him, when Fuller reaches the oil spill there's a crowd formed around Jantor, and they're all falling about laughing, clutching their sides and punching their mates in the shoulder. The robot, like in a slapstick comedy, whenever it tries to clean the floor keeps slipping and falling over, and then scrabbles around for a minute before it can regain its feet. Fuller goes bright red in the face but seems unable to come up with a solution. He yells at the workers, "What the fuck are you doing? Get back to your stations." But someone reminds him that, with the slowed production, they're not needed for a while yet, and so he's forced to stand there as Dale and the others piss themselves laughing as Jantor struggles to clean up the oil spill. It's good for the lads, you can feel the tension of the last few weeks lifting a bit. Eventually, taking three times as long as Dale or one of the other workers would have taken, Jantor completes the task. As soon as it's finished Fuller, still red in the face with embarrassment, barks an order to Jantor, "Fix up the machine, and be fucking quick about it." Immediately Jantor answers, "Yes boss, and what do you want me to do after that?" Fuller explodes, "What do you fucking think? Back onto the fucking schedule of course." In the now familiar monotonous tone, Jantor explains, "After a change in orders I'm required to check, boss. Thank you boss, I'll get straight to it."

Dale, looking serious, interrupts, "Wait a minute, mate, we're responsible for the hoses on all the machines; I'd better check on the rest of them after I've fixed up this one." Looking pointedly at Jantor he says, "We can't afford another breakdown." Fuller's about to remonstrate, but Dale cuts him off, "It's not my fault the fucking machine can't even wipe up a fucking oil spill." Drowned out by the men's laughter, Fuller beats a retreat to his office where he can be seen screaming into the phone, punching the air to emphasise his point. As Dale replaces the broken hose a pair of worried looking technicians arrive, with Fuller, still fuming, in tow. The Techies quickly depart, taking Jantor with them, and head over to the BPOD testing bay. Left behind, looking unsure what to do with himself, Dale says to Fuller, "What's the problem there, mate? Why didn't the robot pick up the fault?"

Fuller snaps, "Why do you think they're here, Swanson? For a fucking holiday? Probably needs recalibration that's all. It won't happen again once they give it the

once over.” He smiles then, an unpleasant knowing look spreading across his face. “These robots can pick up a fault more accurately than any human.” Dale laughs, pointing at the departing Jantor and shrugging his shoulders, “Yeah, fucking looks like it mate.” He points a finger at Fuller and says, serious again, “You know mate, there’s some things maybe humans are better at. You ever thought of that mate?”

Fuller huffs, “Bullshit, you know as well as everyone else it’s only a matter of time before you’re all out of a fucking job. Writing’s been on the fucking walls for years, I’m surprised it’s taken this long.” He smiles again, a bitter thinning of the lips, and then rubs his hands together. In a cheerful voice he says, “But not much longer mate, then this place will be fully automated – Lights Out.” Fuller looks happy about this, a self satisfied smile spreads, as if he’s been personally responsible for achieving the transformation.

Dale shakes his head and asks, quizzically, “But don’t you get it Fuller, that’ll put you out of a fucking job too? Fucking dick.” Fuller shakes his head, looking smug, “I’m good mate, you can’t replace management.” He taps the side of his nose, “I’ve had assurances mate.” For months now he’s been saying the same thing to anyone that questions his job security, so that it’s become a kind of mantra. So much so that it’s become a standing joke among them men on social media. Someone will start it off, “*Fuller’s had assurances he’s got the biggest dick in the factory.... And the smallest fucking brainHung like a fucking horseYeah, a fucking Sea Horse.*” Dale stares at Fuller with a look of exaggerated disbelief, “Mate, there might be some managers they can’t replace, but there’s nothing you do that a robot on a fucking day off couldn’t do.” Looking at Fuller almost pityingly, he says, “Don’t you fucking get it mate?”

Fuller’s expression suddenly changes, snarling with lips pulled back and teeth exposed, “You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about Swanson.” Pointing at the broken machine, he yells, “Just finish up checking the other hoses and then get back on with the rest of your work.” Fuller then turns and marches towards his office, over his shoulder shouting, “You’re not paid to think Swanson, so don’t fucking try.” Dale keeps laughing right up until Fuller slams his office door behind him. Fifteen minutes later, having completed the repair and tested all the pneumatics, he gives the thumbs up to the Production Manager, the quietly spoken Howard Minkun, that to a man the men look up to. He looks relieved and smiles at Dale before firing up the machine. Dale, an hour later, though still dog tired, with permanent black panda rings around his eyes, walks with a lighter step over to sector B, having completed the testing of all the other machines on the production line in A. After making a point of informing the Production Manager about a problem with another machine (“It was allright mate, in tolerance, but

fuck it, what was the point, so I changed it), and Minkun had nodded approvingly, Dale repeats the process along the other production line. Of course the news of the accident, and the problems with Jantor, goes round fast, even across to the other shifts. Before long Dale is being hailed as some kind of hero but surprisingly, when the lads want to shout him beers for the night, he tells them, his expression empty, "Sorry boys, I've got things to do at home with the missus. Maybe another night, hey."

I'd have thought no more of it, the poor cunt looked like he needed a month of sleeps, but then I get a call from Ellen, crying and asking me what to do. "He's been drinking all night, so much he's pissed and shit himself. He's lying passed out on the living room floor where he fell off the sofa. Naomi and have tried but we can't shift him." I tell her, "Just leave him there then. He won't come to no harm, and he can clean himself up in the morning. He'll be alright if he's late tomorrow." Laughing I ask her, "You heard what happened?"

Ellen says, "No, he didn't say anything. But it's been hard to get anything out of him since the robot study started, and today he was worse. In a shit mood, everything I did was wrong, and he was straight on the cans. But there's more, he keeps thrashing around, shouting and crying. Can you come over and wake him up and talk to him?" What could I do? It could just as easily have been me or any of the lads. If I hadn't been smart enough to keep my mouth shut unless I had to stand up to something. "Alright love, I'll be over." She thanks me, still crying, like she doesn't know what to do with the situation. I don't tell her none of us know the fuck what to do, this is new territory for all of us. An end of the road it feels like to me. Think about it: where is there for us, any of us, after this?

When I get there Dale's asleep but yelling all kinds of shit; all the things he's afraid of coming from automation taking over. Not so much different to what I'm thinking, but that's the difference between us, with him there's not much thinking going on, just a lot of pointless yap. "They're coming to get me," waving his arms around like he's trying to fend off a swarm of bees. And crying, blubbering like a kid, "Ronnie mate, I'm trying, but the cunt never fucking stops.... All of us a fucking Consumer.... All my fault! All my fault!" To be honest, I got more sympathy for the other lads in the study, them that are doing the specialist jobs on the assembly line that the latest robots can now outdo them on. No idea why they're testing Dale's job, for fuck's sake. Anyway, I drag him to the shower and run it cold. Clean him up a bit as he's coming to. I'm about to leave him when he looks sheepish at me, but says nothing. I tell him, "Don't forget mate, you're not on your own. And there's nothing you or anyone can do to stop what's gonna happen. We got nothing to fight back with. Not yet at least."

Dale gives me a look I can't read then nods and smiles, "Thanks mate, but don't worry about me, I know what I'm doing." Fuck sake, he's the last one that knows. From that look, it crosses my mind what he's got planned. Then something goes off in the back of my mind, reminds me of something he said this morning when I told him much the same as what I just told him now. I want to remember, it seems important, but the harder I try the further away it gets, so I give it up. I leave him in the shower, still cleaning the shit off himself, while Ellen sees me to the door. Leaning against it, she looks quickly over her shoulder. I tell her, "He'll be in there a while, love." At that she grabs my arms and pulls me to her and kisses me hard on the lips, her breath coming hard and fast. We stay like that until the shower turns off, and then I leave.

Over the rest of the week Dale manages to keep up with the robot but it kills him to do it. He gets the lads to make it hard for Jantor, knocking over bins and stupid shit. To them it's just a laugh, but Dale looks dead serious and there's real hatred in his eyes whenever he sees the robot. Thank fuck the lads refuse to do it when he wants them to drop a roll of aluminum on the fucking thing. The cunt must be losing his fucking mind to think he could get away with that, and when I tell him he yells at me, eyes bulging and waving his arms around, "What the fuck is it to you?" like I'm the fucking enemy. "You got the fall back. I can't go back to that, this is all I've got, for fucking all of us."

He looks mad as a cut snake, desperate like, so I decide to say nothing til he calms down. Alone in the locker room later I take him by the arm, shake him a bit, try to make him see, and tell him, "Mate, that's what they fucking want, don't fall for that one. We're all in this together, and it's not the end of the fucking road by any means. Talk to Ronnie, mate, he's got some ideas." I didn't believe what I was saying, but I had to make him see some kind of future, and Ronnie, well he was talking and making some sense, even if I didn't agree with everything he was saying. I finish up with, "Don't do anything fucking stupid mate. Get your redundancy and get the fuck out with a nice bank balance. With that you've got options. Skint, and you're fucked brother. A scrounging fucking Consumer for the rest of your life." Was it him that fucked the pneumatic hose? I don't know, I didn't bother asking, but he's stupid and desperate enough to have tried some bullshit like that. But when some of the labels on the cleaning materials get mixed up so the robot pours corrosive into itself instead of cleaner, then I'm fucking sure. Though of course no one could prove anything. The fucking thing starts to melt, alarms going off, flashing light. The fucker had the sense to put a water hose on itself though; fucking smart, you had to give it to him. But it was too fucked to be repaired so they just chucked it out. Dale looked pleased as a pig in shit, and was

still smiling when the new one arrived. Identical of course, but I never see the same look he used to give the first one when he passes by the newbie.

But of course it doesn't matter shit. At the end of the week Fuller pulls Dale into his office: the poor cunt can barely keep his eyes open and as Fuller yaps on he's to prop himself up against the wall to stay upright. He just staring blankly, like nothing is registering, as Fuller yells at him, "Well Swanson, you fucked it up good and proper for everyone, didn't you? Just as we fucking expected." Cunt. After a minute's silence, the two just staring at other, Dale, looking dazed, asks him what he means. "What do you mean, what do you fucking think?" Fuller yells back, "You got the easiest job in the fucking factory, that anyone would want, but you can't get off your arse enough to want to do it quicker than the robot. Even when you have got the lads to fucking sabotage it." Fuller squares himself up, expecting some kind of fight from Dale, but the boy's got nothing left in him: head hanging down, shoulders slumped, a picture of defeat. Fuller looks at him for a bit then smiles, "I'll let the lads know."

Dale looks up, "Know what?" Fuller's smile widens, "Scrap heap mate, all of you. None of you managed to beat any of the robots, or even come fucking close. And they can go 24/7: how you ever gonna compete with that, hey boy? Of course there was only ever going to be one outcome, we just needed the data to prove it. And you didn't let us down, cunt, did you?" He looks at Dale, weighing him up like, then, his voice condescending, flicks his chin at the door, before turning away, "Go on, get the fuck out of here."

Chapter 1.04

The Year 2063: Down at the club there's a group of about a dozen of us around a few tables. Grub's done, and we're back on the beers. A few of the lads are still going on about strike action. And they're none too happy with Fuller, who's still advising against it – then again that's his job, isn't it? "The cunt's the bosses' lackey, what do you expect him to fucking say? We've a right to a job, it's not our fault this fucking automation is taking over. They need to find other jobs for us. Got us where they want us if they don't: fighting over the scraps, worker against worker, and slave fucking rates. Fuck that. We gotta stick together like never before. Strike, that's what I say. Anyway, what's the alternative if we don't? Roll over and let them fuck us? What do you say?" These cunts are stuck in a time warp, from fucking centuries ago. The kind of bullshit that used to be tolerated, it passed the time, but it's past a fucking joke. But it still struck a real chord with some of the lads, firing them up for a fight: gives them all the excuse they need to fucking start one.

I'm waiting for Ronnie to say something. It's never easy to predict which way he'll go and he's kept things pretty close about the redundancies, so I don't know what he thinks we should do. He never says too much and you gotta wait until he's good and ready. "Slade, Foxton, shut your fucking mouths. Who gives a shit about the fucking job? Why would I want it back? We're going to get paid, not as much as it was before I grant you, but what do you expect when you're not working for it? And with the redundancy payout, if I ever do ever feel like it I'll start a business with a few of my mates. Fuck, I'll be able to retire in twenty years. Why would you want to strike for what we had before? Work our arses off for what? Fucking idiot if you do. Stick together, you're right there mate. But if you want a fight, do it for more money, not for more fucking work. That's a dead fucking end anyway: it's gone mate, and it ain't never coming back. Ever. Get the fuck used to it."

You could have heard a pin drop. Heads swivel. Ugly faces, angry, ready to shut him up. Even Ronnie's mates are looking at him slack jaws. Someone pipes up; I can't see who it is. "Ronnie, mate, what the fuck are you talking about. Mate, we've worked hard for this company and they're treating us like shit."

Shane, one of Ronnie's best mates, stands up. Tall fucker, but sometimes you forget, since he's built like a brick shithouse. "How the fuck is paying us exactly what we were paid before for the first twelve months - and not having to work another fucking day to earn it, plus all the rest they're promising - treating us like shit? Tell me that, mate." It's hard to argue with that, and it's the fucking truth.

We get the same wages for a year plus a big payout. It seems almost too good to be true. Of course we should have realized it isn't our ticket to fucking Paradise. Twelve months passes quick and before you know it you're a fucking Consumer. But that's how we saw it then, especially after one of the senior managers gave us the Garden of Roses story. Never have to work again and always have enough money to do anything we want. That last one, we should have realized he was fucking with us then, but somehow he made working for yourself sound easy and the only way to go if you got the chance. With the redundancy, even on your own it's a go, and with a few mates, fuck it seems like you'll be swimming in money.

Fuller, who's been quiet up til now, all of a sudden chimes in, "And there's the training, lads. If you want to upskill to another job, don't forget the training." The cunt tries to make it sound all good, "Everyone's talking like there's no other jobs. Come on lads, look around you, there's plenty of jobs if you're prepared to put in the hard yards and do the training. No need for anyone to become a Consumer. And if you do well, fuck it, it's your own fault." Yeah, I'll never forget him saying that. It was the first time I heard that line, and it barely registered, but that was their whole fucking angle all along. All the time he was flapping on, all I was thinking was, why the fuck would I want to go back to college? Just so as I could take on some other boring fucking job? Mate, I want to take a break for a while. Later on maybe, do the old place up a bit; the girl has been on to me about that for long enough, and I've about run out of excuses. Whatever. We can do what we want now, no worries. Any road, I can go back to the old trade any time I want; Ronnie and me have talked about that. That was our thinking at the time.

And what's Dale's big plan? He jumps up and tells everyone, "Mate, I'm gonna save up for a fucking luxury BPOD for myself. They say if you've got the cash anyone can buy one." There's some laughs, shakes of the heads, and a few empty plastics get thrown at him. Ducking he goes on, still dead serious, "Fuck it, why not? From what management tells us I should have plenty enough, and some left over for a rainy day." Now he's laughing too; winks and says, "Pity I can't afford one for the missus too, hey. Shagging Mea Condor I could be boys." His eyes go glassy for a minute, like the stupid cunt actually believes what he's saying. "Ha fuckin' ha. Fifteen years, mate. Wouldn't you get bored after fifteen years of looking at the same face, fucking the same cunt the same fucking way. Mate, it's defo time for a change. God, imagine it, I could be fucking Mea Condor every night. Wouldn't yours be dead jealous?" Yeah I know you're not allowed to do that, but, back then it seemed like anything was possible, however fucked up it was. Dale, he's not so bad; for all his fucking talk, he treats the missus allright.

Ellen's smart though, so I never understood why she hooked up and had a kid with the clown.

Dale's all fucking motor mouth. Some people get like that when they're scared, and anyone that says they're not afraid is talking bull. We're all shit scared, just doing our best not to show it. And I guess after the past few weeks with what Fuller put him through, it must be a relief for it to be over, however fucked the outcome is. It's easy to rile him: when any of the lads take the piss out of him about it, his back is straight up, him thinking he's responsible in some way. Even Ronnie couldn't get through to him that it wasn't his fault. The lad's always good for a laugh, and he might have lightened the mood, but this is no time for clowning. Someone tells him to can it and sit the fuck down, and then says, "All along we was dumbfuck enough to believe the government when they said there'd be enough new jobs to replace the old ones. Yeah, give me a fucking break – can you see any of us as fucking nerd heads? Come on!" Laughter ripples round the room. "And I read there's a billion people coming onto the job market every fucking year. Against a couple of million jobs in the IT sector. Mate, my maths was never good but fuck it, even I can tell that don't add up. And that's the fucking lie! They fucking know it! Keeping the lid on it long enough until bang, all the low level jobs are automated in one hit, and you feel it's too big to do anything about it." He shakes a fist and says angrily, "They knew, all a fucking long!" But then he stops and the undirected rage becomes focused, "Think they're smart hey? Better than us. But they got it wrong, we can do something about it!"

Someone shouts out, laughing like he doesn't believe it, "What? What the fuck can we do mate? Stop eating? That's all we gonna be doing: eat, shit, sleep." And another lad says, "Yeah that cunt Fuller, he made no bones about it. He says to me, *You can all fuck off. We've got robots now. I'll have no trouble from them, they'll perform ten times better than you shower of shit, and I won't have to watch your hairy arse pumping some poor tart from the canteen.*" Someone else laughs and says, "Yeah, he always was hanging around the fucking toilets, the dirty cunt."

I glance over to where Fuller had been, but he's not there. But just then he's back, bold as brass, standing at the end of the tables looking down at us. Condescending. A smug look on his face, he says, "Pissing up your savings I see boys. Not very smart, is it? You need to be thinking about the future, and change your habits to fit within your means now you're Consumers." I thought as much. Cunt wanting to gloat, and rub some shit in the wound.

The first lad interrupts, good on him, "Not yet cunt, we got twelve months on full pay, and by then things will be very fucking different." I hadn't planned on saying anything, it's what he's after, isn't it? To rile us up. But the full of himself

look on his face, I can't help myself, "What are you looking so pleased about, cunt? You think you'll have a job after our redundancy runs out? Mate the lad was right, and you'll be the first White Collar to go. Once we're off their hands at the end of the twelve months, what the fuck are they gonna need you for?" Something flashes in his eyes, and he takes a step round the table towards me, so I stand up, nice and slow. You can smell the booze, but there's something else. Fear. Maybe I just made him see it, or had he already worked it out for himself? And all this is just some sicko pleasure he gets from seeing us down and getting a kicking. Fucking asshole would. Fuck him! So I tell him, "Mate, you were always just the same as us: management were just using you to do their dirty work. Soon enough they'll have no more fucking use for you and then you'll see. After all, robots don't need a fucking union, do they mate?"

He takes a swing at me, but he was always slow and on top of that he's pissed, so he misses by a fucking country mile. One good straight and he would have gone down like a sack of spuds. But I'm just as bad: more shorts than I realised. Cartoon fight, air swings and punches you can see coming from Mars. Everyone pissing themselves, at our expense. Then I'm fucking laughing too, and he lands a few good ones. Backing away then, he screams, "You're all fucking useless. You could've got a better deal if any one of you had any fucking backbone." It's all the spark they need. No-one likes the cunt - flashy, and a big mouth with it. A fist knocks him sideways; legs go jelly. King hit. It might have been a Ronnie special, but I was too gone by then to take in who was clocking who.

But then they're coming from other tables and there's fists and legs every fucking where. Piling into each other: old scores being settled, going at it with all they got. A head cracks against the mirror ball which was always hanging too low. Glass shatters and goes everywhere, but does anyone take any notice? Do they fuck - too busy nailing the next fella, ha ha! Then it's the fire sprinklers going off, and everyone's getting a soaking. Glass, blood, broken heads and bones, everyone getting a say: fucking good night.

Make it to a dark corner, out of the way. Don't feel too good; can't feel my legs. Piss doesn't usually do that to me. Someone maybe spiked my drink; it's started happening a lot these days at the Club, ever since the rumors started up about the redundancies there's been more drugs around. Fuck, I can't understand why anyone would take that shit, if this is what it does to you. I notice that the fight's running out of steam, and I start thinking of leaving, but just then the cops arrive and start laying into the lads. Everyone's all fought out to give a shit and don't resist when they start dragging them out the door. I look around for Ronnie; there he is, in the middle of the dance floor, crashed out, lying on top of Shane. Best of

mates, always fighting with each other, and then it's all made up the next day over a few beers. A good clean out seems to work for them. Me and Ronnie go back a long way; in the army together. Shane was in too, but I don't know him so well.

I know Archer will be looking for me; the girlfriend's brother. He doesn't think I'm good enough for her, after she used to go round to him bitching. He's a copper and probably decent enough; he just doesn't like me. Fair enough; if I was her brother I'd probably feel the same. He finds me: he always finds me. I got nothing left, so I'm an easy target. He starts with a few good kicks in the gut, but the balls are well protected. I don't feel a thing so I'm laughing, and of course that only riles him up more. Fists pumping into me, he gets a steady rhythm going and I'm starting to go under. Then one of his mates pulls him off, but he must have give me a parting fucking Kiss, because after that I don't remember a thing til I come to next morning.

My first morning of freedom! Spent in a prison cell. Ha-ha! Gingerly open one eye, expecting a sledgehammer. Not as bad as I thought. Sure, the head's banging, but that's no bother. After a big night, that's what you'd expect, a sore head and the feeling like, let's get the fuck back on it. But, instead, I'm just lying there on that cold, hard prison floor wondering, what the fuck? Sitting up, so then the head does start pounding, I look around at the ten or so of us: these are men I've been working with for twenty years and yet what I'm feeling is that there's most of these fellas here I wouldn't give a fuck if I ever saw them again. That's how it is mate: when the work's gone, what have you got to connect you? With the army lads it's different. You've fought together, saved each other's lives, and seen mates killed. And together, after, we've drowned ourselves in piss. To bury the fear of going back to face what fucks a man so much he isn't recognizable as a man any more. Yeah, but that was with Ronnie, Shane and Dale, not this shower of loose lips.

It's a big cell. No outside window. Just bright lights, white walls, glass panel on one wall, and a small door in another. Looking again, I realise there's more than twenty of us crammed in here. It looks like Shane already got out, but Ronnie's still asleep. Just then he opens his eyes, then shuts them tight and says. "Mate, give me some water, I feel like fucking shit". I don't give a fuck how he's feeling, how any of us are feeling, but I get him the drink anyway. "How are you feeling, mate?" he says, sitting up and taking a swig. He looks terrible, and normally we'd be taking the piss of each other by now, but I don't want to talk. "What the fuck difference does it make to you? Just get me the fuck out of here and home." "Sore head mate?" He's laughing now; the hangover forgotten. I'm not in the mood for

banter. "Fuck off, the head's fine. I just wanna get the fuck out of here and get in to work. We're fucking late already, we're on the Yellow Shift, remember?" A fist heads my way. I duck, but not quick enough, so the ear's ringing. "What the fuck's your problem mate?" He's not laughing now. "Me remember? Have you forgotten mate? There'll be no more of that, on our jacks from now on mate. All up to us."

"Fuck you." For a minute there it had seemed like a bad dream, but of course it isn't. Well at least it means I won't be getting another lecture from Fuller about coming in pissed, and the shit about my responsibilities to my family. Which is a fucking joke, because the cunt is the biggest Pisshead of the lot. Cunt's permanently cut. There was the one time when he was crook and had to come off the grog for a week. Stone cold sober, and that was the only time I really seen him acting pissed. They sent him home to get better, and get back on the beer.

Dunno how much later, I'd fallen asleep, but I wake up to Dale saying he's leaving. Ellen must have been in to pay up. Like the rest of our women, she's used to getting the phone call from the cops. He's quiet, and subdued, like he always is when he first gets out. But it won't last for long; soon enough he'll be bragging about the fight, making himself sound like a fucking UFC champ. To anyone that will listen, even if it is only the young kids on the street he doesn't even know. You can see from the look on their faces, even they think he's a fucking clown. Men like Dale are getting out of date, soon there will be no need for them, if there ever was. He should be in a fucking zoo. And me? Maybe I should too, but if it gets to that, I'll go back to the uniform. They talk about robot armies - that's all bullshit. It'll be a long time before they can replace an NCO and the rest of the command structure, if they ever do. Run them remotely? Fuck off, you need men on the ground, always have and always will.

Chapter 1.05

I've always admired Ellen. She's a determined woman, stronger than she realises, and with looks she doesn't know she's got. She sees herself as second rate which is maybe why she settled for Dale when she could have done better for herself. She's afraid to make the kind of decisions that need self confidence, the ones that lead to loneliness and being cut by your so called friends. But upside is, after a while you don't care because you're becoming the person you want to be. It's going to take something to force her to find that, and fulfill those ambitions she had for herself before she met Dale. She's never loved him and I think even he knows it, though neither of them have ever brought it straight out in the open. She sometimes blames herself and wonders if she'd really loved him, would he have been more respectful? I mean, in the sense of being honest like most normal couples, instead of kidlike going behind her back, and then bragging about it. Like he was breaking rules, when there fucking aren't any to fucking break. Which makes him look a dick, and somehow that rubs off on her as well, so her friends don't respect her as much as they used to, when they were all single and it looked like she had the world at her feet.

We've been seeing each other for five years now. It started on a day trip somewhere, everyone was drunk and she opened up to me heart and soul. Tears, the fucking works. Maybe our trip reminded her of something from those days when it seemed anything was possible, but then you get a heavy feeling, like it's gone and can never be the same again.

The others are still at the bar; she wanted some air and I was feeling it too, so I agreed to go with her. Maybe there was something in the back of my mind, but it was sure buried deep because what happened came as a surprise. Cold July winter day, walking along the beach at Manly, we've almost got the beach to ourselves. All of a sudden she's sobbing on my shoulder, "Fuck, Jeff, I can't go on like this much longer, even if it is for Naomi's sake." The black sky with birds skidding across it, a big wind howling and tearing at our clothes, the crashing waves and the empty beach, it felt like we were the only people in the fucking world! I hold her to me and she smiles through her tears when I start asking her questions. She answers, "I can't believe how much I've changed since I've been married to Dale. As a kid I was into everything. I was pretty enough you'd say, but as a teenager I preferred sports, especially one on one, like tennis or athletics. I did OK at school but like everyone I left early and got into a low level customer service job. Almost done it without thinking; it was just what we all did. A small voice sometimes

made me stop and think that I should be going for something more, and be thinking about the future. But it was never loud enough to do anything about it, we were having too much fun, you know?"

I'm a Bathurst boy, born and bred, and Sydney for me was still the Big Smoke, so I asked her what it was like, "It wasn't so bad, Sydney's a great place to party, not thinking too much about anything but having a good time. The years can roll by fast when you're never thinking about the future. There might not be a lot of point to it, but it was that good I almost don't regret it! Clubbing every weekend, dancing til you dropped, high all the time on whatever was the latest craze. Trips away, Bali, Thailand islands, the usual places."

She looks at me and I shrug, "Farm boys lead a different life Ellen, what can I say?" She's looking me in the eyes, and it's the first time I'd looked into hers properly. There's nothing striking about them to look at, just a light blue, but in there I see lots of love, and pain, and fear, and I want to make it better for her. Then she kisses me. Seems like it must have been an impulse, cos it doesn't last long and then she steps back, untangling herself from my arms. But then she stares at me, and we're staring at each other, and there's nothing and no one else around - we could be on the fucking moon. Suddenly she throws herself at me. We're at the end of the beach by now, taking shelter behind some rocks, so there's nothing to hold us back. The kiss goes on and on and I don't want it to stop, but when we eventually do it's like a flood gates opened and we can't stop talking. I'm full of questions and she seems to like telling me about those good times. "There were boyfriends here and there, but we were just fooling around, there was never any thought of it being long term. But then my friends started having babies. The numbers started to dwindle, each year a few less people around, until there was hardly anyone left to party with. Dale is still there, he'd always been in the group I hung around with but I never took much notice of him. No, he hasn't changed, he was a bit of a job back then too, but always good for a laugh. A bit of a larrikin; always getting himself into stupid trouble." We both laugh, I mean, that sums him up and he hasn't changed in all that time. "Big city, you would have thought it would have been easy, but it was hard to meet anyone outside our group of friends. Sydney's like that, clicky, and I guess so were we: we'd all grown up together, and nearly all married amongst our classmates."

Ellen looks up for a second then smiles, "There was one exception. She was more adventurous than the rest of us; Mary. I remember the day clearly. I hadn't seen Mary for a few years by then; she'd been travelling, seeing the world, whilst I'd been drifting from one dead end job to another. The crowd was down the beach at Bondi, doing the usual, when, out of the blue Mary appeared,

accompanied by her boyfriend, who was from Israel. I'd been blown away by the difference in the way he saw the world, and a little frightened to realise how unoriginal my ideas were compared to his. It struck me, it wouldn't matter if half of us, and me included, had never lived; weren't our lives so interchangeable? This really shook me up. I'd never expected a life as mundane as the one I realised I'd allowed myself to slip into. The very next day I booked a flight, and a week later I was in Europe. Not just a holiday, I'd organised myself a job. OK it was another deadend, but at least it meant I could stay as long as I wanted and I'd be in a different mindset, living here, not just a passing tourist. Before long though, I was missing family and friends, and after six months of homesickness I'd had enough and decided to quit and head home."

She laughs for a second, but then looks down with a sad expression, and her voice drops, "Yeah, funny. Soon as I made the decision, so I only had a few weeks before I'd be going home, things started to change. Getting some of the things I'd hoped I'd find by going there. I made some new friends, people who reminded me of Mary's boyfriend, and they showed me places. In Paris, where I was living then - places I'd never even heard of. We'd talk about things that would never have come up in a million years in Sydney. With hindsight I wish I'd done things differently, in fact, as I was heading to the airport I almost did tell the driver to take me home. Yeah, at last, my dingy little apartment on the Left Bank really felt like home, felt like where I was meant to be. But by then confusion had set in so I pushed these complicating thoughts aside, and kept going. Everything had been arranged, and anyway people were expecting me back home, weren't they?"

You could still hear the regret in her voice and I ask her if there's any other reason. She laughs and goes red, "I guess so. There'd been a guy, someone who'd shown interest in more than just wanting to get inside my pants. I not only liked him, but I also really admired him for what he was doing. Here was someone who was actually following his dreams, thinking about the world, where he fitted into it and what he wanted to do. While here, in my old life, people didn't believe in anything except having a good time, and the only way to keep that feeling going is to get pissed all the time. Yeah it was hard to leave Jean Pierre."

She blinks back a few tears then shakes her head as if trying to get the memory out of her mind. I asked her where Dale had fitted in. "Yeah, he was there then. For some reason, around the same time as me Dale had travelled to Europe, and we'd naturally gravitated to each other. Even then we didn't have much in common but we could always talk about home. We got drunk together a few times; fooled around, but it never meant anything to me. Coincidentally, soon after I got back Dale returned too and it seemed natural to hang out with him, like

we had in Europe; we had those times to reminisce about and anyway there were even fewer singles to hang out with before. I can't explain why I did it, almost without thinking I ended up agreeing to have a baby with Dale. On the back of, I guess, everything feeling all out of whack. Loneliness too I suppose; I saw a safe future, and I was ready to have a child. It might as well be with Dale." She shrugs her shoulders, "I still finds it hard to join the dots of how I ever came to think of that as a good idea. Is that really all I was looking for then? Obviously I'm not proud of that decision. And you might ask why I didn't get out when I realised what a mistake I'd made. But people's expectations.... I know, I know it shouldn't matter, but it made it harder and harder, and I kind of had nowhere else to go by then." She looks at me shyly, "Family trouble you know."

A guilty look then comes over her, and as if she might cry again. I pull her to me and put my arms tight around her. She sags against me and then I feel her body shaking. She goes still then and we stay like that for a minute, and then she looks up at me again, red rings round her eyes. Taking my hand she squeezes it as she tells me, "Yes of course, even then I knew how selfish I was being, not caring that Dale might have had a child with someone who really loved him, and I'd prevented him from ever having that experience. To be honest at the time I didn't think it would make much difference to him, whether it was me or someone else. Before we married I barely gave Dale credit for having any feelings at all."

I tell her, "You shouldn't blame yourself, you talk as if it was all up to you." She smiles, "Yeah that's true, I feel angry with myself for letting us get into this mess, but shouldn't he have seen it too? He's not a fucking child, but he's so blind to anything that isn't straight in front of his face. And what is there to love about him?" She looks shocked after she says that, and becomes reflective. I tell her how, knowing Dale, I can understand how she would feel that way. She glances at her watch then, and tells me we should be heading back. By now I don't want it to end, but I know she's right. There's a few in the crowd that like to gossip, and if they haven't already if we're much later the tongues will start wagging. And once they fucking start it's hard to turn them off. Yeah, already I'm making plans for this to be something more than a one off. The sound of the waves comes back to me then, the crash and rush up over the sand. It's peaceful, knowing it's been going on forever and will continue long, long after we're gone and it makes the walking back kind of timeless, endless. On the way I ask Ellen more questions about herself and she seems happy to get off the subject of how she ended up with Dale. "My life now? I feel ground down to an existence, a robot. Ha, ha, how appropriate. I know I should be expecting more from life than this, but what?" She looks up at me for a second, but then she's looking straight ahead, almost as if

she's talking to herself, "Yes, I'm sometimes tempted to have another relationship, and the opportunity has come up from time to time. I don't know why I haven't taken any of them up on it, except I spend most of my time with the girls at the club, so if anything happened, fuck it would be back to Dale before I'd made it home. I know there'd be nothing wrong, but then what would there be left between us?" But then she stops and looks at me and smiles, "But yeah, why not? I suppose if the right man came along, I might do it, if nothing else, just for a change." She raises her eyebrows a fraction and we both smile at the idea. Then, patting me on the arm, she drifts off down to the water's edge, while I walk back up to the bar. Fortunately no one seems to have noticed how long we've been gone. The rest of the day all I could think about was what I could do to make things happen in Bathurst, but in fact that night the chance came up. Both of us up for it, it was good, very good, better than I'd expected.

Chapter 1.06

The whole time Dale has said nothing to Ellen about his job and what's going on at the factory. Anything she found out came from me. But then, after she picks him up from the station, he tells her everything. Ellen feels sorry for him but at the same sees it for what it is, a trap, one she hadn't foreseen and which could unravel all her carefully worked up plans. For all the talk, she knows Dale will never work again, and how he'll react when she tells him her plans, and she doesn't have the strength to deal with that. Instead she asks him, "So, what are you going to do with all this free time you're going to have now?"

Barely listening to his response she doesn't notice the look of uncertainty and wariness when he responds, "I don't fucking know, do I? No one ever told me I'd have more down time than I'd know what to do with. It's not as if Naomi needs us, is it?" The man and woman stare at each other for a minute, but in fact they hardly see one another, being so caught up in their thoughts about their own future. One of them is nervous but optimistic, and excited. The other, with a vague sense of unease, is unsure exactly what he's afraid of, but one thing he's sure of - he's totally unprepared for what's happened. He tries to console himself, *OK there were warnings of what was coming but something like this has never happened before. And anyway, what the fuck could I have done?* Still, a feeling of guilt creeps over Dale. But in a sense he's right; while there have been massive upheavals in the working landscape, there's always been something to replace the lost jobs. The industrial revolution minimized the need for physical labor, but created a new demand for skilled labor and White Collar. The dawn of automation and AI has changed the landscape just as dramatically, but this time it's different - stripping back the need for every kind of job, and replacing it with a handful of very specialized jobs. The human intellect has been made largely obsolete by these changes and so has made humanity itself obsolete - the only job left to it being as a Consumer of The Product. For the first time in history it's no longer necessary for the majority to work in order to survive.

Ellen says to Dale, attempting to keep out of her voice the contempt she feels for him, "You must have thought of something to do, I mean, this has been coming for years." She'd expected anger but instead there's defeat in Dale's manner. He shakes his head and, looking perplexed, in a flat voice he says, "But there was always someone saying there'd be something else, and anyone saying any different was laughed at. No one could believe it could be the majority of us that wouldn't be working."

Ellen tries to inject some positive into the conversation, “Well, it is true to an extent – for instance, there will be lots of part time jobs, working for those that still have jobs.” For the first time Dale reacts strongly – a look of intense hatred flares in his eyes. Thinking of her own situation Ellen’s heart sinks and the feeling of being trapped returns. Dale says, “Yeah, fucking cunts, it’s becoming more Them V Us every fucking day. They know there’s millions of us on the Heap, so they can pay shit money, because there’ll always be someone desperate enough. No.... Fuck it, no pride. They got no fucking pride, and no solidarity.”

Ellen, unable to disagree but still wanting to turn the conversation in a positive direction, says, “Look, it’s not as bad as that, and anyway it’s not about money anymore, you’ve, we’ve got plenty with the redundancy...” Dale snarls, “What do you mean, it’s not about the money? Why else would you fucking work?” Ellen looks at Dale forlornly, and in a pleading voice says, “Things have changed, can’t you see that? Working, having a job, it won’t be just about money. Unless you’ve got something else, it’s going to be the only reason for getting out of bed. You know, and this is going to be hard to take, having a job will become a privilege.”

Dale stares angrily at her and says vehemently, “You’re talking shit Ellen. We have rights and so long as we stick together, fuck it, we WILL get a fair day’s pay. That’ll take getting organised, but Ronnie’s already talking about that.” On seeing for the first time a look of real determination in Dale’s face, Ellen smiles. But it’s short lived: for her there’s a sense of futility about the whole thing. Surely any attempt to resist is doomed from the start; only delaying the inevitable. Really, only making it worse in fact, because it will build up unrealistic expectations - and she can easily see Dale doing that. The inevitable. She pauses and looks cautiously at Dale: what is that? But then her mind recoils and she feels her chest squeezed so hard she can hardly breathe. With a feeling of intense failure she wishes, so fervently she wants to cry, she wishes that Dale was different. If only he could think for himself, look ahead even a little, not just walk blindly into the future without thinking about it, let alone preparing for it. Not even hoping it will be alright, just not thinking about it at all. She becomes angry then, with herself more than Dale, *What chance has he got? A fucking dinosaur, what chance has he got?*

Glancing across at him she sees an already beaten man. Nearly two metres tall and the build of a heavyweight, slumped in his favorite chair - a black leather contraption with an automatic footrest - staring at the blank media screen. It seems as if he’s forgotten she’s even there, and she takes the opportunity to look at him more closely. For a long time she wouldn’t have even bothered, their relationship having reached that stage of mutual disinterest, in which conversation

is limited to the functional. But now, out of the blue, their lives, their expectations, have collided: Ellen knows something will have to give, and immediately she feels herself tensing. Trying to calm herself she looks at Dale again. He's staring at the screen with the same blank expression as before, though it's now turned on and tuned into a Daytime Soap.

It's two weeks later, and Ellen and Naomi have just come in, having spent the morning out together. Their daughter, as usual, goes straight up to her room. Ellen glances into the living room, which as usual has the curtains drawn so it's difficult to see in, and for the person in there, it would be hard to know what time of day it is. Illuminated only by a single tall lamp by his chair, Dale is glued to the constantly playing media screen, absorbed in his current favorite, a virtual war computer game. Whereas before, when he'd been working, Dale had looked healthy – just as fit and muscular as when he'd been in the army - his face is now bloated from going to the Club every evening, drinking sometimes so much he's so drunk he can't remember how he got home and what he did there. Gaining several kilos and a noticeable paunch, in the short space of time since he stopped work, to Ellen it looks like he's aged ten years.

Suddenly he turns and stares at her with a malevolent hatred, before turning his attention back to the game - slumping a little lower in his chair and rounding his shoulders as he does so. Just then there's a knock on the door: it's one of the boys from work. Ellen smiles and invites him through to the lounge. As Dale grunts a greeting, hardly showing any interest in his former workmate, Ellen goes over to the windows and throws the curtains back, which not only throws a burst of sunlight into the room but also lifts the gloomy mood that's always there when Dale is at home. Johno laughs, "Mate, you must be a fucking expert on the Soaps mate. You and half the rest of the lads. You heard they're gonna be running a Trivia Night just on them; mate you should join." Dale's eyes are bloodshot and he looks terrible, after a bigger than usual binge. One which had really concerned Ellen because for the first time they'd started when it was still daylight, almost straight after lunch in fact. Dale turns a disinterested gaze on his ex work colleague and says, "What the fuck do you want mate? I told you after the last time, fishing bores the fucking shit out of me."

Johno, as tall as Dale but of thinner build, and with a thick rash of unkempt red hair, had recently started growing a beard, and already it gives him a wild Mountain Man look. Looking only mildly upset he says, "Mate, you're not the only one. There's plenty pissing the day away playing computer games and watching shows but I still find it hard to get a fishing buddy." Pointing at the screen he goes on, "Mate, you gotta do more than that with your fucking day." He turns to Ellen

then and says, laughing, "You wouldn't think it would be hard, hey.... Hey, hey, love, what is it, you look like you just saw a fucking ghost!"

Ellen seems unable to speak, just staring with a fixed, terrified expression and pointing at the window, her lips moving but no words coming out. Dale glances at her with disinterest for a second then goes back to his game. Johnno runs to the window, throws it open and looks down. From below come yells for help, and from somewhere above a woman is screaming over and over: "No, no, no." Her voice trails off for a bit, then suddenly resurges: "No, no, no." Somewhere else a child can be heard crying uncontrollably. When Johnno turns back to face them his normally cheerful expression has been replaced by one of despair. He shouts, "That's the fucking fourth this week, and it's only fucking Tuesday. This is getting worse and worse, and no one's doing a fucking thing to stop it." While Ellen is standing in the doorway, her hands to her mouth and still too shocked to speak, Johnno walks purposefully over to where Dale is engrossed in the computer game, grabs the swivel chair and swings it sharply around. As Dale stares up angrily at Johnno, just then Naomi's voice floats down, "What's up, what's going on out there?" Ignoring her, Johnno says to Dale, his voice sharp and admonishing, "Mate, is that gonna be you in a fucking month?" Dale continues to stare up at him, though now more frustrated than angry, "Well mate, take my word for it. If this is all you're gonna fucking do, it fucking will be...."

Dale half rises from his chair but then Ellen lets out a whimpered, "No, please no," and then sinks to her knees. Dale for the first time seems to come to and show some interest in what's going on. As Johnno looks questioningly at Ellen, wondering if hers is a delayed reaction, Dale, bleary eyed, points to the window and, his manner as if it were the most normal thing in the world, says, "The missus just went past the window too mate."

A few days pass, in which Johnno becomes a regular visitor to Ellen and Dale's apartment. On the fourth day, taking considerable effort from Johnno and Ellen, Dale is persuaded to take a shower, have something to eat and after that head down to the nearest park, with the intention of getting some exercise throwing a footy ball around. When they get there Dale is surprised to find many of his former workmates playing Touch Footy. Inviting him to join the game, one of them says, "Mate, I heard what you been like. Mate, you gotta get out the house or you'll become another fucking statistic." He sees Dale bridle at this but ignores it and goes on, "You can always be sure of a game mate, we're out here every day." He eyes Dale up and down, "Mate, take a break from the Club, you look fucking terrible, packing it on already." In response to a question from Dale he nods and

replies, "Yeah, of course you'll find Ronnie and few of your other mates here most arvos. He's got something on with Shane though, so not every day, mind."

Later that day, with Johno and his girlfriend joining them, Ellen throws a small dinner party, at which the topic of discussion is the same as it is everywhere else. What are the men and women made redundant by Gargon to do with the rest of their lives to avoid becoming nothing more than vegetable Consumers? Ellen, her manner very cautious, and seeming to pick her words very carefully, suggests, "Look, since none of you were expecting to be in this situation, and you've had no outside help, you're bound to find it hard. This is new, never before happened to anyone. But with education..."

Dale interrupts, waving a hand dismissively, "What's the point of training? I'm never gonna be a fucking computer programmer. I mean, look at me for fuck's sake!" He holds up his hands as he stands up and everyone immediately laughs at the image he presents. A huge man, he almost touches the ceiling and his hands, in proportion to his body, are great massive hams, with fingers you can only imagine wrapped around tools or a weapon, not something small and intricate like a computer keyboard. But then laughter dies as the obvious questions once again surfaces.

Ellen, smiling and trying to keep the mood light, shakes her head and explains, "No, no, I know that for most of you training would be a waste of time. Some paperwork if you're doing a trade people still need, that would be about the extent of it. No, I'm talking about education for NOT working." Both Johno and Dale are immediately up in arms. Johno gets in first, "What, that's it, just accept that we're gonna do nothing for the rest of our lives? Become Consumers and do nothing?"

Ellen shakes her head, for once exasperated by their never ending negativity – them unable ever to think of ways out; only ever complaining, complaining. "Listen! Hear me out. Open your minds for a start, and forget about how things ought to be. Because, I'm telling you, if you don't you'll be left behind on the scrap heap. And these days, no one cares who gets left behind, it's dog eat dog." For once, feeling the best he's felt since their enforced idleness began, and with Johno all ears to what Ellen's saying, Dale appears willing to listen. Up to now he's shown scant respect and been dismissive of her ideas, usually shouting angrily that she knows nothing, or just flat refuses to discuss anything. Ellen picks up his change in attitude and smiles gratefully at him, "Allright. What I'm talking about is being educated by professional teachers in how to come to terms with what's happened and make the most of it."

Hazel, Johno's girlfriend shows immediate interest, asks, "What, you mean psychology and such?" Ellen nods, and holds up a hand when Dale starts huffing, "Start with that. There's so much you can learn that's relevant to any situation. For a start, if you're not in a positive frame of mind, not much gets through. Get some peace in yourself, understand what you're feeling and why. Learn what you can do to change thoughts that aren't helping you. Then, looking outside, you've got to start by accepting things for what they are – automation is here to stay. No! Because it doesn't stop there, Dale. We can shift things to suit us. Yes we can! And then the question becomes, how can things be changed to work for me? Once you start to ask these kinds of questions, you can start living again. Like what do you want to do with your free time so you feel there's a point. And then there's the bigger picture. Like, this is a hard situation: how are we all going to get on without killing each other? And to stop just reacting: seeing how things are going to affect you BEFORE they happen. Working out a plan to benefit, not lose by it." The last few minutes Ellen has made a point of not looking at Dale, but it's hard in the confined space of the living room not to be aware of his shifting in his chair, grunting like a bear with a sore head, and altogether looking a picture of discomfort. For some reason though, which she's almost shocked by, he restrains himself from interrupting her.

Hazel on the other hand is super enthusiastic, wanting to know everything. She says to Ellen, "I suppose it's easier for us girls, we can talk about how we're feeling and all. But I'm gonna stop meeting with them so much, and it's worse at the Club when they get the booze on, and then you can't stop them, bitching about everyone and everything. And you know, as sure as this boy here gets a stiffy of a morning, when you're not there they'll be bitching about you too." The two men look sheepish while the girls laugh knowingly at each other. She goes on, "I wanna do something with my life, and this seems the go: obvious when you explain it, love. Yeah, it doesn't need to be work - though the extra money is always be handy - it's about doing something so you can sit back at the end of the day or the week and say, yeah, I did that. Which is more than I ever felt for that fucking job at Gargon. You know, I never realised what was going on with them bean counters forever tweaking my job around. Used me as a guinea pig, making little changes here and there until they were satisfied I was working as efficiently as possible and then, bang, I'm on the Heap and there's a robot fitting the body parts exactly the way I did it. I suppose it was cheaper that way, than playing around with the robot. That's what sticks you know: them telling you nothing, like you just a fucking ant. Anyway, fuck them, it's the past. This would be different, something that would

mean a deal to me. Ellen, I wanna do it, where do I sign up? Johnno, you up for it too?"

Johnno looks a little less enthusiastic. He knows he's got to do something, he always feels better when he's fishing or playing footy with the lads. A tonne better than those ones they all have, GULs – give up on life days. You can see when someone's had one – look lost and frightened, like they're the only person facing life without ever working again. He says, cautiously, "The psychology shit, I hope there's not too much of that but, yeah, the rest of it, I can't be fucking around on a footy pitch the rest of my life. If they can help me find something useful to do, like you say Haze, things would be looking better than when we were working!" He laughs and thumps Dale on the back, but then he sees the look on his face and the smile fades. Turning back to Ellen he asks, "So, tell us Ellen, where is this place we can get these courses? The school you used to teach at was a vocational college, wasn't it? They haven't started it up again have they, teaching this stuff there?"

Ellen stutters a bit and she glances at Dale, who's eyes narrow, "No, no, this is something new." She gives Hazel the address and some more details about the course and who to contact. Then Johnno turns back to Dale, who still looks buttoned up and ready to explode, "Mate, what is it mate? What about coming with us? The four of us can go together. What do you say?"

Speaking slowly and very carefully, Dale says, "Yeah, Ellen, you don't teach this stuff, how come you know so much about these new courses." His voice rising, angrily he questions her, shouting, "Tell us, what's going on?" Hazel and Johnno look confused, while Ellen has gone white in the face. At first she seems lost for words, but then she takes a deep breathe and, in a rush of words, tells them, "I've been studying to be a head teacher, and my research was to bring in this type of study. In fact I finished the course a month ago, and my proposal for the college got accepted and they want me to start working on it from next week." She hadn't meant to say it, had warned herself against it a million times, but it just seemed to pop out, like someone else was saying it. They look each other. Dale surprised, blinking rapidly. Ellen watchful. And then she sees it, the raw anger, burning in his eyes. For a moment Hazel and Johnno had been pleased and excited for Ellen, but when they see the expression on Dale's face it sinks in; at the same moment Ellen bursts into tears. Everyone's staring at Dale now, waiting for his reaction, and they don't have to wait long. Suddenly he's on his feet and waving his arms around and shouting. Ellen, sitting next to him, catches a blow on her head which throws her back in her chair. Dazed, looking like she might keel over any minute, and still crying, the question's immediately there: did he mean to hit her or was it an accident? Johnno doesn't wait to find out, and lunges across the table and grabs

Dale by the arm. As Dale struggles to free himself from Johnno's strong grip, it looks certain a serious fight's about to start. Amongst these men, stoked by the frustration at their sense of powerlessness, it takes little for their anger to flare up to a level they can't control. Building and building over days or weeks, sometimes fighting is the best way to relieve it, before they do someone serious harm. Men have been killed; women on the estate have been on the end of a beating that might have ended that way too. And Ellen is one of them. Johnno knows this, Dale has made no bones about it, sometimes down the Club even bragging about it.

But then Dale lets his arm go slack and, after staring at each other for a few moments, Johnno releases his hold. His eyes boring into Ellen, who's gone out with Hazel onto the balcony, Dale shouts at her, "Why couldn't you stick with being a fucking teacher? Why do you have to go over to their fucking side? Why? Why?" An almost pleading tone comes into his voice for a moment, but then the anger flares again and he screams, "It's a fucking betrayal!" Johnno and Hazel try to talk some sense into Dale but he won't listen. Ellen doesn't even bother trying. She knows when he's in a mood like this, all she can expect if she says anything to him, however she puts it, is another beating. At that moment Ellen realises what it is she's been afraid of. Behind the obvious there was something vague she could never pin down, but now it's clear. From now on, every waking moment he'll hate her for it. And not only him, her friends will too: all out of a job, and with their men under their feet 24/7. They'll see she's free of all that, and so they'll take it out on her the only way they know how, the only way they can.

Dale is still shouting, hoarse now, "Become one of them, and rub our noses in it. Kick us when we're down. No fucking way!" Ellen wants to explain, that it's only because of her that the new courses are starting and that Dale, more than anyone else probably, would benefit from studying at the college. Because, and she's sure of this, if he doesn't he'll probably end up killing her or himself. Still in a rage he goes on, "No fucking way is my wife going into management. There's a line! And they're the other side of it. Bad enough you got a job, but a boss as well! Who ever fucking needed a fucking manager anyway? They just fucking wander round doing fuck all except making our lives as shit as they can. What do you mean by going back to college anyway, at your age?"

Ellen gives Dale a look he's seen a million times before, like, what the fuck was she thinking when she agreed to marry him? She attempts to hide it but fails. Hazel winces and Dale looks like he's going to completely lose it – he seems to physically expand, with red face and eyes bulging. Johnno steps between them and puts a hand on his arm. Ellen, angry herself now, and no longer caring about the consequences, yells back, "Dale you don't know what you're talking about. What

has age got to do with it any more? People are studying at all sorts of ages these days. Things are changing fast. You need to adapt – we all do. You might even want to think about it yourself – you’re not a complete idiot, though you try very hard to pretend to be.” Dale lets out a roar and lunges at Ellen. Johnno tries to restrain him but Dale flings him aside effortlessly and he smashes into the wall.

With Johnno still slumped on the floor and Hazel backing off, a look of terror on her face, Dale stands over Ellen, his whole body shaking. His face feels hot and he finds it hard to breathe. He’s already hit her once and looks ready to go at her again. She, on her knees in front of him, blood oozing from her nose, looks up at him defiantly. It’s enough, more than enough in fact, and so the hand, half curled into a fist, lashes out again. Hearing the sickening crack as Ellen’s head slams down against the hard white tiles, Hazel starts screaming for help. Johnno, having come to but with legs still wobbly, crawls across the floor and puts himself between Dale and the two women. His voice loud, and with a commanding tone, he tells Dale, “Mate, if there’s to be any fighting it’s gonna be between you and me. Leave the women out of it, they’ve done nothing to deserve a fucking beating.”

Dale, who’d been staring at Ellen, challenging her to come back at him, looks incredulously at Johnno, “What do you fucking mean, mate, you heard what she fucking said, talking to me like I’m shit.” Johnno gets slowly to his feet and, his voice still authoritative, responds, “She was speaking the truth mate, and it’s sometimes hard to hear it. You wanna listen to her more mate, the girl makes a lot of sense. You could learn a lot from Ellen if you’d stop fucking hating her. She’s trying to help you mate.”

Dale shakes his head then, growling like a cornered animal, he takes a couple of steps back and raises his fists, yelling at Johnno, “Cunt, you’re on their fucking side! What, you wanna get in her pants, is it? Like the sniff of her cunt do you? Fucking go for it mate, I don’t care, you can fucking have it. What, come on! You gonna fight or what? All talk are you mate?” Dale takes a step toward Johnno, who has his arms raised as if in surrender, but as soon as he comes in range a fist flashes out and hits Dale square on the nose. Immediately blood starts pouring from it. Eyes watering, unable to see, Dale hesitates and in that second the thinner, faster man kicks him, a short low side one just below the knee. Dale’s whole leg bends sideways at an unnatural angle, and he screams out in agony, before falling down, clutching at his knee. Wiping his eyes, he staggers to his feet and, limping on the injured leg, starts circling round, keeping just out of range of Johnno’s fists and legs.

The fight might have taken a real hold but just at that moment there’s a crash and the yellow front door of the apartment crashes to the floor. In the doorway

stand four masked SWAT, with weapons drawn and pointing at the two men. Someone yells, "Get down, get the fuck down of the ground, hands behind your heads. Do it, do it. Now!" Immediately the two men drop to the floor and the same person yells again, "Cuff the cunts, get them out of it." One of them raises a visor and says to Hazel, "Where's the fucking gun, where did they put the gun?"

Hazel starts screaming again; Ellen turns and smacks her hard on the face, which immediately stops her. Ellen shouts at the cop, "There's no gun here, what are you talking about?" The man glances around, counting the number of people and taking everything in. A heated debate begins between two of the visored SWATs, while their leader is listening intently to his radio. Suddenly he yells at them, 'Get the fuck along, it's next door. Now, now!' Just then there's a deafening roar from the apartment next to Dale's. Three shots ring out in quick succession - bang, bang, bang! Each one a sharply distinct and separate sound. This is followed immediately, drowning out everything else, by a solid wall of noise - the echoes of the gunshot, the smashing down of the door and the shouts and screams of voices. The SWATs rush in, but they know it's already too late. Lying on the floor are three bodies, two adults and a child, and blood is still pumping from massive injuries to their heads. In the man's hand is a large military issue handgun.

It's late and only the stragglers, the men who've given up trying to work out what to do with themselves, are still left at the Club. Steadily, determinedly, they're drinking themselves into oblivion. Earlier they might have been in a crowd, but now the men are mostly in pairs, taking turns to listen as the other spills out their hopeless thoughts. Dale has been on his own since he got to the Club and, with the look of the angry, caged animal that is such a common sight these days, has been given a wide berth. Suddenly though one of the pairs, lads he knows from the same shift as him, call him over, buy him a drink and tell him, "Mate, something is eating you up, you better tell us before you fucking kill someone." Dale gives the man such a look that, despite being very drunk, he recoils in surprise, looks worriedly at his mate and makes as if to leave. But the other's having none of it, shaking his head and pulling his mate hard down on to his seat, so hard that he lands awkwardly and nearly falls off it. The whole time, staring at him warily, he never takes his eyes off Dale. "Like he said mate, tell us what's been going on. Trouble at home mate?" It's not such a wild guess; with no one else to take out their sense of the futility of everything, it's the men's wives that bear the full force of their fear and anger. Dale appraises the man for a second and then nods. Eyes half closed, mumbling sometimes, he tells them what happened, and

ends with, "Mate, you'd have done the fucking same, there's only so much a fucking man can take. Yeah, I hit her, what you gonna do about it?"

They start nodding, sympathetic words coming to their lips, but then without warning Dale grabs the nearest one by the shirt collar and, tears pouring down his face, desolate, tells him, "Such a good fucking mate. Known him for years.... Been drinking together at this very fucking table." Letting the fella go, he puts his hand on the Formica top and rubs slowly over it. "I never believed him when he said he was gonna top himself and the missus. You hear that talk all the time and it never happens." He pauses for a second and then says, as if it was very important, "He never mentioned killing the kid. Known him for fucking years, we been neighbours since we moved to Bathurst. Why would he fucking do it?" One of his drinking buddies asks, "Why did he, he must have said something?" Dale nods, "Yeah, but you hear it all the time these days." Eyes darting from one to the other of them, he licks his lips and says, "You don't take it seriously, or you'd be ringing the cops non stop mate, right? How do you know if they fucking mean it?"

The drunk's becoming annoyed, "Yeah, yeah, but what did he actually fucking say? Exactly what did HE say." Dale, very drunk himself, struggles to remember, "Something like this, yeah, it went like this."

"Brother, we weren't in the same regiment, but still we've both been there, so you know what I'm talking about." The two men are very drunk, having been drinking as soon as the bars had opened, and at least one of them has reached the teary stage. Dale's neighbor shouts, loud enough for other tables to hear, but no one pays any attention, "What were we fighting for? Freedom, democracy? Some of that, and the fucking thrill of it. But, mate, I was expecting a good life out of it. After the risks we took I was expecting to be taken care of like. And wasn't that how they told us it would be? But look at us now, what fucking future have any of us got? Same with the missus." His voice suddenly drops, his hands starts shaking and his eyes fill with tears, "But what about the kid? And all the other kids born into this fucking life. Mate, we didn't know it but we had the good life. What the fuck have they got to look forward to? I mean, what have they got to live for. Come on mate, I ask you?"

Dale, on a bad day and just as lost, has very little to offer other than to tell his friend, "Mate, hang in there, it's early days yet. We can get organised, there's people doing it already, and Ronnie has some ideas for a business that he wants to talk to us about."

The man shakes his head, "Mate we can't change anything. It's done and dusted; kept it from us until the last minute and then overnight everything's

automated and there's fuck all to be done, right? Ronnie? Mate, I'm a trained killer, not a fucking entrepreneur. No mate, that's not for me. No mate, there's no way out; nothing for it but to end it, and sooner rather than later. What's the point in dragging it out? No mate, nothing's gonna change. Only makes it harder." For Dale, full of his own concerns, only a little of it sinks in, but enough for him to look worried. His neighbor laughs drily and says, "Don't worry about us brother, we'll be alright."

Dale, well the worse for wear, has little to add and the pair soon go their separate ways. After that he doesn't see his neighbor, down the Club or anywhere else, but he barely notices and almost forgets about him and their conversation. It's only when he's standing at the doorway looking down at his mate with his head half blown away that he recalls the conversation, is instantly reminded of every word of it. Dale gives a sharp cry. One of the SWATs spins round and draws his gun. Dale spins round and starts running down the hallway. One of the uniformed cops tries to bar his way but he barges past him. The cop is about to go after him but the SWAT officer shouts, "Don't worry, let him go, we'll get a statement from him tomorrow."

After that night Ellen and Dale barely talk. It's actually not so hard as during the day Ellen is at the school getting ready for her new job. And before she gets home he's already left for the Club. On the rare occasions they cross paths he, hungover or already drunk, hardly takes notice of her, fixedly watching the media screen or absorbed in a computer game. Worried about him, she tells me, "After that evening when he made such a dick of himself he's even stopped seeing his mates – too ashamed I'd guess. I've seen him criss crossing the street to avoid them. Shambling along with his head down, he's lost all pride in himself; you'd take him for a rough sleeper. I know what you think, but I still feel responsible for him."

After what she told me how he'd been treating her my attitude is, fuck him. But she can't let him go, so I tell her, "Some of the lads have got together a Union of sorts. Not the bullshit management organised ones, this is real Unions in the old tradition – disrupting production and wildcat strikes across other industries. There's rumors they take things a lot further than that, but it might be just that, rumor." She looks hopeful and asks me a lot of questions about the Union. We'd arranged to spend the afternoon together, but all she could talk about was Dale, and after we talked about the Union she told me she had to go. When I argued with her, mate to be honest I pleaded with her to stay, but she was insistent, then promised to make it another day. But that didn't help, I could tell she was only saying it to shut me up and make me feel better: she just wanted to be gone. Just

before she left she said, laughing, “Shit, I almost forgot, I’m starting the new job as Head Teacher at the College next week.” But then the worried expression is back on, “If I don’t tell him he’ll find out from someone at the Club. If I give him this maybe he won’t take it so badly...”

Immediately I tense up - jaw clamped shut so hard it hurts; fists clenched. Angrily I tell her, “Take it badly – you mean the cunt will hit you. If you’d only let me...” But then I see the look on her face and realise, *fuck this how he must talk to her; this is all she fucking hears*, so I pull her to me, and speak to her softly, “I know it’s not just you. But if Naomi knew, would she want you to put up with Dale just for her sake?”

I feel her shake her head and, in a muffled voice between sobs, she tells me, “Yes I’m doing it for Naomi: whether she wants me to or not doesn’t matter. I want her to finish college. It’s only a few months away and then she’ll be out of it. She’s already made plans for a long trip, to Africa. Somalia. But it’s for Dale too: I don’t think I could live with myself if he committed suicide. I’ve got to help him get through this and then,” she steps back and looks up at me, smiling through her tears, “Then I can leave him with a clear conscience and we can live together.”

How could I argue with that? We kiss; I don’t want to let her go, but in the end she pushes me back and tells me she has to: she’s told him already they have to talk and she wants to get him before he’s drunk. As she’s leaving I tell her, “If he crosses the line, you know you can call me and I’ll be straight there. You don’t need to be afraid of him.”

She starts laughing, one of those ones where it seems they can’t stop. Through it she says, “I’m not afraid of Dale; never have been. How could you, of such a big baby? I know he can hurt me, kill me even, but I’m not afraid if that happens. What can I do? It’ll come out of the blue, no warning. No, I feel sorry for him. Sorry for anyone that can’t look even one step into the future, and so life comes AT them. Always like left field so they’ve got no chance. Day to day even, they struggle with. How can I do anything but pity him, and try to help, give him some clues as how it’s going to be...” She trails off, smiles and shrugs her shoulders. Yeah, that’s Dale’s problem: alone he can’t make it, and with this new world, he never will.

It starts as soon as she walks through the door. Immediately she knows everything she’d planned to say, the words intended to burr the edges of his anger, she won’t get the chance to say them, at least not so as they’d have the effect she’d been hoping for. Dale yells at her from the living room. As usual it’s in complete darkness but for the glow of the media screen which lights up the unhealthy pallor of his face. Standing with her back against the front door at first

she doesn't answer, and so he turns and stares at her down the corridor. Separated by the short passageway from the front door to the living room, the distance seems to suddenly stretch, to like looking in mirrors at mirrors, and Dale shrinks to a small pinpoint. She sways, and grasps the door handle to stop herself from falling. Suddenly he flies towards her and his face fills her entire vision – the expression is terrifying, one consumed by pure, white hot hatred. But in his eyes there's only black holes devoid of all feeling, and all hope of understanding. His voice booms out and seems to reverberate inside her head, an echo of each word running into the next so she can't understand what he's saying. She wants to just merge into the door, but as she shrinks back she feels herself pressing against the hard, unyielding surface.

"So, you're going ahead with it, after all I told you, right?" He shouts, shouts as if they were across a valley, when his face is almost touching hers. "Thought I wouldn't find out, did you? Scab!" he screams, "Betray your class! Become one of them! I'll fucking teach you..." As she crouches down, Dale seems to expand, and keeps on until he seems to fill the entire passageway, and his hand, raised against her, looks the size of a shovel. As it sweeps down, time slow motioned, she watches it with curiosity, not blinking. Anticipating the feeling: imagining her bones crumbling to dust on its impact, her head becoming a jelly without form or structure to it. The initial sharp burst, which is nothing, is followed by waves of unbearable pain that pulse through her, again and again, each time filling her entire body. Between each pounding throb there's the briefest moment of relief, but these only heighten the agony when the pain resurges through her. Again. Again. Again. On this occasion the blow is so powerful it's not long before she falls unconscious.

Later, down the club, completely unabashed Dale tells his mates how he came to hit Ellen, and then says, " When she comes too she gets up off the floor and sits on the edge of the settee, just staring at me but saying nothing, with that look on her face that makes me wanna fucking hit her again. I tell her, *What the fuck are you thinking? Why can't you be like the rest of the girls? You should be home looking after me, looking after Naomi.* Then I says to her, being reasonable like, *No one's saying you can't go out with your friends, down the club, partying. Isn't that enough?* She tears up, like that's going to work this time, and says. *I've put up with you for too long, Dale. Running around after you.* Which she never does. There's more along these lines, but I've switched off. White noise. *I'm going to do this whether you like it or not. I have to, otherwise I'll go insane. I have to have something to do. And I'm lucky enough to have a great job, one I really enjoy because I'm helping people. Really helping.* Pauses, then says, *I could help you if*

you weren't so pig headed. The bitch gives me that look again, You can't go on like this Dale, and you've got no excuse. These courses are specially designed for Consumers that want to make something of their lives. Mate, I can't help myself, she's sounding like one of those fucking bosses again. After she pulls herself up off the floor again, this time there's a bit of blood at the corner of her mouth. It won't show though. I tell her straight, I don't need you to tell me that, I worked that out for myself, cunt. We're not talking about me, this is about you and your betrayal, of all of us. And you'd better get this straight, you can't have it both ways. You're either with us, or with them, and that means, against us."

Dale looks around his group of friends and says, "Mate, I can't even understand why she'd be wanting to work anyway; aren't the wives usually happy as shit not to have to work." He throws up his hands and says, exasperated, "But of course Ellen has to be different, thinks herself better than them. Fuck it, better than all of us. So I tell her, *Haven't I worked hard Ellen, and always provided well for my family? We're worth something, you only have to look around this apartment. Do I look like a loser? Not from where I'm standing, mate. You and Naomi got everything you could want."*

"She shakes her head and looks at me, like I'm some kind of backward fucking Hick, and tells me, *If that's what's important to you, good luck to you Dale. But they're not important to me: it's about feeling like you're worth something. Some people don't need that. And lots of the girls don't, I know, I know. Good luck to them, they'll be happy being Consumers. I sometimes wish I COULD be like them, but I'm not.* She stops for a second then, I dunno why, and looks at me warily then goes on, *Maybe you're not either, you'll have to find that out for yourself. You know something mate, you SHOULD feel good about yourself. Not because we've got the latest gadgets, but because of what you've done with Naomi; she's a good kid and she's almost grown up now. You should be proud of yourself for that, Dale, you've been a great dad to her.* She hesitates again, then says slowly, *What about us, Dale? With Naomi gone, what should we do?"*

"*What the fuck do you mean by that? I'm yelling now mate. Why are we even talking about this? What's changed? Because of me losing my job, is that it?* I can't help it mate: completely lost the rag, *Think you're better than me, do you? Is that what this is about? Now I'm no good to you, you want to kick me out?*

I tell you mate, the fucking bitch has an acid tongue. That condescending look back on her face again, she says, *Come on, Dale, the best we can say, it's been convenient. But we both deserve something better than that, don't you think?* Then she says it, still cold as ice, *Maybe it's time to call it a day, now Naomi's nearly off our hands. What do you think?* As soon as the words came out she puts

her hand up to her mouth, making out like she hadn't intended to say it. Fuck off! Of course she did; that was what the whole convo was building up to. That was clear as, as soon as she said it. The look of relief on her face, like now she's said it and she just can't wait to get the fuck out. Of course she gets it again for that; didn't she fucking deserve it? And I'd hardly be a man if I let her get away with it, hey?" Dale looks up for a moment, bleary, bloodshot eyes becoming unfocused as he goes on, "All those years of feeling like she never loved me, but she'd stayed with me, so later I'd assumed she did feel something. And now she's telling me it was just, convenient? Fuck her, like I count for nothing!" Dale goes quiet for a minute, and a silence falls over the small group of drinkers. Two of them have nodded off, tipping over themselves the drinks they're still holding. Dale and the other fella, himself already talked out of his troubles, is happy to listen. Dale's voice, which up to now has held a hard edge to it, suddenly softens, "Mate, you always dream of having a kid with a chick you love, right? Well, with Ellen it wasn't like that. I knew she didn't love me when she agreed to marry me, but I thought with time that would change. At first I thought I loved her, and I did care about her, in my own way. Not 100%, I just didn't, but I couldn't have told you why. Now I guess I fucking know why."

Dale takes a long pull of his drink before continuing. "Mate, I had to get out of there. What she said made me feel, like my whole life has been a waste of time. When I think about Naomi, I don't want to see her either, because she's just the same. Of course, right on cue she walks through the door; back from school. I try to walk past her but she comes up with a smart arse; seems like she can pull one out any time she likes these days. *So, what are you gonna do now, dad. You know mum's not gonna let you stay at home watching TV all day for much longer.* Mate, it took everything in me not to wallop her. But I don't say a fucking word, just out the front door as fast as I can. Mate I tell you, if I'd hesitated, even for a fucking second, I'd have turned around and killed the fucking pair of them."

With Dale gone, Ellen tells Naomi everything, filling in the details about her plans, none of which she'd mentioned to Naomi until now. She's immediately excited and claps her hands like a kid, "Mum, I've been waiting to hear you say that for I don't know how long. That's great news about the job, I can see you really enjoying that." Ellen smiles, and a spark comes into her eyes as Naomi goes on, "As far as dad goes, you know I love him because he's my dad, but I don't know how you put up with him for this long. Do what you have to do, and don't worry about me, I've got my own plans."

Mother and daughter look at each other, for the first time as equals. The realisation releases something in Ellen, and her legs start to go. Her whole body shakes and tears flood, from relief and self pity. A few minutes pass and neither of them speak. Ellen is pleased but surprised by Naomi's reaction: she didn't think she'd take it as well. Suddenly realising she'd been afraid of losing her daughter too, she grabs Naomi and kisses her fervently several times. Then she holds her at arms length, seeing her in this new light. Smiling through her tears, a warmth spreads through her and she thinks to herself, *Yes, you'll be alright. You're almost a woman now, with a self confidence I haven't had for a long time. You won't let people sway you if you're sure about something, and you won't let anything get in your way.* Ellen used to think she got that from Dale, but then remembered what she was like at her age, then life happened and she lost something in herself. She nods wearily and thinks, *Yes, I suppose that happens to most of us in the end – life finds a way to defeat us.*

Ellen takes Naomi's hand and squeezes it hard, saying, "Maybe it was a mistake to talk to Dale like that, so soon after the redundancy. But why should I have to pick my moments? My life shouldn't revolve around placating Dale. Walking on egg shells all the time; half the time it was living with an animal. No, I'm just glad it's said, because it means I can't go back on it." Looking unsure, and a little anxious, she says, "I'm not going to rush him; you'll probably be gone before anything happens. I'll leave it to him, I've got plenty on with the new job." She smiles, and the tears come again, "It's such a relief to say it and stop living a lie. Maybe he'll find someone, someone that would be good for him." Naomi laughs and says acidly, "I doubt it mum, I've seen the women he likes to hang out with. You know, don't be so hard on yourself: you were good for him." Looking at Ellen intently, she says, "And you?" Ellen, taken off guard, stammers out, "There is someone, but he's said he'll wait, and it's early days, so who knows..." She's trying to make light of it, but Naomi sees the flush in her mother's cheeks, and the sparkle in her eye. She's about to say something to tease her, but thinks better of it and gives her a big hug instead.

A few weeks later and the same argument starts up between Dale and Ellen: just a scrap of paper with something on it related to the college, but it's enough to set Dale off. After a few minutes listening to him Ellen makes for the front door, telling him, "I don't have time for this Dale. I've got evening classes tonight and I'm already late. Anyway, what's the point? Nothing's going to change."

Something in what she says triggers in Dale a sudden feeling, with the utmost clarity, of the absolute futility of his life. How his whole life, it seems, he's been pushed around by other people, telling him what to do. The major events of his

life flash before his eyes, going to Europe, getting married, working at Gargon. Even the things he didn't do, the big regrets: his actions were all dictated to him by someone else. Suddenly he hears screaming: Naomi screaming at him, "Get off her, let her go! You're gonna kill her!" She's hitting him, on the back and round the face, but he barely feels it. Coming out of a trance he sees his hands gripped tightly round Ellen's neck – the veins prominent, her eyes bulging and tongue out, and her hands clawing desperately at his. He screams and lets her go. But then his heart leaps into his mouth when she doesn't move, just lies there, her body at an awkward angle. Panicking, he shakes her, begging her to wake up. And then she blinks her eyes open, and he feels a flood of relief surge through him. She's on her hands and knees now, choking and gasping for breath. On his knees too, staring up at Naomi, he says to her, "I'm sorry love, I didn't mean to. Really, I didn't know what I was doing."

Naomi, who was standing at her mother's side, stroking her hair, turns to Dale and, in a cold, menacing voice, says, "You're going to pay for what you've done. And if you do anything..." He doesn't let her finish, jumping to his feet and storming over to the front door. But she's too quick for him and gets there first. Back to the door, she stares up at him, defiant and completely unafraid. "Listen to me very carefully, because I mean every word of what I'm going to say to you. Do anything like that again and the cops will be here. Second, you need to find somewhere else to live. You don't belong here any more..."

Dale is about to say something, but then from behind them Ellen, who's up now, pleads with them, "Please stop. Please. I didn't mean for us to start fighting. Please Naomi, let him go." Without a word, Naomi pulls the door open and stands aside to let him pass, but instead he turns and goes back into the living room, slumps in his usual chair, turns on the media screen and stares intently at it. Ellen, eyes still red, gives Naomi a quick kiss and tells her, "No, it's alright, don't worry about me love, I'll be fine." She looks at her phone, "Shit, I'm going to be late if I don't go now; see you later love." And before Naomi can remonstrate further, she's gone.

It's a relief for Ellen to get to school, where she's quickly distracted by the noise and activity. All the positive energy of the students always affects her, no matter what's been happening at home. During the evening's lessons there's even times when she forgets what happened. But, during a break between classes, as she's preparing for the next one, a teacher, someone she's known for some time, but never that well, comes up to her and asks her, "Who did this to you?" pointing to her neck. His tone is authoritative and insistent, something she's never heard in his voice before. She tries to bluff it out, but when Stephen pulls down the scarf

around her neck and holds up a hand mirror, Ellen reels back at what she sees. Her throat is red with raw, broken patches of skin, but even more shocking are the dark blue bruises and the clear, sharp outline of two sets of fingers around her throat. Still shocked, she glances quickly around then wraps the scarf carefully around her neck. Stephen goes on, in the same authoritative tone, "Ellen this has to stop, otherwise he's going to kill you. Let me talk to him; warn him. It usually works when they know that other people know and aren't going to be quiet about it." She tries to remonstrate, pleading fearfully, but he's adamant. Putting a comforting hand on her shoulder he explains, "Look, I've done this before. Please, trust me." He looks around and Ellen's eyes are drawn in the same direction, and for the first time she notices the concerned expressions on the faces of the rest of the teachers in the staff room. "Trust me, we care about you too much to stand by and let someone hurt you." Against her better judgement Ellen agrees and so, after classes have ended, Stephen accompanies her home.

As they walk the short distance between the college and the estate she says to him, "I know if I can't make a clean break of things with Dale in the end I'll give up everything. And you're right about the people around here, they don't matter. Not if they're so stupid and heartless they can't differentiate between me trying to do some good for them, for everyone! And those bastards of managers at Gargon that are just in it for themselves. Well, if they can't or won't see the difference they're no better than Dale, so are they worth having as friends anyway?"

Ellen suddenly looks frightened. But Stephen, shy, usually the last to offer up his opinion, and then so awkwardly at times you want to cringe, smiles encouragingly at her and says confidently, "Lots of people go through this. You hit the point when you say to yourself, are they really worth it? Do you really want to be a part of their world?" Ellen nods, for the first time acknowledging to herself that there's another road for her to take. It's time to move on, break away not just from Dale, but all of them. She shudders at the thought, but her step is lighter as they make their way up to the apartment.

Ellen had expected some trouble trying to get Dale to leave the Club and come home but to her surprise he's still there - very drunk and still glued to the media screen. Stephen walks slowly into the living room while Ellen goes into the kitchen and busies herself. A moment later Naomi joins her and, looking with concern at the dark bruises on her neck, asks, "How was it at school? And how are you feeling." Ellen smiles and strokes her arm. Naomi gestures into the living room, half smiling, half serious, "Is that him, your fella? What's he doing here..." Ellen shakes her head and is about to respond but just then they hear furniture being knocked over and Dale yelling. Running in they find him standing over Stephen,

who's on his back, blood pouring from his nose, and one eye already almost closed. "...You keep away from my family and tell the rest of them too to keep the fuck out of business that doesn't concern them. This is between me and my missus." Bending down he snarls, "Come back here and I'll fucking kill you cunt."

Stephen, looking frightened, in a shaky voice says, "Mate, you better stop this. There's enough wives been killed already, and whether you mean to or not, that's how it's going to end up here unless you stop, right here and now." Dale lets out a roar, bends down and grabs Stephen by the collar and drags him to his feet. Spit spraying from his mouth, he shouts in his face, "This is my fucking life. My fucking home. My fucking wife! You dob me into the Pigs and I'll be looking for you cunt. Mark my words. And mate, don't think I won't be able to find you: you won't fucking even see me coming. And don't forget cunt, I've got all the time in the fucking world!" He half pushes, half throws Stephen out of the living room, who stumbles down the hallway and slams up against the front door. "Go on, cunt, get the fuck out of where you don't belong. Get back to your fucking classroom, back to all you other smart arses that think you're fucking safe."

Stephen seems lost for words for a moment, but then repeats the warning of calling the police. Dale lunges out of the darkness of the living room, like an ogre out of his cave, into the brightness of the hallway, but then hesitates for a moment, blinded by the light. In that moment Ellen steps in between them and holds out her arm and yells, "Stop! Stop where you are!" Dale starts yelling back, incoherent, barely making any sense, but each time he starts up she tells him again, "Stop, be quiet!"

Eventually he just stands there mute, fists clenched at his side, and with a sullen expression. She talks to him in a slow, calm voice, each time he tries to interject staring at him coldly until he quiets down before continuing, "Look at us, reduced to this! I'm afraid even to talk to you. Knowing if I say the wrong thing it'll set you off and you end up hitting me. I'm no different, alright! I know exactly which buttons to press to get you going. I'm just as guilty as you." She knows he's actually frightened of her on the rare occasions when she really lets rip. These last few months have smoldered, just a matter of time before one of us loses it, and only takes a word to set us off. You can cut the atmosphere with a knife. Naomi spending less time at home. What if this does go further – you're in prison, me maybe dead. Where does that leave Naomi, Dale?" Her voice suddenly drops to a whisper, "Can't you see where we're headed? This has got to stop."

Dale's head jerks up and as his hands ball into fists she cowers back. Hadn't she been ready, expecting this all along, wondering at the back of her mind how long she'd be able to keep going before he took to her? After all, isn't it what it comes

to every time they have an argument now? But then, to her surprise, his arms suddenly go slack, he hangs his head, and his shoulders droop, all the fight gone out of him. Then, his face a mask of desolation, he pushes past her and Stephen and, without looking at any one of them, yanks open the door. Stumbling a little, he makes his way unsteadily down the corridor towards the lift, wavering from side to side as he goes. Ellen looks after him and says, sadly, "Poor, poor bastard. In the space of three months his entire world has been turned upside down. He's not the only one, but he'll take it worse than most. And then there's this." She shakes her head, and says again, "Poor, poor bastard," then turns to Stephen and wails, "What chance is there for the likes of him?"

As Dale disappears into the lift, Ellen closes the front door and immediately everyone lets out a huge sigh of relief. Naomi smiles at Stephen and then turns to say something to her mother. Ellen, without any warning, sinks to her knees, and her face crumples.

Ellen doesn't see Dale the next morning. When she comes home that night she finds her home trashed almost beyond recognition and everything of value has been either taken or destroyed. The media screen had been ripped off the wall leaving a gaping hole with live wires hanging out. He'd stripped the living room curtains from the rails and they now lie in a heap, torn to shreds. Tables, chairs, all the furniture in fact, has been smashed to pieces. His favorite chair he'd taken a knife to. All the things Dale had bought Naomi were either gone or destroyed. The only room he'd left untouched was their bedroom, taking only his clothes from there. Ellen sits down on the bed. *Finally*, she thinks to herself, *Finally, it's over*. Naomi, who comes home a little later, finds her still on the corner of the bed, quietly sobbing.