



THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Neon, for the Lonely: Exploring Gay Men's History and Well-Being through Memoir-Based Reality Reconstructions

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by

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Dedication

I dedicate this whole thing to Sailor Shane, who will hate that I did.
My Sister, Mum and Dad will not mind so much.

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Abstract

Neon, for the Lonely: Exploring Gay Men's History and Well-Being through Memoir-Based Reality Reconstructions is both an adapted memoir and an exegesis that charts a PhD journey of self-empowerment, and healing through the lens of a queer individual's past. The memoir, set against the backdrop of 1990s gay men's London, offers an exploration of the era's cultural complexities, history, memory and documents the genesis of a personal descent into addiction. The exegesis critically examines the transformative potential of such narratives. To do this I investigate the writing process used to produce the work, narrative development, influences, and narrative development.

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Part One

Neon, for the Lonely

Did you forget? We were all fucking bitches, man.

Hospital Admittance

Raptured. Evacuated. Abandoned. The first half hour of *28 Days Later*. All ways to describe the City of London's financial district on Saturday September 25th, 1993. And into this void came my Aunt Caroline. Her blue cigarette smoke billowed into view well before the neat "Swing Out Sister" black bob ascended the steps of St Paul's tube station. Outraged brick hues of ancient buildings looked down on that cock-sucker-red lipstick and blushed in the afternoon sun. Smoked glass windows of contemporary architecture stared open-mouthed in horror as she dotted out a Marlboro Menthol on a wall that had been witness to several coronations. She trumpeted a greeting. Pulled me into a warm hug. The stale smell of the empty street overpowered with that heady mix of Obsession, Boots No.7 pancake foundation and the endless cigarettes that I associated her with.

A short stroll took us to St Bartholomew's School of Nursing and Midwifery. A seven hundred year old leviathan, crouched behind Smithfields meat market where leprous flakes of bricks and mortar exfoliated themselves into gutters running red. A nurses' block - the crumbling post-war addition where Caroline now walked, inspecting the halls like the Princess of Wales at a new wing of an AIDS hospice. Smells of luncheon meat and disinfectant, passive aggressive notes on a communal fridge, two pin plugs that fused the whole building if you used a hairdryer, the common room where white girls called Becky watched *Casualty* on a loop in their uniforms. And worse. Worse than this. The nursing gods had bestowed the only room on the corridor painted pink: to me. The only fella in the shuffle. Opposite... the nun. Northern poof, pink room, girl's corridor opposite the nun. We sat on the edge of my cot, in the tiny vagina coloured cell, chain smoking and grimacing over mugs of *Mellow Birds*. Before long, absurdity kicked in and our bawling laughter caused Sister Inviolata to bang on the wall. Into this chaos: some words.

"I want you to know I'm gay."

The rocks in that gravel driveway of a laugh only shook harder.

"Oh god, I know that. Jesus Christ." She made a little performance of lighting another cigarette. "I've known that since you were seven years old."

"You, did?"

"Of course. I knew from when I'd come up to stay for Christmas that time, and we played snooker on your Dad's new table. Straight boys don't break that badly. Not even when they're seven." She began to laugh again. "Look, how about we get out of here and get a real drink? I can tell you all about how I'm a lesbian."

Pink, Pink, Sunshine

My pink cell did nothing to cure my aversion to vaginas. Its sugar walls were closing in on me for the last time. The room I had been assigned was getting a makeover at last. I sat on the stripped single cot, throwing CDs into a battered Whiskas box trying not to think about why I had found such a thing in the nurses' accommodation kitchen. Through the muddle was a teeny, tiny, tippy-tap at my big pink door. *Joyful, joyful, heavenly chorus.*

"Hiiiiii, how're you getting on? Excited for moving day?" It was Sister Mary Inviolata. *No, that's not her real name, I saw it in a film, two criminals dress up as nuns to escape the mob and hilarity ensues* - Sister Mary Inviolata perky, plus-sized Sister Sunshine, close personal friend of Jesus, and my next door neighbour. I didn't have the heart to tell her boundless cheer was one of the reasons why I'd planned not coming back from the temporary relocation. Her close proximity put a serious damper on the possibility of bringing pick-ups back for sinning. *Come back for a blow-job, meet the nun in the shared bathroom, it'll be hilarious.* Sister Oblivious produced an envelope from behind her back and presented it to me with a flourish, "We'll miss you!" she chipmunked.

"Oh, Mare. Now you know nuns aren't supposed to lie. You're gonna go straight to hell." She slapped my hand as I drew a hot pink card from a pastel pink envelope. A crying pink princess in a pink ball gown was holding a bunch of droopy pink flowers. In a pink glitter thought bubble were the words I'm blue. Maybe I had misjudged Sister Inviolata, maybe underneath all that angelic bluster was a wicked sense of humour.

"Well, thank you." I didn't know if nuns hugged, I didn't want to cuckold Jesus, so I just smiled at her. "Really. Thank you. But you know, this princess is only moving over to the next tower."

"I know," she leaned in conspiratorially, "but I didn't want you to think you weren't wanted back in this one." She squeezed my hand, smiled again, and disappeared behind her door in a flutter of blue gingham. I drew in a deep breath. She had left a comforting scent of coal tar soap. I pressed my lips together and retreated into my clamshell.

Skinheads in the Mist

In my nursing cohort there was one other gay fella that I knew of. He wasn't especially fun, funny, or friendly. The kind of gay you sometimes meet who maintains they are above the mainstream interests of most other gays. Didn't like to go to bars or clubs with the hoi polloi. Watch TV. Read fiction. Listen to aggressively perky pop. The kind of gay that saw themselves as above. Exalted. Content to stay home to hang bohemian Indian screen printed fabrics with little mirrors from the ceiling, burn coconut incense whilst whale song wailed wistfully from a mini-CD player. Smoking hand rolled joints wearing rainbow brushed cotton, Camden-obtained Nepalese hoodies. The breed who surrounds himself with a coterie of fragrant young maidens. Maidens who had made their pilgrimage from down the corridor to this, their new Dalai Lama of the 2nd floor nurses accommodation. Me? Go to a bar? But I am beyond. I have ascended your filthy mortal existence. I have no need to socialise with other homosexuals. Here, here in the halls of nursing, I am king.

Fact was though I needed a wingman, a co-conspirator for my first foray onto the London gay scene. I had no-one else. I would have to appeal to that innate curiosity all gay men have about other gay men.

"C'mon Lance, be a mate. It'll be fun, there's probably tons of other hippies there. You'll be able to talk about different flavours of cigarette papers with people who care."

"You're not selling this very well."

"Sorry. I can't express myself very well. I'm painfully shallow and insecure. Help me, Lance." He blinked his eyes very slowly at me, I continued, "Hey why don't you bring one of your fag hags then?" Lance winced. "I bet Becky would love to listen to something sassy with lyrics for a change, wouldn't you Becks?"

"I like the whales."

"Well of course you do. We all do, but even the other whales take a break once in a while. Stick their head out the ocean for a change of air, listen to some fisherman singing along to... Kylie... c'mon." She went back to picking at her shoe as she sat cross legged on the floor.

Lance was taking a long time relighting a particularly resinous joss-stick that kept going out. I felt I was getting somewhere. Becky was watching him intently now, probably wondering what their kids would look like.

"Well..."

"That's the spirit, I'll come by your room at eight and we'll head off. Okay? It'll be *fun*."

I left his room and closed the door on the whales. Lance had pinned a 'magic eye' poster to his door, and I regarded it with disgust. I didn't understand magic eye pictures. I wondered what this one was. Probably another fucking whale. All I could see were psychedelic dots. *Stupid*.

By half past eight we were emerging from Tottenham Court Road station. I'd been studying the central London area in my A2Z on the Central Line, trying to pretend I didn't see the scowls Lance had been flinging at every person and object that reminded him he wasn't in his room smoking roll-ups. Now out on the street, at night, I figured I pretty much knew how to get to Compton Street. Basically. Sure, no problem.

"Out of here, south towards Leicester Square, should be right at Les Miz, or something. We'll find it, we'll find it. I was in the cubs. No problem."

Lance walked with his arms folded. He was wearing a flouncy, blousy purple grandad shirt with yellow piping, beads and bangles for days and puce linen trousers. He looked like my Aunt Margaret at one of her festivals.

"You know Lance, you seem awfully tightly wound for someone usually so laid back."

"It's not my thing, this... city. I like country pubs and spliffs."

"Geez, going to St Barts was a big mistake then, in the middle of the Big Smoke."

"It's the best for midwifery."

"Yeah, I guess so. Being a male midwife, well. There's not many of those is there? Oh look, there's Misérables. It must be over here somewhere."

"Do you even know where we're going?"

"Yeah, Compton Street. That's where the pubs are. I er, don't know what they're called but that's where they are."

"And what kind of people go to them?"

"I dunno. Y'know. Gay people."

"Hmmm."

"C'mon, I'll buy you a couple of ciders. You'll have so much fun your weed will roll all by itself."

"Very funny."

We played chicken with a couple of Routemaster buses and tripped over a curb into Old Compton Street. People down here seemed to lose their fondness for baseball caps and disposable cameras, favouring crop tops, hair gel and cackling. Further down the rabbit hole a wonderland called Clone Zone offered poppers and dildos the size of a small dog. Techno tribalised the air; a symphony of aftershave scented it. We paused to judge a packed pub from across the street, whilst buffeted by brightly coloured peacocks hailing their Marys. A couple of burly bouncers stood outside chatting. The pub was painted in a bright scarlet, matching the neon of the nearby tattooist. Above the central doorway, painted in gold on a blue background were the words Comptons of Soho. Huge picture windows filled themselves to the corners with shaved heads and fitted white t-shirts. My meticulously moussed quiff and provincial Top-Man townie ensemble was going to look seriously out of place here. Lance was going to stick out further than Marianne Faithful throwing shapes at a Technotronic gig. I looked across at him. For all his hippy-dippy fey-ness, he looked rather terrified.

"Are you sure we should go in there? They look like Nazis."

"Yeah, they do don't they?" I smiled. "C'mon, we'll be fine, Rolf. Lie back and think of Liesel".

"Eh?"

The two bouncers stopped talking about whatever bouncers talk about to let us pass. "Evening Lads. Finally made your minds up, eh?"

I couldn't think of anything particularly devastating to say so I just smiled and went in. In a way I was expecting the scene from the *Police Academy* film where they wander into The Blue Oyster Bar. Nothing like that happened. The music didn't stop with a needle scratch. Nobody stopped talking. Nobody turned around. Nobody gave a shit. I had just lost my cherry to Compton's, I mean I wasn't expecting a round of applause but still... red letter day. Something.

Pushing myself to the bar with awkward almost near sincere smiles. I already knew what Lance was drinking, a pint of cider and bleugh-currant. I didn't really know what all the different lagers on tap were, but I saw a tower of Breaker cans in a glass fronted fridge and when the huge barman leaned over to me and said "Yes, darlin'" I knew for sure firstly this was truly a gay bar and secondly that a Breaker would be my drink of choice.

We wandered off through the crowds and clouds into a corner. There were seats available, though mostly people seemed to want to stand. Shelves along walls to put drinks and ashtrays down. We both lit cigarettes and tried to look less conspicuous. I felt like Dian Fossey, attempting to blend in as well as a white woman can into a tribe of silverback gorillas. Lance was looking like he might shatter if someone so much as touched him. Sweating patchouli oil from every pore. The clientele of Compton's appeared to be fairly uniform and have a uniform. And man, was I into this new look. Wondering where I could get it. Bomber jackets, shaved heads, white t-shirts, camo t-shirts tight as you like ditto on the blue jeans, dog tags, earrings, tattoos. Big black boots, Marlboro lights, none of this 100 length that I was rocking. These were men. Testosterone was well-hung in this air.

"I'm kind of into this look, aren't you?" I turned to Lance already knowing the answer. Lance looked about ready to start administering his weed intravenously.

"Are you alright?"

"Not really my crowd this."

"Well, they're not teenaged white girls from Kent, I grant you, but you probably have more in common with these guys. Becky didn't wanna come I take it?"

"Busy."

"Busy planning how to turn you straight? Whether to bring the kids up Jewish?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've probably paid that girl more attention in the last month than she ever had in her entire secondary school career." Lance was blank. "She lurrrrves you."

"Nah."

"She's got a crush." I took another drag on my cigarette and looked around the bar again. Mental notes on the etiquette, stance, everything.

"I doubt it. You just don't like her."

"I doubt your doubt. And I like her just fine. I like girls. I like the girls at Barts, but they're all kind of blah."

"I think I'm gonna go after this."

"What why? We just got here. We can go to other places. I've seen people reading those papers over there, I bet they have info in them. We could go somewhere where they worship Kali and serve cider handmade by druids, you'll be right at home. It'll be just like The Wicker Man!"

"Did you know your sense of humour is quite mean sometimes?"

"...humour...?" I gave it a beat then smiled. "C'mon Lance, just one night on the town. Be my wingman, you'll never have to come again, you and Becky can go set up house in the suburbs and it'll be a funny story to tell your grandkids."

"OH alright, go get a paper."

"No, you. There are people over there for god's sake."

The Irony Deficiency

Wednesdays were lecture day, and as such were usually fairly painless. Our cohort piled into the freshly glued together amphitheatre, most with an excitement I

couldn't fathom. A lot of the home-county girls wanted to sit at the front of the hall. Sometimes the lectures required volunteers, and there was no shortage of peachy keen, Body Shop apricot exfoliated faces to help them. One or two of the old-school-nurse-turned-tutors had almost idolatry status with certain students. *Certain students, who were not currently me.* Lesbian Sharon *as opposed to straight Sharon* tucked her braided bob behind an ankh shaped silver earring, grabbed my arm and marched us up to the middle-middle. This is what we called sitting halfway across the row, halfway up the auditorium. Sharon in her early 30s, lived in Hounslow with her teacher girlfriend and couldn't tolerate being near the young heterosexual girls in their clouds of Vanilla and White Musk body oil. She only barely tolerated me. Lance joined us in our row accompanied by his heady mix of clove oil, hashish, and tinny ambient techno from his earphones. He began the emancipation of textbooks and folders from a black cotton, red elephant embroidered bag which immediately ejaculated flakes of tobacco over the desk and floor. Sharon had two red lever arch files, colour tabbed, highlighted to the Gods, tiny perfect handwriting on well-thumbed pages, post-its covered in underlined words I didn't know. I looked her straight in the eye and made a show of taking the top off my biro. Sharon looked at it and tucked her bob away again, an attempt at covering her amusement.

"Is that all you brought?" She slid some lined A4 paper over. "At least make notes."

"I am ready to absorb the knowledge. I am focused, galvanised. Hear me roar... quietly".

"Mmmhmm. What's the lecture on?"

"No idea." I wrote my name at the top of the paper. "What time does it finish?"

Lance put the final touches to his chaotic arrangement of books and papers. "Today it's the fundamentals of nursing practice." He knew what was going on at least. *Show off.*

"Oh, goody. Practice does make perfect." I drew a ghost next to my name. "What time did you say it finished?"

An hour later, the ghost had been joined by several others, a witch on a broomstick and the silhouette of a haunted castle. I looked up at Sharon expecting

to see a reproachful stare, but if she had one it wasn't directed at me. She was watching the old-lady-nurse down the bottom droning on about some blah or other. I tuned in or attempted to at least. We'd had this awful woman take lectures before. She still wore an immaculately pressed, bone-white nurse's uniform despite her retirement from the wards. Adorning her breast were badges and medals for long service, the betterment of mankind, world peace and curing the common cold. A decorated General in the war against sickness. A tiny person in stature, but hard like a walnut. The kind of nurse whose bedside manner consisted of "get better or else". She used the pronoun *she* for *all* nursing staff. Her mission to emasculate the fuck out of all men filled the air around her like nuclear fallout. A concentrated pent-up ball of scary nonsense. I didn't understand what she was saying. To me she was the schoolteacher from Charlie Brown. I chewed the end of my biro and wondered what meesoh-gai-knee meant. Probably some kind of disease. What stops us from catching all this crap when we're on the wards? I looked at Sharon to ask, but she had her hand up. Sharon never put her hand up, she never seemed to *need* to ask questions. I sat up in the banquette, Nurse Mumm-Ra would no doubt look up here when she saw Sharon and I'd get it in the neck for slouching and eating my pen. *I'm just a man, lady.*

"Ms McKenzie," Sharon said loudly and very clearly.

"*Sister* McKenzie," was the doleful reply. "Perhaps we should hold questions to the end...?" But Sharon had already begun talking.

"Can you tell me what you mean by meesoh-gai-knee."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose you may have not heard the term before dear. It means discrimination against women."

Sharon's mouth was open, goldfish-like. "You mean... misogyny? Misogyny."

There was a beat. The world was very still.

"You can say it either way, dear." A dismissive laugh.

"You can't." Half an hour later in the corridor on the way to the canteen Sharon was still talking about it. "She's read it in a book. She's read it in a book and never heard it said. Pronouncing it in that stupid way in front of a roomful of students in a lecture about the fundamentals of nursing practice."

"Well, practice does..."

"DON'T." She stopped by the fire door. Other students passed us. "I'm gonna put a complaint in. I'm gonna do it now."

"Well, okay I'll sign it too if you like. I guess." I looked down the corridor ahead of us "Hey, what d'ya..."

But she'd already gone.

Back/Wards

"Charge-Nurse Williams?"

"*Sister Williams.*"

"Oh, I'm sorry, *Sister Williams*, do you know who the charge-nurse is today?"

"*I am.*" She flushed a little. I enjoyed the effect I had on her. I painted a puzzled expression on my face and chose my next words carefully.

"Oh. Then Sister, perhaps if I wait till after lunch I can talk to the Charge-Nurse? I'm supposed to be doing a placement on this ward today. I need to talk to a charge-nurse." I pretended to look around the ward for somebody in more authority.

Her redness deepened. She snatched the paper out of my hand and poked a pale finger at it. "It says right here, Mr er... *Cummerfud.*" *I'm sure she mispronounced my name on purpose, cheeky cow.* "That I am the one managing this ward today."

"Yes, but I wondered if that had changed because you're not a charge-nurse. Oh, have you met my colleague? Sister Mary Inviolata? She's a nun. Do you know her? Maybe you pray togeth..."

"Shadow Nurse Charles," she clipped and stalked off toward the nurses' station signalling the end of our happy introduction. *Hmm, I seem to have this reaction from every Sister I meet.*

I sighed. Ward 4E had skid-marked walls like dirty underwear. Yellowed lino that saw puke and worse on a daily basis. IV drips out in the open, sticking into flesh where everyone can see. Pruny faced pensioners coughing up stuff and looking at it, wrapping it in tissue, saving it for later to show to their friends. Sick people calling nurse over light snatches of daytime television. *Nurse, nurse.* Puzzle

magazines out of reach on the floor. *Nurse, nurse.* Plastic tumblers of weak orange drink sitting in puddles of weak orange drink next to plastic pitchers of weak orange drink. *This is what hell looks like.* Beelzebub has turned up the heat. Starched, unbreathable uniform fabric cut into my neck. *I don't even look like a nurse. I look like the dentist from Little Shop of Horrors. I want a cigarette. I want a cold pint of lager and a ploughman's. Eight hours of this? Eight hours in this urine soaked, poo-scented sauna? I hope to God Nurse Charles is a laugh.*

He wasn't.

"Supernumerary is considered a dirty word around here," said Nurse Charles as he tucked in the corner of the sheet of the bed we were making.

"I know much worse ones. Want me to tell you one?" I smoothed the top sheet and fluffed the pillow with a slap. "What rhymes with shunt? Let's think..."

The male nurse was paying no attention. He was already halfway to the next bed and pulling fresh sheets off the trolley.

"They just expect everyone to pull their weight."

I took an exaggerated breath in and said, "Are you making fat jokes about Sister Williams again? Wash your mouth out. She's just big boned."

"A little precision please, Mr *Cummerfud*. Let's have nice *tight* corners, shall we?"

"We shall."

"Watch me. Do the corners like this. Fold the sheet under the mattress. Like *so*."

"Hey look at me, gaining knowledge. A degree in sheet-ology." I put on a Spanish accent "Hello everybody. I am Nurse Sheet. I come with my big bag of sheet and share my sheet with everyone. Hey you! Do you need a sheet? You look like you need a sheet. Relaaaaaax. I will give sheet to everybody."

"Shhhh, stop mucking about, you'll get us in trouble. Changing bedding is just part of nursing. Same as everything else."

"I suppose so. Tho' wouldn't it be easier if we just gave everyone a sleeping bag? If they die, we can just zip 'em up and shove 'em down the laundry chute straight into the incinerator. No muss, no fuss."

"First rule of nursing. Try and keep the patients *alive*."

"They should make that the St Bartholomew's motto. It'd look great on a tea towel in the gift shop."

Changing The Dressings

- You may only watch nursing dramas or nursing documentaries on the television in the accommodation's common area. If none are being broadcast, you may insert one of the VHS tapes for viewing. All are nursing dramas and nursing documentaries. There are no exceptions.
- Constant vigilance on ward placements to eradicate any speck of filth is juxtaposed with the nurses' kitchen microwave having layers of baked potato and curry dating back to Florence Nightingale's legendary mid-morning tea breaks.
- When shadowing Sister McKenzie on her drug round;
 - Do not refer to medication as Smarties, M&Ms, or Sherbet Dibs in capsule form.
 - Do not say "It's time for your pharma-cute-icals" to patients.
 - Do not say "Oh my God, did you swallow those? Charge-Nurse McKenzie, this patient has swallowed their suppositories," even as a joke.
 - Do not refer to Sister McKenzie as a charge-nurse under any circumstances.
 - Most important - Do not refer to Sister McKenzie as a charge-nurse.
 - For the love of God - Do not refer to Sister McKenzie as a charge-nurse.
- When requested to take everyone's blood pressure on the ward, and lack the skill to do so, do not 'make-up-something-that's-probably-in-the-ball-park' and expect no repercussions.

Iguanarama

Musk scented sunlight broke through windows that were not my windows. The floor carpeted in threadbare battleship grey. Towers of paperwork on the verge of collapse near deep emerald walls where fissures of white plaster showed through. Soft and comfortable was the bed I found myself in and although there was trepidation about where I might be, it wasn't enough to get me out of the warm cotton envelope and hunt for clothes. I felt about under the bedclothes and rolled my eyes. Naked again. *Carry On Where's My Underpants.*

Fresh coffee and cigarette infusions waltzed through from beyond the open door. Blue fumes in amber sun beams danced geometric shapes, these early morning odours teased my still pickled, alcohol buzzed brain. A quiet opera was playing not far away, and the playful sound of... trickling water? *Someone peeing? Shall I risk a cough? Run a cough up the flagpole see who came to salute? *cough** A cup clinked on a saucer. A creak of leather as a body rose up from sitting. A barefooted pad across hardwood floors and a figure stood in the doorway.

"Mornin'," it said.

"Mmmmmorning," I replied, rubbing my eyes pretending I had just that second woke up. I looked at him. A slightly built fella, middle to late thirties, probably, pretty good looking in a Napoleonic way. Tight thin features, a tousled light brown boyish crop. His green silk dressing gown looked oddly flamboyant, like a feather boa on Sherlock Holmes. A serious peacock.

"Coffee." It wasn't a question. The figure left the doorway. Alone again, I took the opportunity to scan the room looking for my stuff. Smoking in bed was no doubt frowned upon but hey, this looked like a nice place, and I was in no hurry to get back to the nurses' accommodation to salute *my three bags full* at Nurse Ratched just yet. Coffee, cigarettes, and hangover-sex were all on the cards right here. Why leave?

He returned before I could do anything more. He held two steaming stoneware mugs in one hand and an ashtray in the other. A lit cigarette hanging from the corner of pencil thin lips. It was the sort of image that Humphrey Bogart could probably pull off but no one else. No one here. Still. I lifted the corner of the

duvet so the man could get in. Reached out and took one of the cups as he let his green silk fall to the floor. He was in good shape, hirsute, my dick was bigger though, so I wasn't completely at his mercy.

"Just how I like it. How'd you know?" I said blowing steam off the top. He looked puzzled for the briefest moment.

"We had coffee last night when we got back from the Edward." He offered a cigarette, full strength Marlboro, well, when in Rome. I took it. I could find my menthols later. He lit the end as I inhaled. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh yeah," I lie-laughed. So that's where I had been. The King Edward in Islington, oh God, that's right. I'd walked there from Barts for something to do on a do-nothing day. God, had I been there till closing time? How much money had I spent? I was totally screwed. I'd have to resort to stealing food from the communal fridge. Again. Mr. Popularity.

"You don't remember, do you?"

"I do, I do. It's just all a bit hazy. I think I must've been there all day. Things will come back after a coffee or two," I took a sip. "Wow, that's good coffee."

"Thanks. You kept saying you had to go home but I'm afraid I kept buying us drinks. I apologise if I kept you from anything." He didn't look too sorry.

"Nah. Just student nurse stuff. It's all bollocks anyway. 'Tho I should try and get back over there pretty soon."

But it was another hour till I left the bed.

I was still pulling on my t-shirt and looking for my boots as I wandered into the sitting room of his flat. Deco leather sofas and Erté style furniture stood around looking cross and expensive on Chinese rugs. There was money here. And... a pond. A deep taupe wall had been enclosed in glass down which ran rivulets of water into a container on the floor. About a foot deep and four feet across complete with river boulders, weeds, and some stoned looking koi. Well, ain't that something I thought and had a faint desire to flick pennies into it. On safari past potted palms and ferns to find the toilet I found myself face to snout with a huge lizard. Although he was safely behind a scratched plastic wall taking up an entire length of the hallway standing stock still on a large knobbly piece of wood. I had to vocalise my

bewilderment in an ever so slightly nellie way. More in surprise than anything, you understand.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. I uh, forgot about your um... dragon?"

"Boris." The man came and stood in the doorway sipping his coffee. "The iguana. You met him last night. You said he was scale-o-rific." He raised his eyebrows.

"Of course. So fun here."

Go Fish

"What's up?" he asked. I was leaning over the side of a brown leather deco armchair, my upper body hovering above a few inches above the indoor pond as I looked at the koi. *Oblivious swimmius. Buh-buh-buh.* I sprinkled in a pinch of fish flakes. They stuck their heads above the water. *Buh-buh-buh, do you wonder where the sky is little fishes?*

"I think your fish are bored."

"Fish don't get bored."

"How do you know? They might look out from their pond and say in fish-speak, hey Fred, where the fuck has my Japanese garden gone?"

"They never had a Japanese garden. They're from Streatham."

"Still. They can dream." I sat down properly in the chair, and he pressed a glass of red wine into my hand. "Thank you. I've been thinking. You know. I reckon there's a possibility I'm not really cut out for nursing."

"No?"

"No. Everyone is really serious. Nobody has any fun there."

"It's nursing. It's not supposed to *be* fun. It's about healing."

"Hmmm." I eyed him and lit a cigarette using the table lighter embedded in a block of blue and green marble, blowing vague-sapphire smoke toward a glass chandelier that could use a good clean. An electricity bill left on the kitchen counter during my second visit removed the embarrassing question of having to ask his name when sober. Dr Francis Fuller-Jones. Out of the hundreds of doctors working

in the hospital I had found a retired one day-drinking in an Islington gay bar. He no longer generally practised, but wrote himself occasional prescriptions, and together we had been practicing generally in the bedroom. Other times he haunted Islington establishments, having lunches, doing things and stuff I didn't need to know. He never stepped a toe across a zone border unless he was in his jeep and driving out of the city to visit country friends. A small antiques concern somewhere or other was sometimes mentioned, but not visited (at least by me). Now he sat on an art deco walnut sofa, sniffing his wine like a fine vintage of poppers. Running his hand over burnished leather upholstery. Leontyne Price was doing Puccini on vinyl again. He looked content. Grey winter eyes looked over the top of his wine. "You can take your clothes off now," he said.

Doctor Knocked Her

A postcard. Black and white. Sandra Bernhard wearing a halter top and looking furious with whoever it was behind the camera lens. A stamp celebrating the opening of the 'chunnel'. *Fancy. She'll like that stamp.*

Caroline,

See you at top of escalators, Angel tube, Thursday Feb 10, 6pm.

Think we're having fish, Francis cooking. He put sugar in the pasta sauce last week, so... dunno.

Been ages. We'll have a drink.

Looking forward.

Love M.

But for the vertigo inducing escalators, you'd think Angel Islington was some cavernous white open kitchened restaurant. Brushed barriers of steel, industrial cabinets, faint whiff of burger meat, Dettol. *Everyone here annoyed. Yup, seems like a London restaurant to me.* Only the chorus of commuter chaos, and a distantly distinct 'mine-DUH THE gah-PUH' gave it away. *This is the cleanest tube station in the whole of London. My name is Lord Fartington Derby-Hat, and as I breed mink*

for the upper classes I demand absolute daily decontamination of my local tube. I will NOT have tradespeople coming into my minkery with dirty tube shoes. A heaven of unblemishment for my unsullied Angel or I will reduce my Tory party contributions and start coming to the house of lords. I longed to see a Juicy Fruit wrapper balled up in a corner, a used condom stuck to a wall, graffiti proclaiming that Tracey loved to suck cocks. *Anything.* The legion of pointed-stick-wielding-black-bag-dragging transport staff would rather die than see that happen. Must be the only station they work at. Friday night at Tottenham Court Road was like digging through a skip to get to the ticket machine.

"What are you mumbling about?"

"Oh, Caroline, hi! Miles away. How are ya?" We hugged. I kept the hug a beat too long.

"You okay?" She held my shoulders at arm's length then wiped her ruby lipstick off my cheek. Caroline had her Caroline uniform on. Black and grey, top to toe. Silver jewellery dripping in strategic places. Recently atomised Calvin Klein.

"Hmm?"

"Yeah, course. Just missed ya."

"Okay. Well look." She pulled open her charcoal and chrome backpack, "I brought a bottle of red and a bottle of white, because I don't know what he prefers. I'm dying to get a pint though first, so shall we do that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure we'll be okay. I don't know why we just didn't all go to the pub anyway. He just seemed to want an excuse to grill some trout."

"Normally I don't eat anything with a face."

"Well, I'm sure he'll cut the faces off if you ask nicely."

Seven pm saw us buzzing the Doctor's buzzer. The relic of a wooden door squawked electronic unlocking, uncomfortably cyborgian. No word from Francis on the intercom, just the buzz of admittance. The two pints of Carlsberg Export sloshing in my belly took no notice and I stretched out my arms in the lobby; Julie Andrews on a mountaintop blissfully unaware of the third Reich. A graceful arc of art nouveau iron bannistered the steps. They flowed up the stairwell on marbled feet to a stained glass pyramid skylight four stories above. "Nice uh?"

Doctor Francis lived in the refurbished residence of a long forgotten concierge, the entrance hidden in an alcove off the hall, a sort of Victorian oubliette for staff. Not seen, not heard. I pushed back the door. Francis was in the kitchen slicing something red and syrupy, perhaps making a start on the fish faces. Leontyne was once more blasting her way through a series of arias, *take a break Leontyne*. A sharp tang of vinaigrette zested on the air. No salad in sight. Glass of burgundy next to the chopping board. An ashtray held a Marlboro that had burnt down to the filter. He put down an extraordinarily long knife and turned to Caroline. Here began a litany of nice-to-meet-you-I-heard-so-much-es. Very grown-up. I chose my best grin, plastered it to my face and started to administer drinks until Francis told me to sit down.

It was a little uncomfortable eating trout next to a pond of koi, faceless or no. After several glasses of wine, it seemed easier to live with. Only bones were left. With three of us smoking, you could barely see the pond through the nicotine cloud, so silver lining and all that.

Caroline admired the antiques, said nice things about the décor. Effortlessly charming. A racontress, she told Francis about the Christmas snooker game we'd shared, laughed about my parents, waxed wild about Camden Council. Francis talked much of the importance of his previous position in the Red Cross. Dangerous places he'd been, blood, land mines, how very beautiful his possessions were. More than once my Aunt cast a bloodshot eye in my direction and emptied her glass. The springs were missing under the sofa cushion where I sat next to the Doctor. A slowly sinking spectator in the verbal Olympics. Occasionally I threw out a wisecrack, sometimes it even landed.

During the third bottle of cabernet, after the Shiraz but before the Barolo, Caroline made it clear she had no intention of becoming bosom buddies to Boris. Grinning Francis had insisted on taking him out and waving it in her direction like an airplane. *Stroke Boris, go on, stroke him!* She begged him not to bring it too close. Boris wasn't fun to touch - like any form of spiky cardboard covered in pins. Caroline escaped to the toilet and didn't come back until Boris had retired and I fanned notes of a robust Italian red under the bathroom door. She swept out in a fresh coat of

lipstick, hair repaired, Calvin Klein had got into bed with the Marlboro man. She clicked her way into the living room and applauded the new carafe.

It felt a good natured uncomfortable as we sat and enjoyed the last bottle. Caroline wished she'd had her guitar so she could sing us a song. I was glad it was in Kilburn. Francis quietly spun the stem of his wine glass in his fingers, I thought it his crooked contentment. He asked me to make a gin and tonic, don't put a lemon slice in it, just the zest like I showed you. I made three as Caroline sourced a cab on the avocado princess phone in the kitchen. Neither of ours took much drinking, the Doctor savoured his more.

It took a little time to get her into the taxi when it arrived. I probably should have measured gin. There were a hundred goodbyes. A forgotten lighter. A hundred goodbyes again. I didn't hear what the driver was mouthing to himself as he revved his engine. It probably wasn't very Christian despite the two-thumbs-up dancing Jesus stuck to the dashboard in a large mass of Blu-Tac. Finally with the passenger in the back, her cab took off down the street in the direction of High Holborn. I waved it away, let out a little sigh and bolstered myself to re-enter the concierge's old flat.

Francis had opened his windows; the fog was clearing. "I've got your Aunt's arse sweat on my Follot leather ribbed chair." He was rubbing it down with a tea-towel.

"...well, it is ribbed for her plea...."

"Fat arse. Sat there drinking all my good wine."

I looked in squashed packets for a Marlboro.

"She's not coming again. Don't ask her."

I lit a cigarette. "She wants us for a garden picnic when the weather gets warmer." I looked hopefully at the dregs in a cut glass tumbler, but disappointed to taste melted ice.

"Go on your own."

"Kay. But you'll miss meeting the nazi who lives below her."

"Go on your own."

"Kay."

"Fucking Kilburn."

Egypt Unzipped

"I want you to come with me."

"Much as I'd love to be living out my Agatha Christie Nile fantasy. I need to get my shit together here."

"You don't need to. You're fine."

"My wallet says otherwise. I gotta find a job. Place to live."

"You live here."

"It's a fairly awkward situation when I don't have a key. It involves a lot of the bench at the bus stop."

"I explained that to you, it's the board of governors. They're very restrictive on who gets keys into the building. There are some important tenants. That said you can of course use my key whilst I'm away."

"Well thank you. And think. When you come back, I'll have a shiny new job, and a place to live all of my very own. It'll be great. Go endure the curse of the mummy, I'll look after Boris and the fishes. Boris likes pizza, right?"

Here Today, Dalston Tomorrow

DALSTON E8: lrg dbl bdrm UF - young crowd / old house - 50pw + utl Liz 020 XXXXXX
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Grey and wet. Bits of white glossed wood floating in the puddles on the platform - Suiciders from the holes in the rotting wooden canopy no doubt. *Is this even safe? Hardly anyone got off the train. I guess you can get a tube to anywhere in London as long as it's not Dalston. This public transport was overland for God's sake. Practically a dirty word for a seasoned tube rider with eight months experience under his belt. What am I? An animal?* There was something primal in utilising anything that wasn't a tube. Forbidden territory, a schoolboy 'out of bounds', these

places, these things are not for you. Day to day I felt deliciously rebellious using anything other than the Central line. According to the London AtoZ (all hail my London bible, never steer me wrong) Dalston was slumped in the void between Hackney and Islington. Had no tube, lots of buses but of course you had to know what your destination looked like to get off in the right place or end up lost. Worse; the suburbs. Dun dun dunnnnnn. Ask the driver? Such crazy talk.

I emerged onto the high street next to a battered supermarket. Nobody had bothered to lift its metal window shutters despite being open. A salt'n'vinegar crisp packet, and several plastic carrier bags stuck to the rained pavement right outside its door. I checked the note on a fluorescent yellow post-it and re-centred myself on the AtoZ to get my bearings. Two magnificent black ladies walked past me in a kaleidoscope of African fabric; fuchsias, glittering golds, green foliage paradise prints. They passed by, laughing, under a rainbow golfing umbrella as big as the sky. Sunshine on a rainy day. I watched them go.

Back to the A2Z. I should cross the road, here. Over to that noisy fruit and veg market straight out of Eastenders. Then dodging discarded wooden punnets and shouty men try to sell me strawbs I... go two streets down to find Sandringham Road. I knew getting that map-reading badge in the Cubs would come in useful one day.

Sandringham Road - Large whitewashed 19th century terraced houses lined the street. Occasionally a tree set in the pavement, but one or two of the younger ones seemed to have been run over. Metal dustbins sat in the gutters wherever they could find space between parked cars, a creative way of saving your parking spot maybe. There were no entrances at street levels. A gate, then steps going down to a basement to the left, big fancy stairs (there was a railing at least) going up to a large front door. All the frontages were the same. Concrete in varying shades of decay. I liked it. It was a street graciously rotting away and not giving a fuck. A good way to grow old. 82 had a blue door, many times painted - none of them recently. A cracked pane of glass in the panel had been repaired with duct tape. I reached for the door knocker, but it had been painted over and refused to be moved so I used my knuckles to beat a short tattoo on the door. Someone somewhere was

cooking a curry, and I could hear faint wafts of tribal chanting. Maybe this was a cult. A curry cult. The Children of Bhuna. I should leave.

Shit. Too late. The door is opening - Garam masala and the ethno-opera got a little louder. Two women were standing in a scuffed hallway with a checker-board floor. Although one was shorter and older than the other there was an unmistakable similarity between the two. Brown hair, brown eyes, olive skin, little snubby nose. *Don't look cult-y. No hoods. Should be fine.*

"Hi. You're Matt, right?"

"Live, and in person. Hi." I put out my hand and shook their hands. The two were very smiley. This mild formality of a handshake seemed to have amused them greatly.

"I'm Liz, this is my sister Katherine."

"Hi, hi. How are ya?"

"C'mon in out the rain. Did you have to come far?" Liz, the elder sister seemed to be in charge. She took my coat off and threw it on a chair.

"Well, I suppose not really, but I never know how to judge distances once you get underground... then overground trains... so..." I put my bag on my coat. The hall table was covered in takeout menus and circulars, a dusty blue vase with dead marigolds in it. I smiled.

"It's like the Wombles." Katherine's first words stopped everything rather. Her sister and I looked at her. Liz made an indulgent noise, but Katherine continued regardless. "Y'know, the Wombles. Underground, overground, wandering free."

"Wombling free," corrected Liz and rolled her eyes at me with a head tilt. "Katherine lives here with her boyfriend Michael. He's not here now, but you'll meet him sometime. Uhhh, that room there off the hall, the old dining room. That's where Shakti lives. Only, she's not here either..."

"We don't see much of her, do we?" said Katherine. "But she's ever so nice."

"Yes, she's ever so nice."

"Unusual name. Shakti," I said, attempting to look quizzical. I didn't want to ask where she was from. Might sound rude.

"Urr, mmm. I think it's Hindu actually. Something to do with female god energy... Or something."

"She's not actually Hindi though," put in Katherine. "She's from Surrey. Her parents are dry-cleaners." The corner of her mouth twitched up a little "Any letters addressed to Helen are hers, just push 'em under the door."

"Namaste," I said. Katherine and I shared an imperceptible smile.

They showed me around. The kitchen was large, dated, messy, dogeared. A little saucer by the kettle to put teabags in so they could be used again. I decided to not take them up on the offer of tea. There was more lino missing than lino on the floor. A beaten up behemoth of an orange corduroy sofa under a hurricane of Indian scarves. It pointed toward a tiny portable TV propped up on a chair, matching the one in the hallway complete with flyers and menus. Condensation covered windows looked out onto an overgrown garden which Liz wistfully explained was forbidden for our use as the building's owner who lived in the basement flat with his prodigious family were in charge of it.

"They never use it," she lamented. "It's all gone to rack and ruin. You know, there's apple trees at the back. I could make all sorts of things, plant vegetables even." Liz looked disdainfully at the yoghurt pots on the windowsill with small shoots poking out. "It's not the same."

Up unmatched carpeted stairs to the first landing found you the main bathroom. Roomy, but cold, more chequerboard tiles. Toothpaste freckles on the mirrored cabinet over the sink, and some laundry hung on a wire over the bath. A long thin window running the length of the room displayed more of Liz's plant pastime. "It's always freezing in here," said Katherine. "But your spider plants don't seem to mind, do they Lizzie?"

More stairs, another landing - three doors. One was a large cupboard/single room. "We don't think it's fair to rent that one out, it's too small. You could barely get a single mattress in there. We just chuck stuff in there we don't know what to do with." There seemed to be quite a collection of things they didn't know what to do with.

The next room was Katherine and Michael's. Another huge room with tall ceilings. Neat and tidy, in contrast to the rest of the house, spicy ethnic rugs on the floor and a large flag I didn't recognise hanging over the bed. "Michaels from South

Africa." Katherine explained, as she straightened a book on the table by the bay window. "They got a new flag. It's very exciting."

"It's... It's a nice one." It was the only thing that came into my head. Flag compliments were not my forte.

On the other side of a narrow passage of stairs was the final door. The chanting and didgeridoos (please, didgeri-don't) I had heard earlier was coming from here. Liz knocked. After a couple of seconds, the door opened and a pale, blonde, dreadlocked couple stood in the doorway in matching drapey cotton smocks. The room was filled with smoke. You could tour Europe in the bags under their half-lidded eyes. They looked at us rather stupidly and giggled.

"Shavonne, Jerry, this is Matt. He might be taking the room upstairs." I had no idea which name belonged to which person. But judging by the amount they had been smoking, neither did they.

"Cool. See you later. Welcome." It was the girl that spoke. Then she closed the door with a click and turned the volume up on her Inuit-walrus-tamer-choir CD.

"Shavonne's boyfriend Jerry doesn't live here, but he is here a lot," said Liz to the closed door.

"He sells weed. Mostly to Shavonne... then he helps her smoke it."

"Well, that's convenient, I guess."

"Okay, if we go up these little stairs here." I went first up the gloomy passage, a bare bulb on a small landing illuminated an avocado green trimphone sitting on the carpet with a long wire. The wall behind it sported a poster declaring the lineup for the 1990 Camden Jazz Festival. I opened the door to my right. Liz called from behind Katherine at my back. "Oh, that's my room."

"Are you sure?" I said. The room was filled with furniture, lamps, towers of books and magazines, lengths of wood, this and that and knicks and knacks. Packed. I couldn't even see where one might sleep, maybe behind one of the drawers propped up against a wall. Plants longing for light, dying in shiny metal tins, plastic pots, and coffee mugs in the semidarkness.

Liz came up behind us and squeezed in. "It's a little cluttered."

"Cluttered?" I backed into a column of old knitting magazines balanced on an MDF bookcase. They toppled to the floor, or as much of the floor as they could find.

Liz made a noise of despair, her hands clasping and unclasping themselves, but still trying to smile through it all. "Well," I said "perhaps we should just...uh" I manoeuvred around as much as I could - the door would only open halfway and there were three of us. I didn't want to knock anything else over and give Liz a coronary. Katherine the poster-child of unconcerned bemusement flattened herself against some reclaimed wooden planks leaning against the wall and allowed me past. With the postage-stamp landing and the steep stairs leading down the passage, I was having flashbacks to that detective falling down the stairs in Psycho. I exhaled with relief as I got to the other door and into a very spacious attic room. Empty apart from a naked double mattress on the floor. I walked over to the window, rain hitting the glass harder than ever before. It looked down onto the street. I took a breath.

"It's great," I said. "I'll take it."

His Egyptian Condition

"We got dysentery on our fifth day of the Nile cruise. After that the only Egyptian engineering I saw was in the en-suite."

"Everybody got dysentery?"

"Apart from the natives. Laughing at us."

"God. What were you eating?"

"Probably came from the ice. Probably made with Nile water. They're very dirty people, Egyptians. I thought I was going to die," he said.

"I'm sorry I missed it." Dr Francis looked up from his wine with a *look*. "Well. I mean I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

"I could have written a prescription. All you would have needed to do was go to the chemist and get it. Would have sorted the whole thing." His face flushed. I hoped it was the wine.

"I would have got myself kidnapped and forced to work as a snake charmer's assistant," I said in a cheerful voice. He didn't laugh, and I could still feel his heat as I lit a new cigarette. "Can't speak a word of Egyptian. Would have come back with condoms and Lemsip. Completely useless." I laughed an easy breezy laugh - throw

away, disposable. Picked up the merlot and topped off his glass with a smile and my breath held.

He watched me silently for a minute then quite quietly said "I got you a present. Here." He produced a small white paper bag and tossed it onto the coffee table where it landed with a light tap. I stubbed out my cigarette and reached over to pick it up. Inside the bag was an oblong black box. "I only managed to get it yesterday, on the way to the airport. Was too sick before."

"Thank you, Francis. You didn't have to get me anything. Really." I opened the box. Inside on a thin chain was a silver cartouche. Three hieroglyphics set inside, a bird, a hand, and a bowl. "Wow. It's beautiful." I turned it over in my fingers.

"The hieroglyphics are your initials. Put it on." I removed my dog tags (new colour, all the rage - black) and undid the clasp on the silver chain. I couldn't fasten it once it was around my throat. Francis got up from the sofa and stood behind my chair, taking hold of the chain, and securing it around my neck. "There," he said. "That's not going anywhere." It felt heavy.

A little later as I left the bed on the pretence of getting cigarettes and making coffee. I looked at my reflection in the microwave door as the kettle boiled. The silver cartouche hung high on my bare chest. Cold. Almost artificially shiny. Its straight bottom corner had already scraped a crescent weal on my breastbone. Francis' desecration of my own personal burial chamber was a lot rougher than just two weeks ago. Just missed me and got over excited, I guess.

I had yet to tell him that Liz and Katherine were expecting me on Sandringham Road at the weekend. Two cardboard boxes sat in the corner near Boris's enclosure. I hadn't bothered unpacking here apart from clothes. It took a minute or two to plan how to force it into the conversation. Although perhaps it wasn't long enough.

"Hey, when you were away some good stuff happened."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, the temp agency set me up with working at the Prudential. I've been there for two weeks."

"Urgh. The Prudential? Seriously?"

"Yeah. It's in this super-fancy glass building near Tottenham Court Road. It finishes this week though. Next week they're sending me to the Serious Fraud Office. I have to sign the secrecy act. It's like I'm a spy or something."

"Hm. Yeah. Exactly the same." He yawned as he said it. "Actually, that's just down the road from here. Convenient at least."

"Yeah. I could meet you during my lunch break. Um. That brings me to the other thing."

He laid back in the bed with an arm around the back of his head, breathing smoke out like Smaug and looking like he'd just smelt a hobbit. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"I found a place to live. So, you won't have to be tripping over my boxes anymore. Not too far neither."

"You're moving out? Where to?" Smaug sat up and leaned forward, taking the ashtray off the side table, and putting it in his lap.

"Dalston. Really lovely house, big Victorian. I'm sure you're gonna love it."

"Dalston? You've got to be fucking joking. I wouldn't even drive through Dalston. Jesus."

"It's colourful." He made a noise. "They have a 24 hour bagel shop."

"So what?"

"You like bagels. Sometimes. We shared one for breakfast once".

"Well good luck to you. I'd drive you over there, but I think I'm gonna have to catch up with the antiques shop this weekend. We'll see."

As it turned out, the antique place needed him.

From Napoleon to Dalstonian

The bag won't close. It's a big bag, but it won't close. Why are you reluctant to close, you stupid zipper? Is it the CDs stuffed every which way? Fuck you. I began to take them out and stack them on the carpet. I suppose I didn't exactly need

those Bizarre Inc remixes. Oh. But wait. Know what I actually don't need? This nurse's uniform. I pulled it out of the holdall and threw it on the unmade bed. Francis never made the bed, and today neither had I. He had left early, hadn't said where. Live 'n' Kicking was having a phone in with Wet Wet Wet in the other room, and as I repacked the CDs, I hoped they wouldn't start singing that song. Not today. Prayers answered. The bag closed.

It wasn't everything, there was still a box of stuff. Maybe if Francis had a good day with the antiques, he might drop it around. I had left the address and phone number on the back of an envelope on the kitchen counter signed with a light-hearted "Hope to see you soon." But really, my mind was more concerned with moving day. I could always drop by next week when I start the Serious Fraud Office gig. Boris didn't even get the benefit of a goodbye. I shut the door firmly behind me. I enjoyed the freedom of not caring how I'd get back in again. The emancipation of Matt. I hit the street and began the long walk toward Islington. Once there I could get the bus. Sun was out. People seemed cheerful. I seemed cheerful. It was a nice, happy day untainted by even one Wet Wet Wet song.

Dalston on a Saturday was a circus. Every fella flogging bananas and potatoes on the market had a yin to be the ringmaster. Who can shout louder, whose produce will make you ride the trapeze with joy. And joy was the word, nobody could be sad in Dalston on a Saturday. It was carnival. If everyone burst into a song and dance routine, Dick Van Dyke showed up with Julie Andrews and quickstepped you arm-in-arm to your front door. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary. Welcome to the chorus. This was theatre.

"They're having fun out there today," I said as Liz opened the door to me.

"Who?"

"Everyone." I dropped the holdall on the hall floor. "Markets-a-poppin."

"Oh yeah?" She didn't look surprised. I guess she was used to it. "Is this all your stuff?"

"Oh. Um uh-huh. I have another box of things but I couldn't manage it on the bus today."

"Come and have a cup of tea, and I'll give you the key. Oh, and Michael is here. Michael! Our new housemate is here."

Katherine and a mass of messy ginger curls came into the hall. A pale, freckled face on a barrel chested brawny twenty-something. "Howzit, Matt." He shook my hand, firm and enthusiastic. He caught onto my confusion quickly "You weren't expecting a whitey, eh?"

I laughed, genuinely. Nothing quite this whitey at least. "Oh, you got me. You know, I don't think I was even thinking about it until you came through the door. I'm sorry."

He wasn't in the least phased. "No worries, brah. It happens." We followed him into the kitchen, a small hand, Katherine's, on my shoulder.

Doctor Drop-er

Dressing full-on skinhead style when exploring Dalston that first day had its issues. Whilst perusing the cheapest bread products and margarine at the local Happy Shopper surrounded by people of colour I realised my error - I had showed up to a black-tie event in a chicken suit. Being sexy and throwing shapes with my tribe at The London Apprentice on a Friday night, yes. The Dalston mini-mart on a Sunday afternoon, no. I returned home feeling I had done something very wrong indeed.

"Won't do that again. Dial it back for Dalston."

"What's that?" Liz was lying under half the Indian scarves on the sofa with a book in her hand. I hadn't seen her.

"Oh. Hi. Nothing. I think I've just been mistaken for a white supremacist that's all."

"Oh no... why?"

"I was trying to be sexy."

"Mmmhm" It was an odd noise. *Liz talk for yup, I hear ya.*

"Okay, so. Plastic white bread in a plastic bag, plastic tub of plastic margarine that has so little marg or butter in it they can only call it spread. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to tomorrow's lunch." Tonight was a tin of beans, and maybe the end slice. I cursed the packet of cigarettes called Black Cat - the cheapest ones I

could find. But I'd rather do without food than smokes. Katherine came into the kitchen as I was putting the spread in the battered Frigidaire that looked like it had been lifted from a skip 10 years ago, put back five years ago, taken out again and put in our kitchen the day before yesterday. It stank of old tomatoes and garlic powder and always had a tub of hummus growing mould in.

"Matty, this came for you. Did you see?"

"Eh?"

"This box." There was one of my brown cardboard boxes on the floor by the door. "And this." She waved an envelope.

"Really? Where'd it come from? That's my box of stuff. Was Francis here? Did he not wait?"

"I didn't see anyone. It was just outside the front door when I went to get bagels."

"You got bagels?" Said the pile of Indian scarves.

"He just... left it at the door?" I went and took the tiny white envelope, obviously a card of some kind. Probably saying he'd see me later or something. I opened it. There was a small abstract design on a piece of white watercolour paper, folded in two to make a card. You see this kind of thing in arty-farty little shops in Islington, takes 10 seconds to make but an hourly wage to pay for.

Dear Matt,

You broke my heart; how could you do that to me? I don't ever want to see you again.

F

"What did you do?" Katherine's voice whispered near my shoulder.

"I... don't. I... don't know, Move out?"

"At least you got your things." She rubbed my arm. "It's weird to just leave 'em on the doorstep though."

"I'll say. Um. You know what? I'll see you later." I went up to the top of the house and played some ridiculously cheerful music for a while, or at least until the

hippies downstairs complained I was disturbing their kalimba practice. They really were very up tight for laid back people.

The Man in Manpower

"Oh HIYA! Matthew, isn't it? Here for your registration? You're nice and early, uhhh I'll just find you a form to complete... Would you like some coffee? Water? No? Sure? Okay."

Over-perkiness was a trait I suspected I was going to be seeing a lot of at Manpower. Sandra's shiny strawberry talons moved what looked like the contents of a large handbag about her desk. She located a navy blue, faux-leather document folder from beneath a Kit Kat wrapper and a Kodak envelope, a photograph of Sandra mugging at the camera in a bikini on a beach slid out.

"Whoops, ha ha. Get back in there.' She picked up the folder with a smile, pushed the envelope in an open drawer and said, 'was in Cor-Phew last month,' then whispered "gawgeous." Another big smile. *She has lipstick on her teeth.*

Sandra rolled back her office chair and stood up. Manpower's office staff livery was a bastardisation of an old fashioned flight attendant uniform; skirt and blazer in navy with gold piping, topped off with a jaunty ascot around the neck with the Manpower logo emblazoned on it. *Were the men in the office expected to wear an ascot? I couldn't see any men... at Man-power. But then again were Kelly girls always girls? No doubt there were a couple of utter bastards masquerading as Office Angels. But ascots? Would I have to wear one on assignment? Would I have to stow the hand luggage in the overhead bin? Was I destined to start my office career looking like Fred from Scooby Doo?*

Blissfully unaware of these important questions, she led me to a corner sitting area. Low semi-casual chairs around a low semi-casual coffee table littered with trade magazines (Temp Today, Recruitment Digest... Hello!). A fanned display of the Manpower newsletter had its very own clear plastic shrine, centre stage. I knew this newsletter just had to be super fun because the Manpower had an exclamation mark after it. Manpower! Bam! Jazz hands! The pictures of the temps in various office situations were all laughing so hysterically I felt concerned for their mental well-

being. *Manpower! SO fun guys! Oh my GOD we're so damn fun.* My mouth had suddenly become very dry.

Sandra had caught me eyeing Manpower! Perhaps mistaking my dry mouth for enthusiasm. "OH yah, yah. That comes out every couple of months or so. It's really greahht. Sometimes they interview one of my temps. Like if they're temp of the month or something? Do well and maybe they'll ask you." She let out a long exaggerated gasp, and I prayed for sarcasm that never came. "You never know. Fame! Eeee. Imagine. Exciting. So, just fill this form out, and sign at the end. Sure, about that coffee? Water? No? Sure? Need a pen? No? Oh good. I'll just go and get your data entry test set up. We're just gonna see what kind of speed you can do. Nothing to worry about, you'll be greahht. We'll have a little chat after. Okay? Greahht, greahht. Shout if you need anything."

She left behind a short-lived floral scent, the chair cushion let out a sad sigh and re-inflated itself. Sandra floated further back into the office calling for someone called AshLEAN who had access to something called a 'registration floppy'. I resisted the desire to cry out "I'm just nervous, it happens to a lot of guys," and turned to my clipboard.

The form was basic and over-logo-ed. I briefly contemplated suggesting to Sandra that unless your name was Agnetta Faltskog and it was 1982 that perhaps blue mascara wasn't your friend. But as I dithered over the numbers in the postcode of Francis' flat, I decided I rather liked blue mascara. In fact, I admired the tenacity Sandra must have had to even find a tube. *Go Sandra. You wear that blue mascara if you want to. And if you get drunk at the office Christmas party, I'll get you singing Thank You for the Music on the karaoke.*

It'll be greahht.

Man from the Pru

Everybody knows what they're doing. Look at them, those bastards. An important meeting to get to, appropriate clothing, smart and professional, security passes at the ready, talking to colleagues, a leather briefcase, an executive effect, easy breezy plans for the weekend, come for dinner one night. None of them look up at the huge

Crystal Palace knockoff they're in, silver grey tiles, hothouse greenery swaying in the air conditioning, glass lifts straight out of Towering Inferno. Uniformed guards repeat good morning and check your pass. High heels and brogues. Eyes on you, and you and you. Wait for the lift. It's a movie set. They don't even look at it; just adjust their pocket squares, re-apply the powder.

"Welcome to Prudential, how can I help you?"

"Oh hi, yeah, I'm here to see Darpan Dhar. I'm from Manpower."

"Name?"

"...Darpan... Dhar... um." A blank look. "Durpin Door?"

"No...Your name."

"Oh yeah, ha. Commerford... Matt Commerford... From Manpower."

"Take a seat over there, security will come and get you for your photo."

"Photo?"

"For your pass. We will take a photo."

"Oh, well. Then. I'm ready for my close up, heh... wish I'd worn something low cut and sexy now." The man behind the desk double blinked but said nothing.

"Okay. So... Over there? Wait and?"

"Sit. Yes."

"Kay."

"What we're essentially doing Matt is updating our records to a new computer based electronic database. All the old written that is to say, hard copy records need transcribing into that database. Then the original records will be archived in the vault." Darpan Dhar was a tiny Indian man as slight as cricket stumps with a suit so sharp it could put your eye out. If you told me, you could snap him like a twig and throw him in a bush, I'd believe you. Mr Dhar led me through labyrinthine office corridors and open plan areas where worker bees buzzed around chewing the ends of pencils on the way to photocopiers. Flaccid faxes. Glass walls. Memos pronounced meemos They divided the interior almost randomly, like too many were ordered but the boss said, "well stick 'em in where you can anyway."

"You have vaults?"

"Yes... obviously. More than one."

"How very Dog Day Afternoon. Will I get to see them?"

"Well, not really, no."

"Ah..." Silence. "So, copying onto the data-whatsit? I can do that. No problem. Here to help. Manpower-can-do. Dib dib."

"Yes... Manpower will have to do. Now, I'll show you how I want it done, then leave you to it. There is a time-frame to do it by, I'll be monitoring that. Ummm, look I'm sorry if I'm patronising, er that is to say talking down to you. It's just I don't know how much you know how to do."

"Uh huh." I smiled at the floor. "I'll manage."

Couple of days later, after work I sat on a bench next to a red phone box where black and pink prozzie calling cards poked out of every available orifice. I waited for my Aunt Caroline so we could have a drink. I smoked my penultimate cigarette and gave the pub opposite the benefit of a hairy eyeball.

At 5:30pm on a Thursday evening the only part of The Black Cap that was open was the upstairs Mrs Shufflewicks bar. Mrs Shufflewicks, a traditional Victorian parlour with an open fireplace that was never lit and the expectation of a sleeping dog by the hearth who was never there. Mrs Shufflewicks up a creaking back stairwell where the current reigning coterie of drag entertainers judged your every step from high placed framed publicity photographs.

"And what's it like where you are?" said a sing-song voice.

"Huh? Oh hi." I got up from the bench, brushing my behind and gave my aunt a hug.

"I said hello about three times. You going deaf?" Today Caroline's work drag was a symphony in grey and black, with the usual smattering of silver jewellery. She was putting her lighter back in her handbag. "Shall we go in, or do you want to sit out here in the rain some more?"

"Sorry, yeah. Daydreaming. Nice to see you."

Caroline only grunted in reply, then said "I'm dying for a pint though." She put her arm through mine, and we went in ignoring the shady stares of Lola Lasagne and Regina Fong as we tripped up the dog eared stairs to Shufflewicks.

The barman, a middle aged queen with one dangly Alexis Colby ruby knock-off earring hung from his left lobe was reading the gay free press: Boyz.

"Hi um... Caroline, what do you want? Pint of Export please."

"Yes, me too."

"Two. Ta." I pulled out my velco-ed wallet and ripped it open to barrel-scrape in each of its compartments for cash.

"Four pound swee'art." The barman was holding out his hand, but his eyes were on the Boyz classifieds.

"Fanks." I counted out a large amount of small change. It got an eye roll and some kind of impatient noise from the barman. I smiled apologetically and picked up the pints to make a hasty escape. Caroline had taken a throne by the window, handbag under the chair, cigarettes on the table, lighting up as I approached surrounding herself in an ermine of smoke.

"Been looking forward to this all day." She exhaled the smoke, as the pint glasses rang their brazen arrival onto the marble topped table. "Music."

"Crappy day dearest?"

"Mmm. Corporation politics are exhausting. Diffusing potential disputes between people who should know better. It's like kindergarten." She smiled at me and swept dropped ash off the table onto the floor. "Sorry. I'm frustrated."

"Why can't they just solve their own problems?"

"Because bureaucracy doesn't work that way, Matt. Especially council bureaucracy. Besides that's what they pay me for."

"Oh." I helped myself to one of her cigarettes.

"Well, four days into my man-from-the-Pru shtick and I can honestly tell you that at the Prudential there's also a lot of disruptive office disputery that nobody bothers to diffuse."

"Marxist theory proving itself, is it?"

"Umm. Dunno. If that's anything to do with Sheila taking her shoes off under the desk and ponging everyone out with her cheesy, salami feet, then yeah. It is."

The lager that spurted from Caroline's mouth extinguished her cigarette in an unrepeatable feat.

"Oh god. Sorry. I wasn't expecting that." She placed the wet cig on a beer mat to dry and lit another. "What did you say?" she asked as she corralled the spilled beer off the table and onto the floor with a beer mat.

"Well, there's this woman, Sheila. Sort of close to retirement age..."

Sheila keeps taking her shoes off under the table and her feet stink. Nobody says anything to her face, but whenever she leaves her workstation everyone else talks about it and says what a fat disgusting blob, she is with rotting hooves and why won't she retire already. I don't think it smells that bad. Kind of old cheesy and talcum powder. They just hate Sheila. This gives them something to talk shit about her with. Then there's Amena, she's deaf. She doesn't think anyone notices that because she uses a text telephone, she's making personal calls to her family most of the day and slagging off her work colleagues to her other deaf friends. But it all gets logged, and they've been saying all week she's gonna get fired, only they only say it when she goes to lunch, on top of making fun of how she talks - she sounds a little weird coz she can't hear herself. Poor thing. She lent me 45p for the coffee machine actually. Then the manager, Darpan, he writes down what time people come in, how many times they're late, how long people are in the loo and all that stuff in a little notebook in his desk. But guess what, when he's not there some of them get it out and make adjustments. They're all fucking nuts.

"What do you think they say about you when you're not there?"

"Who cares? They don't talk to me much, anyway. I'm only the temp. You're the first person I've had a conversation with all day."

Caroline had just come back to our perch by the leaded window with our third pint of Export. The bar was fuller now, office workers like us dissecting another dire day. I had shredded my second beer mat, enjoying my evening thoroughly.

"Want one?" She held up a pack of Marlboro Lights.

"Ta. How are things in Kilburn?"

"Oh. You know I told you about the Nazi who lives with Margaret in the flat below me?"

"Yeah, Hans Gruber or something?"

"No, er, that's Allo Allo. This guy's name is Frederick. Anyway, the other night I could hear all this shouting and banging and carrying on."

"Geez, what was happening?"

"I don't know, but I'm worried that he's beating her up or something."

"You think he's beating up an old lady?"

"I wouldn't put it past him, he sprayed me with a hose last summer when I was lying out in the garden."

"Proof enough."

"Francis still in Egypt?"

"Yeah, he's not back till the 24th. But it's kinda nice having the place to myself. Even though Boris won't come out from behind the water pipes in the toilet. He's probably planning my downfall one night when I have to get up to piss, stringing up tripwires. Landmines. Oh, talking of the flat. Listen to this. I was coming home the other day, let myself into the lobby and this old woman was coming down the stairs, fur coat, Cruella De Vil hair, shouted out hey you boy, what are you doing? Wondering who I was, how I got in, if you please."

"Oh God." She inhaled deeply from her cig and blew the smoke out vertically. She literally did smoke like a chimney. "Was it real fur?"

"Probably. Looked the type. All I could think of was that Miss Havisham must've survived the fire."

"What did you tell her?"

"Oh, I just said I was minding the flat for Dr Francis while he was away. Then she just sort of snorted at me and went up the steps mumbling stuff."

"I didn't think people like that still existed." She vigorously stubbed out her cigarette in the already full glass ashtray and lit another.

"I look out the peephole now before I open the front door." I took a gulp of the lager; it fizzed down the wrong way and made my eyes water. "It's safer," I squeaked.

We rattled south together on a tired Northern Line rollercoaster that felt ready for the scrap yard. Caroline left at Euston leaving me with only burgundy lipstick on my cheek and a five pound note pressed in my palm. Instead of

changing trains at Tottenham Court Road to the shiny red, white, and blue plastic-fantastique of the Central Line I had a change of heart instead. I left the tube and headed for Soho. Boris could go fuck his spiny scale-o-rific butt. Four pints of Export had convinced me it was too early to go home. Time to conduct an experiment into the effects that a young lad in a shirt and tie would have on the bomber jacket brigade in Compton's. An automated female voice thanked me for travelling with the London Underground.

That's not how she did it (or) Tea-dium (or) Deja Brew

"I know it's not the usual thing, but it's just for a week and *it'll be fun!*"

"Making tea?" I was unconvinced.

"And coffee." She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head as if this was an incentive. "Look you'd be doing me a really big favour, the only other free body I've got is Brigitte. I can't send her." Off my look, Sandra cocked her head and rolled her eyes. "She's French. They don't really understand about, y'know, tea... YOU are my top temp."

I hated how much that pleased me. But six months into my temping career at Manpower I had begun to learn some golden rules that had unexpectedly made me a hit with clients and the agency. Firstly: be flexible. Second: smile. And third: always say yes, no matter what they ask you to do. Can you replenish the toner on the MegaFax Ultra 2000? Can you fix the MirrorTone SupraCopy 4XL? Can you horseback ride? Is it bigger than a breadbox? Yes, yes, and twice yes.

"Well, I suppose it could be a laugh, pushing a tea-trolley around. Pretending I'm an air-hostess. Chicken or beef madam? Hot towel sir?"

"Hah! See. Fun! And they're paying quite well too. Eight quid an hour. Bunch of old-school solicitors on Chancery."

"Old-school solicitors don't know the arse end of a teapot from their elbow."

"Indeed," Sandra cleared her throat. "Well, because they are old-school solicitors, you'll be expected to wear a nice, smart suit. Okay?"

"People pushing tea-trolleys don't wear suits, Sandra."

"At Parker, Parker and Tattershall they do. And so will you."

"Alright, alright, I'll dig it out. Hopefully it won't clash with my gingham pinny."

"That's the spirit. You'll be taking over from an old married couple, a Mr and Mrs Ainsworth. They're going on holiday. First time in years apparently. Go to this address on Friday at 8am and ask for them." She handed me a Manpower logo-ed envelope containing the details. "You'll be shown the ropes. Then from next Monday you're on your own."

I felt like Sabrina getting an assignment at Charlie's Angels HQ.

"Thanks Bosley."

"Huh?"

I never met anybody called Parker or Tattershall at Parker, Parker and Tattershall. They were either long dead, on a golf course, or both. Charles Dickens walked past their chambers on his way to Christmas a thousand years ago and received the inspiration for Ebenezer Scrooge from the building alone. The architectural term is Victorian Creep. These Adams Family solicitors were smack damn in the middle of Chancery Lane WC2, a lane so narrow you could spit across if the wind was right and had the right motivation. The mausoleum itself; a straight up and down affair in grey brick and blocks of pale stone draining anything joyful nearby with infectious monochrome. Gargoyles were on the inside looking out. Green Man motifery around a coloured glass lunette above the door gave an authentic *Wicker Man* welcome. The front step worn down by generations of stooped clients weighed down with legal troubles. *Did they ever leave?* Speak via intercom to *Mandy-the-ever-depressed-but strangely-aggressive-receptionist* who will assess whether your reason for existing is good reason enough to buzz you in. She is the keeper of the gate. You may not question her. Directing your passage down a dark hall into a complaining lift to meet *Mandy-the-ever-depressed-but strangely-aggressive-receptionist* in person on her ergonomic office throne behind her plastic-wood admission desk. Here you found that Parker, Parker and Tattershall didn't brook with frivolous law (translation - *interesting* law). No murders, scandal or juicy blackmail to find out about. This was business law, for businesspeople and was very, very serious thank you very much. Now if you'll follow *Mandy-the-ever-*

depressed-but strangely-aggressive-receptionist, I'll introduce you to the Ainsworths. Quickly please.

"Do you make tea at home, dear?" Elderly Mrs Ainsworth appeared to be dressed for the 1986 Annual General Meeting of the Women's Institute. A floral print dress by her two good friends Polly and Esther, chunky turquoise plastic jewellery, and enough Elnett to keep her smoky blonde coiffette from moving in a category five hurricane. Garage-door eye makeup. Grotesque. *Attractive, in a hideous sort of way.* There was no physical resemblance to Marlene in Witness for the Prosecution, but I expected her to suddenly grab my arm and hiss "Wanna kiss me now, Duckie?" in my ear anyway. *I kind of liked it.* She repeated the question "At home, dear. Do you make tea?" She phrased it a little slower this time, and louder.

"Coffee maybe?" This was put in Mr Ainsworth, looking like he'd just returned from driving Miss Daisy to a tea party.

"Sorry. Yeah, from time to time. Yeah." I wasn't quite sure what was happening, the three of us stood in this tiny white kitchenette on the top floor, next to a stainless steel behemoth of a tea trolley. Complete with plumbing, it gurgled and steamed; white cups and saucers rattled. The Freddie Krueger boiler-room of tea trollies. Mr and Mrs Ainsworth, a seemingly pleasant elderly couple in their Sunday Best stood appraising their temporary protege. "So, you look like you're off somewhere nice after this." I ventured. I suspected maybe a grandchild could be graduating, or perhaps a christening, charity whist drive? They seemed mildly affronted at the question.

"Oh, you have to be smart here, dear. Surely you were told that?" said Mrs Ainsworth "They like us to be smart don't they Charlie?"

"They do, yes. They like us to be smart here. Lots of important people here. They like us to be smart."

"Important people here, yes." Mrs Ainsworth continued looking me up and down as if for the first time. "What you've got on will probably do."

I looked down at my black Yves Saint Laurent suit that I'd received for Christmas two years ago and worn once for a wedding. I bit my lip and smiled. "Oh good. Because it's either this or a purple bridesmaid's dress."

"They like things done a certain way here, don't they Charlie?" Mrs Ainsworth was watching me wash up some crockery after a carefully monitored tea-run. She picked up a teacup from the draining board, inspected it, and dropped it back into the washing bowl. "Give it a good scrub, dear."

"They do like things a certain way," agreed Mr Ainsworth. "They do that." He licked his finger and turned the page of a *Reader's Digest*. He looked up as if struck by a sudden insight "They like things a certain way, and we're happy to oblige aren't we Mrs?"

"Oh yes dear. Happy to oblige. More than happy. We like to be helpful, don't we dear?"

"We do that. That's us alright. We like to be helpful."

The smile I had painted on my face had been hurting for at least the past hour. They really were a very nice couple; however, I could have done without the half hour seminar about tea-bags being the second coming of Christ. My role of Cletus the slack jawed yokel was beginning to grate a little. The possibility of getting to Heathrow and driving back a Boeing 747 just so they would go on holiday sooner was becoming more attractive by the second.

Diary of a Tea Boy

Monday

8:00am till 4:30pm Lunch 12:00 - 1:00pm

Black YSL suit, white shirt, navy necktie burgundy stripe

AM: Unknown solicitor on 3rd floor - will call 'Prickface Blueshirt' for short - clicked fingers at me whilst on phone. Prickface then proceeded to point violently at an empty cup and saucer on desk as if poking out the eyes of some poor fox he had finally caught up with on a blood hunt. Attempt by me to remove said cup and saucer was met by yet more aggressive gesturing at the trolley and a slap on the desk. I suggested his telling me what he wanted would save further charades and time, he mouthed the word tea. I mouthed something quite different whilst my back was turned. Prickface Blueshirt did not have a visit from the trolley for the rest of the day, and suspect may not see it again all week. Poor thing.

PM: Met the girls from the typing pool on my rounds, all sequestered neatly away below stairs. Friendly and lovely all, they told me the Ainsworths give them tea and coffee but keep the biscuits for the big wigs. I left them a whole packet of digestives and am now the champion of the ground floor.

TUESDAY

8:30am till 4:00pm Lunch 11:30am - 1pm

Black YSL suit, minus jacket. Yesterday's shirt and tie

Rounds slightly shorter today by walking faster and having selective hearing. Have discovered that the altitude on higher floors seems to have a detrimental effect on politeness. I wonder if air stewards find this to be true also. Scottish solicitor on floor four (I shall call her Lipshit Rosebud because her brown lip-paint is a bitch to wash off the cups and makes them look like they've been kissed by a shitty arsehole) asked me if it was too much trouble to "pop out to the patisserie, sweetheart, not too difficult is it, you can manage that can't you?" to get some fancy munchies for her and her clients to scoff. I did do, but only because I only had 'bread and spread' for lunch and thought I could nab a cream horn at her expense for myself to alleviate the hunger. I had two.

WEDNESDAY

8:30am till 4pm - Lunch 11am till 1pm

Black trousers - white shirt - no tie

After almost getting caught by the bus driver for fare dodging I was in a bad mood, so decided to take advantage of my relative invisibility and enjoy a longer lunch. Ended up in First Out Cafe after a walk and allowed myself a Newcastle Brown Ale which I had to make last as I went over the gay papers. Absolutely nobody worth looking at, but I might come back and try the food one day, even if it does look like it all came from Granny Scroggins' allotment and don't-bother-washing-it-the-soil-is-the-best-bit.



Parker, Parker & Tattershall

Parker, Parker & Tattershall
47 Chancery Lane
London WC2

Memorandum

Re: Misplaced or missing items

It has been brought to our attention that several items appear to have been misplaced or lost recently and we would ask you to be extra attentive when it comes to using office supplies. In addition, if you come across any of the following items please return them to Amanda on the reception desk who will deal accordingly.

- 4 x *Tork* T2 Jumbo 2 Ply Toilet Paper
- Undetermined number of *Niceday* office supplies
 - Reams copier paper
 - Box fluorescent sticky notes
 - Box assorted ballpoint pens
- *Athena* Hotelware Crockery (white) -
 - 2 x teapot
 - 1 dzn cups & saucers
 - At least 6 side plates
- An amount of cutlery, esp teaspoons
- 1 x catering box of *Lyle* white sugar cubes
- 1 x catering box of 1000 *Typhoo* tea bags

Karen Kenyon
Administrative Manager

Cumpadres (or) Peer Pleasure / Queer Pressure

The hair clippers were bought through bared teeth; twenty quid I could scarcely afford. This green bomber jacket and second hand boots from Army & Navy already signalled baked beans on toast being dish-of-the-day 'til Christmas.

"The amount I'm gonna save in hair mousse will pay." My reflection in the wardrobe door looked... unconvinced. I flicked the on and off switch on the clippers. Buzz-buzz, buzz-buzz. Do-it, do-it. Cow-ard, cow-ard. Bringing them up to my forehead, Mexican stand-off style. "Coward, am I? Suck it." The clippers ploughed a furrow straight through the lacquered dark brown quiff. This is what gay farmers feel like at harvest time, pushing their little pink combine harvesters through wheat. Should their wheat have half a can of Studio Line sprayed on it.

A troubled looking reflection sported a reverse mohawk. Queer Moses had parted the seas. I looked nuts. My sister's Girls World hairdressing head after I had been at it with pinking shears when I was five had nothing on this. I was prepped for a lobotomy.

"Oh God." I touched my flocked scalp with a quivering fingertip and whispered, "I'm Frances Farmer."

A knock at the door. "Shit." Clippers on the floor I opened it to find a decisive looking thirty something making a note on a clipboard. I cleared my throat and affixed a look of mild, unaffected curiosity to where my face ought to be.

"Matthew, I uh...."

Teresea McVay the student nurse housing coordinator trailed off as her eye rested on my new parting, her professional smile evaporating quicker than her insincerity.

"Hi Terry," bright and breezy as I nibbled the tip of my forefinger. "What can I do for ya?"

"Um, well I... Uhm, did I interrupt something?" She frowned and cocked her head, eyes on the top of my head.

"No."

"Oh I. Your... hair."

"Oh thanks, yeah you like it?"

"Yeah, it's... great." Her frown remained, but she attempted to regain that smile, bless her heart. "Look, um, just to let you know that your old room has been repainted... white... now. The pink is gone, so you can move back there whenever you'd like."

"Well, oh. It's just I'm sort of settled here now. I'm not sure I want to move all my stuff again. Kind of a hassle"

"Okay, well if that's what you want... I'll update the records... I um..."

"Mmm?"

"Is... Is everything alright Matthew?"

"Couldn't be better, well, see ya later."

I didn't see her later; she may not have recognised me if she did. I barely recognised myself. Scalp as closely shorn as fresh spring lamb on the way to the abattoir, white ribbed t-shirt deliberately a size too small, bleach-splashed blue jeans giving good basket presentation, arse looking tidy and high, huge second hand black boots from the Army & Navy store, brick heavy, steel toe capped, ripped from the feet of some dead soldier I imagined. The look was almost complete. I hung the dog tags around my neck where they tinkled on my chest with all the expense of tin. Finally came that army green bomber jacket with the fluorescent orange lining. I had never worn anything Day-Glo, even if it was on the inside where nobody would see. Slipping it on came with a surge of forbidden electricity. My reflection looked authentic. Skinhead tribe - every detail carefully curated. I could now go to Compton's and feel part of the pack.

"I'm Nigel."

"Hi." I hadn't been there five bloody minutes. Not enough time to blend in with the furniture even. Only enough time to buy one can of Breaker and fumble around self-consciously for a cigarette.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Oh, well you're about 3 minutes too late." I lifted the can up as evidence and appraised the enquirer. Nigel, it seemed, hadn't really committed to the skinhead aesthetic like I had. Okay, he'd shaved his head, but the rest was really quite normal. Black leather jacket, dark blue jeans - snug, pair of trainers and a polo shirt I could see his nipples through. Nice looking guy probably in his late thirties, stocky. A real beefcake. Didn't look out of place in Compton's at all, and here I was wearing the required uniform. Still feeling like Johnny Impostor, goddamn it. I offered him a cigarette; it was all I could think of. I didn't know how to talk to him.

"I've not seen you in here before." He said, refusing the ciggie.

"Been a couple of times. I'm uh, new to London I suppose."

"Oh really? That's great," he stood a little closer. "Brand new. So, where you from?"

"Yorkshire." I had had my fill of trying to explain to nursing girls where Hull was or about the Humber Bridge. Just say Yorkshire and be done with it. Those who had heard of it had heard bad things. Telling people Hull was your hometown was telling people Typhoid Mary was your mother.

Nigel bought me two more cans of Breaker over the next hour and then asked if I'd ever been to Putney.

"Putney? Uh, no. I've not been anywhere apart from St Barts and um, well, here." I grinned a shiftless grin. The Breaker was strong, the floor began to gently undulate like it was floating on water.

"Come and see Putney with me, it's not far. I'll make sure you get home alright. I have a car."

"You have a car? People drive in London? People do..." I let out a tremendous belch behind my fist. "Oh God, sorry."

Nigel laughed, his hand kneading my arse cheek like a stress toy. "C'mon." He took the can of Breaker out of my hand and put it on the bar as he headed toward the exit. After a beat, I followed. Outside the wet alleys off Compton street were spackled with laughing revellers giggling their way to the next pub, the cruisiness of the venue increasing as their night wore on. The labyrinthine Soho streets, a warren of shortcuts to those who knew their way. Nigel knew his. His possession of a car

amazed me, and I repeated this amazement often, in between less theatrical burps and sniggers. Nigel was a lot quieter now we were no longer in the pub, a new focus showing on his face. I poured myself into the passenger seat of his blurred car and let out a sigh which turned into a hiccup, a siccup? Nigel installed himself in the driver's seat looking thoroughly at home. A hairy knuckled hand stopped and rubbed my thigh on its way to the gearstick, pushing a finger into the muscle. He had a satisfied grin on his face, as if he'd got a good deal on a bottle of wine and couldn't wait to pop the cork. The ride to Putney was equal to any amusement park big dipper. My fingers gripped pleather upholstery; forehead beaded. Nigel looked over to me and grinned, amused, squeezing my leg like he was checking the ripeness of a watermelon at the supermarket. "You have to drive aggressively in London, or you'll never get to where you're going." To demonstrate he cut in front of a black cab who blasted his horn in protest, then sped up as the traffic lights ahead changed to amber. "I like to drive," he said. I grin-iced, and pushed down on the seat so I could return my arse to where it had slid from replying "I see that," another belch made a bid for freedom.

My mind mirrored the roads as the hyper-chaos of the West End traffic melted into the slightly less manic roads of the near south bank. I felt rebellious, mercurial, terrified. Lying to my parents about where I was going when I ventured out to a gay bar for the first time had nothing on this. This was a dangerous comedy.

Nigel's Putney pad was a terraced house down a terraced street found in any British city. Orange lamped. Parking problems. Bins by front doors. Shop'n'Save. Fish'n'chips. Star'n'Garter. It would have cost chump-change up North, I bit my lip and attempted to not erroneously snob all over it - not yet being acclimatised to the London differential I didn't know any better, at least there was an attempt at politeness.

"Well, here we are." He walked into the centre of a beige and cream walled, orange pine furnished living room. Argos catalogue decor inspired by shades of Werther's Original wrappers.

"Mmm, yeah. Nice."

"Wine?"

"Uh, sure. Yeah." I was gonna need something.

I looked around the space, misty botanical watercolours in pine frames hung like wet leaves on the walls. No personal photographs, no letters on the mantle. A lumpy light brown futon sofa slouched in front of a portable TV relegated to the corner position. I sat down, way down, too quickly down, on an unyielding cushion to discover a QX magazine under my backside. I pulled it up and threw it onto a nearby bamboo coffee table. Nigel came back in with two glasses of red wine. He offered me one, and I took it. I could feel its redness coating my teeth, tannins on my tongue, drying my throat. "Good huh?" said Nigel and I nodded, doing a poor job of a convincing smile.

"So," he took a sip of his wine, "would you like to see my etchings?" The corner of his mouth on one side rose a little.

"You're what now?"

"My... etchings."

"What are those?"

"They're upstairs."

"Oh. What are they?"

"Etchings."

"I don't get..."

"Look...Just come upstairs with me."

"'kay." We got up, it was awkward. Futons are low.

Nigel stopped at the bottom of the stairs with his arms folded and gestured with his head that he wanted I should go up first. I could hear him a couple of steps behind me, feel his eyes watching my buttocks work the staircase as I ascended into darkness. "These jeans are a good investment," my falsely bright inner voice observed, talking over a quieter worry that they were working too well. On the unlit landing, Nigel's grip on my shoulder steered us left through an open doorway, behind me the click of the light switch introduced a cold white brightness from an unshaded bulb. After a second my eyes adjusted - the room was decorated from the same section of the catalogue as the living room. A job lot: the knotty pastoral pine

collection, buy the living room set and get the bedroom free (lightshade not included, see in-store for details). My mind was waking up to the fact that there were no etchings, never were, as my mouth murmured "Is, is that it..?" fixing on an irrelevant pine frame leant against the wall. Any further doubt evaporated as Nigel's large hands gripped my hips from behind and pulled them back towards himself. A jeaned crotch pressing into my jeaned backside. Firm at first, then soft. Hands slid 'round, unbuckled my belt, roughly pulled apart the buttons of my fly. Reached inside... I made a noise I hadn't made before. I smelt his breath on my neck, he kissed the nape I had buzzed just that afternoon, little hairs now standing up. Honey dripping down my spine. Neck arched. A scented cocktail of red wine, lager, a tang of body odour. Baritone pleasure.

Getting screwed wasn't how I was told it was gonna be by TV. It had little to do with those straight people on Dynasty. No shoulder-pads. No autopilot. Things didn't just. No montage moment. No close-ups of holding hands as music swelled. A pleasurable, passionate, uncontrollable experience was promised by late night Channel Four programming, by Dallas, by Rocky Horror even. As Nigel began unceremoniously stuffing a meaty dick between my arse cheeks and I knelt before him on all fours really examining my feelings about the ugly beige and cream striped wallpaper. My mind soon wandered. Empty suitcases in the corner, no wardrobe, I realised this was the spare room. I saw a ginger tom-cat watching from under a nearby chest of drawers. Judging my every move, giving points, tutting. I was indecently exposed. More than naked. Uncomfortable. Awkward. There was small pain, and big pain. Worries about farting. I stuffed a fist of duvet into my mouth and screwed my eyes tight shut till psychedelic flowers bloomed behind my eyelids. When Nigel seemed happy with his... arrangement he began to pound. A stevedore at work. Slow and steady. Heavy nutsack slapping my crack with each thrust - slow applause for sustained effort. I countered Nigel's grunts and unintelligible words with strategic moans and gasps - wanted to feel as though I was contributing... something. Rhythm increased, I felt his skin getting hotter, wetter - mine just redder. A compostable, locker-room smell. Occasional open handed spank of a butt cheek. Even faster. Exclamations. Urgency Hands around my neck, pulled back.

Back arched.
Plugged in.
To the hilt.
Do it now.
Explode.
Release.

No romantical, thighly tangled, twosome of cuteness entwined in crisp white cotton sheets. Nigel covered my body like an inflatable dinghy with the air leaking out onto a damp patch of sand. Wet. Flat. Spent. Empty. His moist, husky body weight restricting all movement. Nigel breathing heavy, laboured in my ear. Faint groaning. My inability to breathe is an issue. Rolling off onto his back with an exaggerated sigh. "I'll drop you off at the tube station," he said.

A London Apprenticeship - Smoke and Stairs

"I can't take my A-Z to a club, can I? Or can I? I don't know how to get there without it. What do I do?" I tossed it around like a magician presenting a white dove he'd liberated from his sleeve, then tried to stuff it in the pocket of my bomber jacket. It didn't fit, not even if I rolled it in a tube.

"I mean, do you have to take the whole thing?" Liz said from the sofa as she sipped tea in front of The Simpsons. "Just rip the page out you need, fold it up and put it in your pocket." Her eyes never left Homer as he strangled Bart. She tittered.

"Oh God, you're a genius, why didn't I think of that? So mentally challenged." I thumbed to the right pages and tried to pull them carefully away from the spine. Ripping was minimal, just a few side streets.

"All the pages are falling out of mine. I have map pages everywhere." Someone on the TV was questioning why you would take two bottles into the shower. Liz's eyes left the set and watched me from behind the tattered cushion she

hugged when watching telly. "The inside of my bag is wallpapered in them. If I ever left Dalston I'd get hopelessly lost."

"You never leave Dalston. You only ever get as far as the bagel shop." This was from Katherine, she was watching the television upside down. Legs over the back of the couch, head resting awkwardly on Michael's leg. Can't be comfortable.

"I'll maybe just be able to follow all the other skinheads." I said to myself as I tried to see if the two pages of the A2Z spoiled the curve of my jeaned buttock. "I expect there's a special bus from Soho, they'll all get off and march in a big parade to the club. Laughing and joking. Having the time of their lives."

"Aww that's sweet. Gay geese flying home for the summer." Katherine again.

"Gay geese?" Said Michael, he chuckled and stroked Katherine's hair.

"I've had schnapps. Matty, don't you get nervous going to clubs on your own? Kinda weird."

"Well, it's not like straight clubbing. We don't all go dancing around our handbags to Black Lace, drinking Babysham... talking about boys in the toilet." I gave the can of Carlsberg I was holding a little shake. Empty. I pushed it firmly into the already full kitchen bin. I could hear Liz make a disapproving cluck but pretended I didn't.

Katherine put herself the right way around on the sofa. "Remind me to take you to clubbing with us one night, because I've never done any of those things."

I tossed her a wink as I went out into the hallway to check myself in the large hall mirror propped up against the wall. "Hah," I called. "I have." Then to myself "Apart from the Black Lac, the Babysham...handbags. There is a lot of dancing though... Boy talk." I leaned into the mirror and looked closely at my scalp, making sure I hadn't missed any hairs when I'd buzzed it earlier. Nope. All good. Pity I can't seem to grow sideburns, but never mind. Maybe when I'm older. "But I could sure do with a handbag. I never have anywhere to put anything."

"Okay I'm off." I span around. "How do I look?"

"The same as you did an hour ago."

"Matt. Take the rubbish out with you if you're going. Pleeese."

"I can see where your bollocks are in those jeans, brah." Michael didn't even take his eyes off the TV and sucked his Budweiser.

What me and my brazen bollocks wanted was to go to Compton's for a couple of hours and then take the tube to Old Street to finish the evening at The London Apprentice. That's what all the other queer skinheads did on a Friday night. I'd read about the free gay press bible- Boyz. They'd been photos. Men with very wide eyes and no shirts yelling ecstatically at the camera, holding bottles of water above their heads. The London Apprentice - where skinheads went after Compton's, very popular, very cruisy, very tribal, and from what I could gather very can't-call-yourself-part-of-our-pack-if-you-don't-go. My pocket was not happy about this idea. My pocket hated this idea. My pocket said it could reluctantly stretch to getting to the club on the bus, entrance charge, pack of cigs, maybe four drinks. Five if I walked. Walked. To a club I had never been to. In an area I didn't know. Anything more than cigarettes and a few beers and it's "spread and bread" all week. Worse than that, no smokes. You know, I can walk. I will walk. I have legs. There are map pages folded up next to my arse cheek showing the way. It's easy. I was a scout. It's not that far at all. Just two pages of the A-Z. No problem. I mean. I don't really understand the scaling. Two pages. How far can that be? That orienteering badge was a long time ago, and to be honest I just followed Akela.

The avoidance of walking through Dalston wearing my skinhead gear since the one and only other time I'd done it had been strictly enforced. By me. I was hoping tonight was sufficiently past prime time to get away with it. Just keep my head down, smile incessantly, try not to give out a nazi energy. Take a deep breath as I go out the front door. Summer. The sun was only just beginning to set over the church at the end of the street. Saturated gold even though it's 9:30 at night. Balmy evening - don't need a jacket but I'm wearing it because men don't have handbags. If they do, they don't go to clubs like the LA. My jeans are too tight to fit anything other than a zippo and hope in the front pocket. Laughter and music come from Sandringham Road's open windows. A couple of giggling kids are running around the dustbins, guess it's not past their bedtime (mine was 7:30 at their age, made for a

long night). Domestic noises on the air. There are men in white thawbs. ("It's not a toga party, Matt. They're wearing thawbs" Liz had once said on the way back from the Co-Op). Thawb. It's fun to say. Looks comfy too. The men stood by our flaking cement wall, smoking and talking fast. I liked the sound of their language, they made all kinds of noises I would have loved to make but couldn't. Couldn't even roll an R. Our landlord was no doubt among them, but I didn't know what he looked like from the front. Liz had pointed him out as he'd walked away down the street at the head of a family procession and told me in a whisper he wasn't keen on wearing deodorant.

My combat boots felt heavy, hot and loud as I descended the steps down from the front door. The men in white trailed off talking and watched me put the plastic bag of kitchen rubbish in the metal dustbin. It felt very quiet all of a sudden, the children in the street were not giggling or squealing. These bins were being very noisy - the steel lid reluctant to be replaced. I banged it down harder than I meant to. The men seemed expectant of something. Like I was about to remove the lid once more and reveal the bag of waste had been turned into a giant white rabbit. Ta da. And for my next trick...

Uncomfortable. Awkward. I increased the width of my smile, as if I'd just noticed them for the first time - "Hello. Hello there. Hi. How are ya?" They didn't say anything but most of them exhaled their smoke in my direction. I kept the smile up and walked a little more forcefully as I got out of the gate - barely audible "okay, then see you later." Exit stage left but with a total loss of how to walk normally. Complete blank. How does walking go again? Carrying on down the street, legs on strings like Pinocchio. Overly conscious that I'm demonstrating some peculiar parody of what comes naturally to literally everyone except babies- this isn't walking. I'm moving but this isn't walking. The thawb club are probably all laughing at me. Quick down here. I turned a corner into an exact replica of Sandringham Road and sat on a wall for a minute and tried to remember how to be a real boy. "What the fuck in fuck was that fuck, Matt?" I half wished for a thawb of my own, I could wear it over my own stuff then throw it off when out of the danger zone. Like a Catholic schoolgirl rolling up her skirt or putting on make-up on the bus. This road was quiet

though, possibly this one was a bit posher than Sandringham Road. Sandringham Road's more respectable twin. It was closer to the church. People here watch telly with the windows shut. I lit a cigarette, stood up and brushed the flaked paint off my arse. Got to get myself ready to walk over to the Kingsland Road. That much I didn't need a map for. I didn't like walking and smoking at the same time though. Celia Johnson had said in *Brief Encounter* that it was common or something. I was rather inclined to agree with her. But just this once. For my nerves.

A determined march and some aggressive nicotine inhalation brought me back on track down the Kingsland Road. The sun had finally bugged off behind the houses, and the street lights were coming on. The less they see the better. Dalston retreated behind me, the area became more solitary. Things were closed for the weekend, no-one was about. Ghost town, Dawn of the Dead. A sort of no-man's land of dodgy looking hardware shops and manky blocks of flats. But where was everybody? My feet hurt.

Am I nearly there yet Jesus? Map says... just a little further. Watch says... I'm gonna be Little-Johnny-First-In-Line - it's only 1 minute past 10... Shit. Can't do fashionably late. Can't do fashionably... anything. Well. A fashionable re-adjustment of my package coz there's nobody about. Might as well try and get something right, even if it is just something as basic as penis presentation. And perhaps a pee behind that wall. Negotiating the toilets at a club with a combination of stage-frighty-pee-shy syndrome and universal lack of men's cubicles can result in wandering around with a throbbing bladder. I'd read once that Joe Orton thought it made his dick look bigger but look what happened to him. I took a piss behind the wall with an eye on the street, even though I hadn't seen a soul in half a mile. A thorough shaking and twenty paces on I came to a bus stop bench outside a dark and shuttered "Kingsland Fried Chicken". A place to sit if perching on a narrow, parrot red plastic plank could be considered seating. London Transport obviously thought so. I smoked as slowly as I knew how to. I read the side of the Marlboro packet. I pried off a piece of chewing gum from the pavement with the toe of my boot and knocked it into the road. I spoke the song lyrics to "No More I Love Yous" under my breath

with particular emphasis on the do-bi-do-bi-do-do-do-s. To pause and sit at a bus stop appeared acceptable. Appeared like I was supposed to be there. Appeared to your casual observer, like, I was waiting for a bus. People think "Oh, he's at a bus stop. He's waiting on a bus". If you stop and sit on a wall with a shaved head (not holding one like a football, I mean like if a shaved head is attached to the top of your shoulders like what mine is). With a shaved head people think you're quite probably a bit dodgy. About to do a bit of the old burglarising. In Dalston I'm a member of the National Front passing time till the next "Up with Whites" meeting. God, Jesus I need new clothes for Dalston. Definitely run with that thawb idea ASAP. Did people think I might be a bit break-and-enter-y over this chicken place? Why would anyone think I was gonna rob a Kingsland Fried Chicken? There's nothing much to steal from a Kingsland Fried Chicken, apart from their secret blend of herbs and spices, no no, that is your actual KFC. This is the Kingsland Fried Chicken KFC. See what they did there? Clever, eh? Straight people can be funny.

A couple of cars passed by, drivers looking particularly judgemental and cross as I chattered away silently to myself. Plain clothed policemen? Skinhead watch? Now a Routemaster - six bored passengers on the lower deck. All of them were staring at me. Watching me try to take a suck on my cigarette, I forgot how to. First the walking and now smoking. I wanted to cough. I won't give them the satisfaction. I tried to look contemplative like the man in the cigar advert. Look like I just remembered something important. The lights changed and they drove away. I choked - displacing a lung and threw the cigarette into the gutter along with it. Through smarting eyes, I saw a railway bridge was close by. Dark iron, tattered posters, graffiti. Not even the good sort like in the West End, just the crappy East End stuff. Swear words and hieroglyphics in just one colour. A train rushed over the top on its way somewhere more important, lights on in the carriages, looking cosy against the dark blue. Twilight now, I could smell the silver smoke of my cigarette mixing with my aftershave and the diesel from the bus. This is the good aftershave actually, the one I got for Christmas two years ago. Hardly ever wear it because it's expensive. It smells really good, but then so does that bus diesel.

I got up and patted my behind. It was pins and needles back there. This place can't be much further. I'm almost to the bottom of the A-Z page. Stupid place to have a club if you ask me. Arsecrack of London. The City on one cheek and whatever that other place is on the other? I wanna say Shoreditch... but who knows what-or-where-the-fuck. I saw a white sign on a corner - Old Street. It's an appropriate name. It's an - old... street. Like Dickens old, like Dickens as a baby old. I wander down with a weather eye open for The London Apprentice. The LA. I knew its logo was Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, I'm expecting to see it somewhere, but I can't... and... is this it? Sat on the corner like an ebony toad. Sat hungrily waiting for all the flies. Black with dirt or paint, can't tell. Huge place, three stories up, maybe four. A Victorian workhouse from Oliver! Would the Victorians have approved it was now a gay club? If they'd sobered up long enough after laying about in those opium dens they were so fond of, perhaps they wouldn't have. Windows, if The London Apprentice ever had any are bricked up, shuttered up, sheets of plywood now in their place. The dull thud of a techno bassline beats up faintly through my boots under the stone flags. Even out here on the street. That's a meaty system. I felt like a child who had wandered out into the sea just a little too far.

I popped in a fresh stick of Wrigley's my fingers had come across in my pocket. You know, I'd heard that if you chewed gum and smoked at the same time you almost always got mouth cancer. But it looked so cool, and I could get cancer anytime so I did it anyway. I need to look cool, especially here. Especially now. During the last few steps, I took a last chance to check myself over. The sky now indigo velvet, still not cold but you could still see the little hills of nipples through my t-shirt. Good, that's good. That looks good. Should my boots be shiny? Is that a thing? I think that's a thing. I should have shined the boots. Boot concerns caused me to almost walk into the one bouncer who stands waiting outside. He's dressed in the same outfit as the building. All black - bomber jacket, jeans, polo shirt. Radio strapped to his breast. Shaved head, eyes that flicked everywhere except me. Probably checking for snipers. He says "aight," in a disinterested tone and snaps his gum, guiding me to the door with an outstretched arm. I try an interpretation of a casual saunter to the entrance. Sort of get away with it. There's an elderly woman

hunkered down in a windowed bunker by the door. Wrinkled and squashed like an apple left out too long in a bowl. She reminded me of one of the gypsies at Hull Fair, a gatekeeper to some death defying ride. I gave her three quid - as instructed by a laminated sign behind her - in return I got a bingo ticket. I had no idea what it's for but said thank you anyway, and hesitantly went inside stowing the little stub in my bomber. A large, open space waited beyond the door. Sweet, sugary, stale beer mustiness, pine floor disinfectant on untreated wooden floorboards, still wet in worn shallow potholes. They reflected industrial wall lights confined behind chicken-wire cages. It's dim. To the left are a couple of pool tables, larger overhead grey steel shaded lamps light up the tables but no farther. The baize is blue. Never seen a blue baize before. Blue baize before. Try saying that ten times fast. A pint of lager sat by a corner pocket, a man dressed like me is shooting balls all by himself. He stood up and looked. Nodded. An unlit cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth. Thinks he's in a Tom of Finland postcard this guy.

Taking up a centre stage was a large wooden, horseshoe shaped bar. Behind it, two staff members were bickering in front of the spirits. The small angry looking woman on the right appeared to be tearing a young man in a London Apprentice branded polo shirt a new arsehole. Fast talk, angry talk, her mouth opened very wide on the vowels. Waved her hands about; one held a bunch of keys, and I bit my lip as they jangled dangerously their faces. She'll have someone's eye out. He had his arms folded, nodded occasionally, his eyes strayed. I'm no master lip-reader but I could tell he said "yeah, okay" a few times before she seemed to exhaust her anger. Swung her keys into the palm of her hand and stalked out through a door in the wall behind the bar. Bright white light sliced in and there was a flash of pale ceramic tile before it shut. The slow-close fire door mechanism prevented it from enjoying a good slamming - Must have been frustrating for her. The barman was looking at me looking at the door. Didn't say anything but flicked his head up slightly and smiled. International code for "don't worry about it, what can I get ya?" He seems none the worse for his ordeal. Maybe it happens a lot.

"Uh, yeah. Can of Breaker please." I bellow. Music was loud. Now that I'm up to the bar I can see he's wearing black leather shorts below his LA shirt. I'm afraid

they might rip as he bends over to pull my can from the glass fridges. But as it turns out leather is surprisingly accommodating.

He held up two fingers and mouthed two quid as he straightened up and snapped off the ring pull with one hand. I passed him a fiver, hoping I'd understood wrong and tried to not choke when I got my change and realised I hadn't. Better sip slowly.

It was candyfloss, the air. The feel of it. The texture. Anticipatory. An excessive fog like Hammer horror films right before the monster shows up. - a mix of smoke machine, cigs... a cigar there too somewhere. My dad smoked cigars. I can pick a Hamlet out of a line-up no sweat. Other people are here in the darkness, out in the mist. Just can't see 'em... yet. I took a sip. The Breaker tastes odd here. Appley, pear-like. Not like lager. The bubbles fizzed sharply on my tongue. I looked at the can and wiped the opening with my sleeve. This wasn't the sort of establishment you ask for a glass in.

Breaker in hand I allowed myself time to explore, before it started to get busy, before it started to look like the photos in Boyz. Maybe someone will take my photo. That'd be something eh? To the right of the bar were several alcoves with seating and tables, looks like there were windows here at one point but they were painted out, boarded up like outside. It's a self-contained world. The inside of the toybox when you close the lid. Everything dark, and secret... The decorating must be really easy. Pop open a tin of that black emulsion and slop it all over with a mop. Job done.

Two openings exited the main bar. Between them was a projector screen suspended from the ceiling showing psychedelic computer generated animations. Surreal images merge and loop together, flow out and contract back in, a tie-dye kaleidoscope of colour. Shapes dance with the cowboy-techno blasting out banjo samples and yelling. Hypnotic. It mesmerised. I stood transfixed before remembering where I was. I threw out a sheepish glance around to make sure nobody was mocking the weird guy losing his chromosomes by himself in the middle of the room. I decided I best move on.

Above the doorless exit to the left someone had painted "Cloakroom" in fluorescent yellow. It glows neon in the black light. I had no plans to visit it just yet. I don't want to remove my jacket and show anyone my skinny arms - let them have a few drinks first, get over the shock. I chose the other exit. I had no idea where it went but I hoped for a toilet. Success. Just beyond was the gents. Tiled and overly light after the gloom of the main bar, I have to take a second or two before I could even see the urinal. There was no-one here. So, I propped my Breaker down on a chipped sink and relieved myself. Extra thoroughness with my shake afterwards and made sure everything was plumped back in place. This is show time after all or would be soon. Everything has to be just right. No sprinkles. No bollock out of place.

There are some steep stairs outside the loo. They descend to a landing then disappear around a corner, covered in the dark blue, marbled lino. I used to see the same stuff in the lobby at the municipal swimming baths. In for a penny, might as well. On the midway landing there was a musical confusion. The sounds from the upstairs and downstairs met, creating a colliding, irregular, discordant mess. Beats all over the place. Can open, worms everywhere. I hurried to get out of musical purgatory and opened a heavy door in the stairwell the same time a cloud of smoke from yet another fog machine on the other side went off. I'm the Wicked Witch appearing in Munchkinland. If there had been someone with me, I might have been tempted to have a throaty cackle and ask who had killed my sister. I can be funny too. But there was nobody down here to hear any jokes. Nobody in the basement club. That I could see. Wait. The raised mezzanine railings overlook the dance floor and there was a lone dancer. Feeling his boogie, off his tits, holding a pint aloft as it sloshed out onto the floor. I wonder what it's like where HE is? Where the fuck was everybody? The only other person was the DJ. High in a box against the wall. How'd he get up there anyway? Up a knotted rope through a trapdoor? Like a boy's club treehouse? He's another one in his own world, one ear clamped to an oversized set of headphones. Concentrating super hard. Looks a little silly. Music isn't serious, why do DJs always look so serious? Have fun, you're not solving the housing crisis. Some more stairs. More stairs? What did the Victorians need all these stairs for? Get a thigh-master and stop wearing frock-coats. I'm gonna have calves like a Hungarian

shot-putter. I sauntered across to the other side, giving my dancer friend a wide berth. He doesn't notice me. A short flight of steps goes up to an identical balcony space. Variety is the spice of bad in the LA. I wanna get out of this basement. The music is too hard. The techno is drilling into my brain. It's like the bugs the bad guys put in the away-team's ears in Wrath of Khan. It makes me want to call Dr Francis and ask for a lobotomy.

To return to the main bar and rest me legs in one of those alcoves for a bit was my plan. My dogs were barking. At least I could sit and watch for a bit till the Compton's crowd made it over from Soho (shouldn't they be here by now?). No more of this aimless wandering.

The stairs on this side emerged behind the pool tables through a light door that looked heavy. This meant I pushed too hard, slamming it open, following through with a tumble. I'd have given it a solid 6.7. The lone pool player had found a friend and were playing pool in silence, not that the music volume allowed for intimate conversation anyway. There was no reaction to my acrobatics, and both watched me dust myself off and walk self-consciously past to the alcoves on the other side. I took an alcove for my own. A good cruising spot. Prime in fact. I stretched out my legs under the table, found my cigarettes and lit one. Relieved to rest up for a bit. Far too much athleticism - going clubbing. Maybe I'd sit here a while. Maybe I'd try drinking a pint. The Breaker is weird here.

I tried to get a handle on the music. Each techno track was indistinguishable from the last, but there was some kind of wanton Pied Piper quality there. Forcing you to follow, succumb to its desire. The thought that music could be so lecherous had never occurred to me before. It was base, primal, and urgent, appealing to some low instinct. I felt *something* needful in it. I wanted this *thing* being dangled on a hook by relentless throbbing baselines. An intangible thing. A thing I wanted to make tangible. Fog bulged out from the smoke machines and clung around legs and chests. The crowd of skinheads had swelled, thickened, the air growing heavier still with their presence and the exhalations of a hundred cigarettes. I had barely noticed their entrance. They were just suddenly there, a mass of bare torsos and hungry eyes, as if bussed in directly from Compton Street after last orders. I queued at the

bar and ordered a pint of export from the disengaged man in leather shorts, beginning to understand why he'd been given a talking to. I wandered to the blue baize and watched skinheads play pool with each other. I returned to my alcove and watched them standing confidently in front of the projector, the imagery now running over their white t-shirts, and their skin instead of the screen. I watched them drinking. I watched them smoking. I watched them head downstairs to the dance floor. I watched them as they danced freely, without care. I ordered another pint. I watched as some went through the coat check door to check their coats but didn't come back. I had been sitting in my corner long enough. I drained the last of the pint of Grolsch (pricey but refreshing), set the glass back too hard on the table where it made a loud noise and interrupted the skinheads kissing opposite me. We locked eyes for a second, all three of us, I shrugged, and they went back to sucking each other's face.

I got up and made my way through the crowd. Faces flashing before me. A bizarre family reunion, everyone looking kind of the same but also just a little bit different. A kinky version of the field of daisies scene from Harold & Maude. Some patrons had more piercings than others. Some had more tattoos. Some wore a black wife beater and others wore white. Some had braces - some were red. Some dressed to the left, some to the right. None were shy about it. All had dog tags. Some boots were up to the knee with yellow shoelaces. Some black patent leather was so shiny I could see bar lights reflected in the toe caps. Some wore black wrist braces, or leather bands on their biceps. Some wore collars, with steel rings like key fobs hanging from them. Some wore bleached jeans, camouflage combat trousers, PVC trousers. One wore a Fred Perry polo shirt made of rubber. I was having a hard time getting through to people. It's the bar scene from Gremlins. They were lining up 3 deep at the bar. 4. I hadn't realised that so many people had arrived. More shaved heads. So. Many. Shaved. Heads. A French Crop here and there served relief, a pause in a long shaved sentence. They stood around the periphery, watching each other, thumbs hooked in their jeans. I feel dizzy. They wandered slowly around with pints of lager, pausing at strategic locations, slowly moving on again. They loitered around the pool area, pretending to watch a game but enjoying

the players' bend over. They stood in dark corners for watching. I could do with some air. They mustered in small groups. They talked in each other's ears. They laughed. They drank. They smoked. They smoked so much, not even worried about how many they had left and how long they had to last. They looked elsewhere with a rogue eye even when they scored. Rogue eyes prickled the hairs on my neck. I liked it. People had seen me. I was here. Officially present. The cloakroom doorway was in front of me, I went through it. Cooler here. Feel better. Stairs went up (stairs, again? I'm so sick of stairs). Guys were hanging about on the steps, watching me, watching everyone. I made my way up. At the top a bored looking young skin with no shirt on and very pierced nipples was manning a trestle table. Behind him aluminium racks on wheels sagged. Row upon row of bomber, leather biker, all kinds of jackets hanging precariously on wire hangers. He was taking pound coins and coats in exchange for a raffle ticket. Jigging, shuffling to the music - barely audible up here. He seemed content enough to enjoy the dull beat coming through the floorboards as he smacked on his gum and drank his water. Beyond him a little area with patio furniture, perhaps rescued from a skip. I would have left it there. I sat for a second. Just a minute. In the corner, an alcove with a huge water heater found in countless Women's Institute Bring and Buy sales to supply coffee and tea for middle class white people. A young punky lass was sitting reading a magazine on a plastic picnic chair. A chalkboard propped on the wall behind her declaring that coffee was 50p. It was very bright here - fluorescent light. Not my friend, I remembered the wards of St Bartholomew's making the sick look sicker and the staff positively diseased. Get out from under these lights.

The corridor continued down dark. Maybe I'd find myself in the angry manager's office and she'd give me a ticking off like Mr Leather Shorts. But the passage came out into a room, a dark room. A darkroom. At the moment, I couldn't see anyone, possibly empty but possibly not. A thick hand went between my legs and pulled me to a wall. I wasn't expecting it. I didn't know what to do. I apologised "Sorry I'm uh..." and made my way back to a rectangle of light. The coat check kid smirked as I banged my way downstairs. Arsehole.

Cruising reached new heights as the small hours approached. Not much pool was being played anymore, abandoned for this new game. Guys sat on the pockets, sucking beer out of bottles and swinging their legs. It was hot. I was hot in my jacket. Half wanted to go give it to the coat guy until I saw a cadre of Muscle Marys in t-shirts 5 sizes too small. The before and after pictures of a Charles Atlas advert if I ventured into their vicinity. No thanks.

Check out the dancefloor maybe, not to dance, just to see. Almost sort of loving the music now. Getting into it after a few. Men chatted on the stairs and outside the loo (the music was quieter, they could hear each other on the stairs, atmosphere less abrasive). I wondered what would happen if I had a friend to come here with, how we would ever find each other? It's like a giant Guess Who game with the same person on all the cards.

I made it to the mezzanine. Squeezed my way best as I could to the rail. Pint is close to my chest, it slopped out and wet my t-shirt. The beer is cold, and it makes me gasp a little and I push into some tall guy, stand on his boot and spill a bit of lager on his leg. Shit. I look up at him.

"I'm sorry" I mouthed, pretty sure he wouldn't hear me. "Really." I smile and cock my head as if to say, well, what can I do? He looked down at me. He was attractive. Stubble. Pale skin. Late 30s some little wrinkles around the eyes. Laughter lines they say, maybe he laughed a lot. The thought made him seem friendly. I smiled. He didn't say anything. Didn't mouth anything. I mimed a sorry again. And just behind him leant on the railing. I could breathe here. Might even be able to light a cigarette without causing scarring to my neighbours here. I could certainly finish what was left of my drink here. Could watch the dancing here. Cruise here. Maybe get chatted up by the hot man behind me here. I stuck my arse out a little more. Pretty sure it worked in a nature documentary I had once seen and watched the dancing. I didn't dance. Self-conscious hell. I flicked a side-eye back. The man had continued talking or shouting or miming to his friends.

There was a tap on my shoulder. I turned and it was the guy. He motioned me in, I put my ear to his mouth. He said "Your friends are missin' ya." I didn't get it. I grinned stupidly and looked at him expecting him to say something else. He

smiled back, "You're friends are missin' ya." He repeated and jerked his thumb to the door. I still didn't get it. He stopped smiling "Fuck off, man." That time I got it. Insides slumped but I kept the grin on my face and nodded, walked away. Humiliated. Upstairs, I smiled all the way through getting a fresh pint and finding a free alcove. I sat well back where it was good and dark, and I could allow the smile to fade.

Those smoke machines really do make your eyes water don't they?

Blind Date, Mate

Kings Cross NatWest Towers. Black, tall. Saruman waving from a window to the orc horde. Only not as much fun. There's a lot of glass. Not the white, bright and breezy open plan Crystal Palace vibe of the Prudential building. More a closed effect. Glass is tinted... the same colour as the wall. The smoked glass and black ash furniture all the rage from Argos in the 80s was here in a giant tower, building shape. In its defence the people filing across the quad outside looked less pretentious than the Prudential's, and not as ugly as Saruman's army. Hard to be pretentious when you're a stone's throw from the open-all-hour prostitution and seedy hoteliers of Kings Cross. Takes the edge off. I followed the horde. First days at new gigs were the worst. Lobby is grey and silver, so depressing, I think their interior decorator took a lot of inspiration from the NatWest letterhead. Interesting choice.

"Hi. I'm Matt Commerford. Manpower. Here for Erin Zuleman, property management."

The young girl behind the counter held a finger up. I got a finger for ya. She had blonde curly hair, and a cheap grey blazer. Shiny. Her name badge said Alex. Alex was wearing a headset and was pressing buttons on a console. She looked about twelve. She lowered her finger.

"Can I help you?"

I continued my smile, but I hadn't meant a second of it. "Matt Commerford, Manpower, Erin Zuleman Property Management?"

"Calling now. You can wait over there." There was no seating. I loitered near a large plastic palm in a cement pot.

The day didn't improve much. Erin Zuleman was a dark, buxom, beautiful Cher, with a knock-off Princess of Wales sense of style - but vague in communication to the point of exasperation. A delegator unable to complete anything herself, handing tasks out like fruit pastilles to her friends in the playground. Ask a question - be shown her new nail varnish. She never answered her phone, wandering off to the fax machine if it rang. Eventually I was given to understand their filing system was a mess, mostly due to members of the department not being arsed to put things back where they belong properly. I had been called in to tidy it up. Easy work. Didn't have to talk to anybody on the telephone, no new systems to learn (Erin was the only one with a computer), no piles of numerical input. Any upgrades given to other departments in the information technology line had passed property management by. NatWest had branches everywhere, and above those branches were flats. This department's job was to manage those flats. They'd get rent checks. Complaints. Send handymen, rat catchers, police. I wondered how much the rents were, if I got a permanent job with the NatWest would I get a discount? Turns out. No. Greedy. I sat on the floor by the filing cabinets with document folders splayed around me, went into my own world. I had no lunch, no money, and come five o'clock no transport to Dalston from Kings Cross. More walking. Liz and Katherine were on the dole and seemed to have enough money, how come since I worked, I had nothing. Made no sense.

"Matty, if you wanna hang out in those expensive west end bars why don't you just work in one of them?" Said Katherine as I bemoaned my aching feet over a tea of beans on toast that evening.

"Be a barman? I don't know how to do that. They'd probably want someone who can make cocktails."

"See a lot of people drinking cocktails on Compton Street, do you?" said Liz, poking at the bones of the chicken she had roasted the day before boiling on the stove. It smelt bitter and chalky.

"Well no." I coughed, "Liz... what...?" I nodded at the stove.

"I'm making broth. Saving money, the money you seem to think I have a lot of."

"I didn't mean that. It's just frustrating to work a lot of hours and have nothing to show for it."

"We work too... sort of." Katherine again. "Lizzie addresses envelopes, I post flyers."

"I'm also a translator. I don't get much work that's true but occasionally I get a gig at the airport."

"Most French people can speak English." explained Katherine unnecessarily and filled the kettle.

"Not the greatest career plan, it's true, thank you Katherine." Liz huffed.

"You're welcome. Tea?"

"Yes please. Oh, use one of these teabags." She indicated the saucer of dried up used teabags by the kettle.

"Kay. Matty, you want a cup of tea?"

"Oh urhm. No. No, I'm fine." Actually, I would have loved a tea, but not that tea. And I had no appetite for any forthcoming broth either.

I finished my beans in silence and watched Liz snip the ends of her cigarette 100s and empty the tobacco into a leather pouch. I opened my mouth to ask a question but closed it again and took my plate to the sink before going to bed.

Wednesday morning, I "borrowed" one of the office phones when I thought nobody was looking. As I flashed a glance across the department Erin smiled at me to let me know she'd noticed and tapped her watchless wrist. I nodded and turned my back and continued listening to Caroline who had been talking all the while,

"Where are you working? Kings Cross? Get the tube up to Camden after work and we'll go for a pint."

"Caroline I can't. I've no money till tomorrow. I have to walk home as it is."

"Okay, I'll come to you. Outside Kings Cross twenty past five. Got to go, have a meeting. See you later." She hung up. I replaced the receiver, and looked for Erin. But now she was having a personal phone call of her own, twirling her fingers around the beige coil of wire attached to the receiver she had clamped between her head and shoulder. I went back to my quadrat of filing on the felt tiled floor. Made new piles of the F-H's, knocked over the E-Gs. Meeting Caroline after work was something to look forward to. Get a couple of pints anyway. Maybe bus fare. Excellent. My cheap shoes thank you, one has a hole. Will have to start wearing my combat boots to the office.

I was early for Caroline. I smoked my penultimate cigarette on the pavement and turned down a copy of the Big Issue three times from two different vendors. Kings Cross had caused me no end of confusion the first time I had seen it. On the telly, in a film - it's completely different. They use a different station because the Kings Cross entrance looks so shit. A seventies nightmare, not what people imagine it to be. Flat roofed, white corrugated plastic, blue sidings. Tons of tourists outside St Pancras, but they'll never catch their train in time. It goes from down the road.

"Always dreaming, you." A cloud of black and silver with its familiar scent of heavy perfume and cigarettes descended and engulfed me. I hugged her back, and she patted my right shoulder with one hand and lit her cigarette with the other. "Any pubs around here"

"Umm not sure really."

"There's one in the station. Come on, I'll stand you a drink."

The pub was a new place pretending it wasn't. Given the decor we were supposed to be expecting the Railway Children to come rushing in here after a hard day of waving their red Victorian bloomers for a nice, ice cold pint of Carlsberg. It might have made it marginally more interesting. Tables were arranged outside the open doors of the pub on the concourse. Inside, a group of men being loud in football shirts.

"Let's sit here, shall we?" I sat down at a metal table furthest from the door without waiting for a reply. Caroline dumped her bags and scarves onto the other chair and went to the bar. She didn't have to ask what I wanted. A pint of something strong. I watched the business of the station. Rush hour. Annoyed faces. Hurried footsteps. I saw a couple of people from the NatWest property management office. They walked past where I was sitting. I smiled at them and waved my fingers. I might as well have been Claude Rains for all the reaction I got.

"People you know?" Caroline was back, she put down the pints and a few packets of dry roasted peanuts. I tore one open eagerly with my teeth. "You know they have a little tab to ope... okay well never mind."

"Not really." I said with a mouthful of peanut and took a couple of deep swallows of the lager. "Woo. Needed that."

"So, I see. So, what's up?"

"Oh nothing, don't get paid till tomorrow that's all. It'll be fine." I took another gulp "You ever do bar work?"

"Yeah, actually that'd be kind of a step down for me."

"I meant ever. Not do you want to."

"Oh, well then, no."

"I need some extra money, I thought I might see what's going."

A screaming kid ran past us on the platform, scattering a flight of pigeons. They flew up in the air, the wind of their wings created a gentle fluttering sound like pages from a book. Low coos. All heads upward. It could have been a beautiful moment if all the pigeons in London weren't hideously deformed in some way.

"Ugh, I hate it when people do that," said Caroline loudly and glaring at the child's parents as they stalked past pretending not to hear her. She turned away and began to reapply her lipstick in a small black compact. "I just know one of their legs is gonna fall off into my drink. Fucking things. Do you like this lipstick? It's called Vamp." It was a dark burgundy.

"Yeah, it suits you."

"Hah. I'm a vamp. What were you saying? Oh bar work. Go for it. Might as well earn money when you're standing around in pubs."

"Yes, that seems to be a popular point of view."

"Must be some truth to it then." She put away her lipstick, lit a cigarette and examined the way the lipstick had stained the filter with a tut. "What have you got to lose?"

After we'd started on another pint, and I'd produced a Pink Paper that I just happened to have with me it was decided that we perhaps, maybe, we could just pop around the corner and see what Kings Cross' only gay pub had to offer at this time on a Wednesday evening...? Okay it was more my idea than Caroline's. She's happy in any pub as long as she can smoke.

It wasn't far. Just five minutes down. Near the old gas works near a tree growing out through the pavement. Central Station had a cosy corner entrance, bit awkward to get through but inside not too male-centric. A community feel. Gals as well as guys. Caroline headed straight for the pool table squared up near a shuttered and painted over fireplace.

"Go to the bar, love." She passed me a twenty from a zipped compartment in the front of her handbag and went to chalk up a cue. I guess this meant I was playing pool. After I'd ordered two pints of Export from the short, tight little hottie behind the bar with a military crew cut (the bleach probably wasn't standard issue) and returned to Caroline she'd already started a game with a couple of girls out for a drink or two after work like us. There were twenty pence pieces lined up at the head of the table. Winner stays on. Could take a while with Caroline hustling. I didn't interrupt, just lifted the glass up to her line of sight and put it on a nearby wooden table and drew up a stool. Pool really wasn't my thing. Terrible at it as previously mentioned. Opportunity rife for mockery after I rip the table and pot the white. Best not bother if I don't have to.

After Caroline had won her game, and conceded the next she came and sat down next to me. I had spent my time wisely in the meantime by making eyes at the blonde crew cut. He had kept coming to rearrange pint glasses at this end of the bar, so I suspected I was getting somewhere.

"You should have come and had a game."

"You know I'm awful. 'Sides, I'm enjoying a little game of my own."

Caroline turned in her seat and looked back at the bar. "Oh yeah, not bad." She retrieved her compact and began to coat her lips with another layer of Vamp. "This lipstick," she said her words made comical through the contortions her lips were doing "spends more time on pint glasses and cigs than it does on my lips." She made a popping sound with her lips and stowed the tube and mirror. "But I like the colour."

"Life is a compromise, dear." I looked around "Where'd those girls go?"

"They wanted to leave before the entertainment came on. Wednesday night they do Blind Date in here with some drag queen."

"That sounds fun."

"I don't know if I'm going to stay around for that, Matt, don't really like that sort of thing."

"Blind date or drag queens?"

"Neither. Not keen on Cilla Black."

"Shhh, don't anger the natives. They probably have a shrine."

"Anyway, one for the road? Then I'm off."

Less than an hour later she was gone. On her way back to Kilburn with a belly full of beer and a smile. My job was done at least. We'd made plans to meet up on a Sunday soon. Over to hers then the afternoon in the King William in Hampstead. The weather would be good. Could sit in the beer garden. I'd told her I would be leaving not far behind but now armed with a crisp new twenty pound note - I had the money for bad decisions. Cigarette machine and another pint for starters. I was feeling about as merry as I wanted to get on a Wednesday school night, but I'd stick around for the drag show. Not seen one since they used to swing on little trapezes over the bar in the Vox in Hull. You had to stand with your back to the wall or risk a stiletto in your eyeball. Could be a laugh. Besides, next time I went to the bar I could time it so Crew Cut would serve me.

Blind Date night was something of an institution at Central Station. As 9 o'clock approached the area around the pool table became crowded. The two men playing gave up as yet another innocent bystander knocked their cue and ruined a shot for the half a dozentime. I couldn't see anything from my table, a mass of

people stood around it, putting their drinks down around my own and stubbing their cigarettes out in my ashtray. I was feeling quite awkward. The only person sitting in church when everyone else has stood up to sing Jerusalem. I'd be better off standing at the bar. I could get another glimpse of Haircut at least. I pushed my way through the denim-ed crowd till I found a little space by a bar corner next to a wooden support. I could see pretty well from here, the dais where I had previously found the cigarette machine now had a young woman arranging some tall bar stools on it. One to the left, and 3 together on the right. A man helped her move a fabric covered screen between them. The kind of screen they used to have at school, where the teacher would pin your artwork, or projects. The good ones anyway. Not yours. Everyone had been watching the young woman, she mugged at the audience and gave a little curtsy before heading off into the crowd again.

The relatively small space was probably the first truly mixed pub I'd been into. Most of the places I'd been had been filled with men, exclusively in most cases. I'd never even asked Caroline where the girls went. I felt a tang of guilt as I realised, I'd pretty much just assumed lesbians didn't go to bars. If they did, did they go with their gay nephews?

"I'm such a moron."

"What's that mate?" It was the barman with the haircut refilling an ice bucket, in front of me. I hadn't noticed him come over. The counter the only thing separating us, star crossed lovers.

"Oh, um. Pint of Kronenbourg please."

"Two secs." He took the ice bucket away and came back a minute or two later with my pint. I held out a fiver, but he waved it away.

"This one's on me. Are you staying for the show?"

"Well, I thought... yeah."

"It's a laugh. Stay." Some bastard called out a drink order. Bastard, can't you wait you motherfucking motherfucker. "Yes mate?" Haircut smiled and wandered off. My disappointment was hidden as the lights dimmed and the iconic Blind Date theme music blasted out. Hadn't heard it for years. My mum used to watch it every Saturday, popping Maltesers and drinking Cinzano but it held no interest for me.

Showoff-y straight people being show offs with other showoff-y straight people whilst go-karting or spending the day on a dairy farm. Urgh no thanks. Good thing gay people aren't show offs isn't it? The drag queen entered.

Lola Lasagne.

Lola was dressed in a red sequined evening gown with a scandalous neckline, gold piping and a gold embroidered dragon crawling up the leg slit and up to her shoulder. She had chosen her jewellery by falling into a rack at Claire's Accessories and saying "I'll take it!" Her hair was a feat of engineering worthy of the Forth Bridge. An auburn beehive two foot high, stuck with flowers, fake dragonflies and jewels. I stared slack jawed over my pint, as the other patrons dah dah'd dah dah'd to the theme tune egged on by Lola and her glittered microphone.

"Good evening, good evening, good eveninnnnnnng!" she bellowed with a thick Birmingham accent into her mic and raised her arms up. Her hair was higher than her arms could ever reach. "Nice to see you all, nice to see you all. Do you like my outfit?" A chorus of cheers and wolf whistles accompanied her modelling, slowly turning and wiggling her bum. "Oh stop." She said, "This old thing?" general laughter. "Who have we got behind the bar tonight?" She shielded the spotlights from her eyes with a stack of cue cards with a Blind Date logo "Hello Michael darling, you're looking particularly delicious tonight." She was talking to my barman who was smiling and waving at Lola. At least I had a name now. "Let me know if I can serve you a slice of Lasagne later, Michael," She ran her hands seductively over her dress. A parody of Marylyn. "I'll keep it hot." The crowd bayed.

"I'm not hungry!" Shouted Michael to guffaws of laughter. Lola affected a look of heartbreak and put her hands on her hips.

"Well, really." She said, "Oh Michael?"

"Yes?"

"Answer me a question."

"Go on."

"Did your mother have any children that lived?" The crowd lapped this up and laughed heartily as Lola strutted around with a Mae West walk. "Okay, okay, okay. Let's leave the poor boy be. Nature has already been so cruel." Lola certainly had

some diehard fans in the audience. They stared raptured up at her, hung onto her every word, and laughed a little too hard at her jokes. They were pretty good jokes though.

"Now, let's get this over with. Later on, we'll be catching up with last week's lessssssbians. Buhhhhhht for now, let's call my lovely assistant Denise!"

"Denise!" roared the audience. I supposed this was a thing. I felt like an actor in a play who hadn't seen the script. Like when I went to audience participation Rocky Horror for the first time and didn't know when to throw the rice or squirt the water.

"Denise," continued Lola, "has told me she has already picked out three willing victi.... uh I mean contestants. All we need now is our... picker!" Suddenly she was in the audience. Out of the speakers played some cheesy, tensionless countdown music. Lola stalked around the people. Making comments. A butcher looking for a prize bull at a county fair.

Oh god she was coming closer. I turned to face the bar. I became very interested in the bubbles in my lager. Through the amber liquid I could see Michael's torso on the other side of the glass. I looked up and saw he was waving at Lola with one hand and pointing at me with the other. Oh god no. I mouthed no. But then, I could feel movement behind me. Why didn't I leave with Caroline?

"And who do we have here?"

I turned and gave a faltering, awkward smile. "Nobody."

"Okay, Nobody, come with me. Lola's gonna make you a somebody. C'mon." She grabbed my hand and I found myself walking toward the dais, my faint protests roundly ignored. Everybody was looking at me. My cheeks were hot. My mouth dry. "Sit up here." she indicated the bar stool next to the screen, "Where's your drink? Someone pass him his drink up before he faints poor thing. Now then, sweetheart," Lola's accent changed to Liverpool, and she began her Cilla impression. "What's your name and where'd ya come from?"

"Um, my names Matt and I'm from Dalston."

"I'm sorry?"

"Dalst..."

"No, I heard you, I'm just sorry." She slammed her scarlet high heel on the floor and did jazz hands to the audience. "Old ones are the best, right? And what do you do for a living sweetheart?"

"I'm a temp."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm a..." I looked at Lola's face, she was thoroughly enjoying herself. This close up I discovered that drag queens really did wear a lot of make-up.

She pointed at me, "Arrrrh, you're learning.... Good for you." She winked at me "Now Matt, was it? Yes? Matthew. Are we single? We are. Not that it makes much difference these days. We don't judge, do we audience?"

The audience yelled that no, they didn't judge and laughed and grinned like kids on Christmas morning. More like the zoo at dinner time. Tiger cage.

"DENISE! Will you bring in the contestants, PLEASE." The Blind Date music blared out again and all over a sudden Lola's hand was covering my eyes. I could smell a long forgotten scent - oil pastels from art class, getting ready backstage at the play competition in fifth year. Then the hand was gone. It squeezed my shoulder, telling me don't worry. It's all in fun. I tried to unclench my sphincter, it was difficult to do on a barstool.

Lola was gone, on the other side of the screen. Off to meet the contestants. I sat on the stool, in the spotlight, a bunch of people staring at me, laughing, smiling. I was still wearing my office clothes. I wished, I wished hard that I could have been wearing something else. Somehow in a place like this it would have given me some confidence. In my cheap black trousers and a tie that had used to be my Dad's I was adrift in a sea of confusion.

"Now then number one," Lola's Cilla Black impression really was quite uncanny. "What's yer name and where'd ya come from?" She did the same to all three, there was Mark from Hackney, Rob from Bethnal Green, and Paul from Brixton. Lola came back to me, and I was relieved. Nobody would be looking at me with Lola and her dragon stood by my arm. "Now then Matt. Why don't you ask a question to one of our contestants?" There was a whisper in my ear, "if you can't think of one, I have some written down." Probably be less embarrassing to think of

one of my own, who knows what questions a drag queen on a dating game show would come up with.

"Urh, where would you take us on our first date?"

"And who's that to?"

"Um, numb, number one."

"Number One," said Lola, crossing over to the other side of the screen.

"Number one, where'd you take the lovely Matt on your first date? Where'd you think, eh?"

"Well, I don't know where we'd start out, but I'd like us to end up at Fist."

The audience burst into laughter.

"Wouldn't we all?" Said Lola. I hadn't heard of Fist but judging by the reaction it was probably something along the lines of the second floor at the LA. My cheeks were going hot again. "Is that something you'd like, dear?" Lola's pantomime quizzical face popping up over the screen feigning curiosity. "Bit of Fist? Hmmm?"

I realised that I was gonna look pretty stupid to pretend to know something about something I didn't. I decided to play it innocent. Maybe it would work in my favour.

"Oh uh. Well, I don't really know what that is, but uh sure." It was a good move, there was laughing and a few "awwws". Maybe I wasn't going to have to run out the fire exit after all. I picked up my glass and took some deep swigs of my lager.

"Okay, Matt. Next Question, who's it for Number Two or Number Three?"

"Number Three."

"Number three, alright chuck, go for it."

"Oh um, god. Uh, do you have a secret talent?"

"That's a good one, I bet Number Three has a lorra lorra hidden talents, don't you Number three? Tell the lovely Matthew all about your secret skills."

"Well, I suppose I have one talent. But I can't tell you, I'd have to show you." More jeering and laughter.

"Don't be shy, chuck. Show us `ere. No? Not the kind of talent you can do in public. Good to know. We'll talk later. Write your phone number down. Okay Matt. Final question and you've got Number Two left."

Lola came back around the screen and stood next to me. My mind had gone a blank. I looked up at her helplessly. She took the hint at once and passed down one of the cue cards to me. I looked at it, tried to decipher the extremely bad handwriting.

"Number Two, uh, do you favour the boxer or the brief?" There was a general oooo from the audience. Lola took the card off me and walked once more to behind the screen.

"The only gay people who wear boxers are lesbians. Isn't that right Denise?"

The audience responded "DENISE!"

"And everyone knows the gay man's underwear of choice is the boxer and brief hybrid, the boxer-brief." This got a smattering of knowing laughter from the audience, "But the question our Matthew wants the answer to Number Two. He wants to know what's in your trousers?"

Number Two didn't hesitate "I go commando!" I couldn't see what he did on the other side of the divide, but the audience exploded into whooping, laughing and shouting. Lola came back clutching the screen for support as if she'd just had a shock.

"Matt, oh Matt. Little Matthew. How can you choose? Here's our Graham with a recap." Lola turned her back to the audience then whirled around with a new accent - a cheesy game show commentator. "Will it be number one? Who'd get you pissed and take you to Fist? Or will it be number two who saves money by not buying underwear? Or will it be contestant number three whose talents are so hidden they're not allowed out in public ... the choice is yours." The audience started shouting out numbers, I could see Michael behind the bar, revelling in the chaos, I didn't know if I was supposed to be mad at him. "Just to remind everyone, we'll give our lucky couple ten whole pounds to go off on their date this week and come back and tell us how they got on. So Matt, who is it gonna be? Shhh shhh audience, I'm so excited I'm lactating."

"Uh. Number two."

"NUMBER TWO! Yeah! Good choice, good choice. But first we have to say goodbye to the losers.... I mean the other contestants. Number one was Mark from Hackney!" Mark from Hackney had a pierced nose and a firm handshake. I'd probably got off lightly. "Number Three! Paul from Brixton!" Paul from Brixton, waved to the audience, walked past my outstretched hand and went back to his friends in the crowd. There was some laughter on his snub, but I pretended not to notice. "And here we are, your date for the week Number Two, Rob from Bethnal Greeeeeen!" The crowd cheered, somewhere behind me Denise pulled the screen backwards and there was Rob. Late twenties, short brown tousled hair. Black leather jacket. He leaned in and kissed my cheek, and the crowd roared some more. "Aww don't they make a lovely couple. Can't wait to hear how that turns out." Rob and I walked toward the bar, whilst behind us Lola announced that after a short break, they'd be finding out how Kath and Emma got on from last week. As I got to the bar Michael pushed forward another pint. "That one's on Lola" he said. Paul from Brixton didn't have much to say, he was keen to get back to his friends. We arranged to meet in Compton's on Monday at six and he disappeared into the throng.

"Are you going on holiday?" This was from Sasha, the daughter of one of the managers on my floor. We were squeezed close together in the lift on Monday morning. The black Adidas holdall I had with me was being stepped on and generally getting in people's way. Sasha was earning a bit of pocket money on a break from Uni by showing up and doing the bare minimum- her lunch breaks were legendary in length. A NatWest bank nod to nepotism. The mass of raven hair, the hint of honey makeup, the smell of something sugary vanilla from Body Shop. *Too many sweets for this time in a morning and I'm cornered by her curiosity.*

"Holidays? What are those? No. It's a change of clothes. I'm going out after work."

"On a Monday?"

"I'm just meeting someone."

"Ooooooooooooo." The lift crowd's energy shifted uncomfortably around us.

The lift pinged an escape at that moment. *Thank god.* We pushed our way out through clucking middle management muttering something about the hierarchies of lift etiquette. I allowed my holdall to hit several of them on the back of their knees. "Oh, so sorry. Sorry. Did I do that? Sorry."

"Tell me later," Sasha whispered and sashayed off to do not much of whatever it was she was supposed to. Not having that luxury myself, I rounded the corner to property management's small open plan section of the seventh floor, stowed my luggage under a disused desk that I tended to commandeer when not sat cross-legged in front of the filing cabinet, wondering how grown adults couldn't manage to fathom alphabetical order, and began my day.

Everything took longer that Monday. The time passed in slow motion, even lunch break which usually disappeared quicker than Sasha at ten to five PM. I sat on a bench by the quad far below and read pages of *Tales of the City* in the sun. Jealous of the characters. Envious of their storybook Barbary Lane house and their easy breezy adventures, quick wits and confidence. Things seem to fall into place for these guys so easily. Here I am sorting bits of paper for minimum wage, nervous to go on a date engineered by a drag queen with a guy that I can't remember the face of. But maybe it will be great. Maybe he will be the love of my life this... what is his name again? Maybe this will be the love of my life, this man with no face and no name and... where did he come from again? Maybe he will be the love of my life this... this... well I know that he doesn't wear underpants.

It's a start.

Two o'clock. Three hours to go. Wish I'd gone to the pub at lunch. Erin went shopping in Islington. Showing everyone what she bought like the Generation Game conveyor belt. Her phone is ringing- stop showing everyone your ugly striped halter top and answer it.

If getting to five was a long slog, that extra five minutes I waited till people put on their coats and collected their bags was longer. Just go already. I smiled goodbyes and see you tomorrows and took my holdall into the toilet. Nipping into the disabled cubicle I stripped down, ended up perched in my socks on the toes of

my steel capped boots. I didn't want to touch the floor. A sudden thought, and I whipped off my underpants. Never been in my nude in an office toilet before. "I'll go commando too. Give us something to talk about." I gingerly pulled on the pair of jeans I had brought with me, the same ones that I'd worn to the LA, and stuffed my feet back into the combat boots I'd been wearing all day. Jeans felt weird with no underpants. Kind of exciting. Tight grey t-shirt next, my old faithful dog tags. All done I left the cubicle and looked at myself in the large mirror above the sinks. I'm gonna give those security guards down there a fright. Better walk past 'em as quick as I can and hold my bag over my crotch.

Ten minutes later - I was bustling along with the rest of the commuters down the steps into Kings Cross underground no longer caring about covering my junk. Kings Cross tended to be one of the rudest undergrounds commuter wise. I suppose it was because it was a hub of sorts and all the bad manners seemed to congregate there somehow. Looking like some skinhead punk in this situation was not without its advantages. Hey you middle management Hitler from your little office, ordering tea-boys about, making goo-goo eyes at the personal assistant? My steel toe capped boot will crush your toes in that expensive brogue without prejudice if you push into me one more time on the escalator.

Most people were trying to get on the train than get off when I arrived at Tottenham Court Road. Trying to get on without letting me off. More toes are gonna get hurt, none of them mine - beginning to feel like a real Londoner. There was a dirty looking woman at the bottom of the stairs. She held a crying baby with one hand (actually more like a toddler) and shook a chewed up polystyrene cup with the other. She didn't bother even asking for money with words. Just shook. At least I looked apologetic and mouthed a sorry when I walked past the expensive suits pretended, she wasn't even there. How you gonna pretend you don't notice that child screaming? My first week in the city I had wandered Covent Garden. A kindly old lady (albeit pandering to every gypsy Eliza Doolittle flower girl stereotype) huffed up to me muttering "lucky heather dear" pinning a tiny piece onto my wind-cheater. Thank you, says me carrying on walking, how nice. Then angry footsteps behind me, kindly old lady looking less kindly, snatches the mini-corsage off, stomps

away cursing. I had to ask three different people to figure out what it was about. Just thick, I guess.

Compton Street - and the pavement thinned out a little. One positive coming out of being in a queer ruled area was that there were less people walking so slowly in front of you. We have places to be, tourists. I was going to be early for my date, (maybe I should walk slower) so I stopped to look in the windows of some of the "gay" shops. Not sex shops, just "gay". Although come to think of it there was sex stuff in there too. Of course, there was. Mostly they tended to sell a lot of things that "straight" shops sell, like books, homewares, leather organisers and messenger bags. But quite often there'd be a twist, like the bag would be made out of rubber, have a fancy logo and on sale for about 100 quid more than you could get elsewhere. Doesn't stop bright young things spending a week's salary on them though. Suppose it helps bring a little "gayness" into a boring humdrum office junior life. That's worth the heavy price tag - being able to talk about how daring it is to have a rubber bag with receptionist Barbara by the water fountain. Clone Zone was more raunchy than American Retro but lacked authenticity, hardly seeing real even to my naivete. Probably to do with the giggling twinkles laughing at foot long dildos.

Might as well go get a pint now.

Compton's was pretty quiet apart from a smattering of regulars. Was I a regular yet? No. Would I one day be able to go up to the bar and just ask for the "usual" or hear "Alright' chief? Pint of the usual? How's the temping game? You're looking well on it."

"Pint of export, please." The man behind the bar nodded and put a glass under a beer tap. His eyes fixed outside the open doors watching the people walking past. He put the pint on the brass drip tray in front of me. Held his hand without a word, without even looking. I put a fiver in it and dumped my holdall at my feet so I could take a sip. Should I stand here at the bar? I wouldn't normally. I'd find a corner. Someplace I could have a wall at my back. The man behind the bar gave me my change and said thank you. I said "and you" and felt stupid but he didn't seem to notice. Probably hears a lot of stupid shit. I took my stuff and went over to stand in a quiet nook to the left of the door with the window on one side and a nice flat

wall behind me. That way, when whatshisface with no underpants on came in I wouldn't miss him. I couldn't remember what he looked like now but I was sure I would recognise him when he arrived. Then more awkwardness could begin.

I waited quite a long time.

I was buying my third or fourth pint at about 7:30 when I twigged.

"I wouldn't go, but I think you ought to." Liz was making me a cup of Typhoo a couple of hours later. I'd had enough Export by then not to care where she had found the tea bag.

"Thanks. Wait, what?"

"He's the bad guy. He'll get humiliated if he's there. You'll get sympathy. At the very least 10 quid."

"Urgh. Admitting to a room full of people I was stood up, though? Kill me now."

"Ce n'est pas la mer a boire." She rubbed my head. If I'd had hair, she'd have ruffled it.

"And what does that mean?"

"Just means things are fine. Now drink your tea, stop bitching, and watch the Simpsons with me. Michael brought in another tape of Treehouse of Horrors."

"Alright. But it doesn't make up for standing around for 3 hours with no underpants on."

"Caroline? It's Matt." Tuesday and I was at the office. There was a team meeting to which temps didn't get invited and I was taking advantage of the unsupervised telephones.

"Hi Matt. How are you doing?"

"Fine." I spoke the next part quickly, "Look I was wondering if you wanted to go out after work tomorrow. The same place we went last week. Only I have to stick around for the drag show this time and could you as well?" There was silence.

"Please?"

"Why? What's going on?" Caroline seemed amused by the desperation in my voice.

"I... I got roped into the Blind Date thing last week and now I have to go back to tell them about it."

"You did the Blind Date thing? Why didn't you tell me? Oh my god, that's so funny. What happened? Did you get picked? What was he like?"

"Um... I was the pickee... I got stood up, Caroline..."

"Is he here?" Caroline lowered her head as she leaned on the bar after having ordered our drinks.

"I haven't had a good look..."

"Don't lie. You've looked. Is he here?"

"No." I picked up a freshly served pint and took a deep pull. "At least I don't think so. I can't really remember what he..."

"How'd your date go?" It was Michael grinning mischievously, as he appeared from behind a bar post on the other side of the counter. A clown leaping from the shadows.

"I'm sure you'll hear all about it..."

"Got stood up." Caroline's leering matched Michael's beautifully. An impish duo.

"... later." Can't seem to finish a sentence around here today. The devilish couple giggled conspiratorially like old friends.

"Sorry, sorry. I shouldn't laugh but it happens quite a lot. In fact, most contestants don't even bother coming back. Lola will be thrilled." With a grin that made my stomach flip he disappeared off down the bar to serve some older guys in checkered shirts. "I may kill Liz when I get home. She made me come back. Everyone's gonna laugh at me." I turned to my Aunt and did my best Piper Laurie impression; "They're all gonna laugh at me, everyone's gonna laugh at me."

"Cig?" Offered Caroline.

She played pool with the girls she had met the week before, for whom it seemed Wednesday nights were regular pool nights. I didn't know what she said to them but this week they were going to stay and watch the show. If there was a public flogging, perhaps they'd show up for that too. I lost a couple of games with them all, mostly so they wouldn't ask me to play again. My skill at pool being what it was, if I had tried to win, I would have still lost. Then after the longest evening in the pub that ever there was, I saw Denise (DENISE!) arranging the chairs on the dais. Caroline and her new friends came over to the bar where I had been mooning unsubtly at Michael for the past twenty minutes to tell me they had secured a nice little table for us all to sit at where we would all have a nice little view.

"You'll have a nice view, you mean." I said saltily, "I'll be up there..."

"Yeah, yeah. We've all heard. C'mon and sit down." I allowed myself to be escorted over and plonked unceremoniously next to the lesbi-jacks in their checkered shirts and baseball caps. They smiled at me and carried on with their conversation with Caroline on the perils of rent-to-own as if never interrupted. I lit a cigarette and watched the stage being set, by the time I was stubbing it out the lights were dimming, and the familiar rifts of the Blind Date theme tune began to blare out over the singing crowd once more. Daa da, daa da, da da da dada daa. I felt sick.

A magnificent green sequined gown entered.

Lola Lasagne.

Her arms raised high to her bouffant once more. This time her auburn beehive adorned with glitter daffodil trumpets. On her breast, more daffodils flowers, yellow on green. Sequined stems. "Good evening, good evening, good evening!" She clapped the crowd, waving and pointing at her most devoted followers. "D'ya like me frock?" she put her hands on her hips, gave them a twirl. "You get it? No? I'm the host... these are daff....o....dils... no? Philistines. Host of golden daffodils... no?" One person in the audience made a woo noise. "Well thank you for that. I don't know why I bother. Plebs. Okay, who is serving cocktails tonight?" She squinted over to the bar and waved at Michael "Oh, hello Michael dear. You again? What's that?" she feigned he had said something and put her hand

to her ear "You're what? You're desperate to give me your phone number? I know you are sweetheart, but you'll just have to wait till later. I have a lot to get through. No, no, don't beg. I'll see you after the show, dear. Maybe give you a digit of my own." She stuck up her index finger and flexed it - the audience roared. "OKAY! Now before we play our first game, let's hear how last week's testosterone-ys got along shall we?" Lola consulted the card in front of her "Let's bring up on stage, the lovely Rob and Matt," the Blind Date theme once more played out and Lola encouraged the crowd to sing along. "Round of applause please and thank you." She went up to the middle of the dais and looked out into the audience. With encouragement from Caroline and the two girls who couldn't seem to contain their glee, I unsteadily stood up. Brushed myself down and made my way over the cyclone of red hair that was Ms Lasagne.

Depositing myself rather roughly on one of the bar stools, I forced my mouth into a grin. It was reluctant to shape itself into one, but I hoped the effect wouldn't look too pained. I could see Michael behind the bar, practically wetting himself with anticipation. Everyone certainly was having a good time.

Lola stepped lightly up and down the stage, making a pantomime of shielding her eyes with her hand like a sailor on the deck of a ship. "Rooo - obbbbbb?" she trilled. "Oh Roooo - ob?". Nothing. She knew. Someone had told her. The audience looked amongst themselves for the elusive Rob, grinning maniacally. "Hmmm, he doesn't appear to be here, does he? Oh well. We have the lovely Matt, let's ask him how his date went shall we?" A whoop from the crowd. Lola pointed her bejewelled microphone in front of my face and repeated her question "So, lovely Matt. How did your date go? Did you set a day?"

"Yes."

"And when was that day, Matt?"

"Monday at six, in Compton's."

"Monday at six in Compton's? How lovely." She addressed the crowd, "Isn't that romantic, audience? Monday at six in Compton's? Can you imagine?" The crowd obviously agreed with her. "And so, Matt, did you get yourself gussied up and go on your date?"

"Yes." The microphone stayed where it was, it wanted elaboration. "I was early."

"Aww." The audience aww ed with her. "So keen. Keen as mustard for your date. All dressed up. Ready, willing, and able. Monday at six in Compton's." Titters. "So then what happened?"

"He didn't come."

Lola Lasagne faked a heart attack, and from the audience came a mixture of gasps, awws and hysterical laughter. "He...let me get this right." She steadied herself, put her hand behind her back and stretched, "Let me just get the facts. He... came here... onto my show? Got up into *my* business?" Lola began to channel Faye Dunnaway in her famous wire coat hangers *Mommie Dearest* scene, "And didn't follow through....? No one stands up my contestants... ever!" shouts and squeals of delight from the crowd as they cheered and shouted "shame, shame" to the man who wasn't even there. "Matt. I am SO, SO sorry you had to go through all that. Did you have a nice time in Compton's at six on Monday? No? Did you not make a new friend to make up for your unfortunance? No? I expect you were too sad, weren't you? Too heartbroken, audience. Poor Matthew was far too heartbroken to enjoy his evening that started at six, in Compton's. Now listen, you poor, unfortunate, lonely little man. We were going to give you ten whole pounds to pay for your date, but as Rob, that hateful, ungrateful, wire hanger loving motherfucker isn't here, I'm gonna give you his too. That's twenty quid for you, it's behind the bar love. Let's have a round of applause for Matt as he returns to his sad lonely little life."

I wound my way through the crowd. There was a back pat or two until I got to the bar. Michael was there. "Well done," he said cheerfully "Here ya go." He pushed forward a fresh pint and put a couple of tens on the counter. "And, if you fancy it, we can spend them on Monday, at six, in Compton's. I won't stand you up." He winked and went back to work. My smile suddenly felt less uncomfortable.

Sex Talk

"Do you think I'd make a good whore?" I had been flicking through the back pages of QX magazine. The ads for personal masseuses filled every inch, in fact, for many

that was their tag line. All you needed to be a masseuse in the back pages of the QX was someone to take a black and white photo of you in your best underpants and put a mobile phone number in a bold font.

"You want to be a rent boy?" Liz and I were watching Garden Force. We liked to mock the poor sods stuck in suburban purgatory. Their only chance of happiness: Charlie Dimmock installing a knotty pine trellis.

"I suppose want is a strong word."

"Mm. Well I can't say I'm qualified to study your form in regards to qualifications. What about that guy I saw skulking out the door in the middle of the night? Did he fill in a scorecard or anything?"

"Very funny. What were you doing camping out by the front door? Checking tickets?"

"I was waiting for Katherine and Michael to come home, only I must have fallen asleep at some point because they were already in."

"Such a good sister. Always looking to make sure your eggs are all in the one basket. Want some hot chocolate, good sister?"

"Ooo yes please." She brushed stray tobacco off her chest and herded it back into her pouch before lighting her roll up. Something occurred to her, "If you were to start being a rent boy where would you do it? I don't suppose any of us would be too thrilled about the comings and goings."

"Mostly comings if I understand the concept correctly."

"All the same."

I returned from around the back of the telly, the suburban couple were thrilling at the sight of their new water feature made from an old sink. So unusual they were saying. So innovative. "Here you are." I held out a steaming mug, Bart Simpson was on the side encouraging the reader to not have a cow. At that moment Liz was dealing with a small roll-up fire and associated sparkage. "I'll just put it here." I said and set it down on the littered coffee table next to her forgotten cup of cold tea. "I suppose I hadn't thought about that. Where to do it. Probably wouldn't be worth charging much if I have to give blow jobs in the alley next to the 24-hour bagel bakery."

"Save on overheads though."

"Different kind of head." We laughed, and I spilled a bit of hot chocolate on my t-shirt. The joke didn't make any sense but tickled us both. The kind of word play mutually appreciated; Liz was champion at crosswords. I turned a few more pages. "Just seemed like an easy way. That's all."

[Blue Angels. Offers discreet personal massage for professional gentlemen.
Luxurious relaxed surroundings, West London. Fully licensed.]

There was a phone number. I called it. Actually, I called it and put my finger on the receiver button before I hit the last digit. And again. By the time it rang at the other end for real I didn't even have to check the digits with the ad. I knew them by heart.

"Blue Angels." Male, effeminate. But hard.

"Oh hello. Hi. Um. I was wondering if you were looking for any...uh... staff."

"Like masseurs and escorts, you mean?" They were exhaling as they said it, perhaps it had been a long day, or perhaps they get asked that question every five minutes by a never-ending rolodex of callers.

"Yeah. Masseurs and escorts, yeah. Those." I have abandoned any attempt at confidence. Confidence has left me.

"Have you done escort work before?"

"Oh well. Um. Well... not actually." No point in lying. They'd soon know. Especially if there was actual massage to be done.

"It's not a problem. You wanna come down and we'll look at you, doll?" Doll?

"Yeah, sure No problem." Oh fuck.

"Okay come down this evening, Sundays are quiet. What's your name I'll put you in the book?" This evening. Jesus.

"It's Matt."

"Do you know where we are Matt? Have you got a pen?"

I left Turnham Green tube station. It faced open green space next to railway tracks and had a florist. Nice. Feels quite posh here. So, this is Chiswick, eh? Not bad. Not bad at all. Bit village-y. I started to follow the directions jotted down on what was now a damp piece of paper. (I'd been clutching it and re-reading it almost the whole way). I set off by first going under the railway bridge - bullet point number one. The man-madam said it would be about a 10-minute walk. If I see a pub first, I am most definitely taking a moment. Maybe two moments. My legs felt wobbly. I had bats flapping around my stomach. If I'd known Chiswick looked like this, I might have rethought my outfit. These were white middle-class Londoners; they weren't afraid of a punk like me. Once again skinhead chic was way out of its place. Could one have successfully auditioned for a whore house in polyester slacks and a drip dry button-down? I only knew one way to do sexy and this was it. The printed floral dresses, brollies and briefcases of Turnham Green were not impressed.

Ten minutes later I'm still going and muttering small curses at the directions. I saw the George IV across the road I did not hesitate to nip across and duck inside. Despite the early evening - it's light out, red velvet lamps cosy the atmosphere indoors. Traditional horse brasses and fireplaces, stone floors and two old fellas sat in silence at a table made for six. The Slaughtered Lamb of suburbia.

"Hi, um. Can I have a pint of um, oh Kronenbourg, perfect and a large vodka and coke, no ice. Thanks." I probably shouldn't have ordered the Kronenbourg, not great to smell of lager too much. Aw hell, what's the point, it's not really the sort of place they should be complaining about vices now, is it?

It's a young woman behind the bar, pretty, red hair and freckles. She's wearing a pub polo-shirt logo-ed with a crown above the George IV, ground-breaking. It's at least one size too small, the crown is distorted against her boob. We're obviously cut from the same cloth.

"Four fifty." She says looking at a television attached to the wall. It's Catchphrase with subtitles. My existence barely registered. I was grateful for that at least. I took my drinks over to find a corner not too close to anyone. Easily done. Cigarettes and alcohol in advance should make the next hour or two more tolerable at the boy-brothel. I don't know what's going to happen.

What will happen? Is this an interview? Is this an audition? Am I to perform? Will I be performing with the owner? Will I be working tonight? Are they gonna be throwing clients at me? Is this gonna be like the *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*? Is Dolly there? How does it work? Does the guy come in and sit on a white leather sofa with fake pot plants on either side whilst a pimp brings the boys in one at a time, makes them walk up and down until the customer decides which one he wants. This one does whips. This one wears knickers. This one spansks you with a paddle. Am I supposed to be active or passive? My tummy hurts and I want to go home.

I've already necked the Smirnoff and coke and am halfway down the pint, the start of my second cigarette, my first still smouldering in the ashtray. This gig is probably not for you, you know, that right? It's not for you.

Well, you say that. But you know, how different is it from temping? I mean really. You have a task to do, and you go and do it. You show up and make yourself indispensable, the first rule of temping. Works the same here. Temping and renting, no difference. A smile on your face, a song in your heart and a dick in each hand.

Drinks consumed; cigs blotted out there's no excuse not to continue the journey. I pop into the gents on the way out. It's cold and white tiled. Lemon fresh. Victorian styled urinals with yellow discs at the bottom, there's a dead fly on mine. I peed on him with some satisfaction. As I washed my hands, I took a glance at the fella staring out from the mirror. Not bad, good teeth, good stubble. Shaved head. Chest looking good. Plenty of packet on show. I look surprisingly good. I can do this.

Outside, the next turning is my turning. I find the place halfway down a residential street. On the corner, down a little flight of concrete steps with little tubs of box hedging on the sides. A door with a buzzer. No sign. Of course, there's no sign. I hope this is the right place. It might not be, perhaps I should keep on walking. No. Because I just know. I know this is the place. No point in keeping on walking. We came all this way. Let's do this. Let's get this done. It's time to do this.

There's a grey and silver box by the door with a button. I lift my hand, it's a little unsteady. It's a little shaky. With my index finger I press the button for a couple of seconds. From somewhere down behind the painted blue door with the

large silver handle comes an ugly buzz. I don't know why but I find it surprising. I was expecting something more elegant. The door is opening. I may piss myself now.

There's a man standing in the doorway. He's not opened the door all the way, just enough for him to stand in the gap. He's in his 30s, probably late 30s. He has a French crop that doesn't suit him and looks dyed. He's wearing what a lot of the kids in The Village wear, bleachy jeans, and a juicy t-shirt. It's too young for him. He moves his arm up the door and rests his hand on the top. "Hello." He says and tilts his head.

"Hi." I said, wondering why he's got lip gloss on. "Hi. Uh, I spoke to someone earlier, but I didn't get his name. My name's Matt."

"Oh." He said. His demeanour changed. Clenched. His hand came down from the door. He leaned onto the frame and folded his arms. "You're Matt? I thought you were nineteen."

"I... am... I am nineteen."

He was appraising me from top to bottom. Shaking his head. "Oh no," he said. "No no. This is not what we are about. I'm sorry. You should have said on the phone. This isn't what our clients come here for." He waved an open palm in a circle. "But you know what? Let me help you out. There's a place called Broken Noses. Have you seen their ad in the papers?"

"Um I'm not su..."

"You're probably more what they're looking for."

"Oh. Uh..."

"Yeah. But thanks for coming down to see us. Bye now."

The door clicked shut. I stood alone on the doorstep. As I made my way back to the station the springtime evening air made my eyes water a little.

"So, there I am in the middle of fucking Chiswick, too ugly for a whore house."

"Poor Matt. And you're not ugly at all. We're all exceptionally good looking in our family" Caroline was treating me to after work drinks in the Black Cap the next day. "You're not actually going to go to that other place, are you?"

"Ah, no." I blew smoke up towards the nicotine ceiling. "No. Lost my nerve now. Besides, I start in Brief Encounter on Thursday so maybe that'll solve my financial woes."

"In a place like that, you could probably still be a rent boy if you wanted. Freelance. Ching ching."

"Aww, thank you. That's so sweet."

Caroline drained the froth from her Grolsch and picked up her purse. She stopped on her way to the bar to speak again. "Matt though, don't do that stuff. We're joking around, and yeah, in a moment of madness you went out there. But Matt, you don't need to do that. I'm glad it didn't work out." She squeezed my shoulder, pointed a finger at my nose and headed toward the barman.

"Yeah." I stubbed out my cigarette. "Yeah, I guess."

"So basically, what you're saying is, you can only give it away for free?" Michael was stuffing his face with vegetable rice at the kitchen bar and laughing. Katherine sat next to him watching every forkful disappear behind his ginger stubble, and onto the countertop.

"Yeah. What can I say? I'm a bargain. The world's most least successful prostitute."

"Oh, well you're still young." Said Katherine, then she looked up. "That was supposed to sound a little more supportive. I'm glad they said no actually."

"Yeah yeah, the petition has been signed Katherine. It still leaves me with an empty wallet, so voila. Beans de la bread. Again."

"I like beans on toast," she said.

I took my plate over to the sofa and sank down next to Liz who rubbed my arm, an eye on Men Behaving Badly. "How was your Aunt?"

"Oh fine. She's always fine. She wanted me to go back to Kilburn with her, but we'd only end up getting drunk, and then she starts playing her guitar."

"She plays a guitar?"

"Mmmhmm. And she's not bad, but it's just too weird to sit there when someone starts singing at you. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Listen?"

"Well sure, but it's not if she's busting out a Bizarre Inc song, is it?" I put a spoon of baked beans in my mouth and looked at the TV. "Urgh have to try sumthin elsh fer cash."

The audience on the television laughed uproariously.

Earth Moves

Katherine, Michael, Liz, and I were squashed together like hogs on our hideous orange and brown velveteen sofa with the fuzzy piping. The ruins of a large communal chili lay in front of us. It gave off a slightly spicy hum, set to stick around for a day or two. I hadn't eaten much of mine not being a fan of hot chili. Michael was surprisingly sensitive, so I had made a heroic effort to give it a good go despite my tongue protesting and my eyes watering in between exclamations of "mmmmm" and "gorge".

Tales of the City was playing on Channel 4. Several interspliced legs tapping along to Disco Inferno and rattling the crockery on the coffee table.

"I...I bet our sofa remembers these songs from the first time around." Said Katherine, "It's made him happy and that's why he's extra comfortable tonight." No one commented on this remark. Liz especially didn't look that comfortable. Arms pinned at her side and a blue Argos mini-pen stuck out the side of her thin mouth as she scanned the columns of Loot.

"Whatcha looking for Liz?" I said and tried to shift my weight over into the arm a little to give her more room. I failed.

"Just seeing if there's any casual jobs going, sometimes I can find an interpreting thing in here. Or handing out flyers. Cash in hand."

"Couldn't you collect the flyers, dump 'em in a bin, and then just say you handed them out?"

"Some people do. Seems dishonest though."

"Mm I suppose so."

"I love Olympia Dukakis." Said Katherine.

"She's good, isn't she? I didn't picture Mrs Madrigal like that in the book but now I'll always see Olympia Dukakis." That was a lie. In fact, I hadn't read the books before the TV show, but I felt that as the house homosexual I ought to at least pretend I was a somewhat competent gatekeeper of gay lore. Upstairs in my room were the first few books in the series, hastily bought, and becoming increasingly well thumbed. I should be living with gay people. That's how to make gay friends. Live with them.

Later that evening after everyone had gone to bed and my stomach was still complaining about the chili. I crept mously downstairs for more and plenty of delicious water. Liz's Loot caught my eye as it lay seductively on the sofa. I picked it up as I made the return trip, took it back upstairs with me. Can't hurt to look.

Fairy-tale street somewhere lined with trees, near water, cheap, simple accommodation but stylish, white walls and blocks of colour, close to a tube, zone 1 or 2, not south of the river, cool and funky house-mates, not studied funkiness, natural, all have interesting jobs at interesting places, there's an opening at one of them which I would get without having to interview because I'm perfect for it, we all have the same interests and go clubbing together and have barbecues in the summer in the courtyard out the back which is exactly like the one at Barbary Lane, borrow clothes, talk man-troubles like in Golden Girls, fall in love, just be really great mates, really great mates. Yeah. Really great. Mates.

"Is that too much to ask?" I was sitting on a blanket in the garden out the back of Caroline's flat in Kilburn. Green lawn and flowerbeds. An occasional bumble bee floated past like a floating elephant. Not a care in the world. The four or five flats in the Victorian terraced house shared the garden. Caroline said it was kept by a Nazi who lived with the old lady landlady who owned the whole thing. They lived in the flat below and Caroline was convinced he beat her up on occasion. He also wasn't keen on people coming out here. But you couldn't tell Caroline nothing and she wasn't about to hold with any of that nonsense.

"Hmmm?" She was sitting on a lawn chair with her eyes closed.

"Is it too much to ask to live with gay people?"

"You can live wherever you want, Matthew. This is London. Gay people can be arseholes too though, not just the breeders." She sat up in her chair and adjusted her sunglasses at me. "I think Herr Mengele over there is gay." She nodded to the so-called Nazi pricking out seedlings in a far-off corner. "He's just closeted, that's why he's so horrible to everyone. Bitter." She leaned back in her chair again and stretched out her legs. "He sprayed me with a hose once when I was sitting out here. Did I ever tell you that? Said it was an accident, but he was just being a fucking Nazi." She said the last three words loud enough for him to hear. I looked over. He had his back to us, wearing a long-sleeved black shirt. Odd choice for a warm day and gardening. I hoped he wasn't burying the old woman back there.

"What time shall we go to the King Billy?" I asked and sipped my wine.

The King William IV had stood on a corner of Hampstead for eons. I liked Hampstead; it was villagey in an unapologetically fake way. When was the last time you went to a country village and found a McDonalds or an American Style ice-cream parlour? On hot days when boys and men sunned themselves on Hampstead Heath by the ponds and in the bushes, this would be the pub they would head to when in need of replacing lost liquid. I wasn't interested in sitting about on the heath, but Caroline and I enjoyed the beer garden at the King Billy and was a happy mix of girls and boys that kept us both content.

"Shall we sit in the shade?" I asked as I led the way into the whitewashed, trellised garden with a cold pint dripping with condensation. It wasn't so much a garden as a courtyard. Probably old stables. Metal chairs hot from the sun and unstable tables over uneven concrete. An abundance of pot plants in various stages of death. Windchimes hung from corners, no breeze for even a tiny tinkle. A hubcap or two sprayed in garish colours someone found under the stairs decorated a wall. A gentle murmur of good-natured conversation, quieted music flowed out from inside the pub. Sunday-ish and relaxed.

"The shade? God no. I want the sun" She said it was the Sicilian in her but after a while it always made me feel ill.

"Oh, how about here? Take that chair and you've got the sun; I can shade a bit here in this one."

"Get some colour on you, sit in the sun."

"No, I get too hot, I'm fine here."

There was a smattering of people, it was still early. Gays out for lunch, for hair of the dog after Saturday night clubs, updating each other on the gossip and the trade. Lesbians treating themselves when walking their dogs. I'd been at Caroline's for 10am and we had gone almost immediately out into the garden. Wine for elevenses, and now here for a lager lunch. There was a possibility of dry roasted peanuts at some point.

"I bet the heath gets busy today. How come that's just a boy thing? Why don't the girls do that?"

"Coz you boys are dirty bastards. I dunno. Doesn't appeal to me. I'd rather sit somewhere comfortable and be wooed."

"Me too! I definitely prefer to be comfortable when I'm rude."

She threw a beer mat at me.

Teatime saw us tumbling out of Camden Road tube station, holding on to each other. Laughing like frightened ducks at a dog on the shore.

"Oh oh. Stop it, stop it. C'mon pull yourself together. They won't let us in."

"Of course, they will. We're not drrrrunk."

"Shh, shh, shh. Listen... listen... This is very important...Listen... I need to put some lippy on."

I pointed a wobbly finger at a bemused young woman exiting the station behind us and then put it against my lips. "Shhhhhhhhhh. My aunt is putting on lipstick goddammit. We need some quiet. STAT." The woman rolled her eyes, but I could tell she thought I was hilarious. "That's right, go make your noise over there... Caroline? Caroline? Where...? Oh, there you are. I have silenced the peoples. The peoples are husher-ed."

"Matthew. Don't harass the Camdonions. Come on." She pulled my arm into hers and we began to march briskly over to the Black Cap, our legs, and steps in

sync by the time we got halfway. We finished the journey skipping, Dorothy and the Scarecrow. A lone security guard maintained a vigil over the door but didn't try to stop us entering. "Evening" he said. I pulled back from Caroline and was about to say something incredibly witty and devastatingly sexy to him. As I drew in a breath Caroline came back and pushed me into the building. "Not now dear," she said.

The downstairs main bar was open. A whole new world, polar opposite from the traditional fandangles of Mrs Shufflewicks little drinkery upstairs. Here was a dark Christmas - crimson upholstery, gilt, and black ornamentation. A narrow marble topped bar with gold lager pumps dripping diamonds. Bacchanalian anthems called many of the pickled patrons to the dancefloor. Their skin burnished from their day of sun at the Heath or by the lock, dark against bright white wife beaters. Others waited under crystal lights at the counter in anticipation of the scheduled drag magic on stage. Perhaps in search of a different kind of magic, the kind of magic that lasts for just one night. Smog from a hundred menthol cigarettes made minuet to mirror balled ceilings, smoke and mirrors, hidden corners. I stood there and swayed.

"Fun." I whispered to nobody. Caroline was already at the bar and Crystal Waters' 100% Pure Love anthem would drown out a police siren. I reached a hand to my backside to check on my wallet. As I checked my left buttock pocket, I discovered a forgotten tiny envelope. A gush of thrill surged through my stomach.

"Caroline, Caroline?" I landed by her at the bar, she was putting her purse away. "Oh, um, do you want some money?"

"Hmm? No. But you get the next ones."

"Okay. D'you want a dab of speed?"

"What?"

"I've got some speed."

"We've been here two seconds, where'd you get this speed from?"

"Oh, I already had it. I forgot. I'd met this fella last week, and he had some, and when I was leaving there was a little wrap near my jacket and I kind of thought he must have meant for me to have it. So, it sort of came home with me. Anyway, I just found it in my pocket."

"I don't mind a bit of speed sometimes. But I have work tomorrow"

"So, do it...I'm gonna go do some."

"Okay, then come back and I'll go do some."

"Okay, so I'll go do some then come back then you go do some."

"That's what I said."

"Okay, so... okay."

That trade from last week did a line of this stuff. Like Mona in Tales of the City. Only hers was cocaine. Could I do that? Do a line? Can't be that hard to work out. Last week I'd just done a wet finger dipped in the stuff under my tongue while that guy sucked my cock. But I could do a line. Seems fun. Seems naughty. Mona did it. People do it all the time.

I stumbled my way through the summer night city singers, and into the toilets. Pine and wet cigarettes, green flaked walls, and white pipes. There was someone before me waiting for the cubicle. No shirt, arms folded, chewing gum, leaning against the wall. Yuck. Not sanitary. When the lock clicked on the Formica door and a sweaty 20 something fella came out in a pair of ripped blue jeans, two t-shirts tucked into his belt. They kissed and smiled at each other, left the toilet together. I nipped into the cubicle and locked the door before anyone else came in. Best to do this quick. I carefully unfolded the small envelope; it had been thoughtfully creased. Like when people used to make those fortune tellers at school, a specific way of folding that if you knew you knew. The flaps of paper opened to reveal their treasure, huddling together in the crease. The powder was a creamy white with speckled crystals of pink. Okay. So far so good. Nothing spilt. I grinned stupidly and set the opened paper on the cistern lid. Um. What next? Oh, a card. I have my bank card. Yeah, my bank card. That will do. And a five-pound note, just try and roll that into a tube. Could do with a less battered note but it's the only one I have. Right so, try and make this into a line. How big should the line be? I suppose... I suppose about the same length as the card. That makes sense, now just neat it out a bit. And I'm supposed to suck this into my nostril? Is this gonna hurt? Jesus. Okay I can do this. This is the same as doing poppers. Kind of. Got my note here we go...

Oh.

Oh, that wasn't bad.

That's fine. It didn't even hurt. Just need to sniff a bit.

And sneeze.

No, don't sneeze. Don't wanna waste it. Sniff it up. Swallow,

I'll just lick the end bits of my note.

Fold this envelope back up. No not that way. That way.

Sniff again.

Rub nose.

Swallow.

Good.

Good good. Okay I really want that Kronenbourg now. I really want a cigarette too. A cigarette would be amazing now.

I made my way back through the cloud, confident and immortal. I knew something all these losers didn't.

"Alright?"

"Yeah, great."

"Is there enough for me?"

"Absolutely. I just did one line."

"That's what I'll do then."

"Here you go."

"Thanks."

"I'll be here."

The hairs on the back of my neck had begun to lift. My mind felt lighter. Drunken fog lifting.

I am so pleased I am here. With these wonderful people in this wonderful place with my wonderful Auntie Caroline. This is so great. Oh god my lager is so cold and bubbly. My lager is so refreshing. I need to drink all of it right now. This is the best beer I have ever had in my life. I have never tasted anything so good as this beer right now that I am having right now. This Kronenbourg is not like any other Kronenbourg lager I have ever had before. This must be special lager. I want more lager like this. I should drink more lager like this. I don't ever have to leave here. I

can stay here and drink this, the best lager beer in the whole world right now. I will not leave Caroline though. I will wait for her and buy her more of the best lager beer. I want a cigarette. I will light a cigarette. Where are they? Here is the lighter. Oh my god. That tastes so good. This cigarette is the best cigarette I have ever had in my entire life. What kind of cigarettes are these? Are these my cigarettes? These taste like the best cigarettes in the entire world. Where did I even get these? Did they fall in a puddle of magic? Is this the speed that does this? My good they should put speed in everything that ever there was. Speed makes everything taste brilliant.

Caroline suddenly stood before me. Smiling. She pushed something into my back pocket. "Plenty left".

"Taste your lager." I said, "It's the most amazing lager ever in the world. Here taste my cigarette."

Hookers hooking up

Margaret - bouffant haired, vintage blue power suited, patterned tights. PA to who knows which mini-Hitler was speaking to Erin at her desk. No matter the subject she always spoke in a low voice with furtive looks around the office. I had watched her do this before. Interesting tactic. This was NatWest Property Management, there were no big secrets here. An obvious play to assert power. The I-know-something-you-don't-know play. The there's-something-going-on-but-I couldn't-possibly pincer movement. Her low-key glances would have come across as over-acting at the pantomime. I'd encountered a few managerial PAs by this point in my temping career and most were the same. Somehow, they believed the power of middle management was theirs to wield because they audio typed the boss's letters personally instead of sending it to the typing pool. Urgh the typing pool, no I do them myself because sir like them done properly. Empower yourself, woman. I briefly thought about making a paper aeroplane and launching it at the back of her head. It would have pleased me to think of her going home on the tube with a paper dart sticking out the back of her Thatcher-esque hair helmet. Confusing and befuddling the other commuters. Erin was getting antsy. Fiddling with her stack of

post-its and agreeing with everything to try and get rid of her. My fingers were flicking through a pile of cheque stubs that I had already checked (not wanting to start on a new pile till the morning). My eyes fascinated by this strange exchange. Erin was getting panicked. Just a little bit panicked. It was quarter to five in the afternoon and without fail, every day, Erin completed a ritual. First, she would take a minute or two to organise her handbag, removing and replacing various items, then she would go into the ladies toilet with it. Then she would return (with repaired make-up, and freshened body-scent), organise her handbag again, tidy her desk; put pens back into the plastic pot, line up the blotter, get her coat, brush her coat, put coat over her arm, pick up the handbag, then head over to lifts without saying goodbye. It was now four forty-eight. Margaret was seriously eating into Erin's handbag re-organisation time. Finally, Margaret stalked off, after another secretive, make sure everyone notices I'm doing it, glance around, we see you Widow Twanky. She marched past my desk, eyes front, bejewelled fingers, leaving nothing behind but a sharp orangy scent. Did she bathe in citric acid? For a woman of a certain age, her bum looks good in that pencil skirt though. Maybe I should bathe in citric acid.

Erin completed her ritual in double time, clearly annoyed. Eventually as she stood before the lifts with most of the other workers, I pulled my backpack out from under the desk. My turn for ten minutes in the toilet. Time for my ritual. Today was different though. I'd made an investment. I shouldn't have, but some birthday money had come in and I couldn't resist. A pair of black leather jeans. And their first outing was gonna be for my Thursday shift at Brief tonight. Hold on to your hats men. Prepare to have your fancies tickled. I knew they looked good. I had paraded up and down my room with them on and paired them up with every skinny fitted t-shirt I owned. I had modelled them to my housemates, who just seemed confused why I would get leather trousers if I didn't have a motorbike. "I don't need a motorbike, Michael. Look at my arse!" Never mind the arse, take a look at the breadbasket.

The trick to leaving the building with this garb on was to do a Margaret. Look straight ahead, march quick, and in my case wear a long coat. I'd be on the tube before the security guard had a chance to even think about wolf whistling.

Brief Encounter was sleazy. No two ways about it. Bits were falling off it. Fire glass in connecting doors was smashed and never replaced. Chunks eaten out of the linoleum. Holes in the plastic seating. Toilets leaking, flooding. Nothing got fixed. The office upstairs was wall to wallpaper towers. Things were just made do. During the day, given the proximity to Trafalgar Square the occasional startled tourist would mistakenly stumble in... then stumble out again after Queenie or Darius stared them down with folded arms. At quarter past five I hurried inside, breathless after a quick walk from Leicester Square tube. I wanted time to have a couple of pints in the top bar, before heading down to work my shift in the basement. The basement bar was where I was always deployed. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. 6 till 11.

"Alright Queenie?" I could tell it was Queenie behind the bar before my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom because she was so tall. A tall shadow at the end of the bar reading Boyz.

"Hello Matthew, darl." She drawled in her Brummish brogue without looking up from this week's centrefold. I cleared my throat. She looked up and I gave a spin.

"Like 'em?"

"Fucking hell." She got up and came over to inspect my trousers personally. Pulling at the hem of the pockets and feeling the leather. "Couldn't you get them in an adult size?"

"Ha ha."

"You've got a really nice bum in these, Matthew. Where'd you get 'em?"

"Camden market, well in that place that used to be a cinema or something."

"Nice. You'll get some cock tonight."

I went and leaned on the bar. "Can I have a pint of export? How come you're working up here?"

"Urgh, Darius called in so I said I would do it. I've been here two hours and not had a single customer. I'm working with you downstairs tonight as well."

"What's wrong with Darius?"

"Who knows? Got the clap or something." She put down the pint in front of me and waved my wallet away. "There's a new bar opening tonight on Charing Cross Road. Shall we go after we finish up?" She pulled over the Boyz paper and found the advert.

"79 CXR? Weird name. Yeah, I'll go. Can't stay too long though, back in the office tomorrow."

A middle-aged man in a suit came in and went to the bar. He put his briefcase down by his feet and inspected the beer taps. Queenie went over to him and smiled.

"What bitters you got?"

"London Pride or John Smiths."

"Any real ale?"

"No darlin'"

"Okay, never mind." He picked up his suitcase and left the bar.

"Bye." Queenie came back over to me. "He did that yesterday as well."

"Poor thing."

"Mmmmm"

Gay weekend started on Thursday. The wind-up to the real weekend, sometimes they could go on till Monday, the wind-down from the real weekend. Tuesday and Wednesdays were not considered weekends, but often could be busy with people needing a mid-week perk up before the weekend started. There was always something.

In the basement bar of Brief Encounter on a Thursday, it was wall to wall flesh nightly. A DJ booth in the corner pumping out his happy house hits. The crowd would break free, moving as one many limbed Lovecraftian horror. Uninhibited. Unpretentious. Smoking, drinking, sniffing poppers, and nipping to the toilets for gag or a blowjob. Sure, there was renters and rentees, but they mostly stuck to the upstairs bar, can't do business in all this din. Down here was an escape from the stoicity of Compton's, the farmyard cackling of The Village. Revellers were once again three deep at the bar. I pointed at the one who had been there the longest

and looked the most desperate, as he was buffeted and pushed from behind by the weight of the dancefloor.

"Two orange Hooches. Can I have them in pint glasses with ice? And double vodkas." Spirits were half price at this time of night. A good way to get hammered quick was a combination of alcoholic fizzy pop with extra vodka shots. I thought it was too sweet but, hey. As I was filling pint glasses with ice, I nodded at the guy next to the one I was serving to get his order.

"Pint of Carling," he shouted then sang, "sing hallelujah!". This wasn't for my benefit; he was just belting along to Dr Alban. I clipped off caps from the bottles of Hooch and shoved a glass under the Carling tap. I held it with one hand and pressed the other glasses up into the vodka optic. If you wanted Smirnoff in the Brief you had to ask for it by name, otherwise you got the potato ethanol shit that looked vaguely Russian from the outside but was probably made in a Brixton industrial estate. Cheap, and nobody cared. It was gonna be doused in sugar water anyway. What difference does it make? Killer cocktails made and pint poured I set them all on the swimming counter.

"Fiver for you, two thirty for you." I rang them up one after the other and then went on to serve the next ones. There were three of us behind the narrow bar, all trying to stay out of each other's way. In a rare lull we would dance with each other. Occasionally one of us would dip off top to the side and smoke a quick cigarette. Queenie would periodically say into my ear something like "oh, doll, I've made a drink wrong. Vodka coke, just put it there okaaay?"

Ten to eleven and the DJ announces last orders. Ten minutes later we put the lights on and anyone with drinks left ran through the fire doors to finish them off upstairs in a less illuminated area. The bar is a disaster area. We don't bother with the clear up. We only get paid till eleven and whoever is on tomorrow can do it. By five past I'm already following Queenie up St Martins Lane to Charing Cross Road.

"I just got why they call it CXR." I said.

"Aww darlin'." Said Queenie turning back to put an arm around my shoulders. "You're my favourite stupid friend."

A large red brick building with a canopied terrace held various shops and restaurants. The furthest right was the 79CXR. A neon, blue 79 logo overlaid a red CXR. A line curled out in front of a couple of bouncers as a soundtrack identical to the one we'd been hearing all night blared out the door. Queenie made no hesitation in skipping the queue and going straight up to the door staff.

"Hi darlin' we're Brief Encounter staff can we go in?"

"Got your IDs?"

I fingered the back pocket of my leather trouser to find mine. Just a laminated business card of Brief encounter with my name on. At least it was laminated, it had been stuck in that pocket all night. Could have been a sodden mess by now. I could feel my wet legs under the skin-tight leather which had been constricting further and further all evening. We showed our passes to the lady with the headset, and she let us in. We didn't even have to pay the quid cover.

"I didn't know our passes could do that." I bellowed at Queenie, who looked back and grinned. The place was packed. Nothing brings gays out than opening a new venue. Who would claim it for their tribe? So far, the jury was out, this place could fit anyone. The entrance was small, and in width the bar was modest, but it went way back into the building. A neon bordered bar on the left-hand side ran the length of the space up to a set of open stairs going up to a balcony area overlooking the bottom bar. Under the balcony was a darker space but was filled with fruit machines and pinball. Queenie motioned for us to go over to the bar. "We'll get some drinks and go upstairs. What you want?"

"Um, Kronenbourg please."

"Two pints of Kronenbourg please." The barman went away, he didn't look old enough to be serving. "Not as good as us, are they?"

I flicked my eyes up to the balcony, a row of faces, some of whom I recognised from Brief earlier stood by the railing looking down. Good cruising spot. Mix of people, suits, chickens, Compton's.

"Busy innit?"

Queenie was paying for the drinks, "Yeah, they're open till 2. So, people are gonna come here after the pubs, especially if they don't wanna go clubbing."

"God, I'm gonna be here every night at this rate."

"Me too. Let's go and see upstairs."

I followed Queenie up the stairs, the Auntie Mame of SoHo. "Hi darlin' how is ya?" "Alright Terry, you okay luv?" "Ha haaa, you fucking slag. See ya."

We got to the top and picked a perch with a view of the entire downstairs bar.

"Oh hey, there's a bar up here too."

It was staffed by another schoolboy type. An Elvira pinball next to a cigarette machine finished off the space, just a couple of tables dotted around. No chairs. People didn't sit. I felt a bit more comfortable. Those stairs seemed as though they could be problematic after a few sherries Queenie decided.

"Hey," I bellowed in her ear to make myself heard over Cotton-Eyed-Joe, "Isn't that Darius down there?"

Queenie peered over the rail toward the end of the bar where I had pointed.

"It fucking is." She spat, "I did her fucking afternoon today n'all. Sick my arse."

"Shall we peg ice cubes at him?"

"Nah, I'll get me own back. We'll pretend we haven't seen him." She turned to face me and drank the rest of her pint down in one "For now." She handed me her empty glass. "Your turn."

I still had half in mine, but I stalked off to the upstairs bar. It was quieter than downstairs and once I was around the corner a bit; I could begin to hear the talk going on around me. I inserted myself at the bar next to a 30 something stubbled guy with a figure hugging, dark blue Fred Perry top talking to his mate about a flyer he was holding. "You fancy going?"

"Two pints of Kronenbourg please."

"What is it?" asked his friend

"Just a skinhead leather club thing, could be good, I think. Like LA. Look." He passed over the flyer.

I paid for the drinks and came back towards Queenie making a mental note to not leave without a flyer.

"Darius pulled." Greeted Queenie.

Striking the Anvil

What the hell am I doing this for?

Friday night. Midnight sort of. Beautiful night.

If I wasn't in the middle of London, I might be able to see a star or two instead of this vomit coloured mess in the sky. And I'm south of the river. I never come south of the river.

A churning in my stomach. It is as if I had strayed out-of-bounds within school grounds and the deputy head is striding towards me across the cricket pitch, masters cloak billowing black behind him, face like corporal punishment. I'd left the station at London Bridge, emerging somewhere near the red brick arches under the bridge. There was nobody around. Not one person walking down the street. Not a bus or a car. Great. Why don't I wear a come-mug-me sign and ring a bell?

According to my copious amounts of research (reading the flyer) I hadn't needed a map. You come out the station turn right, and this Anvil is part of The Shipwrights Arms. Big pub. On the corner. Cannot miss it. Can't miss it? Where is it? At least I have my leather trousers to keep me warm. Can't I be content with a pair of leather trousers? Why do I have to run about all over London just because I heard a guy I fancied say he was coming here? I'm a sucker for a shaved head and a square jaw. Oh my god here it is. Well fuck me. And it says the Anvil up there and everything. Okay here we go.

Little doorway to the side. I paid entry to an old woman behind a school desk. I could swear that's the exact same woman who does the exact same thing at the London Apprentice. Maybe there's two of them. Maybe she has a sister, a twin. They're admission-sisters, ticket twins. Shut up Matt. Serious stuff.

It opened out into a small central bar. Camouflage netting had been stapled to a wooden overhang about it, the netting fanned out towards the walls, flowed down. Gave an army camp effect. Like in Predator. There was blackness behind the netting, movement. Heavy techno was pulsating from, where? Who knows? Black

rubberised floors. Chains hung down from the ceiling, lighting muted, red and green up lighted behind the nets casting mottles on the moulded roof. Two Muscle Marys stood in a corner. Not moving. Hard as bricks. Holding bottles of water and looking angry. Muscle Marys always seemed angry, I assumed they were angry at me for some reason. My leather trousers squeaked me over to the bar, I hoped nobody heard their protests over the techno. Through gaps in the liberal clouds of artificial smoke I could see silhouettes of other men. A couple I had seen before in the London Apprentice, their attire adjusted for The Anvil. Black leather studded chest harness, PVC shorts. Fingerless leather gloves, what are they for? I leaned on the bar next to a tall, older gentleman in full drill Sergeant get up. My stomach gave a flip. I kind of liked it. Two and two make four but this is asking me to do algebra. Drill sergeant turned, smiled, and walked over to the wall. He had to have been in his sixties. Well. That uniform though. Maybe he's not a sergeant, maybe he's a corporal, he's Corporal Punishment.

"Hi, can I have a pint of export or..."

"No pints, we don't have draft up here. Tins or bottles."

"Oh, ummm." I looked past the shirtless, moustached, fat silver ring through his nose, peaked leather cap with the chain I thought people joked about those, leather chapped over blue jeans bar man to look into the glass fronted fridges behind. "Oh, can of Breaker please?" Not had that in a while. He pulled one out the fridge, set it on the bar top and pulled the tab.

"Two fifty."

Gulp. Wowzers. I found the right change and dropped it into his outstretched palm. There was a faded heart tattoo on it, a heart being stabbed by a dagger. "Thanks." He took the coins and deposited them into an open till drawer on top of the waist high fridge. No till. Just a drawer. I shrugged and turned my back to the bar but didn't leave it. Hoping to see my crush, he'll be smiling and waving at me from a corner. Actually, no he won't wave. People don't wave at each other in The Anvil. Not hands... anyway.

Feeling a bit exposed by the bar, I headed over to a wall close by where a tall, circular marble topped table stood. I put my can down, removed my bomber

jacket and found my cigarettes. I wonder if there's a coat check. Of course, there's a coach check, you can't walk down the street in a leather harness and chaps. Can you? I suppose you can. That one could have caught its death.

I just balled up my jacket and put it on the floor by the table. I wasn't going anywhere. Wouldn't stay long. Should I take my top off? No. Too close to Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee the muscle brothers. I need to pee now.

There was a sign for the gents on the other side of the room. Right next to Corporal Punishment, who was staring into space and smiling at nobody. Guess he wasn't being friendly earlier then, just nuts.

Should I leave my stuff? Not many people here, I think they'll be fine. I'll leave them.

I fixed the doorway with my eyes and moved towards it, feeling eyes upon me. But surely that was the point of being here. Through the camouflaged curtain into a dark nook. Nook seemed the wrong word, too twee for a fetish club, even if you're unsure of the fetish. Let's face it, it's no country cottage. Oh, there's the coat check.

A studded dog collared, tattooed faced skinhead with no shirt on grinned at me.

"Hi-ya!" I trilled, almost immediately biting my tongue. This is not a "hi-ya" place. This is not the office canteen on a Tuesday lunchtime, and you're about to order a cheese and ham sub. Different kind of subs in this place. "Uh, toilets?" The grinning skinhead pointed down the passage, past a set of narrow stairs. If this was anything like the LA, I knew what was up there. Not ready for that.

The toilets were battleship grey and stainless steel, a long trough by a plinth. A lone cubicle at the end. I wasn't alone in here. Laid on the floor, half in and half out of the urinal gutter was someone in a head to toe rubber suit. The gimp mask covered his head. His eyes looked to me. Desperation, and desire. The black rubber suit was wet spotted, and any worries I had for the man's condition were put to rest by the way he was writhing. His black gloved hands feeling the rubber over his body, touching himself, rubbing his legs together like some kinky grasshopper.

"Pee." A muffled plea from behind the mask. "Pee on me."

Oh god.

"I'm sor..." I hurried over to the cubicle and shut the door. A little too abruptly, I didn't want it to seem like I was bothered, but the flimsy aluminium door banged rather loudly. The man wailed quietly. Denied his treat. I'm sorry, I just can't pee when there's someone looking. I had trouble peeing right now, just knowing he was out there. When eventually the stream came, I made it hit the side of the bowl. I didn't want to torture the poor man with the sound of what he wanted most just feet away. Oh my god oh my god oh my god. Where the fuck am I?

Rearranging my downstairs basket for a decent display. I sucked in some deep breaths. It smelt of new paint and that white gunk you splodge around bathtubs. New. Makes a change from piss in these places. Normally these toilets drip in piss. Oh, now that just makes me feel even more sorry for the bloke in the trough. Of all the toilets in London he had to pick to play water sports in he chose the one with the drought. He should try the one at Brief Encounter, it's practically underwater.

I didn't stop to wash my hands on the way out. Nobody would notice, one of the muscle marys was granting trough man's wish.

Oranges and Lemons are not the only fruit

Two pages of Hackney dropped out of the AtoZ and into the wet gook of a Bethnal Green gutter. Urgh damn it. I heard a quiet titter from a woman leaving the train station behind me. I turned to give her one of my best stares which she pretended not to notice (I know you can see me, bitch) and continued her way. "Keep walking toots." Is what I wanted to say but didn't have the guts to actually say without the help of a pint of lager and the secure surroundings of Soho. Just how important is Hackney anyway? Can I leave it in the gutter? Would that make me a conservative? It might be important one day. Groaning with revulsion, I pulled up pages wetly clinging to each other by grasping a tiny corner with chewed back fingernails. Gingerly I wiped the worst off on the bottom of my jeans. Down near the boot. Nobody looks down there. Once I had slotted them into the back of the book, wiped

my hands on my arse and flicked back to the Bethnal Green page, I was ready to begin again. St. Joseph Street was already marked, next to a scribbled post-it of directions taken during a short phone conversation with a dubious character called Tony;

"Hi, I'm ringing about the room I saw in Boyz. Is it still available?"

"Yeah." Raspy sort of voice, like he was about to cough. "Yeah, it's still available. Are you interested? Wanna come see it?"

"It says it's semi-furnished. What does that mean?"

"It means there's a bed and a chest of drawers, mate." Mate? Not very Mrs Madrigal in Tales of the City, where are the quotes about Lotus Eaters? "There's also a washer and a dryer in the kitchen. And..." There was some unintelligible shouting in the background. "Hang on." Some crackling and scraping. The man had put his hand over the receiver. A few seconds later he came back on the line evidently having lost his train of thought as he went all non-sequitural on me "Er what time did you say you were coming to see it? I'm here this afternoon. That would be a good time. Come this afternoon."

"Yeah okay." I wasn't convinced. "How do I find you?"

He went on to tell me his name and mention the word maisonette, followed by the word dorma. My French GCSE told me that maison meant house, and ette at the end probably meant small. Dorma though? Sleepy? Sleepy small house? Looking for a sleepy small house. Okay. Cute.

Not cute. I must have mistranslated. Instead of the quaint sleepy small house I got late 70's brutalism, lashings of UPVC. Beige bricks, large spotted windows with dirty net curtains. A white plastic covered door, skid marks from feet. Had... had someone tried kicking it? I pressed the doorbell before I could stop myself. It rang a tinny tune to "Oranges and Lemons" I couldn't quite place the melody at first, but when the door began to open I heard myself say "Say the bells of St Clements" and the rather large, middle-aged if he were a day, man in the doorway looked at me curiously. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, frowned and said "What?"

"Oh, hah, your doorbell. Oranges and lemons." He looked at me, still frowning. Took another drag on his cigarette.

"Hmm. You Matt?"

"Hi. Yes. And you must be Tony" (God what is this? An interdepartmental work function?) He stepped away from the door to allow me in. It was dark inside, smelt of cigarettes and curry. I went in anyway, like I had been locked into the little buggy at the Ghost Train feeling a pang of regret after the ride started.

"Well, this is it," said Tony although I rather wished it wasn't. Tony seemed more burly than large once we were both inside. Perhaps the door frame had made a trick with the light, maybe it was just a small doorway, maybe I had been dazzled by the splendour of my surroundings. He was wearing a London Transport shirt. It hung untucked over a pair of jeans, dark around the top of his arms, a blob of orange down the front, perhaps the offending curry source? A hole in his black nylon socks above his big toe showed that toenail cutting wasn't high on the agenda. With claws like that, his ability to climb trees and ward off predators was probably second to none. So, he stood in his holy socks on a clear plastic runner protecting a thick emerald green shag carpet underneath appraising me, arms folded. Behind him the walls had white, textured vinyl wallpaper. Its swirls and spirals defying modern taste, pleaded silently for someone to run a feather duster over it. Please free it from the covering of dust and lint. Overall, it looked like my Nana's hallway before she redecorated 10 years ago. In fact, I think she had the same 60s era telephone bench, if I opened the drawer of it I wouldn't have been surprised to find her fake black leather telephone index book, the one with the alphabet dial on the cover. Tony saw my expression and mistook my nostalgia for admiration. Admiration at his plastic runner.

"Keeps the carpet in good nick." He said. "Good carpet, that." A mmmm was all I could muster, I wasn't sure it would be enough so I grinned broadly. Probably look insane, such an attractive housemate quality. Now through a plaster Greco-Roman arch to the right he had led me into a kitchen. Bijou and compact would probably be what an estate agent would say. I wouldn't have said anything, I'd be halfway back to the tube station by now. "Just had it done not long ago." Said Tony

and moved an awkward arm horizontally. The cupboards had a veneer of dark wood, some had little windows cut out with swirly glass inserted inside dissected by leaded panels. The handles; Victorian style, but a distressed dark unidentifiable metal. Countertops covered in white marble vinyl stained with instant coffee granules. Tony surveyed his kitchen, evidently proud and pleased with the aesthetic. I felt guilty for making fun of it, even inside my head. His pride in it was almost heart-breaking. He opened a white freestanding Frigidaire and took out a can of Special Brew and wiggled it in my direction. "Want one?"

"Sure. Thank you." I took the cold can, and noticed it had many brothers in the fridge. Not much else. Good thing I didn't want tea, that milk looks like cheese. I flicked the tab, foam fizzed up around the top and I sucked it down. It was bitter, dry, almost Marmite in taste. Not like lager at all. I looked at the golden can - 9% proof. "Not had it before." I said unnecessarily.

"Winston Churchill used to drink it." Said Tony pulling a long draft to demonstrate. I somehow doubted this. My ride on the ghost train continued. I followed him out of the kitchen and across the hall. On the way he pointed to a door. "Lavvy." There was a framed picture of a cutesy cartoon boy looking back over his shoulder as he peed hung there. I bet there's a wooden plaque in there that starts off "If you sprinkle when you tinkle... Here was a sitting room. Large, spacious, big picture windows gave impressive low rise views of a car parking area. Another plastic runner laid a path in front of a faded yellow velveteen couch, hardly a yellow brick road. Fluffy gold piping around flattened cushions. A glass and metal spindled mid-century style coffee table in front of it held a couple of overflowing ashtrays and a collection of presumably empty cans. There was a smell of cats, but I couldn't see one which worried me. It looked as though it could all do with a jolly good wipe with a bleached cloth. Better yet, a jolly good throwing out.

"We usually sit around in here, you're welcome to too. Watch telly and that. I have a couple of friends here most days, ones me boyfriend." I couldn't imagine a less gay, gay. It was like the Pope telling you he was Jewish.

"Aww." I said before I could stop myself.

"Yeah, he lives here. Has his own room though." He turned to look at me. There was little humour in this man I thought. "I snore." He shrugged.

We followed the green carpeting up the stairs (protected by clear plastic of course, given the carpet's protection I was beginning to suspect it was made from real emeralds) on the swirly wall were a set of three framed string pictures of owls backed in a burgundy velvet. In a corner of the landing at the top of the stairs, an octagonal bamboo and wicker plant stand held a basket of dusty fake pink roses. Nestled next to its lower blooms, not even trying to hide itself was the plastic shell of a gel room deodoriser. The chemical tang of its marine fresh scent, doing nothing to make the area more inviting. Tony had opened a door. "This would be your room." He waited outside for me to enter. I did so warily.

It was about quarter the size of the attic room in Dalston. There was a bed, orange knotty pine and a matching set of three drawers at its head. I went and looked out the window. A view of the street. Some previous occupant had been burning candles on the sill. Globes of grey and white wax littered it like melted snowmen on a spring school field. The floor - industrial grey felt floor tiles. The lack of green shag was a welcome relief. No wardrobe, but meh, no big deal. I took another swig of my Special Brew and winced at bitter malt again. "The bathroom is across the way," said Tony, he gave me another appraising look and then having silently decided something said "I'll leave you to have a look. I'll be downstairs." And he was gone. I looked out of the window again, then sat on the bed, bounced up and down a little like in the movies. The frame moved a little, as if some screws could do with tightening. I got up and went to inspect the bathroom. Thankfully basic white suite and tiled, no green in here. However, there was a pink carpet pedestal mat and loo seat cover. The pedestal mat was stained. I gritted my teeth and squinted at the top of the cistern. Here were the large soup mugs you used to get free at petrol stations. You collected stamps or some such and got those or crystal tumblers. These were the soup ones with the recipes on the front. I particularly remembered drinking tomato soup from French onion. Here they held an assortment of razors and toothbrushes. A comb with hair in its tines. Something pointy and unhygienic looking. There was a shower above the bath, it dripped down

onto a long discoloured splash zone. The whole room is devoid of any personality. I went back over to the bedroom, downstairs I could hear the television loudly playing the theme music to "Going for Gold". I sat on the bed again and weighed my options. C'mon and think. It's no Barbary Lane. But there are gay people here. And its Zone 1, Central Line, takes less than 10 minutes to get to the tube. That's major. Beats the hell out of Dalston there. And yeah, okay, this Tony guy seems a bit weird, but you know it could be cool. Maybe. What the hell. I can always move out if it's no good. I made my way downstairs to seal the deal with Tony who wrote a sort of basic tenancy agreement on a piece of cardboard ripped from a Ricicles cereal box, which I shouldn't have thought would hold up in court should it ever get that far. I had forced about half the can of Special Brew into me when Tony's "friend" let himself in. He was a young kid. About my age, but street smart. When he looked at me, I was being weighed up and assessed. The kind of look that makes you pat your pocket to see if your wallet is still there. He mumbled a greeting that I could have used subtitles for when Tony introduced us. He then hit Tony up for a twenty before lighting up a cigarette from a packet picked up from the coffee table. The atmosphere was beginning to feel a little thick so I told Tony I would see him a week on Saturday and left him with a cheque for a first month's rent. As I closed the door behind me, I pretended not to notice the raised voices.

"So soon?" Said Kathryn, looking a little worried.

"I think he was keen to get someone in there. I'm sorry. I'm all paid up for a month though, so that's plenty of time to find someone."

"We're not worried about that, we're gonna miss you."

"Of course, you are. But I..." I put my hand on hers and feigned tragedy, "I have to be with my own people."

"Manpower temps?"

I gave her a look and continued to fold the towels I was pulling off the radiator. "No."

"Temps from Yorkshire?"

"People ask me why I'm moving, I just don't know what to tell them." I picked up the pile of towels. "And then I remember you." Kathryn stuck out her tongue and gave me a playful slap on my backside as I left the room.

"We'll have to go out. Do something." She called, but somehow that never happened.

I had very little to move. Most people seemed to accumulate stuff. I appeared to shed it. Despite the cost, I decided the easiest option would be to book a minicab. It was that or leave behind my little telly. I didn't really want to have to watch television with my new housemates if I didn't want to. So, I decided to foot the bill for the taxi. I briefly considered the new gay-run taxi firm out of Soho but dismissed it on cost issues almost at once. Besides, now that I had two jobs, things were a little better. I could afford a cab, just not a gay one. Most of my bar pay seemed to go into the tills at 79CXR with after Brief Encounter shifts with Queenie most nights. She had seemed icy at the prospect of my new Bethnal Green digs when I had told her the details, only thawing a little when faced with the cold hard truth of Zone 1 Central Line fact. "I'd kill to live that close to town." Sharing a house with Queenie would have been constant hi-jinks, although given our nightlife proclivities these days we'd probably be dead by Christmas. I pointed this out and uproarious laughter scared off the trade we'd both been eying on the balcony of 79CXR.

There was something comforting about the formality of the Hasidic Jewish population of Bethnal Green. I wondered how they didn't mix each other up, with the same clothes and little hats and pigtails - must be confusing. Thoughts of Friday nights at the London Apprentice, or Saturdays in Compton's I realised I had no business making remarks like that. Visitors to gay town, especially those on a Soho Safari. Let's go into Soho and see the homosexuals, Madge. I hear they're quite outrageous, and it will be something to tell the Bridge club. Bunty will be aghast. Soho Safari members would have said the same thing, how can they tell each other apart? They all have shaved heads and green bomber jackets. It's part of their affliction, Madge.

The sense of peace given by the uniformity of the local Jewish contingent evaporated almost at once on entering Tony's house. He had been a London bus driver but was now on sick leave (due to an incident which he never discussed) and now spent drinking cans of Special Brew in front of daytime television. This in itself was entirely forgivable, however his little friends all of whom he seemed to consider boyfriends were in fact mere rent boys. Rent boys who he paid to keep him company. They in turn would drink his booze, smoke his cigarettes and when Tony inevitably passed out by teatime would proceed to steal everything not nailed down. Including some of my own possessions, and one failed attempt at the Frigidaire. Tony was blind to any of their wrongdoing. He let me off a week's rent when I complained of cash from going missing from my room. He also installed a tiny aluminium lock, which wasn't much use on a cardboard door but was better than nothing. No sooner had I moved into the small, sleepy house than I began searching for a new place, feeling like I was pursued by the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys in my misguided journey down the Yellow Brick Road, a far cry from the vibrant life I left in Dalston.

Kill, Burning

"I don't like Soho, Matt".

"Aww come on, one drink. Compton's is good."

"It's good for you. It's not good for lesbians. It's all dicks and machismo".

"Hey, I've met lesbians like that."

Caroline gave a painful stare. "One drink."

"One drink then we'll go where you want to go."

"Just something a bit more sophisticated."

"What? Like the Raymond Revue bar?"

Caroline rolled her eyes at this and pushed past me to go through the doors to Compton's. "You're buying," she said.

That one drink barely lasted ten minutes before she insisted on leaving. Thursday nights were the start of the weekend, and the boys were out. Sick of being

bustled, her drink being spilled and the end of her cigarette burning holes in at least two bomber jackets I conceded defeat. Caroline could never, would never be my wingman.

"A table," she said. "A table, a chair, an ashtray, maybe even a coaster. That's all."

"You're right, I'm sorry." We walked down the alley next to The Village where the chickens were squealing like pigs on slaughter day. "Must be a full moon." No response. I decided to try The Yard. It was a businessy crowd, suits. In my head they stood around drinking white wine spritzers, smoking Sobranie and bitching about poor people. This wasn't really Caroline either, but I supposed it was better than the spit and sawdust of Compton's. We entered the courtyard of The Yard, whitewashed and potted plants. It was a warm summer evening and there were a few brushed metal patio chairs and tables around. The expected men in suits stood in little groups looked us up and down as we entered. Caroline was still wearing a dressy version of office wear, baggy silk-like black trousers with a silver belt, white shirt and a black blazer with a sparkly black broach on the lapel. My work trousers were wrinkled, a lime green shirt half untucked and a black tie. I had a rucksack over my shoulder. I caught a glimpse of myself in a large vintage mirror mounted on one of the walls of the courtyard.

"I look like I'm going to Kermit's funeral." Caroline ignored me, still cross about being subjected to our last venue. She chose a ribbed metal seat near a fake palm and arranged herself poetically. I put down my rucksack on the other chair and headed over to the bar, coming back five minutes later with two tall narrow pint glasses of Red Stripe. "Red Stripe." I announced. Caroline melted a little as she took a sip, her eyes darting around the bar.

"It's quite nice here," she said. "At least I can hear myself talk. We should have just gone to Islington or something."

"I don't think I've ever worked out where the girls go for a drink after work. Why isn't there a Compton's for the gals?"

"Because we don't go looking for trade like the boys do."

"Mmmm, I bet some of them do. I've seen them in Central Station. They put the man in wo-man."

"Soho is for gay men. The ladies are more provincial."

"So says the woman who snorts a line of whizz with me at the Black Cap of a Sunday. Anyway, I thought you might want to see where I work."

"Brief Encounter you mean? No thanks, I've heard. How's your new place by Bow bells working out?"

"Bethnal Green? Awful. They're always shouting at each other. Especially when he wants a bit of how's-yer-father. The other day one of those kids he pays for blow jobs stole the fucking television. Tony called the police and told them he suspected I had done it. They came and knocked on my door and asked me questions."

"Oh my god what did you say?"

"Just the truth, he's always drunk, and they take everything that isn't nailed down to pay for drugs. Including my birthday money actually."

"Oh Matt. Move out for god's sake. Find something better. I don't know why you moved from Dalston, that house was lovely. Nice people too"

"Yeah, but they were all straight. I would move tomorrow but I can't get a deposit together, there's no chance of getting one back from Tony. I'm stuck there."

Caroline held a mouthful of beer, then swallowed it slowly. I could tell she knew where it was going.

"Look. I'd help you out if I could, but I just don't have enough."

"I wouldn't ask you for money, I know things are tight. But I did wonder." I drew out two Marlboro Menthols and offered her one which she took. "I did wonder," I lit the end for her. "If maybe I could crash with you for a month or so. That way I could save a month's rent for a deposit." I said all this very quickly, to get it out, so she wouldn't stop me and say no before I finished my sentence. I could tell she didn't like the idea.

"I don't know Matt. You know sometimes when we're out and have had a few. We argue. That would be really difficult if we're in the same flat. And my flat is small. I don't have a spare room, you'd have to sleep on the floor."

"I wouldn't be there that much. I have my day job and my evening job, and I'd probably pick up some extra. Really get back on my feet."

Caroline blew the smoke from her cigarette onto the table. She knew she had already lost.

I didn't even bother telling Tony I was moving out. I paid him fifty quid weekly by this point, on the day it was next due I had already gone. The taxi was a lot more expensive from Bethnal Green to Kilburn than it had been from Dalston to Bethnal Green. Caroline helped take a box up the stairs to the top of the Victorian where she lived in the attic flat with sloping roofs. When she handed me a spare key, she had the Ghost Train look. Her buggy was starting the ride, and she was having second thoughts.

"It'll be fine, I promise." I assured her. In the back of my mind, I had doubts of my own. There would be no escaping the guitar here.

Tattoo Much?

If you run along the pavement and jump onto the back of a bright red Routemaster bus as it is pulling away from the curb, you get a face full of exhaust fumes, your arms feels like it could have been wrenched from the socket and the ticket man will give you a good telling off until your face is as scarlet as the bus much to the amusement of the other passengers.

I felt though, that if they knew what I was going to do they may have looked on a little more respectfully. Today was the day I was going to get a tattoo. As I handed some change to the conductor, and he once more berated my behaviour (must be a slow day) I reached into my rucksack to find my headphones. The driving bass of Robin S imploring the listener to show her some love, the retreat of the conductor and the other passengers once more attending to their newspapers and paperbacks I began to feel the comfort of the invisible once more. The young man beside me had been very heavy handed with his aftershave, he didn't look old enough to shave. Some kind of musky, citrus smell I didn't much care for. I rubbed

under my nose with my forefinger, still smelling of nicotine and stared out the window. The masses of people on the streets reduced to a black and white blur. No colourful tourists in the financial district. Just high finance. Don't they ever get bored with all that grey? That monochrome life?

Tourist Trash Tart

"Good morning, Manpower. Chantelle speaking, how can I help you?"

"Hi Chantelle." My voice croaky and weak, dripping with sickness. "It's Matt Commerford, I'm due at Nat West at nine as usual. But I'm not feeling very well." I sound really cut up about it too.

"Oh dear, what's up?"

"My tummy is all upset, my bathroom isn't happy with me at all."

"Ohhh Maaaaattt."

"Sorry." A weak laugh, it sounded painful. Poor me. I'm so sick.

"Okay I'll ring NatWest and let them know. Will you be back there tomorrow?"

"Hopefully." Such a trooper, almost saint-like. "If it's just a stomach bug I will."

"Well, call us in the morning and confirm. Hope you feel better."

"Thanks, I will. Oh oh, I think I'm gonna have to go. Bye." I hung up before finishing my sentence. No, I don't feel guilty for calling in sick. Temps don't have to resort to theatrics. Technically. Could just ring them up and say "not gonna be in today, sorry." Not very professional in my opinion. Pretend to be ill. Pretend to care. See? I'm a professional. Not as if I got paid sick pay anyway. Why be guilty about it? Do though. Little bit. Tiny pang. Earlier, when the dawn sun woke me by shining through the curtainless windows I'd had the fear bad. The fear of missing out. Out there in the big smoke, people are having fun, falling in love, enjoying amazing adventures. Skipping through sun drenched streets laughing about straight people having to do office work... Without me.

Not today.

8:30. I could be in the West End by 10. Determined to enjoy my day of emancipation from office life. Do a few things that once you live in London you never really get to do. For some reason never want to do. Like walk down the Embankment, see Trafalgar Square... Visit gay bars during the day. Maybe Queenie is working. Maybe Brief Encounter have picnic tables on the street. Maybe I could go and get my nipples pierced. Maybe it wouldn't hurt. Maybe I could get drunk first. World of possibilities. I hurried back upstairs to my room from the hall phone-seat - it let out a sigh as the plastic cushion re-inflated itself. Quick crackles by bare feet on the plastic runner covered carpet. Ribbed for no-one's pleasure. I laughed at myself. Plan A: Get out of here before Tony gets up for his morning Special Brew. Get out before his prozzies come and steal more stuff. I don't have anything worth nicking but that flimsy padlock on the door won't keep Fagin's gang out. Won't stop 'em coming in and looking. Getting their grubby mitts all over my unmentionables. Pretending to be poofs to take advantage of an old drunk was one thing, but I won't have them fingering my underpants. I lit a cigarette from the packet on the windowsill and blew the smoke into the middle of the room. They scare the shit out of me, those kids. Probably why after a few weeks, my belongings were still unpacked. Still in their cardboard boxes. Makes it sound a lot, that. Two. Two small cardboard boxes and my clothes in an open suitcase. Work clothes on a wire coat hanger behind the door. My attempt at wrinkle free living. The faithful portable TV sat on the empty bedside table. Television virtually unused in this new setting. It had been spray painted silver on a wet Saturday when I was attempting the nurse gig. A stalwart heirloom of my adolescence. Packed into my parents' car enroute to St Bartholomew's after years of service in my teenage bedroom. My portal; glimpses into other worlds after everyone was in bed - Rocky Horror, Sticky Moments, Moonlighting, Twin Peaks. Almost felt sorry for it now, sitting here practically abandoned like an outgrown toy, or imaginary friend. I gave it a comforting pat and stubbed out the cigarette end into the ashtray sitting atop. Time for a shower whilst I've got the place quiet. Get skinheaded up and go make tourists feel uncomfortable on the tube.

9:30 on the Central line. Commuters had mostly all long gone. Familiar warm wind and soot scented air of the underground labyrinth were now beginning to blow onto platforms lined with trippers. Bellies filled with full English breakfasts descending into the underground. Befuddled and beguiled by the colourful circuit boardery of the maps and tubular, tiled, tunnels. American dead giveaways - the men: middle-aged and overweight - baseball caps, and cargo shorts. The women: noisy neon anoraks, large plastic tote bags emblazoned with the Harrods logo. I hear them before I see them. What they made of me I wasn't sure. Somewhat of a disappointment if they are expecting some kind of Vivienne Westwood British punk. No brightly coloured mohawk. Not a scrap of tartan. No oversized safety pin through my nose. I could try that look one day. That's a good look. Could let tourists take pictures of me riding a lion in Trafalgar square for a quid. Oh, this is my stop.

I'd enjoy the walk down to the embankment from Oxford Street. Take in the sights. Glare at people. Maybe put a cigarette burn in an anorak or two. Not really. Just a fancy. Might have a look around Covent Garden on the way. Next to the railings of the Tottenham Court Road tube entrance a man with a small trestle table was shouting about lighters. I took a look. What the hell. Cylinder shaped brass zippo knockoffs were three pound, but I'd had those before. Looked great but stopped working after a day. Fake Zippo shaped Zippos with a Union Jack on was the same price. "I'll have that one." I said. He told me I was making a good choice and asked if I wanted it filling. I did. Then he swapped it for some coins, and I used it to light up as I crossed the road. It didn't take first time, the rough flint against my thumb, stubborn and stiff. Once lit I pulled hard, filling my lungs with petrol smoke. Convinced it tasted all the better. I rubbed my new prize to a shine on my jeans and slid into my back pocket where I thought it probably made a satisfying little bulge.

Enroute to Covent Garden I decided to head down to Compton Street. I was inclined to sit at a table and chair in the sun outside the coffeehouse with a cappuccino. If I'm lucky I could get mistaken for a clubhead on a comedown. They looked cool. I can look cool too. 10AM is too early for a pint. It is, isn't it? Too early. Pubs aren't open anyway. Yeah, a cappuccino is fine. Would be good. Feel like a real man about town. Maybe Covent Garden after. Maybe find a new pewter skull ring

somewhere funky. Maybe that would be fun. The one I was wearing had been warped by the warmth of my finger, was now almost impossible to put on. It sat with the skull looking to the side, jewellery osteoporosis.

Down Old Compton Street I took the only free plastic patio seat outside the Italian cafe I couldn't ever remember the name of. Something Italian. A young girl came out with a black apron on and silently raised her eyebrows in my direction. "Cappuccino please." Then, "No nothing else."

When it came, I emptied a couple of packets of brown sugar onto the foam where it bloomed dark and sank behind white clouds. A tiny biscuit wrapped in cellophane sat on the saucer, I ripped it open and put the whole thing in my mouth at once. I let it dissolve while I stirred the sugar into my coffee. Keep the foam on the surface intact, just stir the coffee. It was warm out in the sun. The pavement was crushed with passers-by. The whole street on fast-forward as I fell into a half-speed. My eyes closed behind mirrored square sunglasses, I turned my face to the sky. Fresh baked pastries, apricot jam scents streamed out from inside the shop and ribboned up my nose. Somewhere in its darkness, someone, the baker? Someone listened as a 50s crooner sang about moonlight and pizza pies. A faint ripple of laughter.

A lorry beeped its horn on the street in front of me, and someone shouted a swear word. I was back. No doubt everyone over in the NatWest towers of Kings Cross are enjoying their morning. Filing cheques, answering phones. Moving this pile of paper from over here to over there. Zerin showing off another purchase. Ignored faxes. Instant coffee. Good luck, fuckers. I like my cappuccino and sunshine.

A stall near Seven Dials, Covent Garden sold pseudo-hippy jewellery. I bought a couple of new rings, a wide silver band (genuine Mexican silver said the lady wearing all the scarves she could manage and a neon bum bag) that would turn my finger grey over the course of the next week. Also, a chrome skull with red jewelled eyes. Tenner the lot. I didn't care if they were trash. They're trash. Nobody will know for today. Nobody but me. Fingers fully dressed, new lighter, cappuccino and it wasn't even lunchtime. This is a good day. Later on, I'll see if I can find a

postcard to write lies on and send home. Another to Caroline suggesting drinks after work one day. I don't know where she finds those achingly hip, arty ones - black and white Marlene, burlesques that she sends me. So, I'll get the tackiest, most sexist, touristy piece of crap to send her way. It'll be funny. And, like postmodern or some shit.

I wove my way down to the Embankment. The Thames still steel grey under the blue sky. On it, a spaced out free-for-all flotilla of industry and tourism. Kids walking along the embankment wall, holding onto their mothers with one hand, waved at whatever was nearest with the other. I tried to hide a smile; black sphinxes flanking Cleopatra's needle saw me drop the cynicism for a moment but held their own. Under wrought iron Victorian lamps, an outsider. The people beside me on the pavement- hardly real at all. Secondary characters, extras. Walk on cameos, never to be seen again. Safe behind my sunglasses, hide and seek, not checking faces. Just crotches. Faces don't matter.

By the time I reached Westminster my feet were beginning to throb, hot in their boots. Very crowded now, around Westminster. Wish I had a cold pint of Export, somewhere to sit, cigarette to smoke. There was a man with a repurposed ice-cream trolley selling ceramic salt and pepper shakers in the shape of red telephone boxes. Tea towels on sticks lamely flapping in the breeze displaying the heads of Henry VIII's wives. Plastic snow globes; endless blizzards around miniature St Pauls, miniature Nelson's columns, miniature London buses, beefeaters and bobbys. The vendor himself, no more Pearly King than Dick Van Dyke but he was doing his best in the full regalia. His voice, the way he moved his hand, it seemed he might be just as comfortable as a Pearly Queen. Fabulous for clubbing. A sudden urge for postcards crept up on me and I idled over. "Three for a pound, ladies and gents, three for a pahnd yer cards 'ome, c'mon now." An old timey, sepia toned Houses of Parliament spoke to me. Then a cartoonish one of a busty young woman riding the top deck of a London sightseeing bus - all the male passengers were sightseeing her impressive boob-ery. The conductor sweating comically and letting steam out of his collar. The last one, just had the Union Jack on it, that one was for me. I can use it as a bookmark. I offered money to the vendor, who took it without

even the slightest break to his jolly cockney, chimney sweep sales pitch. Too into his show.

Up through Trafalgar Square. Petrol and hot dogs in the air. Pigeons posing for snaps, dips in the fountain, school trips, lions. Nelson on his column loving every second. That kind of guy. That's showbiz. That's showbiz, kid.

Battled up the pavements towards St Martins on my way to Brief Encounter. One of those days where the flags are heavy with people who don't know where they're going and you long for an umbrella to poke them with. Once over into where the homeless get given soup and charity there's more room. The din of shouts died. Breathe Matt, unclench your buttocks, stop grinding teeth. Get some shade. Cold beer, nicotine, gossip with Queenie. If she's working today. Hope she's working today. I feel like talking.

But it was Carrie-Ann the bar manager looking as sulky as ever. I smiled anyway and said hello in the gloom of the top bar. Trick of the light. Why does this sulky straight woman work here? Dying to ask. Ask Queenie on Friday night what the story is. Must be a story there somewhere.

"Hi, how are ya? Pint of Export please." Carrie-Ann didn't reply, ask me how I was, what I was doing there during the week, nothing. Just put her biro back on top of the crossword puzzle and poured me a drink. Disinterest oozing from every pore. "Thanks, darlin'." I sipped the first centimetre off my pint on my walk outside to the street. The nearest of three wooden picnic tables halfway down the side of the building was empty and in the sun. Faint smell of creosote, and an image of a childhood fence. A shirtless man in his early thirties was sitting on the middle one. Bronzed by the gods, hairless chest, illegible tattoos. I'd seen him many times whilst working behind the bar. Tattle is - rent boy. Getting a little long in the tooth for it though, boy? But the boy looked good. No denying. I nodded a hello. He nodded back, an appraisal, potential client? No. Dismissed. Went back to reading his paper. Unless I'm actually standing behind the bar am I Bob Anonymous? Am I that nondescript? I guess there really was nuthin' going on but the rent - he went back to his QX magazine. Checking his advert in the back no doubt, making sure the lies

about his age were spelled correctly. Queenie would have laughed at that one. Now I just feel mean.

Nipped back inside to grab a Pink Paper. Make it look like I'm interested in the doings of the day instead of just the clubbing pics. Maybe look through the flat listings. Maybe there's somewhere else in Bethnal Green. Get away from Tony and his tribe of thieves. In Oliver! They make it seem like living with a bunch of young criminals and an older gentleman is a laugh-riot. Fun and games, singing songs with jolly prostitutes. That's not what happens where I live. I prop things up against the door, so I know when I'm about to get shanked in the night. This is what happens when straight men pretend to be queer. Just for today though, just for today I'll not think about that. Enjoy the sun. Feel the sun on my face. A warm, comforting hand. That smell of fence. Cold lager that eases the worry a little. But damn I wish I could take my boots off. Thick socks. Thick socks in heavy boots on a summer day. Insanity.

My eyes were still closed, face turned up to the sky as I felt the picnic table heave and creak as someone sat down opposite. There was an empty table I was sure, but whoever it was chose mine. I smelt Davidoff's Cool Water. It cut through the creosote, and the traffic. Fresh and clean like sliced limes in water. I peeped. He was older, put together though, tidy. Shaven white hair, stubble. A row of strong brilliant teeth, artificial in their brightness. A t-shirt so white in the sunshine I squinted behind my sunglasses at it. Dazzled. "Hi." He said. "Alright to sit here?"

"Sure." I replied, went back to my paper, pretending to be fascinated by something Peter Tatchell had done. I can see his nipples through that t-shirt or bet I could if I looked hard enough. I withdrew a cigarette from my pack. Made rather a meal of it so I could give this guy a full appraisal. Lit it and looked over at him again. He was still looking at me. "Want one?" I asked. I thought this was more polite than a knee jerk "what you looking at?".

He smiled, nodded and took one. I struck my new Union Jack lighter. It lit first time, gods were smiling, and when I held it across the table to light his cigarette, he covered my hand with his own to direct it. Warm and dry. The grip

tight. Underneath I felt his little finger stroke the inside of my palm. Unexpected excitement, nervousness thrilled through the base of my spine.

He said, "I've seen you before somewhere."

"Probably here." I nodded my head to the bar entrance. Under the picnic table my hands were adjusting crotch chafe. Tight jeans are all well and good for cruising till you got hard. Suddenly you're longing for a baggy pair of chinos, or wandering around with a cushion over your genitals. "I work here weekends. Friday Saturdays." I rubbed the back of a moist neck with an open palm.

"Today's Wednesday."

"I know. Just seeing the sights."

"Maybe I'll have to show you some sights then." He grinned. Not subtle.

"Want another drink?"

"Sure, um thanks. It's uh, it's a pint of export."

The man nodded, "A pint of export." Smiled and got up to go inside. He seemed shorter stood up. Reckoned on forties age-wise. Tight little body poured into acid washed blue jeans, black and chrome wide belt, that blinding white shirt. He knew I was watching him go. He got to the doorway and turned, grinned again before going inside. I fumbled in my rucksack for a pellet of Wrigley's, the strong menthol kind. Under the table I wrestled with my erection, trying to get it to point in a direction that wasn't public. God, some guy smiles at you and what? You go crazy? What's the deal? Down Shep. Control. Count backwards.

The Pink Paper got rather mangled as I stuffed it into my bag. I rearranged my cigarettes and lighter on the table. Gulpd the remains of my lager. Tried to go back to watching the people walk past on the street. Not a main tourist street, all on the next one over. Down here, you have to know it to find it, where you are going, where you were. Riddle me why I'm sitting here on a weekday afternoon.

He came back with two pints, he was barely through the first half of his original. He swallowed it in one, like water on a hot day. "Better catch up," he said. "I'm Mark." I introduced myself and for a couple of minutes we shared minor details; where do you live-s, not what do you do-s. He had a place close by.

"In the West End?" This was a revelation. People live here? "Wow. How'd you manage that? Must be expensive"

"Council flat in Covent Garden. Seven Dials. Same as anywhere else"

Covent Garden has council flats? "I would kill to live that close to Soho."

"Wanna come see it?"

I hesitated only for a moment.

There was a recessed doorway next to the Oddbins, a panel of intercom buzzers the only sign that these were residences. Around the West End there were a legion of funny little doors and alleyways, a person just stopped seeing them after a while. Assumed they led up to some theatrical agent, massage parlour, one of those addresses listed on hot pink business cards found in telephone boxes. If inside I was expecting an art deco stairway and hall like in Dr Francis' building a thousand years ago, I was disappointed. Grey textured rubber flooring and a square metal banister like you might find in the local comprehensive. I followed Mark up the stairs, there was no lift. He really did have a remarkably high and round arse. I wonder if my arse looks like that. Put checking that on the to-do list. By the time we'd got to the third floor I was somewhat out of breath. I'd been traipsing around London for the best part of the morning and now climbing stairs. "I'm gonna have calves like a Hungarian shot-putter." I observed, it didn't get a laugh. I pursed my lips. The third floor was a walkway open to the outside with a 4-foot cement wall. Presumably to stop you from falling down onto Seven Dials below when you came home drunk. On the right - blue doors, numbered with stickers designed for dustbins. Mark found his door and unlocked it. I followed him in. Inside it was as white as his t-shirt. The walls were blinding in the sun, like looking into a strobe at the club. The skirting and door frames, a glossy, deep royal blue. It reminded me of a football strip I had seen once on the telly after tuning to the wrong channel. If there had ever been carpet here it had long been ripped up to expose wooden floorboards; not the good kind but still. Certainly, better than the plastic-coated shag pile of Bethnal Green. He took me into a spartan living room. A wooden industrial cable spool had acquired a new life as a coffee table. Against the wall a battered oxblood chesterfield, a characterful

rip along its high back. I put my rucksack down by the cable spool and felt two hands grab my arse cheeks. Okay, guess I'm not gonna be offered a beer first. I stood up and felt Mark close in behind me, his hands reaching around my waist to under my oversized brass belt buckle. Then the first button. He was grinding his crotch against my backside, then slid a hand down behind my fly, over the top of my white cotton boxer briefs. My dick not hard to find, his fingers held it through the cotton of my underpants. I made a noise and tilted my head back where it brushed against Mark's chin resting on my shoulder. He whispered something complimentary, and I stupidly thanked him. Like we were at a village vegetable competition or something. I worried that this could turn into a very short visit if he carried on massaging my dick the way he was, so I extricated myself from his hold. Turned face to face. Leaned in to kiss. His stubble rough, his tongue forceful. Its tip explored the inside of my mouth for a full minute before he put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me down to my knees. I was momentarily taken off guard, covered it up by opening up his jeans. Inside he was trimmed as neatly pruned box hedging. Disappointment on my part not to find underwear straining to contain his business. Adolescent years making do with porn consisting of the men's underwear section of the Littlewoods' catalogue I had found a predilection for seeing a man in his underwear, speedos, tight jeans. Anything with a bulge. Not fussy. I was close to it his naked penis. From the side we looked like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, except instead of Adam's hand... it was my face. Instead of God's finger... it was a dick. And I could smell shower gel. Nose to one-eye. Not long but thick. Like the end of those Italian salamis hanging outside the deli on Frith Street. I took him in my mouth and massaged his arse cheeks with my hands. I looked up while still working away. Watching me, the same expression from when he sat down at my table an hour ago. Hands clasped behind his head, elbows level with his ears. Looked like he was having a good day. I went back to work.

His bedroom was empty apart from a mattress on the floor, duvet kicked up every which way. He led me by the hand to it, rather awkwardly as my jeans were round my ankles. I still had my boots on. Baby steps. I spent a moment trying to release myself from everything and when I looked up, he was laid on his side

squirting out a palmful of baby oil. Without taking his eyes off me he massaged it onto his shaft, up and down, and around his sack. It glistened and twinkled in the sun.

"No good for condoms that." I said. A feeling in my stomach uncomfortable, like when I had to stand outside the headmaster's office at school.

"I ain't got any." he said "Have you?" I shook my head, equally guilty. "I'll pull out before. Nothing to worry about. Honest. Come 'ere. C'mon. Don't worry."

Doing it without rubbers? Don't do it without rubbers. I see packs of Rubberstuffers. Every day. Every bar top. By every pile of Boyz magazine. Under every poster. He was smiling, saw my indecision. Raised his eyebrows, hand still at work. I don't wanna go. He knew it. L'appel du vide. A mossy bank of chest hair, white as the stubble on his head, his balls laying on his thigh, his hand moving up and down himself. Shining. A comforting scent of Johnsons and Johnsons. Nothing smells like Johnsons and Johnsons, could be anything - lavender, rose, lemon, vanilla? Now it would be associated with Mark's cock sliding in and out, under blind stripes of sunlight on a summer afternoon. Hands gripping my shoulders. Digging into flesh. Animal noises. Words. Telling me I had never been fucked like this. An entirely different sensation. He knew I didn't want him to stop. Told me so. Didn't want him to pull out as promised. Wanted him to shoot it. Shoot it inside me. Wanted it there. Wanted to feel it. At the end. Getting to the end. Just at the end. Faster than I thought he could go. Pleading not take it away. Told me so. He took it away and out. Covered the crack of my arse. My cheeks with hotness. His forehead on my neck.

After five minutes of wallowing in the moment he slapped an arse cheek and offered me the use of a shower. "Thanks."

Early evening now; commuter skinheads coming into Compton's for a tea-time pint. Miss the rush on the tube. Maybe take home a little skinhead shaped supper snack. Hoping to be one of those snacks myself. I was in the moment. After my earlier shower, after I had collected my clothes off the splintered floor and the guy, Mark, was it? As he was in the kitchen making... something. My little eye spied

a, what's that, a scrap of newspaper? A scrap of glossy coloured newspaper. It wasn't newspaper. Poking out from under his mattress was the corner of some kind of magazine. A magazine that looked like it had a boob on it. A boob? Was this guy a breeder? Did he have a stash of straight porn under his mattress? Interesting. I lifted the corner of the mattress to take a look. Furtive glance over my shoulder. Didn't wanna seem nosy. Didn't wanna get caught being nosy. Being raised in a small English village makes everyone kind of nosy. I peered underneath. There were maybe four or five tiny folded envelopes, a couple of inches across. Little envelopes folded up from a mucky mag. What the hell? I could see pouty girl lips, facial and otherwise. Fingers with nails so long they didn't seem practical for people in this kind of business. What the hell? What the fucking fuck? This is his fucking stash, man. Fucking mother-lode stash. I replaced the envelope with the boob on it in its position. Pocketed a couple of the others. Straight into my back pocket. Heart racing felt elemental. Like I'd just done poppers. Ever see this guy again in my bar? Deny everything. I bid him a cheery see you later as I went out the door. He waved a teaspoon at me as he sipped on a large mug of something that smelled like instant coffee.

Now it was early evening, I'd been dabbing at the contents of one of the packets for much of the afternoon in a foul smelling Compton's cubicle. Now as I stood there, thumb hooked into a belt loop, feeling amazingly chatty with nobody to talk to. Feeling good. Feeling like this is probably the best tasting beer ever. Feeling like who gave these cigarettes the right to taste so good? Feeling like my cock had never been so hard as it was right now. Feeling like all the men I was looking at and not one of them seemed interested. Feeling like they all knew I already had sex today. Feeling like I sicken them. These cigarettes do taste so freaking good. Once I had heard someone say they had an itch they couldn't scratch but the meaning of it only just occurred to me. I put in another piece of menthol gum. Chewed it frantically, pulling on my Marlboro menthol like a respirator.

"You know, they say you shouldn't chew gum and smoke at the same time?"

I didn't understand where the voice came from at first "Eh? What?" I looked around and found a short guy next to me. Willo the Wisp hair, like a rat with

alopecia. "Oh. Uh why? Why's that then? Why's that?" I was just happy to hear words coming out of my mouth, I had been dying to hear words come out of my mouth for the past hour and a half. The most I had managed was miming the words to Haddaway.

He laughed. "They say it gives you cancer, but you'll probably be alright."

"Oh good. Ha." I turned my eyes and head back to the room, continuing to try to find a warm body. This guy wasn't my type, he reminded me of that hippy from nursing school, distinct tang of patchouli. Need something in a green bomber, not a grandad shirt and shoes made out of wicker. I mean. I don't know if his shoes are made of wicker, probably not, but he seems like the kind of guy whose shoes might be. Whose shoes. That's fun.

"You er, wanna come back with me?" It was the guy again. Come back with him? Come back with him? Not even gonna buy me a drink first? My head turned back towards him, but my eyes were reluctant to follow suit.

"Oh, errr. I think I'm just gonna stay here."

"Alright. See ya." And that was that, he was off towards the door. Not even trying to persuade me to change my mind. Just an okay and off he goes. Suddenly seems a little more attractive. I finished my pint, gave the room a last desperate look, and followed him out the door.

He'd got a surprisingly long way in the meantime, or maybe I had miscalculated how long it had taken to finish my drink. In any event, I found myself jogging down Compton Street to the annoyance of the gays coming the other way. I trilled a sing-song "fuck off" in response to a particularly loud tut, and admonishment of running in the gay ghetto. I tapped my quarry on the shoulder.

"Hi, um, hi. I thought I'd come with you. That cool?"

"Yeah cool." He said, his scraggly beard and steel eyes giving a nonchalance that just made my knob throb all the harder. "Kings Cross, okay?" He said, then without waiting for a reply he went on "Let's get a cab." And he went out onto the street to get one. I popped another menthol piece of gum, it joined the one I already had in my mouth now devoid of flavour and refreshed it. I wished for a beer, but it didn't materialise in front of me and I couldn't light a cigarette because here

was the cab and the guy is getting in. He motioned me to join him. I did so. Getting in it occurred to me that I may have to ring Chantelle at Manpower in the morning and tell her that my 24 hour bug was a 48 hour one.

We were at Kings Cross station within 10 minutes. I didn't know it was so close by. When you take the tube everywhere I suppose you lose track of these things. The guy paid the cab without even asking if I could chip in. I wouldn't have been able to. I was glad he didn't ask. There was a squat council block here and we headed toward it.

"What is with the council housing today?" I mumbled.

"Sorry what?" He must have thought I was making a derogatory remark. "It's fine, actually."

"No, I meant, it's just a coincidence that..."

"What?"

"Nothing, just I had a friend who... it doesn't matter. Just, I've been looking for a place and there seems to be housing everywhere but none of it is available even though..."

"Yeah, man. Housing crisis. It's a bummer." It's a bummer? Is this guy one of the Monkees?

We were in, I had a feeling of deja vu Gayja view. Despite the location and frontage, I seem to be in the same building as earlier that day. I'm gonna bump into myself careering down the concrete steps gleefully holding a palm over my left bum cheek where I had hidden my stolen drugs.

His flat was the same layout, but entirely polar in its decoration. Wall hangings, plants suspended from the ceiling by macrame, little lamps everywhere, hundreds of records; some in their sleeves, some not. They littered the floor on top of oriental and Indian-style rugs. Overflowing ashtrays most everywhere. A smell of hashish. I recognised it from the hippy lady goblin downstairs from my room in Dalston. Lamps had bandannas covering them, dimming their light. A collection of incense holders that had never been emptied. "You woulda liked my friend from nursing school." I ventured.

"Oh, really why?"

"Oh. Looks like you had a bunch in common."

"What? Being messy? Wanna drink?"

Oh god, yes, cold beer. "Yes please"

"Okay, sit down." He disappeared into the gloom.

There didn't appear to be any seats, there was a futon of course there was a fucking futon. Prone on the floor, an island. Just cushions scattered around elsewhere. I felt like I was inside a Bedouin tent. Out in the desert. Far from home. I sat down rather hard on the corner of the futon mattress and hurt my coccyx, letting out an involuntary noise not unlike a startled cat.

"Are you alright in there?"

"Yeah, yeah." My buzz was waning, my mouth felt dry, and my lips cracked. I felt I ought to do something to remedy this. "Uh. Where's your bathroom?"

"Corridor, first right." Of course, it was, haven't I done this already, wasn't I in that room earlier having a shower and trying to scrub baby oil off my arse cheeks? It was dark green in the bathroom, various jungly plants hanging from the ceiling, this guy likes to hang things I thought. I suppose no matter what he could tell people he's well hung. I laughed at my joke.

"You still alright in there?"

I hummed a positive reply and found my secret stash. I suppose I could do a line in here, but it would take too long and I didn't have any paper money to use as a straw. I'll just dab. Yeah, that's it. Maybe rub a little into my gums like I've seen people do. I don't know why. Must be a reason I suppose. The powder is bitter and grainy. It's a pill that has been crushed, what sort of pill? I don't know but it's working for me. I looked at myself in the mirror. Pretty good, pretty good. Eyes are a little...well. Never mind. Complexion good, a little waxy, and a little shiny. There was some Vaseline on the sink, I opened it up and rubbed a little on my lips. They still felt sore. I started to wonder why there would be Vaseline so close to the toilet and regretted wiping it on my lips. What the hell. What the fucking hell. I took a piss. Arranged everything back beautifully and fastened it back in. Back to business.

He was cross legged on the futon. His shirt was off, hairy chest, slim. Not bad. He was rolling something in a rolling machine. I suspected it wasn't just an ordinary roll given the decor.

"You like skunk?"

"Anansie? Err, well play what you want. Not really my thing."

He laughed, his body shaking as he tried to keep control of the roll up process without having to start over. "No, skunk... WEED."

"Oh. Well sure. Kind of makes me sleepy actually."

"What are you on now?"

I didn't realise he could tell, had everyone known? "Um, well not sure actually. Think it's whizz."

"How come you're not sure?"

"I was sort of... given it."

"Ah." He nodded as though this answer made perfect sense. "I have some charlie too." He licked the cigarette and sealed it, then used the end to point out a bottle of beer. It had a dragon on it.

"Thanks." I took up the beer and swigged on it hard. It foamed up and suds spurted from the top onto my nose and face. The man rolled back and laughed. It was a nice laugh though, not a mean one. I was surprised. I laughed too. It was funny. It felt good to laugh.

"I was hoping to be the one to do that to you." His words came out staccato through laughter. "Oh god." He calmed down a little. "You're funny." I looked him straight in the eye as Chinese lager dripped off my nose onto an Indian mirrored cushion.

"That's me."

Portishead was playing softly. The one about Sour Times. I felt pretty good, but this music was depressing in a minor key. I was naked with the guy, mostly we'd just been feeling each other up so far. Our clothes just drifted off our bodies as we went along. I didn't remember taking anything off. He was currently exploring my mouth with his tongue, caressing my taste buds. His dick, swollen and hot in-

between my legs, moving in and out as if he was fucking the gap between my thighs. He took his tongue out of my mouth just long enough to whisper "I'm gonna suck Mandy off your cock."

"Who's Mandy?" I whispered back. I flicked an eyeball around the room, half expecting a female to have magically appeared. I was feeling too good to be overly worried.

The man laughed. I was making a joke surely. He didn't say anything. Then he reached over to his tobacco pouch and withdrew a small white envelope. I didn't think it was as good of an envelope as mine with the tits on it. I didn't say anything. He smirked at me, eyes on mine and slid down my legs. Resting the envelope on my ball sack he carefully unfolded it. It made my dick twitch to feel his touch. Now open he moved the envelope and placed it on my stomach, pulling my penis toward him. He put the head of it in his mouth, making me groan. After half a minute of this he took up the paper and sprinkled, so carefully, some contents onto the end of my cock. I was reminded for a second of a long ago trip to the seaside and a blackberry ice-cream with nut sprinkles. It at once disappeared from my mind as he covered the powder with his mouth, his tongue dissolving every crystal. My body left his futon and rose into the air lifted up on fingers of light.

My skin had returned to where it belonged eventually. Now reacted electrically to every touch. I repeated the ritual on the man. I didn't know who he was, but I liked him. I didn't know who Mandy was, but I liked her too. She encouraged me to never leave the room, to stay here with all the hard dicks, wet skin and music. Pity there aren't more people. More people are better. Get more people in here.

The man was smoking a cigarette and looking at me, I was writhing, albeit slowly, on my back. The feel of the canvas beneath me shooting stars of sensation up my back. If he were to touch me again, I thought I might just burst into flames. He took a long drag, pulling the smoke into himself. I reached out for it, but he kept hold of it. "I'm gonna finish this cigarette and then fuck you some more." He said. His words alone made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

I woke, one leg covered by some kind of ethnic-y throw I'd seen selling for far too much at Covent Garden stalls. My mouth dry and cracked, my head a flowing river of headache and nausea. The man beside me, snoring gently, face down, hand outstretched with the burnt stub of a cigarette, ash littering his fingers. The room had been a mess before. Before I got here. Before, last night. It looks worse now. The stale fog of redolent tobacco and spilt alcohol. Needed to find my clothes. First, I gotta pee. Urgent alert. I gotta pee so bad. I tiptoed through the detritus, found the green jungle of the bathroom. Yesterday afternoon with the other fella felt a thousand eons ago. I peed, trying to keep the stream to the side of the bowl so as to keep the noise down. I didn't want to talk to this guy today. I looked in the mirror, the area around my mouth was red. Stubble burnt. My nose looked like I had a cold. A splash of cold water maybe? Tiptoed back. Rooted through the landfill, underpants, yes, trousers, socks, t-shirt. All here. Slunk into the kitchen and opened the fridge, no little bottles of pop, no bottles of water; still a couple of beers though. No, better not. Stuck my head under the kitchen tap and lapped up some water instead. Better. Got my wallet. Got my cigarettes, what's left of them, anything else I could use.... rolled up fiver? He wouldn't miss it. Oh, hey there's my lighter. Great. Okay. Boots in hand I crept to the front door and slipped out. On the landing area I deposited myself into my boots and made my way downstairs. Where the fuck is this?

Les-Bionic Woman

"I'm going away."

This is news. "Away where? Why away? What? Away away?"

She tutted, then sighed. "The redundancy? They gave me a good package. So, they bloody should. But I don't know how I feel about things, and I need a break. To go off. Enjoy myself. Have an adventure."

"Oh. Well yeah." She's nervous, that's not like her. Say something supportive. "You know, that does sound like a good idea. Great idea."

"Maybe I can go and actually find myself." If she looks wistfully out the window clutching her pearls, I'll throw my shoe at her. "Don't look at me like that, I'm mid-life-ing"

"Okay, but if you do actually find yourself. I wanna tell you that would actually be kinda creepy. And I'm actually kinda against it, because one of you is actually quite enough."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Yet another reason on why it'll be nice to go away. Really far away. From you." She rubbed the velvet fuzz on top of my head, and walked away from where I was sitting on the floor into her kitchen.

"Rude."

"Do you want wine?"

"Yes please."

I heard the cheerful gurgle of liquid and chime of glass. Caroline came back with two large glasses of red. She handed one to me and said, "I thought maybe Sicily."

"Good lord, why? Oh wait... wine label?"

"No. That's where Mum was from."

"What?"

"You didn't know that?"

"Er, no. Grandma was from Sicily? No. God. I don't even know her name."

"Louisa." She reached over and patted my hand. "You Mum never told you anything?"

"Wouldn't ever. If I ever asked anything she'd just change the subject, or if I was in a bad mood I'd get the "not really anything to do with you" speech." All I knew was that you were all from Darlington, raised in a children's home. I kind of pictured it all as if the Von Trapp kids got placed with little orphan Annie but without all the annoying singing."

"Children's homes aren't like in the musicals really."

"I suppose not." She looks sad, maybe give her a cigarette. "I think Mum just didn't like to talk about it because it was all too upsetting. But I bet she'd be really

interested if you went off on some kind of family quest and came back with tons of interesting facts to know and share about Louisa and her Sicilian ancestors."

"I wouldn't know where to start." I lit a cigarette and handed it to her. She took it and inhaled a deep drag. "Didn't you ever wonder why we are all so dark? Especially your sister."

"I dunno. Good lighting? Never really thought about it."

"Hmm."

"I do remember when your Dad died. I was very little, and we lived at River Lodge. A policeman came to the door. The policeman said something, and she said something. Thank you very much, closed the door and went back to fiddling about with the pressure cooker. That was that."

"How did you know it was about my dad?"

"I asked her. I asked what the policeman wanted. And she said, quite matter of fact he'd come to tell her... well you know. I don't think any of us are great about talking about that kind of thing."

"Well. We do alright. Me and you." She looked around for her cigarettes. "Anyway. My father wasn't a very nice man."

"No. I don't suppose he was." The blue smoke of our cigarettes hung in a lazy halo around us until the merest draught from under the door vanished it in an instant.

"So Italian, are we?"

"Little bit." She smiled and we drank our wine still sitting on the floor.

"Isn't life interesting?"

"I'm not going to Sicily"

"Oh?" I put aside this week's copy of Boyz. There'd been a photographer in Brief the other day and taken a picture of Queenie and I mugging at the camera from behind the bar holding up bottles of the new passion fruit flavour Hooch that'd come out in time for Valentine's day. I guess they'd decided not to use it. Fame is elusive. "Why not?"

"You know when you said your Mum had told you that it wasn't anything to do with you when you asked about family history?"

"Mmmm."

"Maybe it isn't anything to do with me either."

"Oh?"

She looked at me from the other sofa. London Tonight was summarising the weather for the next day. She picked up her wine from where it sat on a dog eared copy of The Women's Room and took a sip. The rain outside gave a gentle white noise to the window.

"I see what you mean." I rummaged about in my work bag, "There's some travel agents listed in the Pink Paper. Want a squiz?"

"Thanks, yes."

It was sticking out of Canada like a giant skin tag. "This bit? What is that? An island?"

"Hmmm?" She finished lighting her cigarette and looked over my shoulder at the atlas. "That's Nova Scotia sweetheart. Go all the way down to Boston, turn right and it's the bit poking out into the Atlantic."

"Oh, I see it. Just. Gosh it's tiny. Looks like Spurn Point."

"Sperm what?"

"Spurn point. The tiny sticking out into the sea thing along the way from Hull. Where plastic bottles and pollution goes to die."

"Uh right. Yeah. Not like that at all. Anyway, I fly to Boston. Then, I get one of those little old fashioned planes up to the Cape. It'll be beautiful. I'll be sipping my gin and tonic, looking down on the dunes. The ocean. Might see a whale."

"Wow." I poured the rest of the bottle of a dewy white into my glass. "And you booked all this today? Don't mess about, do you?"

"No. I don't. I met a wonderful agent called Dianne at Sappho Tours this afternoon." Diana at Sappho? What was this? A Greek odyssey? "We sat down and sorted everything out. Spared no expense. I do not want to go and have to count the pennies," she blew out some smoke. "I'll do that when I come back."

"I have to say, when my Auntie Caroline goes in, she goes all in."

"And don't you forget it."

Drag On A Hot Slate Roof

Too hot. I know that much. That city kind of hot when the air is vertical. Exhaust fumes and rotting burgers out of street bins go straight up... my nose.

A hold-all hooked up over my back was making a damp patch under its unbreathable fake leather. Its handle slick under hot palms. And here I was hoofing up the Bayswater Road from the underground, boots with coals in the toes. On the corner, a little way up, can't miss it. Little way? Didn't mention it was uphill. Should've worn shorts. Black jeans on a day like this? Stupid. Little bugs at my face. Puh. Puh. Off. Gonna get cranky. I am cranky. Dammit, friggin' tourists walk in a straight line. "Move please."

Queenie told me about The Champion. She'd done a Friday night to help out when they were short staffed. Same brewery. – "And Michael the manager's a dead nice guy, you'll like him... umm don't shit on your own doorstep though, know what I mean?"

Makes it sound like I sleep with everybody. Puh. Puh, fucking bugs. Bloody cheek. It was just that glass collector - Dario something, barely a word of English. And the bouncer whatshisname, he's not even there now. I Wasn't that bad, ha. Didn't have to leave. Ha ha ha, puh PUH. "FUCK. Hello? I swallowed a bug, okay? Can I help you? No?" Friggin' tourists. Oh shit. I'm here.

It was on a corner. Ground floor wooden cladding in jet black, flaking in the sun, the absorbed heat making shimmers in the air. A forcefield. Three storeys high, a roof from Peter Pan. Eyed windows peered onto the street heavy with alien foot soldiers and locals desperate for a short cut. I stooped over to stow my A2Z back in my duffel bag ignoring the muttering maelstrom flowing around me, then nipped across the street much to the annoyance of a black cab and a No.28 Routemaster - who sounded his horn and mouthed something about punting, I think. On the other

side I ducked through a dripping (some unseen person had just watered the hanging baskets) gaping maw of a doorway. *Here.*

It took a few moments to make out the interior after being in the glare of the summer street. I could smell spilt lager. I saw it in my mind. Sticky on the wooden bar top, soaking into the varnish mixing up an aroma of wet pencil shavings. A nasal cocktail. Scampi fries, Benson and Hedges, and the sound of a fruit machine paying out to a stranger in the darkness. My eyes began to adjust.

Some guy with messy blond hair and a beefy build that worried the seams of a black polo neck was leaning casually against a pump of Carling Premiere. This could be my Alexis Carrington meets Crystal opportunity. I whipped off my sunglasses in my best 1980s mega-soap move and flashed my most charming smile to date. Unfortunately, the arm of the sunglasses hit my nose, clattered to the floor, the lens popped out and spun like a 50p piece on the tile. I held the smile as though nothing had happened, paid no attention to anything on the floor and stepped neatly over to the bar.

The blond pointed a finger at me "New guy, right?". *He's Australian. Watching Neighbours after-school came in handy after all, Mum.* I confirm I'm the "new guy". Yup that's me - new guy. Guy of the newness. "I'm Stevo." Said the Australian. *Of course, you are.*

Stevo looked around the bar weighing up if he could leave the area. It's 11 o'clock in the morning - just two forty something soaks (matching anoraks) sitting dangerously close to the bar attempting to pry open the plastic ribbon holding the newly delivered stack of gay press. *Having trouble. Hands trembling a little, comforting pints, close by ashtray - two smoking cigarette ends, shared lighter. Pulling at the tape. Bickering on the best way to do it. One of them swats the other's hand away. His feelings are hurt. Poor thing.*

"Just a sec." Stevo picked up the fruit knife from in between the lemon slices and sauntered over to the pair. "Hold on there fellas, let me get that." The knife sliced through the plastic tie, and he whipped them in an effortlessly fluid motion into a bin hidden under the counter. "Fill yer boots, but don't mess up my bar." He

cocked a finger gun at them, tossed the knife back into the fruit tray and winked at me. "They like the pictures," he whispered.

"Fair dinkum" I said, in my best Crocodile Dundee. Stevo's eyebrows narrowed slightly *He thinks I'm taking the piss. Shit. Good start. Well done Matt.*

"Er yeah. C'mon guy, we'll go find Michael." He walked around to the bar hatch, pausing along the way to call over his shoulder, "I'll be back in a sec you two. Behave." The pair grunted yeahs without even moving their eyes up. *Must be a good centrefold this week.*

I followed Stevo toward the back of the pub, scrubbed wooden tables and chairs - empty at that time of day. A bank of three fruit machines entertaining a lone customer in high-viz road gear and a cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth. He doesn't look up from the whirling cherries and a palm full of coins. *There Are straight people in here? Interesting...* It smells of pine disinfectant, no background music - it makes the whole place seem even more vacant. "You don't play music here, then?"

"It's to encourage customers to use the jukebox, I reckon," Stevo replied as we went through a battered green door that has an employee's only sign in three different languages (two of which I don't recognise). "Sometimes a rando song comes on by itself though," he adds. *Music plays all day at the Brief. Good dancey music. So, at the Champion they just stand about in silence? Sounds fun, not.* Up to the first floor through a musty fug of instant coffee and deodorant and into a large industrial kitchen area overlooking the Bayswater Road. Didn't look like there was much call for food in the Champion, unless they were serving a stack of laundry dumped on an ironing board or a dirty coffee cup club sandwich. *Must not make a sarcastic comment... out loud.*

We walked briskly through and stopped outside a closed, white glossed panelled door. Stevo, knocked smartly upon it and turned to leave with a "Better get back to the bar. See ya." I waited. I tried to rub an itch on my left big toe with my other foot, and when the door abruptly opened, stumbled, and I nearly fell backwards.

"I said come in... oh. Who's this then?" He was a good foot taller than I was, muscles tightly encased in white cotton, salt 'n' pepper shaved and stubbled.

"Hi. I'm Matt. We spoke on..."

"Of course, right, come in, come in then. Sit yourself down."

Michael the manager, *Mikey the manny ha ha*, oozed an 'over-it' attitude. Cool. *Cool in an effortless way. That I would give my back teeth for.* Wish I had a pen. I'd make notes. *He's not in the least self-conscious, how'd he do that?* He stretched out his legs under that oversized desk and leaned back in his chair. Hands clasped behind his head and talked about The Champion; what his vision was for it. *Just agree with everything and look at his chest.* As he talked, he spoke to the corner of the room over my shoulder, *is someone standing there? No. He's... reeling off a memorised speech. Bit cheeky. Act interested though. Not just in his chest.* "Yeah, uh huh, fantastic."

After a few minutes of this, he got to the end of the speech and his mind returned to the room and seeing me there looked mildly surprised for a second. "Well," he said. "Let's get you settled in." He took me up a narrow set of stairs covered in threadbare grey carpeting, flaked paint the colour of sour milk. The landing at the top housed two doors, one a storage cupboard that smelled of charity shop. "It's the other one." The other opened to my new assigned room, white and bland. Way up here in the attic space, occupied in the olden days by scullery maids and/or whores. Some things never change.

The room gave off an abandon-y vibe. There was a collection of dead flies on the windowsill. Someone had once put an iron down on the carpet and created a triangle of hard, bobbly plastic.

"Probably gets hot up here in the Summer," he said. *It IS Summer, and it IS hot, is this guy phoning it in?* I crossed the room to the window, unclipped the clasp and pulled the frame. It didn't budge. Michael came to give me a hand, all biceps and wet t-shirt. He smelt of Cool Water, sweat and gin. He grunted and strained, and the frame shot up cracking a small pain on the lower left side. "I'm glad you did that and not me," I said.

"We have quite a regular set of, well, regulars. Most come every day. Why don't you unpack yourself and go down to the bar and get to know some of them. Then tomorrow we'll get you working."

"Okey dokey." *Okey dokey?*

"See you later, then." He went out to go and sit behind his big desk no doubt. *Right, so what have I got here? Won't take me long to unpack with my one small bag, travel light baby. That's me.*

Now that he was gone I could take a real close look about my new home. It wasn't unlike the room I had in Dalston. I wonder how those guys are doing, maybe I could send Katherine and Liz a dirty postcard and ask. I threw my duffel on the mattress and inspected the linen. It was clean at least, bit musty, not bad. Roof and duvet, that was something. The wall was spotted with bits of old blu-tack, a last tenant legacy. I wonder who it was, why they left, did they do something wrong? Why did they go? No wardrobe, but a trapezoid shaped door in the wall piqued my interest. Ooh wonder what we got in here? Long periods of neglect had made its opening stiff and reluctant I can relate but eventually I got it open. It smelt like the inside of a charity shop handbag. Wedged along its interior lengthwise (it was apparently just an opening to get at the pipes that ran along inside the wall but would be good to put things I didn't want in the open. Wedged along at the back appeared to be a full length mirror. *I'm 'avin' that.* I set it up near the window and wiped the surface with wet toilet paper. I don't look much like a barman. Not a barman of this Victorian mausoleum any road. I looked like I was due to cruise at the LA on a Friday night. Dark patches under my arms. The consequences of hot days and tight t-shirts. I pulled it off and rooted for a clean one, an identical clean one. *Variety is the spice of bad.*

"Right. Let's go meet the locals." The locals I don't much care about, but I'd love to meet a pint or two of the Export.

There was nobody backstage, manager's door firmly shut - silence from the inside, kitchen empty apart from the mess. I retraced my earlier steps and found myself back in the bar. My Ozzie chum was still standing behind the bar in front of

the older couple who had been bickering. And time stands still. They were all reading the press. I went and perched myself on a barstool by their side.

"Alright?" I said with absolutely as much cheeriness and confidence as I could muster. It came off insincere, *did that sound insincere? Was that an insincere alright?* They all looked up at me "Alright?" They said in unison as one. Twinsies.

"Pint of Export please, Stevo." I said in hopefully a tone that said I was at home and had been sitting here as a local since time immemorial.

"Righto mate," he said and produced a pint glass. "Settled in?"

I chatted with the two older fellas, they were the George and Mildred - gay edition. A bickering couple, both ogling the pinups in the press, and making slightly concerning remarks about racial minorities. Is this what Notting Hill people were like? Old drunkies, spending all day in the pub, waxing wild with the xenophobia.

Stevo seemed fully aware of who they were and merely gave an upturned eyebrow in my direction once in a while. After a cigarette or two I finished my pint, ordered another one and went outside to sit with it on a bench in the sun. The darkness, and quiet of the repressed interior made me miss the neon of the West End. *I don't feel powerful here. I miss Queenie. I miss music. I miss tight jeans.*

After a little while of watching the tourists bustle past, and giving a decent scowling or two, my boots made me feel powerful. A skinhead came and joined me on the bench. He had a pint in his hand and an unlit cigarette sticking out the side of his mouth. Guess there's another way in-and-out from this place.

"Hey up," he said and sat down. "You're Matt, right? Stevo said there's a new guy sitting out here." *I'm the new guy alright.* "I'm Jason. Welcome to Notting Hill."

I laughed. "Thanks. You're the first person to actually say that I think."

"Yeah. Funny lot around here. Though I'd come and see what you're like. I'm dead nosey, me."

His accent said he was from Birmingham, but it had aged and mellowed after years in the Capital. Tall, had the usual skinhead uniform thank god for that and as he lit his cigarette he stretched out a foot and nearly tripped a passing businessman.

"You're probably one of the regulars Michael said I'm supposed to meet. I've met the ones inside already."

"Doris and Edna yeah? Wankers." He grinned. "I'm alright though. Come in most days. For a livener." He raised his glass and gulped down half his pint in almost a single swig. "What's that? Export?" he pointed at my half-finished glass.

"Yeah, hey thanks."

"No problem. They probably aren't paying you shit." *Well, he's not wrong, in fact I don't even know what they are paying me. Probably should have asked about that, but then they always say don't ask about money in job interviews but hell, I never knew why. What's wrong with having to know the price they put on your head? They price things up in shops, don't they?* He'd gone by this time.

He came back with a tray and rested it on the bench between us where we sat under hanging baskets. There were two pints and two small glasses of a colourless liquid. "What's that?"

"A shot of welcome. Ready? One, two, three!" I knocked the vodka back, it puckered my mouth and made my brain contract for a second. I winced and quickly took a swig of the lager to wash it away. "Nice one! We'll do a couple more of those in a bit."

Maybe working here wasn't going to be so bad after all.

As lunchtime turned to afternoon, we were joined by a couple more people, blurry faces and laughter. My sides hurt, tears down my hot skin, the sun giving no mercy where we sat disturbing the tourist trade.

Once or twice, Jason passed me a small paper packet with a nod. Each time I would take it to the cool toilets smelling of piss and lemons, with their oversized ceramic urinals and brass fittings. I crept into the lone cubical and dabbed a few finger-fulls into my gums. Not sure this does anything, actually, but I'm not snorting today.

The other people we were with were friends of Jason it seemed rather than real locals. They had gathered for an afternoon of sunshine drinking.

"Come with us," said one, "It's borrrrring 'ere."

"Yeah," said another, "Let's go into town." *Aren't we already in town? I feel very popular. These guys want me to join 'em. Nobody does that. I'll see if I can make 'em laugh again.* They responded to my jokes, thought I was great. *Maybe I*

am great. This whizz makes me feel great. Everyone here is great. I love these guys. They're so... great.

Another hour or so passed, a couple of men left, maybe to go into town, maybe to go back to where one of them lived and fuck. As they left and a space opened up on the bench it was filled. *Is this the in-crowd? Am I popular now? Is this what it feels like?*

Jason had been talking to me about clubs, which I had been listening to with half an ear. I went clubbing but it was a different type of clubbing. He was a club personality. He grabbed a copy of QX magazine someone had dropped under the bench. Possibly me. And flicked through the pages, tearing one of two as he chewed his gum with a ferocity not seen since Cannibal Ferox. "That's me." He pointed to a photo from Heaven. Club, not ethereal plane. It was of a bald headed drag queen in an androgynous suit, no shirt and elaborate face make-up.

"That's you?" I was... astounded.

"Yeah." He was proud of it. "Sometimes I'm like a greeter and shit in Heaven, Love Muscle." He took a long drag of his Silk Cut and looked out into the street where black cabs beeped their horns, and the colourful anoraks walked. "You go to Heaven?"

"Not very often. I'm more a LA, or Substation guy." *Mostly because I don't have to dance there, I can't stand in the corner crippled by nerves but look perfect for cruising.*

"I love the LA. But I'm usually helping Jeremy out on Fridays."

"Who's Jeremy?"

"Jeremy Joseph. The G.A.Y. guy. He's my flatmate."

I'd heard of Jeremy Joseph, hell I'd seen him introducing acts on the G.A.Y. stage. Not that I went there very often but when Gabrielle calls you, or Kylie it's time to dig out the leather trousers and a colour t-shirt and head on over.

"You're like famous."

"I know."

There was a beat. And then we both laughed till I was buckled in half. The next time we did the whizz we went together and snorted it up with a twenty pound note. It was Jason's, *I haven't owned a twenty for weeks.*

Another hour passed, things were getting messy, and boring. The top of my head was undoubtedly burnt although Jason AKA Perestroika/Venus Man Trap maintained his albino-like paleness. Perhaps he's a vampire.

"Ugh. I'm gonna have to go inside for a bit."

"Just inside, or up to barman's quarters?"

"Dunno. Inside. Maybe both. Dunno."

"What's upstairs like here?"

"Upstairs where we all live, um. Guess it's okay. Like a shared student flat really going by the kitchen."

"Can we come up and look?"

"Who? You? All of you. Um."

"Yeah, we'll be dead quiet, won't we." General mutterings of course they could be.

"Michael's not here. He's gone bobbin' for jail bait up west. Always does."

"Well. Alright." *Could be a lark I suppose. Can't get me in any trouble. How could it?* "But we'll have to be sneaky, like little sneaky squirrels about it."

"Sneaky little squirrels hiding our nuts."

"NUTS!"

"What? Um. Yeah, exactly. Mission: S'cret Nuh squissles. Uhhh, Jason you and I will go in, like pretending to go to toilet or something, then we'll nip up the back, and the rest of you just sort of filter in one by one and we'll wait by the door at the back I suppose. Unless I can prop it open. But, like shush and shit."

"Yeah, God. Shush for fucks. Yeah?"

"Yeah, like yeah? Okay? "

"Yeah."

"NUTS!"

Now with our plan, highly planned and thought out Jason and I stood up. Jason seemed fairly solid, but I felt a little wobbly. The whizz and the Export rolling

around behind my eyes, the smell of cigarette smoke going in my left eye and making me do a one-sided squint.

"Is this you acting normal?"

"Is this YOU acting normal?"

"Is this you... let's just go in."

We made our way to the entrance, like two bumble bees overladen with pollen, going in the right general direction but with no particular grace.

Jason, obviously used to subterfuge, took his arm away from my shoulder and headed to the door marked Gentlemen. I paused for a second, highly conscious of being watched by Stevo behind the bar and began to walk very deliberately over to the back of the pub where the door led to the upstairs. One foot in front of the other, repeat. And again. That fruit-machine is so LOUD. I got more confident in the gloomier pub back. Someone was behind me, through the side door came another reveller grinning and exaggerating a snaky walk over. Like a villain creeping up on one of the Scooby gang. I got to the door and turned. There were now three people behind me. I put a finger to my lips and said "Shhhhhpppppttt."

We stole through the door, and clattered up the vinyl steps, muffled giggles like 4 schoolgirls at boarding school on a midnight feat run to the kitchens.

As confidence rose and we made our way through the accommodations, people began to channel TV cop shows, the stealthy approaches, flat against walls, peeking around corners, disgusted remarks on the state of the washing up more Cagney and Lacey that kind of thing.

Making more noise and taking more time than it would have taken to just walk through the rooms, we eventually made it to the top of the building and my meagre "apartment".

We crashed through the door and laughed, panted.

"Is that it?" said Jason.

"Er. Yeah. What? You don't think this is the height of glamour living?"

"Where's your stuff?"

"This. This is my stuff in this bag." I sat down on the mattress and tipped over to the side and groaned. "I think I might be drunk a little bit."

One of the others opened the window. "Can you get out from here?"

"I dunno. I just got here an hour ago."

"More like four kid."

"Oh. Well, I still don't know." I got up and went to the window. "Do you think you can see the Queen Mother's house from here?"

"Fuck the Queen Mother, Princess Margaret is who you wanna see."

"I dunno, I'm partial to a gin and tonic. My afternoon would be just peachy with the Queen Mum. She drinks it by the gallon."

"Okay, true, but I bet Maggie has E."

"Alriiiight. Fuck the Queen Mum."

The four of us stood by the window looking out, but the balustrade was in the way, and it obstructed the view. "Fuck it." I said. And began to climb out into the space between the roof tiles and the wall. Jason helped me by pushing on my arse as I clambered out. "Watch it, I don't wanna fall to my death before my first shift."

"Gimme a hand I'm coming too. Tony, grab that CD player."

It was high on the roof. *I'm high on the roof.* The walkway, if it could be called that, I don't think it was designed for people to actually walk around on unless they were fixing the roof. Whatever it was it was about a metre wide and then the grey slate tiles slowly rose up at an angle. There was a sort of wooden ladder structure heading up to a chimney stack. It was missing a brick or two and had a twiggy kind of shrub growing out the top beneath a rusty aerial. A pigeon sat on one of the metal rods baulked in surprise and flew off. I leant back onto the tiles. My back feeling the warmth they had collected. I wonder who was the last person to touch these tiles was. *Bert and Mary Poppins, no doubt.* Soon all four of us were laid on our backs in the sunshine, smoking. My tinny sounding CD player blasting out Robin S, we all joined in the show me loves. Jason withdrew a half bottle of vodka from, somewhere, dread to think. And offered me a pull of it. I hesitated.

"Go on," he urged. I took a swig, and it did the brain pucker. He took the bottle back and drank the rest of the contents down in a few gulps.

"Jesus. I don't know how you can do that."

"Tony's asleep," said our fourth. "Shall we leave him up here and go downstairs. He'll get a shock when he wakes up."

"He'll get a shock if he wakes up and falls off a roof."

"More of a shock when he hits the concrete."

"Nothing to the shock the American tourist will get who breaks his fall."

"I'm not asleep," said Tony. "But please do continue discussing my imminent death."

"Okay," said Jason. "So, if you don't fancy plummeting to your death, how do you feel about poisoning?"

"I'm okay with it. Is it an overdose? I can do an overdose."

"Let's ALL do overdoses!"

"Ohhh I can't," said Jason. "I promised to be the door bitch at Heaven tomorrow."

"Boooo."

There was a cough. I looked up and saw Michael, the manager's head extending out of my bedroom window and looking up at us all. "Ummm. Can you all come back inside please?" he said.

"Uh oh. BUST-ed"

"I'm really glad you had fun with our regulars Matt, but they're not to come into the private areas and nobody is supposed to be wandering around on the rooftop."

"No. Um sorry about that. We got a bit carried away in the sunshine."

He was giving me the company ticking off I felt, but I saw a twitch on the corner of his mouth. And didn't feel like I was particularly in trouble for anything. This admonishment was strictly for the books.

Up the Nose, Under the Stairs

Next time I see Queenie. I'll kill her.

I was cutting lime wedges.

That's what I'll do.

I sliced the ends off another, they sat on the wet cutting board like zesty green nipples. I picked up half a dozen juicy segments and dropped them into a tub of soda water where they fizzed and sank. "At least you're having fun." I told them.

"What you say, mate?" Stevo was flicking through a men's fitness magazine at the end of the bar, a glass full of something rich in vitamins in front of him. He'd told me what it was, but I'd forgotten almost immediately.

"Oh, nothing. I was just talking to the limes."

"Huh, good on ya." He rolled up Muscle and Flex and slid it into the back of his jeans. "I'll pop down the bank and get some change for tonight." He looked pleased to get away.

"Righto." I picked the blue spray and made to clean the bar but after he went out the door, I put it back where I found it and sat down on a stool near the hatch and lit up a cigarette instead. Nightmare. I thought back fondly of Brief Encounter, where the emphasis was on being social, the endless parade of customers, laughing at the breeders who stumbled upon us after taking pictures of the lions of Trafalgar Square and wanted lunch. But here. Here at the Champion. It was all cleaning and catering to tourists. The gays were provincial and only at night, the bar was a circle, so you always had your back to someone, no music, no DJ, no cruising, no late nights, no fun people to work with, no after-hours drinks, no clubs nearby. I'm bored out of my gourd. I put my forehead on the bar and groaned.

Someone rapped a pound coin smartly next to my ear on the wood. "Oi," they said. I looked up. It was Jason.

"Thank fuck it's you." I raised myself up and rubbed my forehead, a red circle forming there.

"Bad day?"

"No, it's just... oh I dunno. What can I get ya?"

"Pint of Kronenbourg and a double vodka."

"On its own?"

He looked at me as if I were very stupid as I ran the stream of lager into a pint glass. "I can't drink vodka neat. You know, one morning I got up and needed a viddy but I didn't have any mixer, so I mixed it with water and toothpaste."

"Urrrrr. That's not what you're gonna do now is it? You got a tube of Aquafresh in your pocket?"

"No." Jason picked up his pint and took a few good swigs, then he picked up the glass of vodka and poured it into his lager.

"Ohhhhh. That's clever."

"Ta da."

"Does it taste horrible though?"

"No, why would it?"

I shrugged.

"Try it."

I took a stealthy look around and certain of being free of any proverbial hairy eyeballs took a gulp. "Huh. Can't even taste the vodka."

"I know."

"Three fifty."

"You want anything?"

"I wanna spend my afternoon drinking in the sunshine again, but unfortunately..." I raised two open hands and put them down again. Stevo came back in just then, a messenger bag over his shoulder straining under the weight of what I presumed was a few bags of coins.

"Hold that thought," Jason said, took another large sip and hurried after Stevo.

If he's gone to mug the Australian, I'm gonna be sleeping under Westminster Bridge tonight.

"Are you working all day?"

"No. Just till six."

I was sitting on a bar stool next to Jason. Nobody else was in the pub. He had a pint, and a vodka chaser, he'd been waiting outside when I opened the doors at 11. I sipped my black coffee, it had a lot of sugar in it and a splash of Smirnoff at

Jason's suggestion to take the edge off. We were smoking, although I had turned down Jason's offer of a Silk Cut as I could never get a proper drag out of those things. "You watch, Stevo will come down in a sec, to make sure I've opened up correctly. I swear to God if he says his fucking "time to lean, time to clean" mantra again I'm gonna kick him in the eyeball."

"Good looking though."

I snorted. "I suppose. If you like that sort of thing"

"Yup. Muscles, killer smile, it's a real niche market." I rolled my eyes at him, so he continued "If you aren't working tonight? Can you do me a favour?" His tone was casual. I am wary of casual tones, they usually come attached to formal requests. Why do people I don't know that well ask me for favours?

"It depends on what it is, Jason. Does it involve a dead body and a spade because I'm in no mood for exercise today."

"I wish. No. Come out with me. I have to go to a party that Jeremy is throwing for someone, and I don't wanna go on my own. It's no fun."

"Whose party?"

"Dunno. Some club crony. In Hampstead for God's sake. But we could go to the pub first, get some y'know, shopping." He rubbed his nose. "Rock up to Dudley Do-Rights for an hour or two and then fuck off."

"Rock up, fuck off. Yeah, alright then. But if you don't wanna go we could just mosey on up west and you know... not go."

"I said I would. Kind of owe him." I wish I were liked enough that going to parties seemed like a payment. "What are you going to wear?"

"What am I going to... What am I going to wear? Jason, I have one pair of jeans, this pair in fact, one pair of leather trousers, and three t-shirts in white, grey and black. Them's me choices."

"BNP drag."

"Well, I wouldn't put it... shit." I had heard the staff door squeal shut. I quickly stubbed out my cigarette and got back behind the bar, pretending to wipe the bar top with a Carling towel. Stevo, of course - "Any probs, mate?" His eyes flicked around the bar area looking for something to bring to my attention.

"No mate," I said "All ship-shape, mate. Swabbing the decks." I made a pantomime of rubbing the bar top. "Just waiting in anticipation of my next customer."

"Good man. Morning Jason." Stevo continued around the bar and out the front door.

"Zig a zig heil!" said Jason mashing out his fag.

7pm: I was sat where Jason had been 8 hours earlier. This time bedecked in a tight black t-shirt, oversized silver buckled belt, leather trousers. A pair of silver dog tags chimed tin around my neck. Reflected in brass panels behind the bar, sipping my pint and flicking the end of my Camel Light - I look like a bald Aunt Caroline.

A hand clapped me on the shoulder and smelt the unmistakable tang of Kouros. "Hi Jason." I said and turned, "Jesus. Wow."

Jason was covered in a clear blue plastic jumpsuit over white tanga briefs. Knee high go-go boots, elaborate make up in blue and yellow, glitter and gems stuck to his face. His nails in contrast to their earlier bitten appearance now jutted two inches from the ends of each of his fingers. He withdrew a blue plastic clutch purse from under his arm and produced a slim cigarette case. He inserted one of its contents into the end of a cigarette holder and stood waiting for a light. I obliged.

"I feel slightly dressed down." I said.

"Yes, it's perfect. I knew it would be. Don't want you distracting attention away from me, darling. I wish I'd brought a collar." He poked my neck gently with one of his acrylic fingernails.

"Um. Thanks?"

"Right, sup up and we'll get out of here. Stevo, large voddy and coke please." There were only a handful of people in the bar area, Tuesday night after all, and although obviously interested in the glittering neon butterfly in their midst, seemed remarkably unaffected.

I began to gulp down my Export, feeling my stomach fill with gas, taking deep breaths so as not to belch all over the bar. Better be quick, a large vodka and coke won't slow Jason down for very long.

"Where are we going?" so says the sidekick. *The moon in orbit. I'm Barbara Hershey in Beaches. Wind and wings.*

"Shall we stop off up West for a couple first?" he said between gulps and tokes on his cigarette.

"Sure. It would be a shame not to show off our outfits." I grabbed the crotch of my leather trousers.

"Ain't nobody gonna be looking at you next to me."

"Granted."

"Right. Grab yer 'andbag. Let's go." He strode toward the doors, his outfit making the same noises as a Sainsbury's carrier bag.

"See ya Stevo." I called on the way out so didn't hear his reply should there have been one.

There was a short debate on the street - much to the amusement of evening pedestrians - on the pros and cons of various transport options. In the end Jason decided on black cabbing the journey. The bus could have been a scream but alright, as long as I'm not paying, fine. He waved one down, and the driver barely registered a smile. Notting Hill after all. Nobody is shocked by anything after the carnival.

I love getting in a black cab. The smell. The expense. I feel like somebody in a black cab. I feel like I'm a 40s movie star on my way to the theatre in the back of a black cab. I laughed a little.

"What's up?" He'd been auditing his make up in a hand mirror, maintaining the adhesion of facial gems.

"Oh nothing. I was just feeling like a 40s film star for a second. Then I looked down at myself dressed like an extra from the Blue Oyster Cafe sat next to a vision in neon plastic and..."

He snorted. "We're thoroughly modern."

"Mmmm." Thoroughly something.

"Here hold onto this. I want a backup case I lose mine." He palmed me a small paper envelope and I wriggled it into my back pocket keeping my eye on the driver. His eyes flicked back at me in the rear view mirror, my stomach dropped for a second, but when he spoke it was only to announce "Compton's." I breathed out. Jason leaned forward and shoved cash at him through the Plexi-glass window. He sat back down not looking for any change and poked on my shoulder for me to get out. "Your side, c'mon."

Out onto Compton Street. There was only one bouncer outside the pub. Tuesdays, who goes out on Tuesdays. The cab drove off for a few feet before being hailed by a group of giggling white girls who whooped into the back. Jason stepped around in front of me and led the way through the double doors, past the bouncer (big, bald guy, give him a wink) and into the interior. "Get us a large voddy... and a straw." Said Jason and continued to the toilets. Probably checking his make-up again. It wasn't particularly busy, maybe a dozen, maybe a little more in. The Spice Girls singing in the background shaking it to the right because they were having a good time, and I took myself self-consciously over to the bar where a new face was waiting expectantly. Always a new face here. I miss the old spit and sawdust days, and those two guys who ran it, familiarity. "Hi. 2 large vodkas and cokes please, one with a straw, no ice."

"Smirnoff?"

"No, the other is fine, ta." I'm not paying extra for fancy vodka. Not the way we drink it.

As I stood at the bar, the word "supernumerary" — that old nursing school buzzword — echoed in my mind. Superfluous, an extra on a stage where Jason held court. The seconds ticked slowly by until he finally returned, almost ten minutes later.

"Did you fall in?" I handed him his drink which he sucked down in one go and signalled to the barman to come over.

"Oh, that's better. Sorry. I was making sure all this," he displayed all of his fabulousness, "looked fantastic. And it does." *That's not all you were doing given the size of your eyeballs.*

People gravitated toward Jason, toward Venus, Venus Mantrap. His light drew them in, me included. Like an equation on Einstein's blackboard, you knew it was brilliant . You wanted to understand, but it stayed always beyond your ken. Whether it was sheer confidence, self-belief, the fact that they could get you a VIP pass into the club, people wanted to be around them. For me it was the confidence. It came out in waves like radiation, and I hoped for contamination. The opposite seemed to happen, I felt almost non-existent next to this shining son of club land. Nobody gave me a second thought. I'm just happy to be included. Really.

Almost an hour in Compton's went by, I popped into the toilets a couple of times with the envelope of helpfulness, and it did. If anyone bought Venus a drink, he made sure to have me included, most of the time anyway. At ten though, Venus came to the conclusion that her court was ending for the evening, and we should be on our way. We hustled out onto the pavement, the combination of spirits and powder making me feel like a scribble in a child's colouring book. I waved at a passing taxi with its light on, but it kept on going. When the next one came along Venus put their arms in the air and stood in front of it "Get in," she said. I did but felt vaguely illegal for doing so.

Back in the luxury of a black cab, Venus withdrew a piece of paper from one of her plastic pockets. "Hampstead please. Here." She passed the paper to the driver through the window. "Address." He grunted and drove off. Don't understand why he would be complaining, it's a big fare to go all that way.

Neon stripes flashed by the windows and we sat in silence for a few minutes. I was enjoying the buzz from the pub, my mind still a messy shape, the noise of the city and a carousel of lights playing hopscotch in my brain.

"That was fun," said Venus.

"Yeah," I replied, still looking out the window.

"Here," she whispered in my ear and pressed half a white pill in my hand.

"What is...?"

"Shhhhhh." And closed my fingers around it. "Do it now."

I nodded and popped it into my mouth and swallowed. The neon stripes continue their race outside the window.

Jason began to laugh quietly. "What's up?" I asked.

"Oh nothing. I'm just having a laugh."

"Everyone loves you. It's like being out with someone famous."

He kept laughing, unintentional laughing at least "I am famous you cheeky fuck. But them? I don't know 'em."

"Seemed like you did."

"Well of course. I probably met them sometime. They remember me because I look like this, but I don't remember them because they look like that."

The inside where my feelings lived suddenly seemed very magnified. Somehow just then, as if someone had opened a door and invited someone very emotional in and it was okay. It laid me open - naked on a bed. "You know, once I was in the LA, and I was standing on that mezzanine thing..."

"The what?"

"The balcony thing overlooking the dance floor downstairs."

"Oh yeah. Is that what that's called?"

"Think so. So, I stood there, watching people dance. And there was this sexy skinhead near me, and we were both leaning on the railing, and he turned to me and said..."

"Yeah?"

"Can you fuck off?" Neon stripes outside the car swam a little. "And I smiled and said, of course. But inside I was destroyed because it was such a fucking rude thing to say and it, I felt as though I'd crashed a party that nobody wanted me at... and... why am I telling you this?"

"It's just the whizz, ducks. You'll be alright after a nice drink. Some people are total cunts, end of. Don't worry about 'em." He reached over and we hugged in the back seat of the cab. A hug from a blue carrier bag.

"How can you wear that and be comfortable?"

A small chuckle. "Who said I was comfortable? It's not the point, is it?"

I didn't really know what he meant.

Five minutes later *might have been five, might have been fifty, things are a little dreamlike now, I can touch emotions I don't like. Need to find a drink and get back to oblivion robotica.* "Here you go lads." That was the driver obviously, I didn't know anyone who used the word lads so cavalierly. Once again Jason pushed money through the hatch.

"It's the cash hatch, the hatch for the cash, thank you very much for the driving." I'm singing some kind of taxi cab haiku.

We tumbled out, not elegantly onto a rather pleasant street, little trees, attractive and well-kept hedges and Victorian townhouses. Looked a lot like some of the avenues in my home town and village, nothing to write home about... at home. In London though... "Posh town. Swanky manors, no?"

"We want number forty three."

"Who the fuck do you know that lives here?"

"I don't know nobody, it's Jeremy's friend's party."

"Oh yeah. They're gonna love us ain't they?"

"Me at least. Here we are" Venus was squeaking her way up the whitewashed steps to the front door. Everything was clean and well maintained. I don't like all this nice-ness. I don't belong here.

Venus banged the lion-headed door knocker three times, took a step back and posed. I waited at the bottom of the steps, don't wanna tread on the moment.

No-one came, she turned to look at me for a second, then resumed her pose. Still nothing happened so she reached for the door knocker once more when there was a sound of it being opening so she quickly took a step back to pose with one arm in the air and the other on his leg. Sort of a weird, neon Marylin.

The door opened to reveal a warm looking cosy interior and a diminutive older man who I recognised from introducing the acts onto the main stage at GAY. His clothes didn't seem to suit him, they were the kind of things the chickens in The Village would wear and looked faintly ridiculous on a man who had seen a few more winters, as in twenty. I'm no fan of a metallic silver shirt no matter what age.

Reminds me of Dr Francis in a way, chasing the bus that's already halfway down the street. Oh. They're staring at me. Did they ask me a question?

"Sorry what?"

"Matt, you freak, come up here."

"Yup, coming."

"What were you doing?"

"Sorry, just zoned out for a sec. Hi."

"Jeremy. Uh Jason, I didn't know you were going to be bringing anyone."

"Matt here, happens to be the bestest friend of all my friends. My most bosom-ist chum. I was not about to leave him on his own sipping sad cocktails in a dark room." I tried to look as pathetic as I could by raising two closed fists to under my chin and batting my eyes as Jason said this to reinforce the point.

"Well, you're here now so you might as well come in. Try and behave yourselves, I see you've been to the pub."

"Darling, you didn't invite me here to behave myself. Don't talk fucking bollocks."

They walked down the hallway, it had a black and white checkered tile floor and a fancy half hall table with expensive looking flowers on it. It looked like we were in the lobby of a posh B&B. I followed them down toward double doors at the bottom of a carpeted staircase. It had stair rods. *Stair rods? Who has stair rods I haven't seen stair rods in... stair rods, stair rods.* My arm was being taken and I was steered into a large sitting room with high ceilings with intricate mouldings. Tasteful furniture and decor in shades of beige and gold, fancy vibes. *Is this a Christine Keeler moment? Expensive blandness.* There were about twenty or so people in the room, milling about in little groups or sat on beige and gold sofas. Dressed fancy/casual. Not really a club crowd. These nutjobs look like they are going out to a nice theatre, just a nice theatre, not a really *good* theatre. I felt as though I recognised some of them but *it's probably just the drugs kicking in.* I'm really feeling it. *I wonder if I can get 'em to turn up the music.* Maybe change the music... Some of them stared at Venus as she entered and really began to work the room. I got a couple of odd looks myself but then I looked like I was off to a leather club rather

than a theatre. So, who could blame them? Smirks, grins, a couple of reactions of pure delight as Venus did not bring beige and gold but shone in her electric blue. I stood awkwardly on my own until I spied a drinks trolley by the wall falling in and out of existence. I seemed to have been mostly forgotten for the time being so maybe I could rustle up a refreshing gin and tonic. Probably ought to drink water but fuck that shit, the walls are melting.

I made my way over to where some bottles and glasses stood, and I was making rather a meal out of trying to get something together. Call yourself a barman? When a man came over. Big bear of a man could have been maybe nine feet up and four feet across at least.

"Let me help you, dear boy," he said. "Now what are you after?" He had a higher class accent, a cadence I remembered from some of the boys at public school. It made me want to sound posher. *Nah, don't sound posh. Sound really cockney, he'll love that.*

"I fancied a G&T, like." I said, I sounded neither posh, nor cockney. Just a bit pissed.

"Gin and tonic, excellent choice," said the man cheerfully. *He certainly looks familiar.* The man splashed a bit of something from one of the bottles into a crystal cut glass. A couple of ice cubes went in with a happy chink and he filled the rest with a generous splash of something else that fizzed and sparkled. "Come sit and talk to me," he said, manoeuvring me with one hand and holding my glass with the other. "My name is Stephen, and I don't know anybody here either."

"I know a couple...."

"Of course," he said. "Here we are." I sat down on a medium sized cream settee.

"It's all a bit fancy in here, isn't it?" I whispered to Stephen. "I'd be afraid to eat or drink anything in this room."

"I suppose it is a bit," said Stephen. "Don't worry, you can't do any harm with tonic water."

I took a sip and my eyes bustled about the room. Venus was standing with Jeremy on the other side of it, talking with a group of people, a couple of whom were in hysterics, the other two and Jeremy looking mortified.

"He's rather polarising, your friend," said Stephen.

"Oh. No," I said. "I think he's from Birmingham." Stephen snorted just then, perhaps his wine had gone down the wrong way.

"What brings you out this way?"

"Um, well. Can we smoke here?"

"Yes indeed, here have one of mine." He offered me a cigarette from a packet I didn't recognise, foreign I think, and I took one. He lit the end of it with a gold lighter and moved an ashtray closer on the low slung table in front of us. *I wish I had some gum. I'm chewing my cheek. I feel it. It's disco-gurning time.*

"Venus, well Jason, he's Jeremy's flatmate and Jeremy asked him to this party but he didn't want to come by himself, so he asked me to come along too. I work in the pub. Jason comes into a lot and so he came in and said did I want to come, and I said sure, and so we came." I took a long pull on the cigarette which had a taste of wood and bark and looked at Stephen with a conspiratorially raised eyebrow and whispered, "We went to the pub first."

"I don't blame you," he said. "I'll be back in a minute, just stay here and you know, stay out of mischief." Stephen got up and walked over to a couple of women that had been motioning toward him, they all three looked at me for a moment and then continued with their conversation. One of the women was quite tiny, wearing a beautiful lace, fuchsia dress. Once more I felt like I knew her face from somewhere. But she was so petite, surely, I would know if I'd met her before. Maybe she was someone Queenie knew. Nah. Queenie didn't know anyone here. *I wish the music was louder.*

Across the table were two chickens, straight out of The Village, straight out of the G.A.Y. on a Saturday. Gestures exaggerated, voices high-pitched, their eyes darting around the room like magpies but mostly looking at me and giggling behind their hands like Japanese schoolgirls. One of them sported a lime green crop top, the other's face shimmered with glitter beneath the crystal chandelier. *Oh Jesus, I've*

been placed at the kiddie table, it's Boxing Day at Grandma's house. I don't wanna sit with these fucking bitches. "What you looking at?" I hissed, unable to contain my annoyance. Their laughter intensified, a chorus of mocking chirps.

"Oh nothing. Nothing at all. Believe me," one quipped. I blew cigarette smoke in his direction, the gin in my glass suddenly tasteless.

"Where's the khazi?" I attempted and failed to sound dangerous.

"The what?"

"Toilet."

"Oh, the toilet," the first one drawled, a smirk playing on his lips. "We don't know, do we, Christian?"

"No, Benjamin, we don't know where anything is. Sorry," Christian replied, eyes gleaming with amusement.

"Hmm," the first one turned away with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "Lost, are we?"

"In the wrong place are we?" said the other.

I scowled and made my way toward the open double doors where I came in, my trajectory somewhat heavy. My boots seemed to have increased in size and weight making my legs feel clumsy. *Watch me then. I don't care, I need a wazz.* Once out in the hall I took a deep breath and headed away from the front door. *Probably under the stairs. Bogs are always under the stairs.* But there was no under the stairs there, so I continued my odyssey toward the back of the house using the wall to steady myself and making a couple of nice straight pictures hang crooked.

Don't posh people piss? Where the fuck? If I find a kitchen, I can do it in the sink.

"Matt, Matt!" Someone was calling me.

"I'm here!" I called, still wandering forward, here's a door maybe it's in here. Locked. Goddamn.

"Matt. Stop." I turned around and Jason was standing in the hall resplendent in neon blue.

"Oh Hiiiiii." I said, as if I hadn't seen him for weeks. "God. How are you?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm trying to find the fucking toilet. Twinky and Twanky wouldn't tell me where it is."

"Who...? Look, it's right here, no back here under the stairs." He led me to a door under the staircase *I swear wasn't there before* and we entered a surprisingly spacious little toilet.

"Ooh, look," I said. "Fancy soap and everything. This really must be Hampstead".

"It's not theirs," said Jason. "Just take a piss, and I'll get you set up."

I wobbled myself over to the white porcelain throne. *Nothing in our sceptred isle has ever looked so virginal, so regal. I can't wait to pee all over you.* I fumbled with the buttons on my fly and dug around inside for my penis.

"It's all gone tiny. I can't find my willy!"

Behind me Jason started laughing.

"Oh no. There he is. Tricky little bugger. What you look like that for?"

I stood and took an impossibly long piss, groaning out an equally long bass-line as I did so. "Pissing is better than sex. Oh my god. So good."

"I can't cut straight lines if you keep making me laugh, just pee quietly."

"Don't talk, it'll go back up." After a thousand years the stream ended and I put my little friend away, not bothering to do up the buttons of my fly. I sank to the floor, legs askew like a discarded ragdoll. "I think I'm wasted."

"Yeah, you are. Me too. Take some of this. You'll feel better."

"I can't do no more. I think I might be making a fool of me-self. I'm sure they're all too polite to say anything coz they posh innit. But I used to be dead classy like them and that. Had a chauffeur, wore a little cap and everything."

"This'll mellow you out. Honest. Come on."

"Alright, but don't leave me here."

"Just come." I slid off the tiled floor, brushing non-existent dust from my buttocks. "Did you wash your hands?"

"No Nurse Nightingale, I did not wash my hands."

I took the rolled up fiver and hoovered up a line. There was no anxiety in the process anymore. It came easily and natural, without stress. Without stress until someone banged on the door.

"Hello? Who's in there?" A female voice, it had an accent like Stevo's at The Champion.

"Ocupado!" Trilled Jason, "Won't be a sec!" He took a turn with the line, noisily sucking up into his nostrils.

"What are you doing in there?" Someone tried the door and knocked again.

"Just blowing my nose. It's hard to pee when there's someone banging on the door though. Be out in a minute."

The knocking didn't let up. Whoever this was, they were determined.

"I think there's another bathroom upstairs." I called out helpfully.

The knocks stopped for a moment and then "How many of you are in there? Open the door!"

"Fuck, now you've done it," whispered Venus.

"Opps. What do we do?"

"Quick, finish the lines and then we'll open the door. Easy breezy."

I sucked up the penultimate line and Venus took the other, we wiped down the ceramic with our hands, flushed the toilet. All the while, the angry Australian was still making noises, she was joined by a male voice. "What's happening?"

"Ugh. That's Jeremy. What an arsehole. Ready?"

I nodded. Jason opened the door. The diminutive thunder from down under and the metallic shirt of Jeremy with his hand folded across his chest suddenly seemed very funny to me and I began to feel myself wanting to laugh. I attempted to hold it in, like an actor corpsing on one of those blooper reels they show on television.

"I was just helping my friend who was not feeling very well," explained Jason. "All the banging didn't help."

"I'm sick." I piped and gave a small fake cough. Stifled a snort, the laughing kind not the drug kind. The woman pushed past us and into the toilet, shutting and locking the door behind her.

"Sorry Danni." Said Jeremy. Then in a quieter tone "You." He pointed at Jason. "Stop making trouble." He turned and headed back down the corridor. Jason and I wandered a little way down into the no-man's-land between bathroom and sitting room.

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Actually yeah." My head was clearing. I felt more focused, less fuzzy. There was no longer sway behind my eyes, like I'd had a refreshing nap and a strong cup of coffee all in one. "I could do with a ciggie and a gin though."

"Oh me too. C'mon."

"Don't leave me at the kids table."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh. Nothing, just got stuck next to those chickens from before."

"Oh them. They're Jeremy's. He likes the young ones, and they wanna meet celebrities."

"Like who?"

Jason looked at me for a moment, his face registering mild confusion. I noticed that about half his face rhinestones had fallen off and his lipstick was a little smeared. "What do you mean who?"

I didn't know how to answer that or even what it meant so I said nothing and walked with him to the drinks area. He busied himself with the bottles. I looked around the room, there seemed to be less people here now. Stephen was back on the settee having some kind of intense discussion with the crop-top brigade. There was a small pocket of people by a long table on which several plates of food were displayed.

"I think they have a buffet." I said.

"Tapas," replied Jason.

"No, I think it's for everyone." I said and took the drink he offered.

Ungrateful Things To do In Hull When You're a Prick

- Filch your host's porn stash.

- Get drunk and pass out, thereby locking your host out of the house until the next morning.
- Take a pill and a line of whizz then wander over to the cruising area to get fucked in the bushes.
- Accompany your host onto the local gay scene and complain to everyone how crap it is compared to what you're used to.

At the Gays of Hull

"Matt?"

"Mmm?" I was standing near Gary's DJ box in The Vox sipping a pint he had bought for me, smoking one of his cigarettes with an expression akin to the evil stepmother in Cinderella. I bet he puts on Electric Dreams again.

"When you and Sam first used to come in here, that was a really good time."

"She'll be finishing up university now. Not spoken to her for years."

"Yeah, but. You know. You were nicer then."

"What? Eh?" I dropped my ciggie. I picked it up, wiped the end and put it back in my mouth. "I'm not nice now?" I laughed. A weird little laugh with no humour in it.

"You have your moments. Just y'know. Take it easy." He squeezed my shoulder as he went past toward the bar, the remix of Dreams by Gabrielle playing on the turntable behind us. It was the long version. He had his back to me at the bar. I looked at it. Then I headed over and ground out my cigarette in the ashtray.

"I'm sorry." I said without looking at him. "You're right." I pointed my eyes at the ceiling and then over to him. "I've been a bit of a wanker lately. So used to being around wankers I guess it rubs off."

Gary put his arm around me and pulled me in for a one-armed hug. Then he took the pint of Carling the landlord produced in front of him and took it back to his booth.

"Ello darlin' how are things going?"

"Queenie! God. Thank fuck. How are ya? How's the Brief? Any jobs?"

"Only glass collecting. But listen to this from the paper. Rose & Crown, Greenwich. Looking for experienced barmen."

"Where's that?"

"Around the corner from the Gloucester. I've been in. Quite nice. Traditional."

"And that's a gay bar, is it?"

"Mmm yeah..."

"What's that mean?"

"It's mixed, but gay owned and run. Mostly got gays in it."

"Great. What's the number? I'll call 'em."

He was dropping me off at the station. This is so awkward. "Thanks for everything. Really. You've been really great."

"It was fine. But I won't do it again." He grinned but he meant it. "My cat is much less trouble."

I gave a flat grin and looked at the train station. "I really am sorry."

"Good luck Matt. Let me know how you get on." He leaned over and shut the passenger door, gave a tiny salute and drove off.

"Bye Gary." This whole thing has been a complete embarrassment. I won't call him for a while. Let the sea settle. I picked up my trusty old holdall and walked into the station. I sold my remaining two Es for this ticket. I better get a good seat.

Train rides are fun. Don't have to be grateful to the driver. Don't have to talk to anyone. Don't feel sick when you read. Can have a cheeky tin of beer and nobody cares. Can even go to the pub in Doncaster when you change trains. It's a pretty pleasant afternoon.

Michael Tolliver returning to San Francisco after England felt the warm comforting hand of the city. The closer I got to London I felt a similar hand. Not altogether comforting. More an okay you're here let's make the best of it kind of hand. The main issue was getting to Greenwich from Kings Cross. Think it's another train.

Greenwich Drunk Time

All I seem to do is walk around London with an A2Z in one hand, Camel light in the other hunting out pubs like Elmer Fudd hunts Bugs Bunny. Greenwich tourists are worse than those in Notting Hill. It certainly tries to cash in on the old timey-maritimely, anchors aweigh vibe around here. If I can find a blue and white striped T-shirt, jaunty sea captain's hat with AHOY embroidered on it, and a newspaper cone full of soggy chips I could fit right in. Here we are - Nevada Street... Oh Mary mother fuck me sideways.

On the corner of a mini-roundabout that black cabs ignored, on the corner up from the market sat The Rose & Crown. A Dickens' workhouse - warped glass window panes, ostentatious doorway, black glossed wood. What's with the Victorians and their Gothic hostelryes? Guilt. It's guilt innit? Make it look like a church and it's suddenly alright to nip in for tequila shots and pick up a whore or two. A pub sign swinging from the first-floor balcony was doing a decent impression of an authentic fake; a simple gold circlet atop a red cushion, the red rose a little too casually discarded, all in all it smelt a little too much of a community art class. The Champion had been at least maintained, the flaked paint outside of the Rose & Crown, belied the fact that maintenance around here was substantially more lackadaisical.

Fuck me and these fucking Victorian pubs, full of fucking fucks. Okay. Shut up. Slap on a smile. Be nice. This guy has done you a favour. First rule of temping, yes, I know I'm not temping, but the first rule of temping is what? Make yourself indispensable, that's right. So, let's get to it. Plump your package, flirt like mad and remember the word of the day – indispensable. I straightened my shoulders and pushed open the door in a way I imagined a confident person would.

Inside, if Steptoe and Son had a local. A big guy, several gold earrings, draped in a shirt (some old lady in a care home was no doubt wondering what happened to) was leaning out from behind the bar talking low with a guy sitting on a bar stool. There was a blue mist surrounding them, both aggressively smoking, little glasses of dark liquid between them. OH, this guy looks fun. Who doesn't love a

filmy polyester blouse in a bold print? I hope that's not him. OH lord what would Cher do?

"Hi! Are you Pauly?" I said brightly. Overly brightly. An attempt to compensate for the fact I'd seemingly just walked into a seventies era pub on a dodgy housing estate back up North. If the universe is sending me some kind of message, I'm gonna rebel.

"No dear. Lady P is upstairs, you want me to get her? Who shall I say?" Lady P?

"Oh yes please, I'm Matt. I'm here to start work."

The old queen's demeanour softened, now they knew I was no mere punter. I was on the team.

"Thank fuck for that. I'm the chef and she's," (a point to the ceiling) "got me pulling pints for this reprobate." A thumb gesture. The old sot he'd been talking to muttered "chef, get her," and laughed quietly. "Yes, *chef*, thank you Colin. I'm supposed to be up there cooking dinners and she's got be down 'ere slopping out gin and tonics like Annie fucking Walker..." he continued in what was evidently a well-rehearsed routine designed to amuse the customer(s) about the terrors of working for Pauly.

I have no idea how to respond to any of this. I stood there smiling awkwardly then let my bag fall to the floor at a suitable pause in the diatribe.

"Oh, sorry dear," *forgotten I was here.* "I'll call her down, luv. Take a seat, ignore this one." They rolled their eyes and motioned to the lone audience member and went off into a little alcove next to what appeared to be a dumb waiter behind the bar. It had been painted in white gloss and the cook of the Rose and Crown hadn't seemed to notice various samples of their menu splattered up the hatch's door. *Tatty. It's a tatty little pub.* Carpet worn through in, dented wooden tables, mismatched chairs, horse brasses, pictures of tall ships, and seascapes, fake flowers, a... *god help us all...* a laminated sign behind the bar declaring no credit or bar tabs, a smell of forgotten mushy peas still in their ramekins, Scampi Fries, and London Pride bitter.

"She's on her way, dear. Won't be long." His stare lingered a little longer this time, "I'm Frank. Frankie to most. Did I tell you that?" the lone customer muttered no and laughed again. "Shut yer face you," they scowled at them with smiling eyes then turned back to me, "Come far?" He was eyeing my little bag, an arm of a white shirt . Trying to escape the zip, I retrieved it from the floor and brought it up to the bar pushing it back inside.

"Umm, yeah. Hull. Today. Just now. Yeah. Hah."

"God. Poor you."

"I know. I was working at The Champion last month, and Brief Encounter before that. Just popped up North to, um, see my family."

"Nice. I never seem to leave Greenwich."

"You talk about it, but we can never get rid of yer. Like a rash." From behind Frank, from somewhere in the mysterious alcove a man in a dressing gown had appeared. Balding, the mauve, terrycloth robe tightly fastened, two pajamaed legs ending in yellow tartan carpet slippers. It's almost tea-time. I've travelled the length of the country, and this fella is still in pyjamas. "Come through Matt. It is Matt, isn't it?" I made a noise in agreement, picked up my little bag once more and squeezed past Frankie behind the very narrow bar.

"Ooo, while you're down there," he cooed as I shimmed past despite my being down nowhere. I faked a laugh nonetheless and followed the flapping dressing gown up a set of narrow, carpeted stairs that hadn't seen a vacuum cleaner since the Falklands, to a darkened room. It was over-stuffed with ornaments, and throws. It smelt and looked like a charity shop. An abandoned charity shop. The world ended, fifty years later you find a charity shop under a pile of rubble, this is the charity shop you find.

"Take a seat." Pauly said and maneuvered himself into an armchair, pushing a small stack of magazines onto the floor.

Take a seat? Take a seat and what? Burn it? I perched delicately on the edge of a sofa, feigning unbotheredness. On the next seat cushion the remnants of a microwaved dinner sat with a fork still in the plastic container, bits of grey minced beef clung dryly to its prongs. A cigarette butt nestled in hardened red sauce.

"So you got here." I was expecting you a little earlier. Frank had to take the afternoon shift and I usually like him cooking lunches."

"Yeah, oh sorry. But I was coming down from Yorkshire. Took a little while. I thought I was starting tomorrow actually. But I can work today if you'd like. Not a problem."

"No that's alright," said Pauly, looking anything but. "We close between four and seven Mondays through Thursdays."

"Didn't they change those licensing hours?"

"They did. It suits us better. We do lunch and then evening. So, if you come back at seven and we can see how you go. Mark is assistant manager; he'll show you the ropes."

"Okay, no problem. Um. You mentioned on the phone, about someone who had a room to rent? I actually have a slight case of homelessness otherwise." I laughed, as if it were the most innocuous thing in the world, terrified that a creepy old queen who lived in filth would offer me his sofa to stay on."

"So, I did. I did. He's been looking. Of course. Let me just give him a ring." He shambled off into another room, and after a few seconds I could hear the murmur of his voice. I took another look around. The curtains were drawn, slices of sunlight dissected the room into geometric segments, residual smoke from countless cigarettes, months of dust creating a laser beam effect. Clubs when they run the lights and smoke machine at the same time. Hands in the air. I miss the clubs. This time yesterday I was watching Blockbusters on Gary's settee as he laughed about contestants asking for a p. I never, ever, wanna see that programme again.

"He's coming in now so you can go see the room. See if you wanna take it."

I went downstairs, leaving Pauly in his trash-heap and Frank gave me a free pint which had the dubious smell of pears about it. Dying to ask what Pauly's deal is but this Frank guy might be his boyfriend or something. He's asking a lot of questions. Better just keep things vague. Be a sort of mysterious stranger kind of thing.

I was finishing my second cigarette and getting to the end of my lager when someone leant on the bar next to me, facing in my direction. Forty-something,

orangey tinge, wife beater size too small, too much Kouros, acid washed jeans, big black belt, big silver buckle, unnaturally jet black hair. "You Matt?"

"Hi. Yeah." Are you the lost member of Big Fun?

"I'm Alex, 'heard you looking for a room?"

"Well, looking probably isn't the word. Requirement. Need..." I grinned. No grin back. Tough crowd today.

"Okay. You wanna come now? I gotta go see someone in Kingston at six."

"Oh. Sorry. Yeah. Yeah. Sure. Yeah." I stubbed out my cigarette, drained my glass and grabbed my bag.

"That's all you got?"

"Huh? Uh. Yup, travel light. Move fast. Ha ha."

"Okay come on then." I followed him out onto the sunny street with a cheery wave to Frank and his friend. The petrol fumes and urban sprawl was a relief. It felt like the 90s again out here. *Some queer Bermuda triangle in there.* This is Greenwich, home of time. *Makes sense things might go loopy in places. Perhaps the Rose & Crown never evolved past the seventies. Waiting around for someone to film a Carry On in it. A billion years ago and the fish were growing legs and popping onto the land, the Rose and Crown fish said "Nah, fink I'll just stay here lads."*

"That's your local then, is it?" I said, hurrying after him. Nippy for a Napoleon sized fella.

"Yeah, I'm in there most days." He turned past a block of 1930s municipal flats and then down another small street, another block of council supplied housing. He marched up to a ground floor door, painted Kelly green and next to a dead marigold in a pot.

"Here we are."

In fine London style, the carpeting had been removed exposing old uneven planks. The optimism of homosexuals, dragging back the carpet in hope of finding beautiful deco parquet flooring to only discover old pine planks with nails and splinters sticking out. The hallway had been painted surgical white, no pictures, no nothing on the walls.

"This is your room. Sorry about the colour, the last guy painted it this navy blue, and I haven't got around to painting over it. You can too, if you like. It makes the room kind of dark, but if you're working at night maybe..." He tailed off. "Ain't got no furniture for you but there's this bed here. You can use that if you want. Fifty quid a week all in."

"Great. I'll take it."

"Mega. Lemme go find you a key." He hesitated after his first step. "You got the fifty though, right?"

"Yup. I got it right here." *Thanks Mum.*

In ten minutes, he was gone. My new home. Just like that. Little snoop about. Can't hurt. See what I'm dealing with. Who I'm living with. In the living room, on a futon seat was a VHS tape. Banging Builders. *An English porno? We have those? Not like any builders I've ever seen.* "What are they trying to build?" I looked at the back, some tame photographs of chicken-y looking young men and a couple of older guys, one of them holding a spade and another standing looking rather perplexed near a wheelbarrow. I recognised one of the older guys – "Hello new landlord." Interesting. I poked my head in his bedroom. It had a surprisingly flowery duvet for a fake builder. I still had the VHS in my hand. I looked at the small print, it was 4 years old. Why did he leave this out? For me to find? Maybe he just enjoys watching it? Plays it for trade.

In the kitchen I looked in the fridge. There were a couple of cans of Grolsch. I took one and popped the top, enjoying the cold bubbles on my tongue. I'll replace it later, or buy him a pint if he comes in.

I washed and brushed up, leaving my washbag in the bathroom. Forgot a towel. I'll use his. No problem. I drank the other Grolsch. I better go get some of those now. Drinking both is potentially a bit cheeky.

I left the flat and discovered a Happy Shopper around the corner. I picked up some beers, a bottle of white wine and Camel Lights. Outside I gathered my bearings a bit, wandering around tentatively conscious of losing my way in the maze of hidden streets. Greenwich really was kind of lovely where it had managed to stave off the modern world, where it had held the McDonalds, the money transfer

bureaus, the KFC knock-offs at bay. When you stumbled across its authentic heart, that heart it belonged to the tall ships, gothic revival, tradition, sailors and art deco council flats. There wasn't an abandoned Tesco trolley in sight. Even the kids were behaving with some small semblance of dignity and they're the worst ones. *What time is it? Six o'clock. Right, go back, shove these in the fridge, then find The Gloucester, I know it's around here someplace. I saw it in Boyz. Right next to Rose and Crown sure of it. Weird, I didn't see it before. Find that, have a livener, go to work with this other fella. Mark. It's just bar work. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to worry about here at least. Just a bunch of campy old queens and sex jokes. Carry On Gay Bar. They want sex jokes? I can give em sex jokes.*

The Gloucester was open, but dead. Owned by one of the big breweries who knew how the gays liked to drink and were therefore fully supportive of their queer customers and especially of their accompanying disposable income. As long as you did things their way. Alex, the assistant manager complete with branded polo shirt and name tag served me himself, he'd have to. Couldn't see anyone else.

"Quiet, no?" I said, for something to say.

"Most people come in later," je replied rather nonsensically. "Are you down for the day?"

"Just moved. Working at the Rose & Crown."

"Really? I thought he didn't let his staff drink in here."

I spluttered a little on my pint. "What? Only met him today, he didn't say anything though."

"Yeah, like, he doesn't let his staff in here and we don't go in there coz he always cops an attitude. Besides, the place is a shit hole."

"Hmm. You ain't looking for staff, are you?"

He laughed, looking around the empty pub. It had brand new exposed brick walls. It reminded me of the bar called Lasseter's in Neighbours back in the 80s.

"No." But y'know. Ask again."

"I will. See what happens tonight in the old Rose and Creep."

Alex wandered off to look busy elsewhere. I've heard about these big breweries. They probably have cameras watching their staff, making sure they clean the drip trays and unclog the glass washer.

At six fifty I had finished two pints, gathered up my cigarettes and called a thank you to Alex. I was ready to work. I chomped down hard on three tablets of Wrigley's extra strong menthol gum and bit my cheek. Goddammit. The door to the Rose and Crown was locked. I tapped on the glass panel and put a hand to my injured cheek, frowning.

"Someone slap ya?" said a young man with a shaved head opening the door.

"I just bit my bastard cheek. Sorry, not the best introduction is it? I'm Matt, You Mark?"

"That's me. Come on in. I'm just getting the bar set. Just so you know Pauly likes everyone here, like, fifteen minutes before the shift."

"Oh really, he didn't say. Does we get paid for those fifteen minutes by any chance?"

"We does not," said Mark, slicing a lemon without looking up. "But it's easier to just do it rather than, well..."

"Duly noted." I picked up a bar towel and wiped the bar down. "Hey, I heard we weren't allowed in the Gloucester, is that true?"

"Who told you that?"

"The... Gloucester... might have done."

"Weren't in there were you?"

"... no."

"He's funny about stuff like that. Probably best avoided. Can you empty the glass washer?"

"Sure. Anything else I should know?"

"Umm, well Frank's funny, he's a good man, but he tells Pauly everything. So..."

"Gotcha. How are the regulars here? Any good or is it tourist bonanza all the livelong day?"

"Tourists at lunchtime. Then in the evening we get regulars and people from the Gloucester who just wanna stretch their legs mid-way through the night or whatever. But it's a good crowd. Not all gay. But mostly."

"Cool. Oh, is that a till?" A battered white and brown plastic box nestled under the optics. Fat plastic buttons, their surfaces burnished from years of use, the printed numbers underneath long worn away. A corner of the cash drawer had broken off, the cracks waving their horizontal way around the front panel. The yellowed plastic base cemented to the bartop through years of spilled mixers.

"Have you worked one of those before?"

"Um. No. I wasn't born until 1974 so..."

Mark laughed, "Fraid you'll have to polish up your mental arithmetic here then."

"Oh. Well, you know Carol Vorderman is my very best friend." *Half of me can't count and the other half can't add up.*

"Really?"

"Uh, no."

Guess I'll be making tabs up and rounding down. It'll make me popular with the punters I reckon.

Working at the Rose & Crown was more fun than The Champion, but less fun than the Brief. The regulars made up 99% of the evening crowd and were a friendly bunch, who had nothing better to do each night than to come down to their local and have the same conversations they had the day before. It was comfortable. It was an old pair of socks. Paulie rarely came down, and what his relationship with Frank was I never really discovered. Suffice it to say, if Frank saw or heard it, Paulie saw and heard it. Every action, every moment. And despite his complaints of having to be there Frank was, in fact, always there. At the end of the bar, throwing out ancient catty one liners to the delight of the older crowd.

For the youngsters there was Riley, a tall, long hair down to his back who after a year of a homeless shelter had finally managed to get his own little art deco municipal residence. Showing us around one night, he remarked on how much he loved it and that he wouldn't be having a noddie-no-mates to come stay on his sofa.

I felt that was a pointed comment. A pointed comment pointed at me. Riley liked to be feminine. The long hair, the long legs, the long drawl of his cadence that I couldn't quite place. There was a danger there. He remembered everything you said and if there was a disagreement would magically pull it from his memory to use in his arsenal. I was drawn to his energy but burnt by his tongue. And in his company, I have never felt so broken and whole both at the same time. I liked to bask in his sunlight but wouldn't trust him to do anything to benefit anyone other than himself.

Straight men loved him. And paid.

It took less than a month.

"Morning Mark."

"Oh. Matt. There you are. Look, I gotta tell you you're suspended."

"Suss.. pended?"

"Yeah."

"This coz of last night?"

"Yeah."

"Fair dos." I turned on my heel and walked straight out again.

Gotta get another job, pronto. Shouldn't have got so pissed whilst working. Pissed and giving away free drinks. They're probably mad about that, right? Yeah. Probably. Just so boring in there. Need a job in the West End again. Today. Suspended. Fired is what he means, just too chicken to tell it.

I headed over to where they keep the trains.

Barcode

"Where you working now?"

"Rose and Crown in Greenwich."

"Jesus, why?"

I put on a face of complete seriousness. "I really enjoy being barely tolerated on a daily basis."

Karl smiled, he was tall and dark, had muscles upon muscles and was smoking a Lucky Strike. "Can you start tonight?"

"You bet. Thanks."

"Did you try Compton's before us?" he offered me a cigarette.

I took the cigarette and accepted his light, "Nah. I've fucked all the bouncers, I thought it might be awkward."

Karl laughed.

I had said it as a joke, but it wasn't. Things were getting awkward in my usual haunt of Compton's. Last time I'd been in there, I'd hit on this guy –

"Matt," *he knew my name?* "We met the day before yesterday."

"Oh. Did we? Must've been drunk." I took a sip of my lager. His friends were watching me, smirking. *I refuse to let any kind of emotion show on my face.*

"You were. You dragged me into a toilet cubicle, told me you loved me until your ex the bouncer came in and chucked us both out for fucking." *Well, this certainly seems to be all my fault.*

"Whoops." I took a drag on my cigarette, not really knowing what to say. I did not remember this happening.

"Yeah, so, bye." He waved me off and his friends laughed and looked at each other.

None of that had made me want to revisit Compton's any time soon. So now as I sat at the bar in the Admiral Duncan across the street from Compton's I felt my face redden slightly, and my fingers tighten a little harder than usual around my pint. I looked across the road, Michael the bouncer was starting his evening. I liked him. I'd been with him a few times. I remembered his name.

Beat Box

The bass beats from the dance floor were making the cubicle door's lock rattle in its groove, I thought someone was trying to get in for a minute and I looked up from the two lines of white powder I was carefully lining up on top of a wiped down seat,

a torn to size rolled up club flyer sitting close by all ready to suck it up. I used to use tens or twenties but, when you're down to the seeds and stems you gotta be creative. Nobody was trying to get in, the dirty red door just kept pulsating with the rhythm. Why had they painted it red here? It was like being in a giant womb, the DJ's thumping heartbeat keeping our blood moving, even the walls were sweating. Lemme get this done and be re-born. I deftly vacuumed the toilet seat with the club flyer, noisily sniffed, and ran a finger over where the lines had been sitting and rubbed it in my gums. Gah. Not bad. Now, if I take half a dove while I'm here and save the other till an hour or two down the road, I should be good till the lights come on. All done, good.

I have a quick last look around, making sure I haven't forgotten any of the 'shopping' and another after thought quick check after that to see if any other punters had forgotten theirs. No luck. I leave the cubicle and take a look in the mirror as I rub my finger under my nose. The sink area is flooded, clogged with toilet roll in an attempt to fill water bottles, management aren't dumb, they turn off the cold water leaving only dribbles of hot. It makes no difference to me, I'm a drink ninja, I'm swiping your water bottle or his JD and coke and I'll swear till the gay gods come down from the seven heavens that it's mine.

There's a girl in the corner sitting on the floor, her arse must be soaked, she's got a cigarette in her hand but she's not smoking it, she's just staring. Oh she wasn't dead, she's down a K-hole, ketamine. Not my thing, never saw the point. I ask her for a cigarette and she offers up a pack of Marlboro Light. She probably thought I'd take one, but I take the pack and leave the bathroom. Dumb bitch.

'You dumb bitch.'

'I'm telling you man, she was totally into me. Oh yeah, couldn't get enough Angel cake!' Angel was dancing on the spot behind the bar, pulling a pint of Red Stripe, white teeth flashing.

'That's gross and you're turning into a bigger slag than I am.'

She blew out through her teeth, 'Matt, you've slept with half of London.'

'And you've slept with the other half. So, talk me through this outfit today Angel Cakes, you look like a black lesbian Lara Croft.'

'Careful queer boy. I can kick your arse, I'm Lara fuckin' Croft.' She pirouetted, arms in the air holding the fiver the regular had just given her for the pint. Tight white sports bra and combat shorts. 'All the girls love Lara. And all the girls love Angel.' She strutted over to the till and rang up the sale. 'You got a place to live yet? Or are you gonna wanna crash on my sofa again tonight.'

'I dunno, depends on who I meet in Substation after we finish up here, you coming?'

'No way boy, Lisa Lashes is DJing the L night at Central Station, and I have some shopping being delivered.'

'Girls and boys, can we mind our language behind the bar? Thank you.' It was Karl sticking his head out of the office, which was really just a space behind a bank of television screens behind the bar showing old Russ Meyer movies, he thought it took the edge of the heavy industrial vibe 'Barcode' had, although he preferred his staff to wear something fitting, (camouflage print, I had made a lot of tips one night by simply wearing a hard hat) and everyone who worked at Barcode had to wear the obligatory Barcode dog tags.

'You know what they say Karl, wimmins be shoppin.'

'Just serve the customers will you. Tills are down again from last night.'

'I said, I think I'm still coming down from last night.' I couldn't really hear what he was saying. He was one of the young regulars from the bar, obviously hadn't heard about me yet. I just smiled and nodded, then pretended I saw a buddy on the dance floor and moved away. You gotta be careful, Barcode was a top joint, people see you working there all the time, when they see you in the clubs they can latch onto you for some reason, like you're friends or something. We're not friends. I just watch you getting drunk all night and short change you if I can, and you deserve it, acting all hipper than thou just because you're on the other side of the bar, well I get in the clubs for free and pay for my JD with the money I stole from

you so who's the fool? Who's the fool? Things are starting to kick in now, my stomach and insides are beginning to lift up with the beat and I can't stop gurning my face, I pop in a piece of chewing gum and head to the dance floor, eyes scanning around people's feet, keeping a look out for dropped money.

'It doesn't make any sense, dropping that much money. We're not down every night, but it's consistent.'

'Maybe it's a till thing?'

'Of course it's a till thing Matt, someone is not putting enough in there or taking too much out.'

I fiddled with a corner of the new staff timetable, folding it up and down, eventually putting it in my back pocket. 'What do you want me to do? Watch the weekend staff with my steely gaze?'

'Um, well yeah, them and everyone. It's not just the weekend, it's all over. It makes no sense, and much as I hate the thought of it, One of the kids is stealing.' Karl got up from the duct tape patched office chair and went over to his duct taped patched gym bag. 'I wish if they needed money they would just come and ask, I'd give 'em a loan. No problem. Hey maybe I should just make that clear after the shift ends tonight. Might stop all this nicking.'

'Yeah, maybe.'

'Buuuuut?' He pulled out a flat bag and unzipped it.

'Well, if they're getting free money, why would they want to get a loan they have to pay back?'

'Bloody hell, because they ain't sociopaths I hope. Here, just inject this into the left cheek will ya?' He handed me a syringe, and inched down the waistband of his jeans.'

'You're such a Muscle Mary, can't you just work out normally like all the other boys?'

'I am working out like all the other boys, what you see here, this, this is peer pressure.'

'In that case, insert joke about small pricks... here.' I went in for the kill.

Judging just the right time to swoop in for the kill is an art I never tire of. I'm up in the plush and lofty heights of the chill out bar, here punters can drape themselves attractively over the railings of its balcony which overlooks the dance floor, it has a heady scent of cologne, sweat and cigarettes. I always come here for drinks, for me it's easy pickings. I spy a couple, no doubt beguiled by the pills they have taken judging by how dangerously close to one another they are. I saunter across and set my empty water bottle on the table and with a sleight of hand akin to any street magician pick up the pint of lager instead. It's not my fault really, it's a hot club and this beer looks cold with drips of condensation on the glass, just like an ad in a magazine. I can't resist it, I want it so I'm taking it. People say you shouldn't drink on pills, I never had an issue with that personally but these guys might so technically I'm doing them a favour. I retreat back to the opposite corner and lean on the wall, stupid prick doesn't even notice. The lager is cold, and pops on my tongue, just what I needed. I find the pack of Marlboro Lights and light one up. This is perfect now. Although the floor is beginning to feel a little unsteady beneath my feet, like I'm on some ship, hope it's not the Poseidon. Slow motion is kicking in, I can see light trails behind people walking like children waving sparklers on bonfire night. The bass thrown out from DJ's track is making my head recoil from its gunshot. I drop my cigarette and it falls to the carpet landing with a thunder crack and sits there smouldering whilst the pattern on the carpet moves to mirror the smoke curling up from its ember. I head on over to the wrought iron staircase that spirals straight down to the dance floor, it's not easy, this Poseidon's adventure is about to begin, the tidal wave is about to hit. The people part before me, maybe I'm Moses. I get to the steps and put my foot out, but now I'm falling.

'So if you're falling behind on your rent, or whatever. Don't feel like you can't come talk to me, I can help you out.' Karl put half a dozen brown paper envelopes on the bar. 'Okay kids, here's your pocket money. Have at it and pour yourself a

drink before you go home.' He put the clipboard on top of the stacked till trays carrying them back to the office space. The two security guards, Gunter and Michael immediately went behind the bar and helped themselves to a couple of shots whilst they attempted to pour pints of Grolsch with the usual foamy results.

Angel examined the names on the envelopes and handed one over.

'Here.'

'Thanks, Doll.' I gave it a cursory glance and pulled a face. 'How do we survive being bar bitches?'

'I have no idea; I might have to go work in an office. Think they'll take me?'

'Not in those shoes.' I stuffed the notes into my front pocket, screwed the envelope into a ball and threw it behind the bar to land perfectly in the bottle bin.

Angel opened a bottle of Rolling Rock and took a sip. 'So have you and Karl been Miss Marpling over all this stealing whoosit?'

'Yeah, well nah, I think it's a tilling error, I don't think anyone's been actually lifting anything, but you know Karl. He takes it all so damn personally.'

'Y'know, when I was doing the Wednesday inventory I noticed we're down two of those huge bottles of Smirnoff.'

'What? No way, how can someone nick those? It's not like you can just stuff 'em in your bomber jacket on the way out the door.'

'I know, exactly, so it got me to thinking...'

At that moment, Troy, one of the young weekenders came trotting up, dog tags jingling, blonde hair tousled after a hard night quenching the thirst of the masses, he smelt of Boss, stale beer and roll-ups. 'Hey man, c'mon to the downstairs' cloaks for a sec, Kit went to go put her wages in her jacket and her wallet is gone, she's freaking' out.'

Angel raised an eyebrow 'I'll get Karl,' she said.

'I'll get help,' he said.

'Nah, I'm fine, I'm fine'

'You took quite a tumble, quite spectacular actually, like in a film. Tens all 'round'

I nod, and try to walk away. But the Poseidon is upside down and I'm having trouble navigating. Some of the revellers look at me and smirk whilst they still dance, as I weave over to the side but most are tripping off their little heads and haven't noticed a thing. That's a relief to me; I don't want to be some Mr Bean like character, although perhaps coming across as some clumsy oaf could be something to work to my advantage later on. Oh crap that fella is following me over.

'Are you sure I can't get you some help or...?' He's looking at me with a strange expression, I don't know what it is, I don't understand it, and I don't understand why he's still here. What does he want?

'Uh, no um, really I'm alright, unless you want to run to a JD and coke.'

'I dunno, you seem a bit out of it, I was thinking maybe I could call you a cab.'

'Yeah alright, why don't you run off and do that.'

He grasps my tone finally, and a shadow of confusion flickers on his face until he frowns, nods and walks off. He isn't gonna call a cab, I wasn't gonna take it if it came. Not that I have anywhere to go now. I feel sad about not getting that JD and coke though, I need to straighten myself out. A low black formica table with acid green plastic chairs present themselves nearby and I sit down, just for a second or two. There's half a dozen empty glasses on the table, some with dregs still in so I mix up a cocktail and I rub the back of my head with my hand, I wince with pain and my hand comes away bloody. Perhaps, I did hurt myself, no doubt I'll start feeling it after these pills wear off. I'm trying to figure out a plan but my head is foggy and the relentless techno beat is making my teeth ache. There's no way I'm returning to the chill out lounge, it's dark here in my corner for the most part. I sit back and wipe my bloodied hand on my jeans, then I see it, concealed or forgotten by the back of the neighbouring chair next to the wall, barely noticeable in the gloom is what looks like a black patent leather handbag.

'A handbag? No it wasn't a handbag, I don't carry around a handbag. It was a wallet, just a green camo wallet from the market. It had all my shit in it. God.'

Kit talks very fast, she's one of those kinds of people constantly in a hyper state. Some people think she's on speed all the time, other people think she's just kind of stupid, you know how stupid people talk real fast to try and cover up how stupid they are and the shock of purple hair doesn't help. But Kit isn't stupid, she's doing a law degree during the week, she's only here Friday and Saturday nights to make some mad money.

'Is this it?' I came over from patrolling the perimeters of the cellar bar, 'grab the money, throw away the wallet, it's what they do.'

'Yes!' Kit ripped open the Velcro and went through the insides, 'Yeah, they've cleaned me out, BASTARDS.'

'Sorry Kit, I really am.'

Gunter pokes his head around the stairwell and chooses his words, 'Guys and ladies, Karl wants a word with you all, please to come upstairs.'

Upstairs in the main bar area, Karl sits at a bar stool, smoking a Lucky Strike with his back to the bank of televisions still playing the tape of vintage Russian stop motion animation.

'Children of Barcode, come stand by me.' He is smiling in a strange way; Angel and I have seen this smile before. It's the smile of no-smile, a disarming attempt to lighten the mood that never works. Karl is unhappy, disappointed, and angry, yes angry. 'Listen kids, we've got a situation here and I'm gonna put an end to it right now. I've been nice about it so far, but here's the deal. This is my bar, and one of you is stealing from me, now that I can cope with, coz I've been around a long time and there's not a lot I haven't seen. But stealing from amongst yourselves isn't something I can tolerate, because you're as much a part of Barcode as the sign above the door. We've got to root out our traitor so we can get on with our shit guys, and I'm sorry 'bout it but that's gonna mean watching your mates behind the bar, the regulars who stand too close to the hatch, I'm having the door staff do random sweeps, I'm gonna move staff around from the two bars. We're gonna find who did this, in the meantime personal belongings will go in my office, not the

downstairs cloaks. Kids, I don't like pitting you against one another, but this crap is ending today. You get me?'

We look uncomfortable, the two weekenders look to Angel and me, the most senior for direction. Angel smiles, silently watching Karl.

'Okay, go get a drink. Kit, come with me to the office.'

I nod to the bar and Angel and I help ourselves to two pints of Red Stripe and disappear downstairs to the cellar bar.

'So, here we are.' said Angel raising her glass.

'Here we are.'

'It's really got to be one of us two hasn't it? Coz the other two are only here on weekends. And I know it's not me.'

'I happen to know it's not me.'

'So one of us is *still* lying.'

'I guess one of us is.'

'Karl must know it's one of us.'

'Yes. He must.'

'So? What do we do?'

'Chinese burns, first one to squeal is it.'

I lit a cigarette, and walked in a circle once around the floor and stopping in front of Angel.

'He probably won't do anything else if it all stops now.'

'Probably not, Karl is good people. So are we.'

'Yeah, you guys have always been so dumb.'

So dumb. Who leaves their shit just lying around? People like that deserve to be robbed. I ransack the handbag as quick as I can, there's notes of money in here, geez dumb, dumb, dumb, a crushed pack of cigarettes, few in there, not bad, hmmm hello what's this little plastic bag? Concealing the shopping in a cigarette packet, not the most inspired hidey hole, I don't recognise these pills. What the hell, I pop one, at the very worst it'll take care of my headache. There's nothing else I want from the handbag, so I throw it back into the corner, bitch still has her house

keys and cards, I'm being nice, if this dumb bitch ever got the chance she should probably thank me for the wake up call.

I feel it's time to relocate though, I feel a little steadier and the dance floor is looking a little emptier. It must be getting closer to the dawn, so people will be getting ready to leave, and I still have things to do. I need to find somewhere to go to after this place closes, either an after party or some idiot that wants to take me home. I really feel very mellow now, if I could pick someone up I could give 'em one of my new pills and make them a little more compliant. That could work in my favour. In fact, that's a bloody great idea, although it's late and that means slim pickings

The music is beginning to wind down, the beat is slowing up. My feet are feeling heavier, made from gold, each step thundering as I attempt to move away from where the fluorescent lights are turning on. My head is bowed, it feels heavy and I can see dark red blooms on my jeans. My blood? I can feel people looking at me. I touch my head with my hand and it feels sticky and hot. I realise there's a strong possibility I look like Carrie at the prom. Time to skedaddle, I think there's someone behind me but I'm not sure if they're talking to me, at me. Here's the door at last, the sun is up in a blue sky and it's bright, it hurts my eyes. The warm breeze flows down the street smelling of the exhaust fumes of morning commuters. My legs don't feel like my legs, however they are carrying me along so I don't complain. Turning into a little alleyway, to get a minute alone, I sense there may indeed be someone behind me, yes I am sure there is someone behind me. But if I can just sit for a minute.

'Just sit down for a minute, Matt.'

'Yassar boss sar.'

'I'm gonna get right to it, coz I'm mad. Yeah, I am. See my face? This is my mad face. After all this time we've worked together I don't know why you wouldn't have come and got help from me if you needed it.'

'Ummm, what with the what and the what?' my stomach falls.

'I know what you've been doing, and frankly I'm shocked. Goodness knows you're clever enough. Manipulating the money from the change boxes into the tills? Stealing from Kit though, that's just the friggin' living end that is.' He slumped back against the wall, and let out a long breath of frustration.

'What? No. No I haven't, I didn't.'

'You've been seen. It was you. Please don't lie anymore. It makes it worse. Seriously, I know you think this is all just a lark in here, but this is how we make our living, this is our job. You gotta take responsibility, it's not Karl's funhouse for wayward boys.'

'But Karl, seriously.'

'No, there has to be consequences, and I'm afraid this is yours. Get your stuff.'

'Karl.'

'Please.' Karl grabbed my jacket from under the desk and tossed it onto my lap.

Gunther had called out a cheerio to the back of my head as I passed him on Archer Street on his way to start his shift, but he got no response. Angel watched me stomp out from the bar, no doubt wondering what hell had been raised.

'Looks like you raised your own hell' A head is blocking the sun, I can't see who it is but I'm grateful for having the sun out of my eyes at least. I try to reply but my tongue doesn't work.

'Well, well kid. You are a mess.' It's Angel's voice. The body it is attached to squats down next to me, in her trademark shorts and tank top combo and sighs.

'You got a cigarette? Never mind I see 'em.' She reaches forward and takes the packet in my lap, one goes in her mouth, and the pack goes in her pocket. She lights up, inhaling deeply, and blowing the smoke out into the alley, highlighting sunbeams as they rest on the wet cardboard and leap off broken glass.

'Consider yourself beat, Matt.'

Fun ways to be a homeless guttersnipe

- Pick up unsuspecting men from pubs, bars or clubs and suggest a 'sleepover'.
- Find naïve tourists sampling the delights of the gay west end and join them at their hotel.
- Use that old checkbook from a closed bank account to pay for cheap hotel rooms in Kings Cross. Enjoy the bed bugs.
- During the day, walk, and look as though you have somewhere to go.

Walthamstowaway

A few west end layabouts were renting the house in Walthamstow. It had been a family home once, little touches here and there echoed a forgotten family life. A child's space themed wallpaper, a gnome guarding an overgrown garden, an everyday dinner service. A stack of unopened letters by the door told a tale of a mortgage abandoned and rent for the inhabitants was a word lost in the smoke machines and lasers of West End clubs. Suppose it was squatting really. They didn't seem to mind that I hadn't left after being invited back one night.

Money was an issue. The few coins I had left on the altars of tobacco and White Lightning. I came to in a cold sunshine, hungry for once without my fill of alcoholic sugar. I tiptoed down to the kitchen and opened various brown, mottled Formica cupboards. Dishes. Glasses. Those soup mugs with the recipe on you used to get with tokens at the petrol station. No tins. In the fridge? Bad milk. Empty shelves. More cupboards. Rice in a little packet. I don't know how to cook rice from a little packet. No saucepans, but instant gravy and a frying pan present themselves. I fry water, with rice and instant gravy. A grim feast, but it dulled the ache in my belly, if only a smidge.

Back upstairs in a bare room, I fish my A2Z out of my bag, the Oracle of Delphi and study the streets of Walthamstow. Asking for help from the government is the ultimate shame, isn't that what my Dad had said. They way he talked about

people on benefits. There must be some kind of office around here somewhere. People on Coronation Street might say "I still have my pride", but personally I couldn't afford it.

The benefits office was a relic of the seventies, with a façade that screamed 'temporary solution to a permanent problem.' Inside, I was met with the weary gaze of a woman who wore her hair as a helmet, lacquered against any assault of common sense.

"Hello, I—"

"Yes?" Her interruption came like a slap, lacquer-hardened and sharp.

"Oh hello, yes. So I'm not sure what to do. I have nowhere to stay, er, no money," I laugh self-consciously, regretting bringing up the sordid nature of coin so early in the conversation.

"And?" She tapped her pencil with the rhythm of impatience.

"I was hoping, you know, for some guidance."

"Seeking work, have you?"

"I've been... preoccupied with survival," I admitted. Her frown deepened.

"Where were you living before? Can you not go back there?"

"Just on people's sofas and stuff. With friends."

"So, you have a place to stay then?"

"Well not—"

"Family?"

"Pardon?"

Her eyes went to the ceiling and the pencil came down. "Any *family*?"

"Up North, bit, complicated."

"Can you not go and stay with them?"

"Well. It's not ideal, I..."

Her advice was as cold as the lino. "I suggest you get in contact with your family and see if you can work things out. The system isn't designed to help people who come wandering in off the street looking for handouts. Especially when they could easily stay with friends and family."

"Oh. I just thought perhaps."

Her final words were well trodden. "Go and liaise with your family in the first instance, if you still need help you can come back here and we'll get you to fill in the relevant paperwork. There *is* a waiting list. You'll need various proofs, ID, that you've been made homeless, how long you've been a resident of the borough."

"All that, huh?"

"All that."

I sat on a bench for a while and looked at my feet. I'd had these "dead man's boots" from the Army Surplus almost as long as I'd been in the city. They were a bit worse for wear now. Let the water in. Shoelaces had snapped, given up on me ages ago. I looked at them, I could smell my jeans, a musty, fusty odour. My jeans wanted a washing machine. I sat back and looked at the street. *An ordinary town street. Could be anywhere. Shops and people, doing their thing, living their lives. I bet they all had homes to go to. Don't know they're born.* Then the sky decided to open up, just a drizzle at first, but enough to make the world around me pick up the pace, all scurrying to dodge the damp. I stayed put, letting the drizzle turn me a shade wetter, watching the life hustle by.

Didn't look as though there was going to be much choice in the matter. I hoisted myself up and set off, not caring much which direction I was going. I found a phone box. What was that about the pride I couldn't afford? My finger found itself punching in a number and I heard myself ask the operator to reverse the charges.

National Exit on the National Express

I didn't have much in the way of possessions. I wandered the house, nobody was around, the door never locked. I drifted from room to room, collecting remnants of lives left behind. In the kitchen, I found a set of flowered plates, the petals on the porcelain faded from countless washes. A vacuum cleaner, more dust than machine, huddled forgotten under the stairwell. And there was a toby jug, its grotesque gargoyle face sneering at me from the mantle as if mocking my plight. *Uppity little bastard.* These relics of domesticity, along with my dog-eared paperbacks, a fairly

decent Walkman (bought by cashing a bad cheque at a Bureau De Change), silver rings from Camden Market, anything. I discovered a wheelbarrow in the garden, brought it inside, arranged the items in it as best I could manage, then as an afterthought added the gnome, paint chipped but smile undimmed. I washed my face and did the same.

'Hi!'

'Hello?'

'Sorry, you don't know me, I live next door. This may sound weird, but I'm having a slight cash flow problem and I'm trying to scrape together a tube ticket. I wondered if you might be interested in any exciting items from my wheelbarrow of wonder?'

'Your...?' She raised an eyebrow; she didn't look convinced.

'Wheelbarrow of wonder. Yes. So here we have a really *super* little Walkman..."

I went down the entire street. Each door brought a new face, a fresh wave of pity or disinterest. Some peered at the items with a mix of intrigue and scepticism, others barely concealed their disdain. I'd been a barman for a long time. It was nothing I hadn't seen before. Eventually when I returned with only the gnome (even the wheelbarrow had sold), I felt a kinship with the little fellow. Walthamstow had no place for his whimsy, and my whimsy had a coach to catch.

London Victoria station, a bustling hub where the weary commuter and the wide-eyed tourist intermingle in a dance as choreographed as any West End show. Vaulted ceilings that echo with footsteps of a thousand journeys, the clatter of suitcase wheels on tile becomes the percussion to a symphony of announcements, greetings and farewells. It is a less poetic place when you're trying to keep your morning cider down and not sweat through a mucky t-shirt. I was worried who I was going to have to sit next to, not for me, for them. It probably wasn't going to be a pleasant six hours. My parents had booked me on a coach, the cheapest option, after Uncle Johnny and his issues they were cautious.

Underneath the great iron arches, I watch the tea shops do a brisk trade, serving up strong brews and stodgy pastries to those in need of comfort, and wonder how many weeks it has been since I had a cup of tea, or any hot drink for that matter. It can't all have been pints of export and blue bottles of cider surely. For the punters, the stoic British spirit is alive and well, a queue of patrons patiently waiting for their turn to dunk a digestive biscuit into a Styrofoam cup. How oblivious they are.

A businessman runs past, briefcase flapping like the wings of a distressed pigeon. A cluster of tourists stands bewildered, their maps a crumpled confusion. Over here, a young couple shares a hasty kiss goodbye, their tenderness a stark contrast to the impersonal loudspeaker droning on about the 10:15 to Brighton. *How long has it been since Katie and I went to Brighton for Pride? How long has it been since I even saw Katie? Is that even her name? That girl with the blonde hair.*

Station staff, unsung heroes of the railway, navigate this world with a practiced ease. They are the conductors of this orchestra, their fluorescent vests a splash of colour against the grey of the morning rush. Thoughts of grey just set me worrying about how dirty my t-shirt is again.

The digital board above the bustling concourse flickered with departures, a cold glow casting a yellow tint on the hurried faces below. I check my ticket with the list, Friday 30th April 1999 the 2:30 PM National Express to Hull. I stood there, a wisp amid the crowd, my eyes tracing over the date—a stark reminder of the time that had slipped through my fingers like so many coins I had pilfered and pints I had poured down my throat. The previous Friday, I would have been nestled in the warm, familiar embrace of the Admiral Duncan on Old Compton Street, nursing a pint before stumbling through my shift at Barcode. But not today. Today, I was to be adrift on a coach, the cityscape of London giving way to the anonymity of the motorway, my reflection in the window a ghost against the backdrop of passing suburban life. The suburban life I swore never to return to.

Beside me, a woman, all grace and forbearance, feigned ignorance to the stench of my decay. She dabbed at her nose with an Olbas Oil-soaked handkerchief,

her gestures a delicate ballet of disgust and decorum. I massaged my Fanta bottle, its contents a deceitful mix of citrus and cheap cider, and I wallowed. I wallowed in the murky depths of self-pity, in the shame of what I had become—a pickled shell of a man, a thief of both money, and moments.

The coach trundled on, oblivious to the horror unfolding back in the city, to the lives shattered by David Copeland. His bomb's echo would ripple through the years, a constant reminder of the day I left. Later, in the grip of my addiction, I would often awaken, surprised by my own survival. When I looked back on leaving the city that had been my stage and my downfall, I couldn't shake a feeling of injustice. It seemed too cruel a twist of the universe that I, the undeserving, could slip away while others, the heartbeats of that vibrant community, had their futures stolen.

Part Two: Exegesis

***Neon* Genesis: Background and Origins**

My journey into the depths of addiction and the subsequent path to recovery is central to the narrative I present in *Neon*. My experiences with substance abuse, which began as a dalliance with recreational drugs in nineties London escalated into a major struggle with alcohol that continued for many years after I had left the capital and moved back up north to Hull just before the Millenium. The memoir primarily pre-dates my recovery from alcoholism. It chronicles the origin, the genesis of my struggle with substance abuse during my time in London.

Eventually, at my lowest point I began a commitment to sobriety in December 2006. The decision to embrace a sober life marked a pivotal moment, one that I recognised as a gift to be used for *something* although at that point I was unsure what.

Taking inspiration from Willy Russell's *Educating Rita* (1980) I embarked on an academic journey with the Open University, hoping to gain the qualifications I had passed over in favour of hedonism. It was during those studies where I discovered the therapeutic power of creative writing.

Initially, I wrote short stories that I thought were purely fictional, until my psychiatrist at the time pointed out that they contained reflections of my own experiences.

My work in autofiction during my Master's degree revealed the potential for personal narratives to resonate with a wider audience, as evidenced by the response to my story about the night I attained sobriety (*Black Eyed Christmas* 2017). This story's inclusion in the City of Culture's Lost Property Project, its feature by the BBC, and its adoption into a new edition of the Alcoholics Anonymous handbook, underscored the impact that such narratives could have. Building on this momentum, I created a dramatic/comedic monologue about one of the characters from *Neon*—my Aunt Caroline—which was performed at the Hull Truck Theatre in 2018.

Empowered by short form writers like Lydia Davis's work I wrote vignettes of my past, some painful, some not, and often out of chronological order. I found that using humour made it easier to write about these experiences and made the stories more relatable to readers. These vignettes eventually became the basis of *Neon* and

evolved into a narrative that is mostly chronological, though it reflects the sometimes confusing timeline of my memories.

This outlet allowed me to delve into my past, to examine it, and to share it in ways that were both cathartic for me and beneficial to others. The PhD project that arose from these experiences, encapsulated by *Neon*, is an exploration of the transformative power of storytelling. It investigates how the act of writing and reflecting on one's past can serve as a personal catharsis, and educate, entertain, and support others. I have termed the form as 'adapted memoir' (referred as memoir for brevity) and define it as a form that combines the reflective and personal storytelling aspects of a traditional memoir with creative liberties often associated with autofiction. It acknowledges the subjective nature of memory and the inherent narrative shaping of personal experience. It diverges from strict adherence to factual accuracy, instead embracing a more cinematic approach to enhance the reader's engagement. Conversational gaps may be filled, and events may be dramatised to underscore thematic elements and emotional truths, allowing for a crafted presentation that prioritises the story's impact over chronological exactitude. *Neon* is an intentional act of reclamation, reflection, and, in a broader sense, recovery. It seeks to unearth the broader cultural history of the LGBTQI+ community and contribute to the collective understanding of its experiences.

Objectives

- a) **Recovery of cultural history:** I endeavoured to recapture the spirit of gay London in the 1990s—a time that was both vibrant and complex for the LGBTQI+ community. The narrative is an intimate portrayal, rooted in personal experiences that reflect the era's activism, sense of community, and adversities faced. While I aimed to present a setting that feels authentic and alive to the reader, it is important to acknowledge that the memoir is constructed through my individual recollections as a gay man. These memories, while vivid, are filtered through the lens of my own limited social interactions and are not immune to the fallibility of human memory, especially one affected by substance abuse. Therefore, *Neon* should be viewed as a

personal contribution to the cultural history of the time, offering insights into the LGBTQI+ and mostly gay man's experience from my own perspective, rather than a broad or objective ethnographic study. This approach allows readers to engage with the narrative as a slice of life from the 1990s, adding depth and personal dimension to the collective understanding of the period.

- b) **Recovery of memory:** As a young gay man navigating the cultural and social landscape of the 1990s, my personal history is deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of that era. However, my personal memories of this time are ones that were affected by drugs or the fallout of alcoholism – so were often diluted, infected, or misremembered. The writing of this memoir has been a deliberate process aimed at recovering and re-presenting those memories in a form that aspires to be coherent and truthful. My objective is to balance the factual aspects of memory with imaginative reconstruction, ensuring the narrative's accessibility and compelling nature. In doing so, I sought to create a narrative that not only resonates with readers but also sheds light on the complex and often hidden experiences of individuals who have struggled with addiction. The memoir employs creative nonfiction techniques to engage readers, providing a window into memory and identity. By presenting these recollections in a structured and relatable way, I aimed to bridge the gap between fragmented personal history and the collective understanding of a cultural past.
- c) **Recovery of well-being:** Using the creative writing process as a form of narrative therapy, I employ writing as a healing strategy and a means of empowering the present self through reframing the past. By engaging in the process of writing *Neon*, I sought to transform and reclaim memories impacted by traumatic experiences. The power of storytelling allowed me to reshape my understanding of the past and promote personal well-being.

Relevance of the setting

The decision to centre the narrative on gay London of the 1990s stems from a personal connection to this time and place, alongside its cultural significance. This

era was marked by significant shifts within and around the gay community, making it a period ripe for exploration and reflection. While *Neon* is primarily focused on the experiences of a gay man, this story unfolds against the larger backdrop of the LGBTQI+ community's history.

This period of London's history is not just a static setting for my narrative; it actively shapes the experiences, identities, and conversations that I seek to explore. The 1990s in London were a time for change, resilience, and self-expression for gay men, and by extension, the broader LGBTQI+ community. This focus allows for a deep dive into the unique challenges and triumphs faced by those gay men during this transformative time.

Additionally, this specific setting provides a lens through which the complexities of the LGBTQI+ experience can be examined. It offers a perspective that challenges the prevalent heteronormative narratives of the era, providing a richer understanding of identity, sexuality, and community. I aimed to contribute a nuanced chapter to the collective LGBTQI+ narrative.

Recovery as a multidimensional theme:

Recovery is a multifaceted concept in *Neon*, encompassing substance abuse, memory, and cultural history. Rather than repeating previously stated ideas, it is crucial to emphasise how these aspects of recovery interlink to form a coherent whole, directly contributing to the narrative's central theme of self-empowerment (Objective B).

The memoir illustrates that overcoming addiction is more than a personal triumph; it acts as a catalyst for broader forms of recovery. It prompts a critical examination of the past, allowing for a reconstitution of fragmented memories, which is vital for personal identity and understanding (Objective B).

Simultaneously, the narrative revives the cultural history of gay London in the 1990s, entwining it with personal memory to offer a richer, more nuanced perspective (Objective A). This interplay between personal and cultural recovery underscores the complex nature of memory and history within the LGBTQI+ experience.

By refining the focus on these interconnected dimensions of recovery, *Neon* becomes a powerful exploration of identity and empowerment. The memoir is not just a recounting of the past but a means to understand and articulate a collective experience, serving as a poignant reminder of the resilience and transformation within the community.

In doing so, the narrative avoids abstract generalisations and firmly grounds itself in tangible, lived experiences that resonate with the reader, fulfilling its objectives and delivering a compelling, insightful account of recovery in its many forms.

Chapter 1: *Neon* Chronicles:

***Neon* Recollections: Reclaiming Echoes of a Queer London**

Neon recounts personal experiences of the gay scene of 1990s London. It is a record of a cultural history, a tool for capturing and preserving a critical period in LGBTQI+ history that is at risk of being forgotten. By documenting the experiences, atmosphere, and character of LGBTQI+ especially the gay men's spaces, *Neon* serves as a written memory of these cultural hubs. It brings to life the sites of resistance, self-expression, and community that were integral to the LGBTQI+ community during that time.

It also brings into sharp focus the broader implications of the disappearance of these spaces. As the physical markers of our past are erased, replaced by heteronormative, mainstream establishments, we risk losing not just the spaces themselves, but also the cultural memory and identity they embodied. The loss of these spaces has profound implications, potentially affecting the way future generations of the LGBTQI+ community perceive their cultural heritage. *Neon contributes* to efforts that challenge this cultural erasure, to ensure that the narratives, the experiences, the struggles, and the triumphs of the 1990s gay scene in London are not lost to time but are preserved for future generations to understand their legacy.

The 1990s, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis, were a paradoxical era for the LGBTQI+ community. On one hand, we witnessed a remarkable display of solidarity, as the community banded together to combat a shared crisis. Initiatives were launched that saw all segments of the community – lesbians, gay men, and others – rallying together. Charities like Rubberstuffers, which undertook extensive measures to promote safer sex within the community. By distributing free condom packs at over 125 gay venues, launching safer sex campaigns on transportation routes like the London Underground, and targeting men en-route to gay venues, and promoting workshops addressing the psychological and physical aspects of condom use, Rubberstuffers may have saved hundreds if not thousands of lives.

Organisations such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation emerged as potent voices championing the rights and needs of those affected by HIV/AIDS. Simon Watney (1997), a prominent British AIDS activist and author, observed in 'Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media', that these organisations employed a range of strategies, including civil disobedience, poster campaigns, and various forms of protest, to disrupt what he called the easy narratives of blame and moralism that were being constructed around AIDS at the time. Complementing Watney's observations, Alexandra Juhasz (1995) examines the ethical dimensions of representing the AIDS crisis in American visual culture, highlighting the complexities of portraying queer life and death during the epidemic. Similarly, the anthology 'Framing the Sexual Subject' (Parker, Barbosa, and Aggleton, 2000) delves into the broader socio-political context of gender, sexuality, and power, offering a critical framework for understanding the media's role in shaping public discourse. Arthur Ashe, the renowned tennis player and AIDS activist, poignantly encapsulated the necessity of an empathetic approach in his statement, 'We must reach out our hand in friendship and dignity both to those who would befriend us and those who would be our enemy' (Ashe, n.d.). This collective fight against adversity is what often takes centre stage in media portrayals of the era, such as in the groundbreaking film *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), which was among the first mainstream films to address HIV/AIDS and homophobia, or the miniseries *Angels in America* (Kushner, 2003), which presented a multifaceted view of the crisis. Documentaries like *How to Survive a Plague* (France, 2012) offer a visceral look at the activism of the time, while the recent British series *It's a Sin* (Davies, 2021) brings to life the impact of the crisis on a group of young gay men in the UK, painting a picture of a unified front despite the complexities and challenges faced by the community. Non-UK narratives like *Angels in America* and *Philadelphia* have become seminal works in the representation of the AIDS crisis, they reflect a specifically American context that may not fully resonate with the British experiences depicted in *Neon*. The UK had its own unique sociopolitical climate and public health response to the AIDS epidemic, which influenced how the crisis was experienced and represented by British media and artists. It is crucial to acknowledge these

differences, as the mainstream American depictions have often overshadowed regional narratives, potentially leading to a homogenised understanding of the crisis. With *Neon* I hoped to contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive historical record by addressing the underrepresented narratives in the broader spectrum of the LGBTQI+ community's history, particularly in comparison to American stories. By showing through memoir the London scene's particularities and idiosyncrasies, it begins to enrich understanding and importance of preserving these cultural stories for future generations.

For instance, day-to-day reality was marked by a level of segregation within the London community itself. Bars and clubs where LGBTQI+ (gay men especially) individuals sought 'safe spaces' of solace and camaraderie, were often divided along the lines of distinct subgroups. There was an unspoken understanding that certain venues were designated for specific types of individuals within the community. As Sarah Thornton argues in her study of club culture in *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (1996) there exist places where people gather based on "their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves" (Thornton 1996, p.3). Drawing on Bourdieu, she develops a concept of "subculture capital" whereby taste serves as a vehicle for the construction of hierarchy and the accumulation of status. Thornton goes on to talk about how hierarchies within subcultures serve as distinctions between members of, in my vernacular, *tribes*. In her example of club culture she came up with three distinctions – "authentic vs phoney", "hip vs mainstream", and "underground vs the media" (pp. 3,4). These could be argued to mirror various types of gay bar or clubs at the time – live performance comedic drag queens (Vauxhall Tavern) vs pop acts lip-syncing to their own songs on stage at premium club night (G.A.Y.), a 'hip' club night at Substation Soho vs a late night bar at 79CXR, and underground nights at Bulk or Fist vs Heaven, but on a more nuanced scale you find the category of clientele also having categories – for example the clones of Earls Court wouldn't go to the Village bar where the chickens (twinks) frequented but they *would* go to the Coleherne or Bromptons, the skinheads of the London Apprentice may not be seen attempting to get in the female only space of the Candy Bar but would no doubt be spotted at Trade.

This dichotomy of unity in adversity and segregation in routine adds a layer of complexity to the narrative. If we accept a notion of complex social hierarchies and subcultural capital within these spaces, it becomes apparent that mainstream narratives often gravitate toward the most salient and sensational aspects of the gay scene. Such narratives frequently spotlight the celebrity-laden nights at Heaven nightclub, where figures like Boy George and Freddie Mercury became emblematic of the era's exuberance. However, this focus obscures the everyday realities of less glamorous but no less critical spaces within the LGBTQI+ community. For instance, the City of Quebec pub in Marble Arch, a pivotal hub for rent boys and their 'sponsors,' the Brief Encounter and its mix of bawdiness and sleaze remain notably absent from popular discourse. This oversight underscores the need to broaden the scope of our cultural memory, ensuring that the full spectrum of experiences—especially those from the margins—is captured and acknowledged. With *Neon* I hoped to contribute to this gap of representation.

The advent of the millennium witnessed societal shifts that contributed to a growing disconnect between the authentic history of the LGBTQI+ community and its mainstream perception. Lisa Duggan, in her seminal work, provides a critical lens on this phenomenon through the concept of 'homonormativity,' which she defines as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them' (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). This assimilationist approach often marginalises those within the queer community who do not conform to traditional societal norms, thereby diminishing the rich diversity that characterizes the community's history. In the context of media portrayals, this term is particularly salient. Mainstream texts, television, and films tend to emphasise an 'assimilated' section of the LGBTQI+ population, often glossing over the complexities and varied experiences within the community for example:

EastEnders (BBC 1985 -PD) (Colin and Barry storyline): This long-running British soap opera featured a storyline with Colin Russell and Barry Clark, which was notable for being one of the first representations of a gay couple on British television. While groundbreaking at the time, the depiction was relatively tame and

focused on a monogamous, domestic partnership that didn't delve into the wider complexities of gay men's lives.

Coronation Street (ITV 1960-PD) (Sean Tully): Sean Tully is an openly gay character in another long-running soap opera, *Coronation Street*. His storylines have often focused on his romantic relationships and personal dramas that fit within the broader narrative of the show, without necessarily challenging heteronormative expectations or exploring the broader LGBTQI+ community.

The Archers (BBC Radio 1951-PD) (Adam Macy and Ian Craig): This radio soap opera has featured a gay couple, Adam and Ian, whose storylines have often revolved around marriage, adoption, and other family-centric themes that align with a more 'assimilated' portrayal of LGBTQI+ individuals.

It's a Sin (Red Production Co./Channel 4/HBO 2021): This television series does offer a look at the lives of young gay men during the AIDS crisis. While it touches on the complexities of the LGBTQ+ experience during that time, its mainstream success and focus on a tight-knit group of friends can be perceived as emphasising a more 'assimilated' narrative.

Alexis Gregory's *Riot Act* (2018) or Jack Holden's *Cruise* (2021): These plays offer a more nuanced look at LGBTQI+ history and experiences. However, their reach is typically more limited to theatre audiences and may not have the same mainstream impact as television shows or films.

It's important to note that while these examples do offer representation, they may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of the LGBTQI+ community, often focusing on more conventional narratives that are palatable to a wider audience. The scarcity of examples that delve into the less 'assimilated' aspects of LGBTQI+ life supports the argument that there is a need for more varied and comprehensive portrayals in UK media. As a gay middle aged man looking back at his life I did not feel particularly represented by anything I was coming into contact with, and writing *Neon* has gone some way to address that imbalance.

In contributing to a media landscape that mirrors the true diversity of queer experiences, it is necessary to confront the challenge of avoiding reductive portrayals shaped by homonormativity. The current portrayals often fail to capture

the full spectrum of the LGBTQI+ community, suggesting the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach. This era of transformation in media representation coincides with the emergence of the 'Post-Gay' concept, introduced by British writer and LGBTQI+ activist Paul Burston in response to the shifting dynamics of queer identity and rights.

The 'Post-Gay' term signifies a perceived milestone in LGBTQI+ acceptance and equality, questioning the necessity of a distinct gay culture. Burston's idea advocates for a broader vision of queer experiences, where sexual orientation is not the sole defining aspect of an individual's identity but one of many facets. This perspective is reflected in the shift from an oppositional "us *versus* them" collective identity to an inclusive "us *and* them" approach, as activists seek to emphasise commonalities with heterosexuals rather than differences.

The 'Post-Gay' ethos suggests that the goal for the LGBTQI+ community should not be found in isolation but in a world where individuals are free and safe to express their identities without constraints. As James Collard articulated in the New York Times in 1998; the new frontier for LGBTQI+ individuals are not in gay-only enclaves but in integrated spaces where diversity is celebrated and embraced.

While the 'Post-Gay' movement heralds an era of acceptance. This inclusivity raises nuanced concerns. The intention behind the movement is commendable, aiming to transcend the boundaries that have traditionally segregated queer identities.

However, as the movement gains traction, there is a risk of diluting the distinct experiences and cultural expressions that are unique to specific groups within the LGBTQI+ community.

This phenomenon is observed in the transformation of Pride events, which, while becoming more inclusive and family-friendly, may inadvertently marginalise the very individuals they were initially created to celebrate. As Dennis Altman discusses in his work *The End of the Homosexual?* (Altman 2012), there is a tension between the desire for broader societal integration and the preservation of a distinctive queer culture. Altman notes, 'In our rush to declare the normality of homosexuality, we risk losing the critical perspective that comes from being outsiders' (Altman, 2012, p. 137).

The inclusivity paradox suggests that in the effort to represent everyone, specific identities and experiences become obscured. For some, the current landscape of inclusivity feels so expansive that it fails to resonate with their personal sense of identity and community. The challenge, then, is to strike a balance between celebrating the diversity of the LGBTQI+ spectrum and maintaining spaces where individuals can find representation and recognition of their unique experiences.

In *Neon* I did not set out to construct an all-encompassing tableau of diversity but rather to authentically document my singular experience as a gay man navigating the socio-cultural life of 1990s London. This work deliberately eschews the potential pitfalls of over-inclusivity and the 'post-gay' ethos, focusing instead on a portrayal that remains unadulterated and true to the personal and collective realities of the time. The intention was to capture the essence of a specific cultural moment without succumbing to the dilution that can accompany broad-spectrum representation, thus preserving the integrity and distinctiveness of this individual point of view.

The perspective that mainstream media often presents a homogenized and diluted portrayal of the LGBTQI+ community is supported by literature, though not all scholars directly critique specific programs like *Beautiful Thing* (Jonathan Harvey, Film4 1996), *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-PD) or *Queer as Folk* (Russell T Davies, Ch4, 2000). Holly Lewis, in *The Politics of Everybody: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Marxism at the Intersection* (2016), criticises the homonormative approach for failing to capture the intersectionality and diversity of the community. Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993) similarly highlights the tendency of mainstream media to simplify and misrepresent the spectrum of LGBTQI+ identities and experiences.

Mark Wardel, also known as TradeMark, a contemporary artist, and a significant figure in London's gay scene since the late 70s, provides a compelling testament to the issue of media representation. He specifically critiques Russell T Davis's *It's a Sin* (2021) for its potential to blur the lines between fiction and reality, stating, 'I know it wasn't a documentary, but a lot of people find it hard to separate reality from fiction' (HuffPost, 2021). This comment becomes particularly poignant when considering that both Wardel and I were active participants in London's gay scene during the

same period, providing us with an intimate understanding of the community's complexities.

Roy Brown, known as ROY INC, a staple of London's LGBTQI+ scene and a familiar face as a model, performer, singer, and songwriter, echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of accuracy: "you have to get all this right, you have to." Brown, with over three decades of experience within the LGBTQI+ community, is acutely aware of the disparities and omissions in the media's portrayals of the community. He recalls the diversity of the gay scene, contrasting it with the representation of *It's a Sin*: 'The [clone] aesthetic was checked shirts, the clone moustache or sideburns, the whole look, and then you had the factions outside of that: you had the punks, the new romantics, the rockabillys, the rocker girls, the skinheads, the rude boys, Black guys who were part of a clone scene, a very young scene as well,' Roy remembers. 'It was very diverse' (HuffPost, 2021)

Neon Shadows: Gentrification's Impact on LGBTQI+ Spaces

By the end of the 1990s, London boasted tens of thousands of gay men, as well as dozens of bars and nightclubs friendly to and catering specifically for the LGBTQI+ community. Yet, as the years passed, these cultural and social spaces have seen a decline. Recent research by Ben Campkin at the Urban Laboratory of University College London revealed a significant decrease in the number of LGBTQI+ clubs, bars, and performance venues. From 121 in 2006, The Guardian reported in 2019 that the number had dwindled to just 51 by 2017 (The Guardian, 2019). According to The Gay Passport, that number has reduced yet further in 2024 to around just 27 bars and an indeterminate number of other venues (The Gay Passport, 2024).

In 2015, the Royal Vauxhall Tavern on London's South Bank managed to obtain Grade II listed status, the first listing of its kind for an LGBTQI+ venue. The iconic London location has an international reputation as one of the most inclusive LGBTQI+ venues in England, built on a tradition of hosting alternative, transgender, and drag performances. Heritage Minister, Tracey Crouch, acknowledged the venue's cultural and historical significance, stating, 'I am thrilled to be able to list the Royal Vauxhall Tavern as Grade II - the iconic cultural hub in the heart of London is

of huge significance to the LGBTQI+ community. Not only of architectural interest, but the venue also has a longstanding historic role as a symbol of tolerance and alternative entertainment' (Gov.uk, 2015). Despite this preservation success, many other iconic establishments that once served as pillars of the community have closed, including the Coleherne in Earl's Court, operational since the 1930s, and the King Edward IV in Islington, the city's oldest gay pub. The Black Cap in Camden, a community fixture for over 50 years, also closed its doors in 2015.

These closures represent more than just the loss of physical spaces; they signify the erosion of important cultural and social landscapes that have played a crucial role in the history and identity of the community. The pressing need to recover and preserve these fading narratives is evident, ensuring that the vibrant, diverse, and resilient history of gay men's London continues to be told. In *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), Doreen Massey explores the nuanced distinctions between 'space' and 'place.' She asserts that 'space' is constituted through interactions and interrelations, extending from the most intimate encounters to global dynamics (Massey, 1994). 'Place,' on the other hand, is more than a location; it is a site imbued with meaning and significance, shaped by these interactions and histories. Massey argues, 'Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings...' (Massey, 1994, p. 154). This perspective emphasizes the role of LGBTQI+ venues as 'places'—not just physical sites but crucial nodes within broader social networks that contribute to the formation of a shared community identity. Further scholarship reinforces this view, highlighting the role of gay venues as essential spaces for social and cultural networking. In their article 'The Importance of Being Ernesco: The Social Role of Gay Clubs' (1999), researchers describe the club scene as a critical site for community engagement and identity formation among LGBTQI+ individuals. The study published in *Leisure Studies* examines how these venues provide a sense of belonging and facilitate the creation of social networks that extend beyond the confines of the clubs themselves (Leisure Studies, 1999). Additionally, David Higgs's edited volume *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600* includes a chapter on London that delves into the historical significance

of gay venues in the city. It examines how these spaces have served not only as places of refuge and celebration but also as pivotal locations for activism and community building (Higgs, 1999).

Ben Campkin's research highlights that media narratives often attribute the loss of LGBTQI+ spaces, particularly those catering to gay men, to the rise of technology and dating apps like Gaydar and Grindr. This suggests a reductive view that such spaces are primarily used for sexual encounters. However, Campkin observes that gentrification often plays a significant role in the closure of these venues as well. The process of gentrification involves historically marginalised and culturally vibrant neighbourhoods, such as Soho in London, becoming increasingly affluent, resulting in the displacement of original inhabitants and businesses due to rising costs and changing cultural dynamics. This phenomenon is not unique to London; it has been observed in many cities globally, including New York, Paris, Montreal, and Madrid. In each case, gentrification has led to the closure of many iconic LGBTQI+ venues and altered the character of these communities, as spaces that once provided a haven for LGBTQI+ individuals gradually disappeared or were transformed to cater to a more affluent, mainstream clientele. Research by Jen Jack Giesecking in *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers* (2020) examines the impact of gentrification on lesbian and queer spaces in New York City 'As lesbian, dyke, and queer people and their spaces are pushed further to the margins by rising rents and homonormativity, their lived experiences of the city are also displaced' (Giesecking, 2020, p. 157) , while Manuel Castells in *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (1983) provides an early examination of the role of urban social movements, highlighting 'the struggle for urban cultural identity by marginalised groups' (Castells, 1983, p. 242) as a key factor in the complex dynamics of urban change. Similarly, the dynamics of gentrification and its effects on gay neighbourhoods in Paris are analysed in *The End of Gay (and the Death of Heterosexuality)* by Bert Archer (2002) noting that 'the gay Marais is no longer a cultural haven but a space that has been commodified and integrated into the broader economy' (Archer, 2002, p. 89).

I examined the transformation of LGBTQI+ venues in London due to socio-economic shifts, drawing insights from seminal works by Neil Smith and Sharon Zukin. However, the temporal context of gentrification and its specific impact on the LGBTQI+ community during the period covered by my memoir needs further clarification.

Firstly, it is crucial to note that *Neon captures* a time before the widespread gentrification of London's LGBTQI+ spaces. In this way, it offers a retrospective view, setting a narrative against the changing landscape of a city that has since experienced significant socio-economic changes. Neil Smith's concept of the 'revanchist city', as detailed in his book *The New Urban Frontier* (1996) – which focuses on New York City's urban transformation – provides a powerful framework for understanding urban redevelopment. However, applying this concept directly to London in the 1990s requires a nuanced historical analysis.

I had to consider the parallels between the gradual impact of gentrification on marginalised communities in New York, as observed by Smith, and the emerging trends in London during the era in which *Neon* is set. This comparison necessitates a careful examination of the early stages of gentrification in London and its implications for the LGBTQI+ community. How my depiction of those venues may encourage conversations about lost spaces.

Sharon Zukin's *Loft Living* (1989) offers a lens through which to view the cultural economy of urban spaces, suggesting that 'authenticity' is a cultural construct shaped by power dynamics. Although Zukin's work does not specifically address LGBTQI+ spaces or the context of London, her theories provide a valuable perspective for understanding the challenges these spaces face in maintaining their authenticity amid mainstream cultural shifts.

In the context of my PhD project, it is important to note that a comprehensive investigation into the status of London's LGBTQI+ venues at the close of the 1990s—whether they were on the cusp of gentrification or enjoying a period of stability—is beyond its intended scope. The memoir *Neon* is not a study of gentrification per se; rather, it seeks to capture and preserve the spirit of LGBTQI+ venues during a time when their existence was not yet overshadowed by this

spectre of urban redevelopment. To document the lived experiences and the cultural vibrancy of these venues, which are now largely absent by focusing on the lived realities of the period, *Neon* illuminates the significance of these venues, reflecting on a time when they were celebrated for their authenticity and vibrancy. The memoir does not aim to trace the chronological progression of gentrification but rather to highlight what has been lost in its wake. In doing so, it contributes to the cultural history of London's LGBTQI+ community by preserving the memory of spaces that were once integral to the city's social fabric but have since been obscured by the city's evolving landscape.

The following sections serve as case studies that exemplify how the narrative recovers the lost past of London's LGBTQI+ venues in the face of gentrification. In examining The Black Cap in Camden and Brief Encounter in Soho, I will reveal the writing process that was driven by a desire to reclaim and document the history and significance of these spaces.

This exploration includes the research undertaken to authentically portray the venues, the decisions made to evoke the atmosphere and experiences of the time, and the techniques used to bring these cultural landmarks to life on the page. The aim was not merely to indulge in nostalgia but to actively engage with the past, using the memoir as a tool to showcase the importance of its cultural spaces. By detailing this process, I hope to highlight the memoir's role in stimulating discussion around the preservation of cultural history and the broader implications of gentrification on community identity and memory.

The Black Cap: A Beacon of Queer Identity and Community.

The Black Cap in Camden, affectionately known as Mother Black Cap, with its upstairs bar Shufflewicks - named in honour of one of its most famous drag performers (Mrs. Shufflewick, or Shuff) - was more than a pub. For over 50 years, it was a sanctuary of acceptance and self-expression for gay men and the whole LGBTQI+ community. The vibrant atmosphere and sense of camaraderie at The Black Cap became synonymous with the community's identity and history.

As gentrification swept through Camden in the 2010s, The Black Cap succumbed to the pressures of rising property values and changing demographics, shutting its doors in April 2015, shortly after being recognized as an Asset of Community Value by Camden Council. The loss of The Black Cap was a cultural blow, symbolising the erosion of a sanctuary that had stood as a beacon for the LGBTQI+ community.

The activist group We Are The Black Cap, campaigning for its reopening, encapsulates the pub's significance: "The Black Cap has always been more than a place of entertainment. In the 1960s, when same-sex intimacy and departing from gender norms were almost inevitably met with hostility and violence, it was a place of safety and joy for LGBTQ+ people from all over London" (We Are The Black Cap, 2024).

The importance of The Black Cap extended beyond its role as a social hub. It was a haven where local women—straight, cis, lesbian, bi, and trans—felt free from harassment. Louise, a regular since 1992, shared her sentiments with *QX Magazine* in June 2015: "The last two years we'd been regular and being a tranny, point is, you're so welcome. I swear to God we haven't been welcome anywhere like this have we? Nowhere."

Jill, who had been visiting The Black Cap since the eighties, expressed the broader cultural loss also to *QX Magazine*: "What's most upsetting about it is we are losing queer history when these buildings go. You still now get young queer people wanting to know queer history and these buildings hold queer history... I learnt a lot about my queer history from places like this and I think that's really important that you don't lose that" (QX Magazine, 2015).

The Black Cap also served as a nurturing ground for various groups integral to the community's fabric, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, with congregations of LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum-seekers; FTM London, one of London's oldest transgender support groups; recreational teams like the Leftfooters and London Lesbian Kickabouts; Opening Doors London, supporting older LGBTQ+ individuals; and the London Gay Symphonic Winds. These groups, and many like them, might never have thrived without the safe environment The Black Cap provided.

The question I asked myself in developing this piece was how effectively I could portray the themes of gentrification and loss in the fabric of my storytelling. I chose to begin by writing first, from a present perspective, to emphasise how it had been transformed from a vibrant, safe, inclusive space into a desolate, boarded-up relic. I also highlighted the change in the people within the Black Cap's orbit. The encroachment of tourists, the middle-class millennial and Boomer generations, outsiders infringing on Camden's High Street, symbolise the societal shifts associated with the effects of the gentrification phenomenon.

I visit The Black Cap through two distinct lenses: 'Earth Moves' (p.97) presents a candid memoirist's perspective, detailing personal experiences. 'The Ballad of the Black Cap' (p.51) is a more lyrical exploration, a poetic homage to the loss felt in its absence.

The Black Cap is celebrated as one of the few spaces on a generally tribalist scene where a gay man and his lesbian aunt could frequent together and neither feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. In 'Earth Moves' I consciously deployed language that would resonate with the sensibilities of the era and the LGBTQI+ community. I chose phrases that were steeped in the lexicon of the time and the queer culture. For example, describing the barman as a "middle-aged queen with a 'dangly Alexis Colby knock-off ruby earring'" was deliberate. It not only paints a vivid picture of the character but also signals the bar's queer identity through cultural references understood by the community.

In earlier drafts, I experimented with different descriptors and allusions. Some phrases felt too on-the-nose or lacked the subtlety required to transport the reader to that time and place. For instance, I initially described the barman's earring as a "gaudy imitation of a Dynasty's grand dame's jewellery," but it felt too explicit and lacked the affectionate humour that characterised the inhabitants of The Black Cap. The final choice of words was intended to strike a balance between clarity and cultural resonance.

Regarding the mention of the publication *Boyz*, in the piece - I wanted to ensure that its mention would not only be a passing reference but also serve in capturing a slice of queer history. Launched in July 1991, *Boyz* was a weekly publication that

became a staple in the gay community. It provided news from the gay scene, entertainment, contact ads for male escorts and erotic phone lines, sex advice, and naked pin-ups (which I had the barman in the piece enjoy). It could be argued that since the 90s the magazine itself has almost become homogenised reflecting the broader shifts in the community. *Boyz* went from a tabloid sized newsprint to glossy full colour more discreet A4 size in 2001, in 2007 all sexually explicit material was removed, the year after that they stopped running adverts for male escorts and sex phone lines. By 2019 it had become a monthly publication, perhaps the result of so many gay venues being closed.

The mention of Lola Lasagne and Regina Fong, two prominent figures in the UK drag scene, provides additional context to the narrative. Lola Lasagne, who began her career in the early 1990s, represents the burgeoning talent that venues like The Black Cap helped to cultivate within the queer community. Regina Fong, on the other hand, had established her persona in 1985 and by the 1990s, had become an icon of queer performance, signifying the venue's celebration of diversity and its support for both emerging and established performers. Their presence stresses that the venue was not just welcoming but actively celebrated diverse expressions of queer identity. Moreover, Caroline's ease in the space—evident as she took "a throne by the window"—suggests that The Black Cap was a sanctuary for all queer individuals, a place where they could express their identities freely and without reservation. In contrast, had the aunt/nephew interaction taken place at a Soho gay venue of the time, such as Compton's or 79CXR, the story would have been markedly different. There, the prevailing atmosphere catered predominantly to a gay male clientele and the cruising culture, and while lesbians were not excluded, the sense of being merely tolerated rather than embraced would have been palpable for someone like Caroline.

Drag queens, once a hallmark of diversity and subculture within queer spaces, have now become a more ubiquitous presence across various venues, reflecting a shift towards mainstream acceptance and the commercialisation of drag culture. This evolution mirrors the broader societal changes towards embracing queer identities.

In detailing the Soho venues, it is crucial to recognise the specific clientele they catered to. Compton's and 79CXR, known for their gay male patronage, often hosted events that were tailored to this demographic. This specialisation, while creating a vibrant subculture, could inadvertently engender an environment where other members of the queer community, such as lesbians, might feel their presence was only tolerated. The nuanced experience of these venues, juxtaposed with the inclusive embrace of The Black Cap, highlights the complexities and variegated nature of the queer social landscape during the 1990s.

The insertion of 'The Ballad of the Black Cap' into the memoir serves a pivotal role, bridging past and present with a poignant reflection that transcends traditional narrative structures. This poetic interlude, contrasting The Black Cap across two different eras, eschews a character-driven storyline to cast the venue itself as the protagonist—a silent witness to decades of camaraderie and change. Its presence is not just an artistic indulgence; it is a necessary act of commemoration and catharsis. Writing in the 1990s, the significance of such spaces was palpable, yet the full magnitude of their eventual loss was yet to come. It was only through writing a piece like this that I could convey the true depth of this cultural bereavement on a personal level. The memoir, as a vessel for healing and empowerment, almost demands its inclusion. In considering the transformative power of writing, an acknowledgment that the act of creation itself is a form of resistance and a step towards wholeness in the face of disintegration. When writing it and employing a more poetic, folk-tale-like tone I hoped to encapsulate an ethereal and transformative essence through language and word choice. I aimed for the venue to become a living character in the collective memories of the narratives about finding

refuge within its walls. The venue's enchantment and profound impact on the lives of its visitors were central to my portrayal.

Figure a,b - Black Cap, Camden, shown open for business in the early 2000s, and closed in the 2020s

My intent was to utilise this personification to breathe life into a pub, drawing from its evocative name 'Mother Black Cap' to conjure images of an all-encompassing maternal figure. "She was called Mother Black Cap, and she was a witch. Her legend was such that after they burned her at the stake, the local public house took on her name in memento mori." The name resonates with themes of witchcraft and protection, bridging connections to the archetypal 'all-mother' and guardians within various faiths. I hoped to imbue the story with a sense of mystery and veneration, thereby deepening the connection readers would feel between the venue and its patrons. The metaphor of witchcraft, with its historical allusions to ostracised covens aimed for poignancy. To reflect the pub's role as a gathering place for those who, like witches of old, were often viewed with suspicion by mainstream society. Yet within the walls of Mother Black Cap, these 'covens' found a strong, trusting bond, echoing the closeness and solidarity of a secret cabal. "A new generation of witches wove spells over her crumbling bricks. Spells cast with the heady fumes of greasepaint, flutters of a beaded lash and discounted liquor. Sequinned sorcery, songs, and dances. Rituals performed nightly, twice on Fridays."

This description of the venue's past vibrancy was an intentional echo of the magical and ritualistic themes that pervade this stand-alone piece. The enchantment is contrasted sharply with the current state of decay, where "badly spelled tattoos daubed across her scandalised Victorian arches" and "rusted railings" are visceral

symbols of the cultural erosion wrought by gentrification. These images not only convey the physical decline of the building but also serve as a metaphor for the broader loss of cultural spaces that once served as havens for the LGBTQI+ community.

I invoked "memento mori, Mother Black Cap" as a metaphorical epitaph, a sombre reminder of the ephemeral nature of sanctuary. "Nostalgia has fixed this place.

Figure a,b - The Black Cap interior, open for business in the early 2000s and in its closed state in the 2020s

Locked Mother Black Cap within a memory, her own spell no match for the avarice of London landlords." This sentiment of bereavement is akin to grieving a lost past, a sentiment that has been a driving force behind my writing. This grief, while profound, also contains the seeds of healing, as the act of remembering, even as we mourn its passing.

The Brief Encounter: Eroded History.

The Brief Encounter, once nestled in the vibrant heart of Central London on St Martin's Lane, opened its doors in 1985, quickly becoming a cornerstone of the gay liberation movement. Unlike later sleek contemporaries such as The Yard or The Box, The Brief Encounter was renowned for its unpolished charm and warm character. It was a place where laughter and music pumped through the air, and the basement dance floor was a nightly melting pot of London's gay male community. Here, cross-class interactions were not just common; they were a defining feature of the venue. Lawyers and labourers, artists, and office workers, all found common ground in the shared experience of where a night could lead to brief unexpected liaisons or enduring partnerships.

Caroline, my lesbian aunt from *Neon*, would have found The Brief Encounter to be a stark contrast to The Black Cap had she ever crossed its threshold. The Brief Encounter was predominantly a male-only space, its palpable air of cruising culture that would have made her feel out of place. It was a venue that catered to a specific facet of the gay man's community, one where the pursuit of romantic and sexual connections took centre stage.

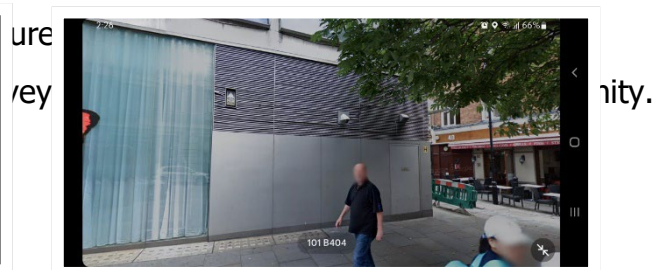
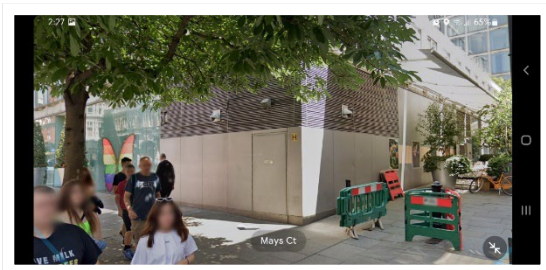
The gradual shuttering of The Brief Encounter began with an ill-conceived modernisation in the late '90s. The brewery's refurbishment efforts, which aimed to update the bar's look, instead erased its raw aesthetics. The sleek, polished, and glossy new interior seemed alien to the regulars. Its core clientele enjoyed the venue because of its original slightly sleazy interior not despite it. This incongruous change signalled the slow disintegration of a once-vibrant venue for gay men seeking freedom and connection. Disenchanted, the core clientele drifted towards the burgeoning scene on Compton Street, leaving The Brief Encounter to flounder. By the early 2000s the bar had briefly morphed into a straight venue before being sold to the hotel that now dominates that stretch of the street.

In a move emblematic of the gentrification process critiqued by scholars cited earlier such as Neil Smith - the hotel occupying The Brief Encounter's former location co-opted the Pride movement in 2022. The Pride 365 / Every Step campaign, crafted by The Penthouse and Be The Fox, seemed to celebrate the LGBTQI+ community with its vibrant displays and video installations (see fig.3). Yet, it conspicuously omitted any reference to The Brief Encounter or its significance. The campaign's focus on the hotel's upscale Chandon Garden Spritz Terrace starkly contrasted with the venue's past, epitomising the commercial overshadowing of community heritage.

The erasure of The Brief Encounter from public memory is an example of the cultural casualties of urban development. My research revealed a dearth of references to the bar, virtually no memories of the venue shared online, visual documentation is notably scarce, with no surviving interior photographs. Today, the building presents a nondescript grey facade, a stark departure from the exuberant space that once thrived behind it (see Figure 5 a,b).

In the vignette 'Brief Encounters' (p.88) I sought to encapsulate the value of a forgotten space, to amplify the sense of energy and vibrancy that once filled it. The use of sensory details was a conscious decision to transport the reader into the heart of the bar, to feel the pulse of its lifeblood. On a personal level I was more connected to the Brief Encounter venue than I was to The Black Cap. I worked at the Brief Encounter, I met my first real friends there, I felt included and *liked* there. All new experiences. I aimed to share and connect to these emotions through my writing. To do this I evoked "bass thumping, pulsating," a "cocktailed tang of stale lager, supermarket aftershave, Marlboro lights and poppers". The goal being to give the reader a visceral experience. I bring in a song reference, a dance floor anthem, I want the reader to know it's loud so I mention how I can't hear the customers as they wave money in my face. This sensory immersion serves as a stark juxtaposition to then changing the timeframe to the present day and finding out that a fellow survivor was not dead, Queenie. A fragmented social media conversation precipitated an experiment into a stream of consciousness from Queenie's point of view to enhance the sense of immediacy. Their colourful language and candid reflections allow for a direct, unfiltered dive into the past. I hoped to underscore the significance of individual stories in the broader context of community transformation. The deliberate omission of clear character signals mirrors the fluidity and complexity of memory, inviting the reader to share in the confusion and the clarity that comes with reflection.

The contrast between the personal reflections in 'Brief Encounters' and the personification of The Black Cap in the 'Ballad of the Black Cap' highlights different facets of loss. In 'Brief Encounters' the focus on personal feeling and the concept of belonging anchors the narrative in the shared human experience of grief and



Gone *Neon*: The Shifting Reality of London's Gay Men's Scene

There is more to the decline of London's LGBTQI+ scene, particularly the gay men's scene, than gentrification. It can be attributed to a confluence of several significant factors, each contributing to its gradual ebb. Primarily, the devastating AIDS crisis resulted in a significant loss of life within the community, an event which had profound socio-cultural implications. As Sarah Schulman, author of *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* remarked, "AIDS did not just take lives. It took our culture, and the tangible evidence of our history."

The legalisation of same-sex marriage in July 2013 and the growing acceptance of LGBTQI+ individuals in mainstream society paradoxically contributed to the decline of these separate counter-cultural spaces. This legal and cultural milestone, while a

Figure a,b - Site of the former Brief Encounter Bar, St Martins Lane, 2020s

cause for celebration, also had the unintended consequence of diminishing the perceived necessity for distinct havens like the Brief Encounter. This interplay between societal acceptance and the decline of LGBTQI+ spaces can enrich narratives, providing a nuanced examination of the consequences of homonormativity on the physical and emotional landscapes of the community. Theorist Michael Warner's analysis of the mainstream gay rights movement in the 1980s and 1990s further elucidates the shift in the cultural landscape. Warner posited the existence of a dichotomy between the 'good gay', who conformed to traditional middle-class norms, and the 'bad queer', who defied them (Warner 1999). This binary, perpetuated by media representations, led to a limited and reductive perception of the LGBTQI+ community, excluding those who did not fit into this narrow framework.

In my reflections on the representation of gay men in London during the 1990s, it is crucial to acknowledge the strides made in contemporary media towards diverse storytelling. Current works such as *All of Us Strangers* (Searchlight 2023) offer fresh and varied narratives that are more reflective of the community's diversity today. Moreover, *Tales of the City* (Ch4/Netflix 1993, 2019) and the BBC's *Queers* series (2017) have contributed to a broader scope of LGBTQ+ representation in the UK,

commemorating significant historical moments and exploring multifaceted experiences.

However, my intention with this memoir is not to depict an all-encompassing tapestry of the gay community but to articulate my personal journey and the unique experiences of those I encountered in the 1990s London scene. While plays like *Riot Act*¹(Gregory, 2018) and *Cruise*²(Holden, 2022) resonate with the representation I seek, their reach remains limited compared to mainstream media. My narrative is not an attempt to speak for every individual within the community but rather to add my voice to the collective chorus, filling a gap I perceive in the portrayal of our lives during a vibrant yet challenging era.

It's important to note that while American series like *Pose* (20th Television, Ryan Murphy, 2018-2021) have made significant advances in representing transgender experiences of a similar period, with a largely transgender cast, this does not directly translate to the UK context of my narrative. However, such examples can be instructive in illustrating the potential for authentic representation and the importance of acknowledging the origin and cultural context of these stories.

There are existing efforts to document and preserve this shared culture, such as the Bishopsgate Institute, Gay Liberation Front archives at the London School of Economics, the Hall-Carpenter archives at the London Metropolitan Archives, and oral history projects, like the Polari Salon run by Paul Burston, which has collected interviews with members of the community. The more the diverse fabric of the stories being told the more authentic holistic pictures are revealed.

¹ Alexis Gregory's "Riot Act" is a solo verbatim theatre piece that chronicles key moments in LGBTQ+ history through the personal narratives of three activists: Michael-Anthony Nozzi, a Stonewall survivor; Lavinia Co-op, a 1970s radical drag artist; and Paul Burston, a 1990s AIDS activist. The play is a powerful and intimate portrayal of struggle, resilience, and community, drawn directly from Gregory's interviews with these individuals. Directed by Rikki Beadle-Blair, "Riot Act" has been acclaimed for its authentic representation and dynamic storytelling, offering audiences a vivid exploration of six decades of queer history.

² Jack Holden's "Cruise" is a one-man play that weaves together the true story of Michael Spencer's last night on Earth with Holden's own experiences as a gay man. Set against the backdrop of the 1980s AIDS crisis, the play is a poignant and celebratory ode to gay culture of the era, highlighting the profound impact of AIDS on the community. Based on a real phone call Holden received while volunteering at Switchboard, an LGBTQ+ helpline, the narrative captures the life-affirming decision of two men to live their final years to the fullest. The play features original music by John Patrick Elliott and has been praised for its emotional depth and authenticity.

While it is true that mainstream television and film have not fully captured the eclectic 'tribes' of the 1990s London gay scene, British literature has been notably more successful in documenting this diversity. The rich tapestry of cultural subgroups—skinheads, muscle marys, twinks, clones, bar boys, drag queens, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, mister sisters, techno kids, and theatre queens—played a crucial role in the era's vibrancy. Their stories, while often marginalised in visual media, find a more resonant voice in the pages of novels and memoirs.

Authors such as Alan Hollinghurst with *The Spell* (1998) and *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Sarah Waters with her vivid depictions of lesbian subcultures such as *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), and Paul Burston with *The Black Path* (2016), have explored the multifaceted nature of the gay community in their works. These literary narratives delve into the nuances of the subcultures and the tensions between them, offering a counterpoint to the homogenized representations seen on screen.

My goal is not to critique the shortcomings of media representation but to enrich the existing narrative with a portrayal that honours the diversity and individuality of the gay community's many facets. While mainstream depictions often simplify our experiences, works like *It's a Sin* (Red/Ch4/HBO 2021), *Pride* (Sony 2014), and *Cruise* have begun to challenge these homogenised portrayals, highlighting the intersectionality of race, class, and the distinct subcultures within our community.

The gay skinhead scene, which, despite being referenced in films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Hanif Kureishi, Working Title 1985), remains an underrepresented facet of our collective story. My intention was to add to this tapestry, to build upon their foundation by drawing on cultural references and personal anecdotes and contribute to the landscape. I used humour to explore the idiosyncrasies of the 90s London gay scene, I acknowledge the humorous missteps of my own journey. A story about being too ugly to be a rent boy, that's funny, a story about seeing a man in a full rubber outfit laying in a urinal at The Anvil asking to be peed on, that's funny too, going to pop starlet's birthday party with a drag queen dressed in blue vinyl and abusing cocaine in a downstairs cloakroom – funny. This approach not only serves to entertain but also to shed light on lesser-seen aspects of our history.

Chapter 2: *Neon* Remembrances: Recovering Memories Affected by Alcoholism and Addiction

Embarking on the journey of writing *Neon* led me to gain the necessary perspective and insight for my growth and evolution as an individual on the recovery side of addiction. As I looked back on the 1990s, my experiences were closely intertwined with a broader cultural context, which was marked by significant movements such as the fight for gay rights and the response to the AIDS crisis. This created tension as I sought to balance my personal narrative with its issues and these larger societal shifts.

While Jeremy Atherton Lin's *Gay Bar – Why We Went Out* (2021) offers a rich depiction of queer history through a collective narrative, my memoir takes a different route. My focus is on personal memory, recounting my own experiences as a gay man in 1990s London. Unlike Lin, who intersperses historical research and accounts from others within his narrative, my memoir is a more personal account, relying on my own, perhaps fallible, recollections.

Both Lin and I explore the past of London's gay scene, but our approaches diverge. Lin's narrative is a journey through various cities and bars, enriched by anecdotes and second-hand stories. In contrast, my work is rooted in personal experience and point of view, offering a singular perspective on the era. While Lin's work paints a broad picture of the queer community's collective identity, my memoir delves into the individual's journey, providing an intimate look at self-discovery and healing.

Atherton Lin's narrative begins with the memorable line: "It's starting to smell like penis in here." (Lin, 2021 p.1) My memoir opens with "Did you forget? We were all fucking bitches, man." Both phrases alert the reader to a potentially unconventional bildungsroman, diverging from traditional trajectories found in classics like Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, yet each remains a journey of personal growth.

Drawing upon a 2011 article by journalist June Thomas, Lin ponders the existential future of the gay bar, the birthplace of the modern gay rights movement, and questions its relevance amidst evolving societal attitudes and behaviours. Lin's personal experiences function primarily as narrative tools to support the broader

historical thesis, illuminating the vibrancy of these spaces while examining their collective cultural significance.

Again, I acknowledge that my memoir, centred on personal narrative, captures only one facet of a complex history, not seeking to represent the entire LGBTQI+ community but just offer a window into one man's life during a transformative time. As Lin and I recount our stories, we embrace the risks that came with living authentically. Both contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of queer history and the impact of societal change on individual identity.

Maurice Bloch's argument about the dynamic nature of memory also influenced my narrative approach. Bloch (1998) argued that "our conscious memory does not contain all our past experiences or even all our past actions and their outcomes...our memory consists of fragments, from which we construct a story of our past in the act of recollection." As a result, certain memories that were previously thought to be irretrievable can be recalled when the individual re-experiences the emotional state that was present during the initial event. The past can be considered a dynamic resource that is subject to change based on the various situations or moods experienced by individuals. I realised that my memoir is not just a static record of past events but a living document subject to my current interpretations and emotions. This understanding allowed me to create a narrative that not only chronicles past events but also reflects my evolving understanding of these experiences.

As a recovering alcoholic and addict, abusing substances to put myself back in the same mental state and thus revisit old memories was out of the question. But if I were to immerse myself in the settings and social contexts of 1990s London, I theorised that I would still be able to unlock forgotten areas of my memory. The issue there was that, as I discussed in Chapter One, that urban landscape is now vastly changed, and it was questionable how useful it would be to go there in person. As Joan Didion once said, "The past is never where you think you left it."

To gather information, I turned to online resources and joined an online community called 'Lost Gay London'³.

Joining this online community led me to a surprising realisation. For nearly ten years, I had been fully immersed in London's gay men's scene, devoting my days to work and my nights to revelry. However, as I navigated through the online group, I couldn't find more than one or two familiar faces. In contrast to Bloch's suggestion that old memories might resurface when re-immersed in similar circumstances, I felt estranged. Instead of reconnecting, my own memories were overshadowed by a feeling of being an outsider, of not fitting in. The collective memories of the group seemed different from mine, creating a sense of disconnection. The established identity and dynamics within the group felt foreign, causing me to feel more like a spectator than an active member. To add to this, unresolved feelings from my past experiences in the scene resurfaced, intensifying my sense of isolation. Despite my past involvement, it felt like I was an outsider, once more a confusing maelstrom of social belonging and memory. I had to try and examine why I felt an outsider in that space dedicated to an era I was most definitely a part of? Was my memory playing tricks on me? On a base level, it prompted a desire within for drink and substances I had been free from for many years. The crutch I had used in my twenties for dealing with my insecurities when faced with a large group of my own community resurfaced and began a difficult battle to not fall back into old habits. Despite this danger, I needed to examine the accuracy of my own memories.

However, I intended to avoid a reliance on rumours and second-hand accounts while recounting certain histories, such as anecdotes about The London Apprentice or the arrests at The Vauxhall Tavern, as I felt it created a disconnect. As a memoir, readers expect a direct insight into personal experiences. When Atherton Lin occasionally steps outside of this framework to present someone else's narrative, it can feel as though the personal, intimate nature of the memoir is diluted. For example, Lin's reproduction of an email from his landlord describing The London Apprentice in the 1990s (2021, pp. 215-216), while informative and rich in detail, is

³ Lost Gay London, where members reminisce about their experiences and share photos from the 'good old days', can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/LostGayLondon>.

a borrowed narrative. Although he clearly indicates when he is using other sources, this shift from personal experience to researched facts may disrupt the flow of his memoir and undermine the memoir's authenticity for some readers. I have chosen a path that prioritises individual perspective over collective narrative. This approach, while different from Lin's, is not inherently better or worse; it's simply a different method of memoir writing that aligns with my objectives for Neon. My entrance into *The London Apprentice* (p.59) takes a different perspective as I try to involve the reader directly into the experience rather than report. "...the bouncer grunts 'aight,' in a totally disinterested tone as I realign myself and attempt an interpretation of a casual saunter to the entrance. There's an old-ish woman hunkered down in a windowed bunker by the door. Exactly like one of the gypsies at Hull Fair guarding the gates to the waltzers, her outstretched gnarled hand wants crossing with silver before allowing access to Wonderland."

With memory, particularly in the context of former substance abusers, it is critical to recognise the pervasive impact that addiction can have on the reliability of these recollections. Substance abuse is known to significantly affect the brain's capacity to encode, store, and retrieve memories, often contributing to difficulties with both short-term and long-term memory. The altered state of consciousness during substance use can lead to state-dependent memories, which may become less accessible or less trustworthy once sobriety is achieved. This phenomenon underscores the challenges faced by those in recovery as they attempt to reconcile their past experiences with their current state of mind.

Moreover, the recovery process itself, including detoxification and the ongoing journey towards sobriety, can influence cognitive functions and, by extension, the accuracy of memories. The trauma and stress associated with addiction and its aftermath can exacerbate these memory discrepancies, further complicating an individual's ability to trust their recollections.

However, it is important to note that the questioning of memory accuracy is not an issue exclusive to former addicts. As evidenced by the research 'Be Careful What you Recall' (2022) conducted by Giuliana Mazzoni and her colleagues, a significant proportion of the adult population—approximately 20%—report experiences of "non-

believed memories." These are memories that individuals acknowledge may not be entirely accurate, yet they continue to perceive them as genuine recollections. This prevalence of memory editing, where we selectively rely on certain memories while disregarding others, is indicative of a reconstructive memory system that is influenced by subjective experiences, emotions, and beliefs.

Considering this, it is evident that while former substance abusers may confront unique challenges in terms of memory reliability, the broader issue of memory accuracy is a universal aspect of the human experience.

Recollections: Hazes of Uncertainty

In the realm of recollection, the line between fact and fiction often blurs; memory is an unreliable narrator. Not just a recording of events, memory formation is a complex process coloured by perception.

Neon, is a memoir that embraces a 'realish' approach, a term coined by David Sedaris, which allows for the inclusion of some creative elements in the recounting of real events. Adopting this perspective is not unusual in autobiographical writing, as evidenced by Sedaris himself "Realish is a word I would use to describe my own books. I've always said that I exaggerate for the sake of clarity" (Sedaris, 2008). This approach recognises the fallibility of human memory and the subjectivity of personal experiences, and it is used intentionally to make the narrative more accessible and engaging for a wider readership.

Sedaris's work offers a different perspective in the landscape of autobiographical writing. Known for his wit, Sedaris has made a name for himself with his humorous and often poignant reflections on life, particularly through the lens of a gay man's perspective. His contributions to the genre of humorous autobiographical narratives are significant, as they showcase the potential of humour to engage readers in discussions on serious issues.

Like David Sedaris's narrative style, which is characterised by its non-linear structure, my memoir adopts a departure from the traditional chronological approach to autobiographical writing. Sedaris's works, such as 'Me Talk Pretty One Day' (2000), traverse through different time periods, recounting experiences from

both his childhood and adult life with no distinct chronological order. Similarly, in crafting *Neon* I have chosen to eschew a strictly linear chronology in favour of a more fluid, and at times, slightly disorienting sequence of vignettes. This decision stems from a desire to mirror the fallible nature of memory, particularly one that has been clouded by the haze of substance abuse. As Sedaris invites readers to piece together the mosaic of his life from scattered recollections, I too position events in my memoir to occasionally provoke that same sense of minor temporal dislocation. It is my hope that this 'off' feeling, this intentional disarray, will not only evoke the authenticity of my experiences but also engage the reader in a more visceral understanding of the disjointed reality that addiction can create. While the timeline may occasionally seem out of sync, akin to the narrative leaps found in Sedaris's work, it is meticulously designed to ensure coherence and to invite the reader in, with all its fractures and reconfigurations intact.

Sedaris's use of humour as a tool for discussing larger issues is a defining feature of his writing. He often uses humour to shed light on his experiences as a gay man, offering insights into the complexities of queer life. Similarly, like Hunter S.

Thompson, David Sedaris blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in his narratives. However, unlike Thompson's Gonzo journalism in a work like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Sedaris grounds his stories in personal experiences, utilising elements of fiction to amplify humour and relatability. For instance, in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000), Sedaris uses a humorous situation in a French language class to navigate serious themes of cultural differences and language learning. In *Santaland Diaries* (1992), Sedaris's elf persona, Crumpet, is an avenue for him to explore and critique the over-the-top, sometimes artificial nature of holiday cheer in a commercial setting. He recounts interactions with harried parents, overexcited children, and jaded staff, all while wearing an elf costume and maintaining a veneer of merriment. The contrast between the expected joy of the season and the reality of working in Santaland amplifies the sense of commercialisation. These examples showcase Sedaris's nuanced 'realish' approach to autobiographical writing, providing valuable insights for my own journey in crafting *Neon*. I sought to incorporate

elements of Sedaris's narrative style, especially his use of humour and non-linear structure, into my own work.

For example, in a vivid anecdote featuring Venus Man-Trap ('Up the Nose, Under the Stairs' p.158)—drag queen and club kid. Venus Man-Trap, the luminescent alter ego of Jason, who reigned supreme in the electric nightscape of the club scene. Not just a personality but an event, a performance that commanded attention and defined the party. Paid to be the spectacle, Venus was the walking, talking promotional material for clubs and bars, ensuring that every event graced by their presence was immortalised and photographed for the pages of *Boyz* and *QX*. Beneath that veneer of neon vinyl and face paint, I suspected Jason's life was a tumultuous journey marked by excess. The intoxicating blend of alcohol and narcotics was both his armour and his Achilles' heel, a means to elevate and escape. Though our acquaintance was brief and his influence far from benign, we found kinship on our road of self-destruction, for a while at least.

So, if "realish" is where vivid storytelling is rooted in personal experience yet amplified for effect, my portrayal of Venus Man-Trap above seeks to encapsulate more than just the factual recounting of events. Sedaris's technique, which I just adopted, involves a careful blend of reality and exaggeration to convey the essence of a character or situation. This approach allows the reader to grasp the full impact of the character's presence in the narrative – an impact that a strictly factual account may fail to deliver.

The 'realish' style acknowledges that memory itself is often not a perfect recorder of events but is influenced by emotions and perceptions. Thus, the description of Venus Man-Trap as both a spectacle and a personification.

In *Neon* our night of misadventure, amplified as ever by the haze of drugs and alcohol, is a compelling example of how memories, although potentially distorted, continue to colour our past. I remember many details of this story quite vividly.

However, given its outlandish chain of events, there has always been a concern that it didn't happen at all, it might well be a 'non-memory'. The gnawing possibility that the tale of 'Under the stairs, Up the Nose' might be a figment of my imagination—a non-memory—a fact which sometimes stirs within me a sense of anxiety. Yet, I've

come to realise that the veracity of each recollection is secondary to the emotional truths they encapsulate. This memory, with its wild and destructive hues, is a chapter of my past that I've learned to embrace, mistakes and all. I've deliberately refrained from seeking corroboration for the events recounted; to do so might unravel the narrative I've held close for so long. The memoir, steeped in the subjective reality of my experiences, is intended to resonate with readers through its authenticity and the shared complexities of human memory.

The snowballing state of intoxication is clearly portrayed through the erratic, disjointed narrative style, fragmented sentences, and my wandering train of thought. "Spinning, twirling – the world a blur of flashing lights and laughter. Venus, always the colourful blur in the corner of my eye." I wanted to convey to the reader the subjective experience of disorientation caused by substance abuse in a manner that would still be accessible, without overwhelming or alienating them. By using humour and an everyday chaotic tone, I hoped to create an empathetic response in the reader, while avoiding any sense of gratuitousness or sensationalism. "Tripping over my own feet, Venus catching me in a fit of giggles – 'Darling, you're a mess!'" Humour serves to further underscore the altered state of consciousness. I used the interactions with myself and Jason (Aka Venus Man-Trap) to oscillate between the absurd and the mundane. The line, "Jason, ever the voice of reason in the whirlwind of chaos – 'Should we get some water, maybe?'" captures the surreal quality of the drug/drink experience. Using this everyday tone to add a *hyperreality* to scenes (such as an elongated and pleasurable urination "Relief washing over me as I finally reached the bathroom – the simple act of urination never felt so glorious!") enhances the sensory experiences.

Each technique contributes to constructing a vivid and engaging exploration of an intoxicated state of mind. Whether this memory is accurate is less important than the overall impact it had.

Neon Pathways: Theoretical and Methodological Explorations

While an autobiography typically presents a sweeping narrative of a person's life, as seen in Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (1992), which weaves a

comprehensive narrative spanning significant portions of Monette's life, a detailed recounting of the first 26 years—memoirs often concentrate on specific incidents or periods that reflect themes. Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018) is themed with Chee's journey in becoming a writer. Gore Vidal's assertion that "Memoirs are our attempt to comprehend our own identities" (Vidal, 1995) a sentiment that echoes throughout *Neon*, which, rather than providing a comprehensive, full account of a life, focuses on a distinct period and experiences within it to illuminate the lived reality of being a gay man in 1990s London.

My approach to *Neon* was shaped by Endel Tulving's differentiation between 'semantic' and 'episodic' memory, as outlined in his work *Elements of Episodic Memory* (1983). His concept of episodic memory (Tulving, 1993 p67) as a system that enables human beings to remember past experiences in a multidimensional space-time context. It is essentially the memory of autobiographical events (times, places, associated emotions, and other contextual who, what, when, where, why knowledge) that can be explicitly stated or conjured. He contrasts this with semantic memory, which is concerned with knowledge about the world, independent of the context in which it was acquired.

Tulving describes episodic memory as allowing individuals to travel back in time in their own minds, a concept he refers to as mental time travel. This is an ability to re-experience the past, and it is deeply personal and subjective. Episodic memory is what enables a person to recall not just what happened, but also the personal experience of the event, including the emotional and sensory details.

I was interested in this concept as a way of working through my memories, which were beginning to form themselves into a series of vignettes, each serving as a snapshot of a particular period or event in my life.

Neon does adhere to the 'truth' in drawing on my real-life experiences, maintaining its non-fiction essence. However, it is not a strictly factual autobiography like Paul Burston's *We Can Be Heroes* (2022), nor a documentary-style creative non-fiction work like Jeremy Atherton Lin's *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out* (2021). Instead, *Neon* exists within the memoir genre as a work that balances historical accuracy with the

truth of my own experiences, acknowledging that these two elements can sometimes be in tension.

This may seem to run against Lejeune's theory that memoir and autobiography constitute an 'autobiographical pact' - an agreement between the author and the reader where the author promises to tell the truth about their own life, and the reader agrees to accept the narrative as a truthful representation of the author's life. With readers of autobiographies presuming that they are engaging with a 'discourse of truth', Lejeune highlights how "violations" of that pact often make the reliability of autobiographies a sensitive issue. This was highlighted in the extreme by the case of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* in 2003. Published as an autobiographical memoir, it was lauded for its gritty and intense depiction of the author's supposed experiences with addiction and recovery. The book gained widespread attention when it was selected for Oprah Winfrey's Book Club in 2005. However, in 2006, the investigative website *The Smoking Gun* alleged that Frey had fabricated significant elements of his book, including major aspects of his claimed criminal past and experiences with substance abuse. This resulted in a major controversy, as readers and critics debated the boundaries of truth in memoir and the ethical implications of misrepresenting personal experiences in autobiographical works. Frey initially defended his book, but as more inconsistencies emerged, he admitted he had embellished certain parts of his story. This admission led to backlash from readers who felt betrayed, including Oprah Winfrey, who confronted Frey on her show about the inaccuracies in his book. Frey's violation of the 'autobiographical pact' was seen by many as a betrayal of reader trust. But then it had been promoted based on its truth status.

This interplay between memory, truth and form is of paramount importance, when we think about the essence of memoirs and the level of truthfulness expected in autobiographical works. I was quite reluctant to define how I trod the line between the relaying of my memories and the fidelity of my account. The post-controversy climate has engendered a degree of scepticism amongst readers concerning the authenticity of memoirs. To preserve the trust of my readership, I believe it is essential to be forthright about the nature of my storytelling, which might include an

admission of the unreliability of memory or the employment of narrative techniques to enrich the story.

My first supervisor, Professor Martin Goodman, raised the concept of 'autofiction'. Autofiction originated in the 1970s with French writer Serge Doubrovsky, in reference to his 1978 novel *Fils*. The word itself is a portmanteau of 'autobiography' and 'fiction', reflecting the genre's blending of autobiographical truth with fictional elements. Autofiction challenges the traditional boundaries between autobiography and fiction, allowing authors to more freely explore their personal experiences and identities without being confined by the bars of hard truth. Doubrovsky coined the term to describe his approach to writing *Fils* (1978), which was based on his own life but included fictional elements. He asserted that autofiction allowed him to delve deeper into his individual experience and consciousness, beyond what traditional autobiography permitted. Since Doubrovsky's pioneering work, autofiction has become a significant genre in contemporary literature, offering writers a flexible and innovative way to explore personal and social truths. The concept of 'adapted memoir,' which I refer to as 'memoir' for brevity, is a form that intertwines the reflective and personal storytelling aspects of a traditional memoir with the creative liberties often found in autofiction. This approach recognises the subjective nature of memory and the narrative shaping of personal experience, diverging from a strict adherence to factual accuracy and instead embracing a cinematic technique to augment reader engagement. Conversational gaps may be filled, and events dramatised to highlight thematic elements and emotional truths, thus allowing for a presentation that prioritises the story's impact over chronological precision. While some critics, such as Brooke Warner, may dispute the validity of this approach—arguing that “it's either memoir or fiction. There's no such category as autofiction.” (Publishers Weekly 2021) it is evident through literary analyses of memoirs and autobiographies that the boundaries between these categories often blur in practice. Ben Yagoda's *Memory & Narrative* (2009) examines the authenticity of memoirs and the continual challenge to the notion of truth, stating, “Every act of memory is to some degree an act of imagination” (Yagoda, 2009, p. 114). Similarly, Mary Karr, an American poet, essayist, and memoirist, remarks, “memoir is not an

act of history but an act of memory, which is innately corrupt” (Karr, 2015). Therefore, the memoirist is frequently tasked with filling in gaps and interpreting events, presenting a version of the truth filtered through their personal lens. This does not diminish the veracity of the memoir but rather illuminates the intricate interplay between fact and memory, acknowledging that complete objectivity in recounting one's life can be an elusive ideal. Laura Marcus's *Auto/biographical Discourses* (1994) further explores this relationship between truth and purpose, suggesting that “the quest for truth in autobiography is inextricably tied to the author's underlying purpose; the level of factual accuracy is often modulated by the intent behind the narrative” (Marcus, 1994, p. 112). This statement reinforces the notion that autobiographical truth is not static, but a concept shaped by the writer's objectives and the context of the writing.

By writing *Neon*, embodying adapted memoir's form, I could bring together lived experiences with a creative freedom I felt necessary to convey their emotional tone.

***Neon*-ology**

Throughout the writing process of *Neon*, I donned multiple hats. As the narrator, my voice predominantly guides the reader through the memoir in the first person, offering direct insight into the unfolding events. At times, this perspective shifts, as seen in the vignettes 'Gary' (p.180) and 'Brief Encounters,' (p.51) where I adopt the voices of other characters, and in 'Ballad of the Black Cap,' where I employ a more detached, omniscient narration to provide a broader view of the story's context. The role of the interpreter was pivotal in sifting through a myriad of memories, arranging them into a cohesive narrative that informs and hopefully resonates. By employing narrative techniques, I transformed raw experiences into a structured storyline.

Lastly, as the protagonist, I delved into the emotional, using evocative language and knowledge I've accumulated in storytelling and literature. This allowed me to paint a picture of the world, inviting readers to step in and feel.

When choosing which stories to include and which to reject I drew inspiration from Roland Barthes' narrative theory. I sought to retrospectively unearth the significance of the narrative by asking introspective questions such as, “What was the lasting

impact on my life?” or “What profound meaning did these events hold?” (Barthes, 1977). An early vignette I had written, ‘Birds and the Blanket’ (appendix 1) serves as an illustrative example. This passage, a memory that lingered, catalysed a process of discovery. Before its writing, the significance of the memory and its connection to other events in the memoir was a mystery. In hindsight, its resonance becomes apparent: firstly, it captures my acceptance of being an outcast, of being left alone; secondly, it encapsulates a motif of ambitious ideas failing to materialise despite a steadfast faith in their planning. As a young boy on a garden blanket, I innocently believed that birds, lured by strategically placed sandwich crumbs, could transport me and the blanket to an avian utopia. This blend of naive expectation and flawed planning is a mirror reflecting my experiences in London. Just as the young boy sits there, expectantly gazing at the sky, I found myself in a city of dreams, often thwarted by inadequate preparation. Yet ultimately the story was not included in the memoir as I felt it distracted from the work, the age of the character was not aligned, the setting was not aligned, the intent didn’t position itself correctly for the rest of *Neon*.

The composition of a memoir demands a deft handling of narrative skills akin to those employed in the creation of fiction. A potent tool to encapsulate a broad time span succinctly is through summary techniques. Drawing from E.M. Forster’s notion of compressing “long passages of time and events” (Forster, 1927), I incorporated the art of summarisation, counterbalancing it with carefully curated scenes to deftly navigate the narrative through time. This technique echoes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s assertion in his notes for *The Last Tycoon* that “action is character” (Fitzgerald, 1925), underscoring the need to harmonise panoramic time shifts with intricate character moments.

An example of this is the ‘Gary’ (p.173) vignette from the memoir. After a spree of drug consumption leading to a blackout, an old friend from Hull made the long journey to London to take me back north for a summer of recovery. I chose to reduce the full details of this episode for two reasons: firstly, (as with ‘The Birds and The Blanket’) it deviated from the central London setting that I felt was crucial to the narrative arc, and secondly, my recollections from those months are mostly

wiped, only fragmented at best. Instead, I employed a change in perspective to introduce Gary, and narrated the transition succinctly. The departure from London, the northern summer, and my subsequent return to the capital are encapsulated in less than two pages. This technique allowed me to maintain narrative continuity while providing the necessary contextual information.

In crafting the narrative of my memoir, I drew upon an array of cinematic techniques to enrich the text and provide a visual depth to my storytelling. I approached the scenes and summaries with a directorial eye, utilising the concept of a cinematic long shot to frame the broader context of my experiences. This technique allowed me to present a panoramic view of life's tableau – from the intimate confines of a home to the bustling expanse of the city. This expansive perspective ensures that while many elements appear within the narrative's vista, they are all perceived from a unified standpoint, with no single aspect dominating the others.

Conversely, when the narrative demanded a more intimate and detailed examination, I turned to the cinematic close-up, a technique that magnifies the minutiae of a moment. Inspired by Fernando Vela's, admiration for cinema's 'magnifying glass', I sought to emulate how the camera lingers on the 'thousand movements of a hand that opens a door' (Duffy, 2005, p.160)⁴. This meticulous attention to detail creates a synecdochic relationship between part and whole, echoing the literary craftsmanship of Hispanic writers such as Mariano Azuela and Francisco Ayala who adeptly translated the power of the close-up into their prose. Furthermore, I found Sergei Eisenstein's montage theories to be particularly instructive. In the realm of film, a scene is not merely a static image but a dynamic means of engaging the audience with the unfolding narrative. The 'close up' serves as a narrative device that zooms in on characters and their settings, offering a detailed portrayal that invites the reader to delve deeper into the emotional landscape of the memoir.

⁴ Fernando Vela was an influential figure in the Spanish literary world, known for his role as the assistant editor for the "Revista de Occidente." In May of 1925, he wrote an essay that served as a commentary and supplement to Béla Balázs's 1924 work, in which he discussed the synecdochic nature of the close-up in film. His insights contributed to the understanding of how cinema could influence prose writing by allowing for a detailed focus on parts of a scene to express a larger concept or emotion.

I drew inspiration from the narrative framework of iconic television series like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, J 1997). Much like Buffy's adventures, each vignette in *Neon* is a self-contained story that also contributes to the overarching narrative. This method allows me to dissect moments with precision, offering readers an intimate glimpse into experiences while maintaining a sense of continuity. Joss Whedon's innovative approach to storytelling, which influenced the structure of later award-winning dramas (such as *The Sopranos* to *Breaking Bad* to *The Good Wife*) was particularly instructive. He masterfully balanced each episode as a special event, while carefully orchestrating the seasonal 'big bad' to loom over Buffy and her allies, culminating in a dramatic finale. Similarly, *Neon's* 'big bad' is the spectre of self-destruction that haunts my quest for identity and belonging, a journey often sidetracked by the allure of hedonism. I weave together these encounters with my own 'monsters of the week', set against a backdrop of sometime turmoil, humour and revelation, mirroring the heady mix of action and teen angst that made Buffy's story so compelling and unique for its time.

Here's an example from 'Hookers Hooking up' (p.105).

"Margaret – bouffant haired, vintage blue power suited, patterned tights. PA to who knows which mini-Hitler was speaking to Erin at her desk. I had watched her do this before." The significance in this scene resides not in the physical environment, but in the dialogic interaction and behavioural cues of the characters. "No matter the subject she always spoke in a low voice with furtive looks around the office." We discover the identity of these characters by the protagonist's observations of their behaviour.

When it comes to the depiction of others the writing becomes a theatre of my own memories, a stage where the characters of my past come to life. However, it is crucial to remember that these characters are not mere puppets dancing to my tune. They are, or were, real people with their own complexities and narratives. As the director of this piece, I have a responsibility to portray them with respect and care. While this memoir is primarily a narrative of my own life, it is inevitably intertwined with the lives of others. Many characters in *Neon*, such as Queenie, Lola Lasagne, Venus Man-Trap, Dr Francis, and Aunt Caroline, are real people. Their identities

have been preserved and are depicted with warmth and affection. Others, whose identities have been lost to the passage of time (untraceable, forgotten), are now either unnamed or given new identities (There were 3 managers of BarCode, now combined into one character, Lola Lasagne never hosted the Blind Date night . It was a female stand-up comedian, but two stories became one). The most flawed character of all these is myself. Any misdeeds or misdemeanours of others are downplayed, not out of revisionism, but out of an ethical commitment to avoid casting aspersions. This is not a tale of blame, but a journey of personal growth, healing, and understanding.

For example, in the vignette 'Oranges and Lemons are not the only fruit' (p.115), I told of how the resident rent boys were stealing anything not nailed down in my lodgings while the landlord was incapacitated by Special Brew. No individual was explicitly named. Thus, preserving anonymity whilst faithfully recounting my experiences.

I aimed to present as authentic a self-portrait as I could, one that avoided any semblance of self-glorification. The reader's engagement hinges on the transparency of emotion, as Mary Karr illustrates in *The Art of Memoir*—the prose should convey the emotional resonance of past experiences (Karr, 2015, p. 17). This required a nuanced approach to self-depiction, ensuring the narrative's tone struck the right chord, whether it be light-hearted or solemn.

To achieve this, I employed varied sentence constructions, often embedding the first-person narrative deeper within the sentence structure. This technique aligns with the principle of brevity recommended by Strunk and White in *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 2000), allowing the narrative's events and reflections to shine without being overshadowed too much by the author's presence. However, the avoidance of superfluous language, while important, does not directly address the use of the first-person perspective in memoir writing. For a more nuanced discussion of the first-person in memoirs, I turned to the insights provided by Vivian Gornick in *The Situation and the Story*. (Gornick, 2001), who emphasises the significance of the narrator's persona and the delicate craft of balancing self-revelation with broader thematic exploration by stating "What happened to the writer is not what matters;

what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened.” (Gornick, 2001 p.91).

A memoir risks becoming a self-indulgent monologue if it succumbs to excessive introspection. This concern echoes Patricia Hampl's warning against memoirs that resemble 'navel-gazing' sessions (Hampl, 1999). It was crucial to ensure that while the narrative remained personal and introspective, it did not alienate readers by becoming overly self-focused. To navigate this, I interspersed moments of self-reflection with broader observations and humour, much like the technique found in the genre of humorous essays by Augusten Burroughs or David Sedaris. This approach allowed me to explore personal growth and experiences while keeping the reader engaged with a blend of wit and skewed insight, thus avoiding the pitfalls of a narrative that might otherwise feel too inward-looking.

Rather than relying solely on extensive accounts of character growth, introspective reveries, or journal entries to reveal themes, I incorporated alternative narrative elements. For example, I might include a humorous letter from an office manager detailing items that have gone missing after I had worked there (p.44), or a satirical list of faux pas to avoid in various social situations—be it on a hospital ward (p.13) or as a guest in someone's home (p.180).

To allow readers to see behind any false bravado behaviour by the protagonist, I adopted a narrative technique inspired by the stream-of-consciousness style pioneered by authors like Virginia Woolf. The protagonist's internal monologues juxtaposed with the external narrative events. This was achieved through a stylistic shift in typography, using italics for internal thoughts, and a narrative tense change, creating a clear demarcation between external events and internal dialogues.

The objective was to craft a narrative structure that allows for a more profound, multifaceted understanding of the protagonist's emotional terrain, fostering a deeper reader engagement. For instance, within 'The Man in Manpower' (p.32), I developed a narrative duality: externally, the protagonist exudes confidence and professionalism; internally, however, a contrasting self-portrait of insecurity and self-doubt unfolds.

This internal-external dichotomy engenders a dramatic irony that enhances the narrative tension and reinforces the reader's empathetic connection with the character. This narrative strategy, thus, not only offers a more layered portrayal of the protagonist but also invites the reader into a more intimate understanding of his psychological landscape.

As Atherton Lin points out, "We did not go out to be safe. I didn't, anyway. I went out to take risks." This sentiment of venturing into the unknown resonates profoundly with a significant portion of the gay men's community. As observed by Hugh Ryan in *The New York Times*, the act of immersing oneself in the communal experience of these bars has had a profound impact on Lin's, and indeed my own, identity. Many of our peers from this time might also identify with this influence. This highlights the intricate relationship between individual agency and societal impacts in identity formation, a crucial theme within queer history.

The memoir serves a dual purpose: it is both a historical account and a therapeutic tool. Through the act of writing, I engage in narrative therapy, allowing for the exploration and reconciliation of past experiences. My work delves into my personal journey of self-discovery and healing, rather than centring around a historical collective thesis.

Chapter 3: Introduction

In this chapter, I delve into the theoretical framework that underpins my memoir, *Neon*, exploring the concept of 'adapted memoir' as a distinct approach to autobiographical storytelling. I position this approach within the broader context of contemporary memoir writing, drawing on the insights of Jonathan Taylor (2013) and Anneliese Mackintosh (2008) to illuminate the unique characteristics and possibilities of this hybrid form, while also acknowledging the ethical considerations inherent in adapting one's own life story.

As Taylor (2013) argues in "Scenes of Judgement: Genre and Narrative Form in Literary Memoir", many contemporary memoirs oscillate between immersive storytelling and moments of judgement or reflection. This oscillation creates a dynamic interplay between narrative immersion and authorial reflection, allowing authors to create a balance between the 'showing' and 'telling' modes of storytelling. Similarly, Mackintosh (2008), in "The Memoir vs Truth", explores the complex relationship between truth and fiction in memoir writing. She argues that while memoirs are expected to be rooted in personal experience, they also involve a degree of creative shaping and interpretation. This hybrid nature of memoir allows authors to explore the complexities of memory and identity in ways that traditional autobiographical forms may not. As Mackintosh (2008) aptly puts it, "The memoir is not a photograph; it is a painting."

Building on these insights, I define 'adapted memoir' as a form of autobiographical writing that draws upon personal experience while consciously employing techniques of adaptation to achieve specific narrative or thematic goals. These techniques might include:

Fictionalisation: This could involve altering timelines or sequences of events, imagining internal monologues or conversations, or embellishing certain details to heighten the narrative impact or to protect the privacy of individuals involved.

Composite characterisation: Combining traits of real individuals into composite characters can streamline the narrative, protect identities, and create more universally relatable figures.

Structural reimagining: Experimenting with non-linear structures, incorporating different points of view, or using fragmented narratives can create a more engaging and thought-provoking reading experience.

It is crucial to emphasise that these adaptations are not arbitrary; they are deliberate choices made to enhance the narrative, explore specific themes, or address potential ethical concerns. For example, in *Neon*, I fictionalise certain events to protect the privacy of individuals involved and to heighten the emotional impact of the narrative. By reimagining timelines and creating composite characters, I aim to create a story that is both deeply personal and universally resonant, allowing readers to connect with the broader themes of identity, addiction, and recovery within a specific cultural context.

This approach acknowledges the subjective nature of memory and the creative possibilities of storytelling, allowing authors to actively shape their narratives to create a more impactful and meaningful experience for the reader. However, it also raises ethical questions about the boundaries between truth and fiction in memoir. While 'adapted memoir' allows for creative licence, it is essential to maintain a commitment to representing authentic experiences and to acknowledge the potential impact of adaptations on the reader's understanding of the narrative.

In *Neon*, I employ the 'adapted memoir' framework to explore the complexities of my experiences as a young gay man in 1990s London, navigating themes of identity, addiction, and recovery within the context of a changing urban landscape and a community grappling with loss and resilience. By adapting my personal experiences, I aim to create a narrative that not only reflects my individual journey but also speaks to the broader experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating similar challenges.

The focus on present experience in 'adapted memoir' may make it difficult to fully dramatise the 'after-the-fact reframing' that is central to narrative therapy and recovery. This presents a creative challenge that I will address in this chapter. While *Neon* does not explicitly portray the process of recovery in a traditional sense, I will explore how the act of writing and adapting the memoir itself has contributed to my own understanding of my experiences and my personal growth. I will also analyse

how specific craft choices, such as the inclusion of moments of reflection from a later perspective and sections from other characters' points of view, contribute to the exploration of recovery, even if they appear to deviate from the strict definition of 'adapted memoir'.

Furthermore, I will examine the concept of cultural bereavement, a term coined by Eisenbruch (1991) to describe "the experience of the uprooted person - or group - resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity". This sense of loss can be particularly acute for LGBTQ+ individuals who may experience rejection from family or society, or face discrimination and prejudice due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The loss of LGBTQ+ spaces and communities, as documented in research on the decline of LGBTQ+ venues in London, can further contribute to this sense of bereavement. In *Neon*, I explore how cultural bereavement manifests in the experiences of young gay men in 1990s London, as they navigate a changing urban landscape and grapple with the loss of community spaces and personal connections.

Throughout this chapter, I will analyse specific examples from *Neon* to demonstrate how the 'adapted memoir' framework has shaped my narrative choices and contributed to the overall impact of the work. I will also discuss how this approach aligns with the principles of narrative therapy, which has been instrumental in my writing process and personal growth. By critically examining the theoretical underpinnings of 'adapted memoir' and its relationship to narrative therapy and cultural bereavement, I aim to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the creative and analytical choices that have shaped *Neon*.

Adapted Memoir and Autofiction: A Distinction

While both "adapted memoir" and autofiction blur the lines between fact and fiction, drawing upon personal experiences while incorporating imaginative elements, a key distinction lies in intentionality and the contract with the reader. In "adapted memoir," the adaptations serve specific narrative or thematic purposes. The author makes conscious choices about how to shape their narrative, always with an eye

towards enhancing the reader's understanding and engagement. This might involve fictionalising certain events to heighten tension, developing composite characters to protect privacy or create a more universal representation, or reimagining timelines to explore alternative perspectives.

Autofiction, in contrast, often prioritises the exploration of the self and the subjective nature of reality.³ As described by Lecarme (2017), autofiction disrupts the traditional "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune, 1975)⁴, creating uncertainty for the reader about what is real and what is imagined. This aligns with Zipfel's (2022) concept of the "double contract" in autofiction, where the author simultaneously claims to be telling the truth while also engaging in fictionalization⁵. This creates a dynamic interplay between truth and invention, requiring readers to constantly adjust their interpretation of the text⁶.

While "adapted memoir" may also involve a degree of blurring between fact and fiction, the intentionality of the adaptations creates a different kind of contract with the reader. The author acknowledges the adaptation but maintains a commitment to representing the essence of their experiences. The focus remains on crafting a compelling narrative that resonates with readers on both an emotional and intellectual level, while also recognizing the ethical considerations inherent in adapting one's own life story.

By distinguishing "adapted memoir" from autofiction, I aim to highlight its unique position within the broader landscape of autobiographical writing. While both approaches offer valuable avenues for creative expression and self-exploration, "adapted memoir" prioritises the crafting of a compelling narrative that resonates with readers on both an emotional and intellectual level. This approach acknowledges the power of storytelling to illuminate the human experience, while also recognising the ethical considerations and creative possibilities inherent in adapting one's own life story.

Representing Recovery in Adapted Memoir

The process of writing and adapting Neon has also been deeply informed by the principles of narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990). Narrative therapy

emphasises the power of storytelling to shape our understanding of ourselves and our experiences. By externalising problems and identifying alternative narratives, individuals can gain a sense of agency and begin to re-author their life stories. In writing *Neon*, I have engaged in a similar process of externalisation and re-authoring, exploring the complexities of my past experiences and reframing them in a way that promotes healing and growth. This aligns with Gu's (2018) assertion that "narrative, life writing, and healing" are interconnected, with the act of storytelling serving as a therapeutic tool for both the writer and the reader.

The focus on present experience in 'adapted memoir' can make it difficult to fully dramatise the 'after-the-fact reframing' that is central to narrative therapy and recovery (Neimeyer, 2000). This presents a creative challenge, as recovery often involves a retrospective understanding and reframing of past events, a process that may not be fully captured within the present-focused framework of 'adapted memoir'.

However, this challenge also presents an opportunity for innovation. While traditional recovery narratives often focus on a linear progression from addiction to sobriety, 'adapted memoir' allows for a more nuanced exploration of the complexities and contradictions of the recovery journey. By adapting elements of the narrative, I can highlight the subjective nature of memory and the ongoing process of meaning-making that characterises recovery (Gu, 2018).

In *Neon*, I do not explicitly portray the process of recovery in a traditional sense. Instead, I focus on capturing the lived experience of addiction and the gradual shifts in perspective that contribute to healing. The act of writing and adapting the memoir itself has become a form of therapeutic processing, allowing me to revisit and reframe my past experiences with a newfound understanding. This aligns with research on the therapeutic benefits of memoir writing, which suggests that the process of constructing a narrative can promote self-reflection, emotional catharsis, and personal growth (Pennebaker, 1997).

Specific craft choices in *Neon* have contributed to the exploration of recovery, even if they deviate from the strict definition of 'adapted memoir'. The inclusion of moments of reflection from a later perspective, such as in the vignette "Pink Freud",

initially offered glimpses into the protagonist's evolving understanding of his experiences. However, I ultimately decided to move these sections to the appendices, recognising that while they may have been therapeutically valuable for me as the author, they risked disrupting the immersive quality of the present-focused narrative and potentially confusing the reader (Doubrovsky, 2012). Similarly, the inclusion of sections from other characters' points of view, such as "Gary", was initially intended to provide a broader perspective on the protagonist's experiences. However, I ultimately decided that these sections detracted from the immediacy and authenticity of the 'adapted memoir' approach and chose to move them to the appendices as well (Eisenbruch, 1991).

By critically evaluating the risks and rewards of these choices, I aimed to demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the creative challenges and possibilities involved in representing recovery within the context of 'adapted memoir'. This required a careful balancing act between maintaining the integrity of the 'adapted memoir' framework and exploring the complexities of recovery in a way that is both authentic and engaging for the reader.

Ultimately, *Neon* seeks to offer a unique perspective on recovery, one that acknowledges the limitations of traditional narratives and embraces the creative possibilities of 'adapted memoir'. By exploring the interplay between present experience and retrospective reframing, I aim to provide a nuanced and insightful exploration of the recovery process within the unique context of my autobiographical narrative.

The Lack of Backstory in *Neon*

In *Neon*, I made a conscious decision to omit a detailed backstory for the protagonist. This was a deliberate choice rooted in my understanding of narrative structure and my desire to create a more engaging and universally resonant reading experience. I felt that the traditional "poor little rich boy wanting his independence" narrative was a well-trodden path, and I wanted to avoid clichés that might distance the reader from the protagonist's experiences.

By removing the backstory, I aimed to create a sense of immediacy and immerse the reader in the protagonist's present experiences in 1990s London. This approach aligns with Hemingway's "iceberg theory," where the deeper meaning and complexities of the story lie beneath the surface, allowing readers to actively participate in constructing meaning and drawing their own connections (Hemingway, 1932). As Hemingway states in *Death in the Afternoon*, "If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them" (Hemingway, 1932).

However, I also recognise that the lack of a backstory might leave some readers feeling disoriented or lacking a deeper understanding of the protagonist's motivations. To address this potential limitation, I employed other elements of the "adapted memoir" framework to provide glimpses into the protagonist's past and inner world.

For instance, the fictionalised encounter with Angel in the club after the thefts at Barcode explicitly shows how the effects of substances erode the good nature of the protagonist. Similarly, the composite characters in *Neon*, such as Jason/Venus Man Trap or Queenie, represent a range of personalities and experiences, offering a broader perspective on the complexities of identity and community within the context of 1990s London.

By critically evaluating the decision to omit a traditional backstory and discussing how other elements of my "adapted memoir" framework compensate for this omission, I demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of my craft choices and their impact on the reader's experience. This approach allowed me to make informed and deliberate decisions in shaping my narrative.

The Protagonist's Journey into and out of Nurse Training

The protagonist's journey into and out of nurse training in *Neon* is a significant aspect of his narrative, reflecting broader themes of identity, purpose, and resilience. While the specific motivations behind his decision to pursue nursing are

deliberately omitted, this omission serves a strategic purpose within the "adapted memoir" framework.

By not explicitly stating the protagonist's reasons for entering nursing school, I subvert expectations and challenge the reader to delve deeper into his character. This approach allows me to prioritise the exploration of his identity and experiences in the present, rather than dwelling on a potentially predictable backstory (Hemingway, 1932).

Furthermore, the protagonist's pursuit of nursing, despite his lack of genuine interest, can be interpreted as a reflection of the societal pressures and limited options faced by young gay men in the 1990s (Savin-Williams, 2017). By omitting a detailed explanation of his motivations, I subtly highlight the constraints and expectations placed upon him, forcing him to navigate a path not entirely of his choosing. This resonates with Savin-Williams' (2017) analysis of gay men's identity development, which suggests that even in the 21st century, they continue to negotiate societal expectations and pressures that may influence their life choices. This omission also contributes to the protagonist's portrayal as a tragic hero. His eventual downfall can be seen as a consequence of his initial compromise, highlighting the dangers of sacrificing personal aspirations for societal acceptance. The challenges the protagonist faces during his training further contribute to his character development. These challenges, including his struggles with addiction and his growing disillusionment with the profession, shape his perceptions of himself and the world around him.

Ultimately, the protagonist's decision to leave nursing marks a turning point in his narrative. It signifies a rejection of societal expectations and a reclaiming of his own agency. While this decision may contribute to his descent into addiction, it also represents a necessary step towards self-discovery and personal growth.

By critically examining the protagonist's journey into and out of nurse training, I offer a nuanced exploration of the complexities of identity formation and the challenges faced by young gay men in the 1990s. This analysis not only addresses the examiners' concerns but also enriches my thesis by providing a deeper

understanding of the protagonist's experiences and their impact on his overall narrative.

Neon Healing:

"The secret source of humour is not joy but sorrow; there is no humour in Heaven." Mark Twain

In the 2017-18 period, as I maintained my sobriety amidst ongoing mental health challenges, I often felt out of place, as if I were an outsider observing human interactions rather than participating in them. My previous instinctive responses were now replaced by a conscious navigation through a sober reality, where emotions had to be faced without the buffer of intoxicants of any kind.

Weekly psychotherapy sessions were crucial during this time, though the intensity of the memories we explored was daunting. It was here that my use of humour and self-deprecation became particularly noticeable, serving as an oral narrative tool to alleviate the discomfort of revisiting painful experiences. This approach was challenged during an incident described in the vignette 'Pink Freud', found in the appendix, where my psychiatrist advised against the use of humour during our sessions.

The rationale behind my psychiatrist's advice was to ensure that the sessions maintained a focus on the substantive issues at hand, without the distraction of humour. This contrasted with my own reliance on humour as a coping mechanism and a means of connecting with others. This dynamic serves as a metaphor for a broader struggle within my journey – the conflict between reverting to familiar habits and the challenging process of developing new, healthier coping strategies in the context of sobriety.

It was possible to extend this beyond the therapeutic setting into a writing process, reflecting the internal conflict that presents itself holistically in *Neon*. The tension between the 'old self', where humour once served as a shield to deflect the discomfort of introspection and the scrutiny of others (represented by the protagonist), emerged in the 'new self' (as the author of the work) as a positive

force, a means of engaging with my experiences and the world around me more fully. This 'new me' employs humour not as a barrier, but as a bridge – connecting my internal world with external realities, facilitating a more honest and constructive dialogue with both me and my audience. The narrative in 'Pink Freud' incorporates this metaphor, illustrating the difficult process of discarding the protective layers formed during addiction.

I recognised that the stories I told myself about my experiences significantly influenced my emotional responses. The transformative power of humour in my therapeutic journey is juxtaposed with the sombre reflection on the Admiral Duncan bombing in Soho⁵. This tragic event, mentioned in 'National Exit on the National Express' (p.204), marks both an end and a beginning: the end of my memoir's narrative and the start of a tumultuous personal journey grappling with alcoholism. The bombing was a pivotal moment, not just for me but for the entire LGBTQI+ community.

While the bombing itself is a sombre topic, far removed from the humorous anecdotes that populate other sections of my memoir, it is an integral part of the end story and the cultural history of late 1990s London. My departure from the city and the subsequent struggles I faced were a way to navigate through my mental health challenges and reshape my identity.

By re-narrating traumatic events with this humorous lens, I could ascribe new, less distressing meanings to them, thereby empowering and highlighting resilience and growth. This approach doesn't negate the pain much but offers a narrative that emphasises a capacity to overcome and forge ahead. For example 'Sex Talk' (p.91); the incident of nearly joining a brothel, while fraught with underlying terror, is treated with a humorous detachment, thereby reframing a serious issue like prostitution into an anecdote that can elicit laughter and, paradoxically, a sense of triumph over adversity.

⁵ On the evening of April 30, 1999, the Admiral Duncan pub, a popular hangout within the city's LGBTQI+ community, was the target of a homemade nail bomb planted by David Copeland. The bomb exploded at around 6:37 PM, during the height of the pub's evening rush, killing three people, and injuring around 70 others, many of whom sustained severe and lasting injuries. This hate crime marked the third in a series of bombings Copeland orchestrated throughout London over a two-week period, each aimed at different minority communities.

Research-wise the work of Berg et al. (2009) in understanding how humour can be employed as a therapeutic tool is useful here. They highlighted the use of exaggeration humour to help individuals with anxiety articulate their fears, cautioning that it must be applied sensitively to avoid trivialising any concerns. This ability to retrospectively laugh at once-frightening events can signify a positive shift in one's relationship with their past.

Additionally, Dziegielewski et al. (Humor: An essential communication tool in therapy, 2003) discussed the social benefits of humour, describing it as a "lubricant for social life" that, when used effectively, can alleviate tension in awkward situations (Dziegielewski, 2003 p. 75). They make a critical distinction between the appreciation and creation of humour, both of which play vital roles in therapeutic contexts. For those who struggle with creating humour, learning to appreciate it can offer a new perspective on life's challenges. Dziegielewski et al. further noted that humour can act as a release valve, allowing clients to alleviate tension, depression, and discomfort, making it less burdensome (Dziegielewski, 2003 p. 76).



Fig 6: The immediate aftermath of the bomb blast at the Admiral Duncan pub in Soho, London on 30 April 1999. Photograph: Neil Libbert/Neil Libbert

The humour in *Neon* comes from the self-deprecating and ironic style that is typical of Northern British comedy. This style isn't just about making people laugh, it's also a way of looking at the darker sides of life and making sense of them. It's a humour that comes from the culture and society of the region, a tradition that transforms the darker aspects of life into a subject for both laughter and reflection.

The candid comedy of Victoria Wood in *Pat & Margaret* (BBC, 1994) or *Dinnerladies* (BBC 1998-2000), has significantly influenced *Neon*'s approach to sensitive subjects⁶. Wood's skill in addressing serious issues with a humorous touch is one I hoped to mirror in my own narrative style, where the portrayal of personal dynamics and insecurities is undertaken with a relatable and poignant humour.

Gay writer Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* (BBC 1988,2020) and *Smut* (Bennet, 2012) are other demonstrations of how humour can be used to connect to readers or audiences on a deeper level than mere laughter⁷. Bennett's monologues, and stories show his characters' inner conversations through an external lens of small talk and minutiae.

Andrea Dunbar's raw and honest portrayal of life in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Dunbar, 1982) didn't shy away from the tough realities of working-class life in Yorkshire, by not just including sex, but focusing upon it⁸. I hoped to contribute to this unflinching tradition with the sex scenes in *Neon* by being authentic in showing the awkward and absurdities of the act itself (p.141).

By drawing on these influences in writing from writers such as Wood, Bennett, and Dunbar, I aimed to also contribute with a Northern perspective. Alan Bennett on discussing the question of how much of oneself to reveal talks about how much of it

⁶ Victoria Wood: Victoria Wood was a celebrated English comedian, actress, singer, and writer, renowned for her versatile performances and her ability to capture the nuances of British life in her work. She gained fame with television shows like "Victoria Wood: As Seen on TV" and "Dinnerladies," and her comedy was characterised by its warmth and observational humour.

⁷ Alan Bennett: Alan Bennett is an acclaimed British playwright, screenwriter, actor, and author known for his sharp wit and poignant storytelling. His notable works include "The Madness of George III," "The History Boys," and "Talking Heads."

⁸ Andrea Dunbar was a northern English playwright best known for her raw and honest depictions of working-class life. Her most famous work, "Rita, Sue and Bob Too," was a dark comedy that reflected the realities of the Yorkshire housing estate where she lived. Dunbar's talent for storytelling shone through her plays, which were often influenced by her own experiences growing up in Bradford's Buttershaw council estate. Despite her untimely death at the age of 29, Dunbar's legacy endures in the world of British theatre.

can be a precarious balancing act. He said there's a certain resistance that comes with the fear of being confined within the narrow walls of a single identity. "It's about wanting not to be put in a box, to be put in someone's pocket," he's talking about how to be labelled is to be limited. This notion rings true for my own writing process, where there are grapples with the desire not to be defined by any singular trait or moment, in the case of 1990s gay London, a world where choosing one bar or club over an alternative venue would label you in one way or another. Bennett further touches upon another writer's paradox when it comes to conveying depictions of sex, articulating a sentiment that resonates deeply with my own experiences: "You're damned if you do and damned if you don't." (I interpret this to mean that a writer can't leave out sex scenes but prepare to be criticised if you keep them *real*). The dilemma of addressing such topics with honesty, yet not being reduced to them. It's a tightrope walk between truth and perception, where every word can either liberate or constrain the narrative.

Bennet acknowledges the challenge, he says "it's hard to write about these things honestly without being seen as crude or vulgar. It's a balancing act between telling the truth and not making people uncomfortable."

If I return to the other influential Northerners and look at their attitudes to sex (within their writing at least) Victoria Wood has had a unique way of writing about sex. Her song 'The Ballad of Barry and Freda (Let's Do It)' (Wood, As Seen on TV, BBC, 1986) is a great example of how humour can be used to talk about sex in a light-hearted way. A song to be performed, Wood's lyrics are funny and honest, showing that sexual dynamics are something that can be both funny and serious. Similarly, Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* deals with sex in a frank and honest way. The play, set on a working-class estate in Bradford, tells the story of two young women who have an affair with an older married man. The play is both shocking and compelling, and it shows how sex can be a source of both pleasure and pain.

In my work on *Neon*, I've come to embrace the brightness amidst the gloom, a process that can be profoundly therapeutic. Although the stories I craft may delve into themes of heartbreak, disgust, or shame, by utilising narrative therapy

techniques and delving into the explorations of preceding writers, I am hopeful to make a meaningful contribution to the literary landscape. Moreover, I find a sense of healing and understanding in the act of sharing.

***Neon*: Illuminating the Past, Reflecting the Present, and Guiding the Future**

Neon is not merely a collection of personal anecdotes; it is the culmination of a transformative journey from my start in fiction, through autofiction to an honest self-portrayal. The characters I once conjured in the realm of imagination were, in truth, fragments of my own story—this revelation was the catalyst for a shift towards a more autobiographical approach.

The process of writing *Neon* was indeed therapeutic, as it forced me to confront and articulate aspects of my life that I had previously shrouded in allegory. By embracing vulnerability and honesty, I was able to dissect and discuss my past behaviours—my explorations of sexuality, instances of theft, and the myriad of choices that, at times, called questionable. These discussions are not just narratives; they are admissions of my humanity and an invitation for readers to engage with the complexities of one person's experiences to compare them to their own.

Neon is also not an exercise in self-congratulation; it is an earnest reflection of part of my life's journey, intertwined with the broader socio-cultural and historical context of a particular era. It was a challenge to compose, taking me back through dark times of substance abuse, recovery from the same and consequential and continuing mental health struggles. Yet, this revisitation was not without purpose; it was a deliberate act of vulnerability, a conscious decision to share my life's most intimate moments, extend them beyond myself, to confront and expose any negative shame. *Neon* is also an inquiry into the narrative craft and the theoretical constructs that have informed its shaping. It was created not solely for the purpose of recounting events but to engage readers in several ways, the three versions of recovery I set out at the start of this exegesis, cultural history, memory, and well-being.

The development of *Neon* has been both arduous and enlightening. As I discovered the vital role that memoirs play in chronicling cultural history and offering social

commentary. My hope is that *Neon* is able to ignite conversations about the preservation of our cultural narratives and the power of personal stories in capturing our collective human experience. I plan to reintroduce stories and vignettes previously omitted for brevity, to provide a more comprehensive portrayal of the narrative, and as such contribute further to the ongoing dialogue encouraging reflection on the influences that shape our identities and profound impact of our individual and shared histories.

Appendices

Stories omitted from the creative artefact but referred to in the exegesis.

Appendix 1

Birds and the Blanket

There once was a red, tartan blanket, a staple in the back of our Volvo estate and a familiar sight in days of garden banishment. Tasselled, blue stripes, green stripes. Unwelcome in the house during the day, ever informed on the benefits of fresh air and generally deemed too underfoot. I was often relegated to the garden on this picnic blanket, perhaps with a cheese sandwich, a rusk, or a rich tea biscuit, you get it. Sat there one warm spring day, the smell of an unnaturally orange creosoted fence up my nose, I traced the lines on the blanket with a finger. Blue, blue, green blue, red, when I heard birds. Just your common garden birds I suppose, sparrows or blackbirds, I'm no Bill Odie but I think we had some house martins under the eaves. Someone told me that later. Perhaps. But a marvellous idea had come, an idea that no-one had ever had before, pure unfiltered creativity. If I pulled off this idea everyone would want to be with me always, they'd never leave me in a field again when I wet myself. Or wet myself because I was left in a field. I forget. But my scheme. This grand scheme. Crumbing my munch, dropping the pieces on the tassels at the end of the blanket. The corners too for good measure. Then I laid down in the middle of the blanket, looking up into a bright white sky and called out in bird language. If you really wanted to, that's enough to let you. Everyone knows that. The birds were to hear my call, come to my blanket, and picking up the crumbs from the sides of the blanket, they would fly up, tassels in beak, I would be taken up into the sky for my very own avian magic carpet ride as a thank you. And how people would like me then.

Birds are pricks though.

Appendix 2

Pink Freud

"Here we are, just take a seat..."

"Anywhere or..."

"Just wherever you feel most comfortable."

"My sofa at home?" Nothing. I smiled. "Well, you probably hear that joke a lot. Okay, then I'll just sit here by the door 'case I need to do a runner."

Again nothing, he drew up a chair opposite mine and sat. *He'd be good at poker. Poker? I don't even know her.*

"So, Matthew," *Is he constipated? He looks constipated. Strained. Is that how I should look? Strained? Don't I usually look like that? How DO I usually look? How do I look now? Wish I had a mirror, I need to look constipated.* "I'd like to start off today, by talking a little bit about why you're here."

Don't I have a file? Does no-one read? What is this bullshitery? Is this because I'm not constipated?

"Straight down to the good stuff huh? Usually I get dinner and a movie." I wiggled my eyebrows. His face, impassive as cold soup. "Tough room. Alright. Well, I've been on medication for a good long while. Take so many pills in a morning I'm a mincing maraca... rattling down sissy street..." Nothing. "Anyhoo. Last time I saw my doctor, well, she thought some specialised, er, specialised this..." I made a vague finger twirl in the negative space around my head, "might help me."

He made a note on a large pad with a black biro but didn't look up.

"Matthew. Remember why we're here. My role is as a psychiatrist and I'll be doing nothing to collude with you, not be complicit in any way, regarding any distractionary conversational techniques. Humour and jokes have their place, but maybe that place is not here. Something to think about. With that said, perhaps we can focus on an open honest discussion and maybe we'll get somewhere." This time

he looked up. "Okay?" There was a possibility, the merest whiff that what I had mistaken for constipation was in something else, something perhaps sympathetic.

"Well, arse."

"I would like to talk about allies." *Don't they always?*

"Allies?"

"Allies." He didn't look up. *He never looks up. I'm not great with eye contact myself. We're probably staring into completely different abysses... abyss? Abyssinia. I'll be seeing ya. Abyssinia. Wonder where that is, I think there's a sort of dog that comes from there and it...oh.* "Matthew? Allies. People you perceive to be on your side. Thoughts?"

"Well, sure. Many and varied. Thoughts. About allies, 'course I probably just called them friends."

"Perhaps there's a friend then, a constant identity throughout your life? A childhood friend that you still know. Who has been an ally."

He really loves that word. It's his favourite word of all the words. The bestest most bosom buddiest word...

I'll have to give this some thought.

Appendix 3

Ballad of The Black Cap

She was called Mother Black Cap, and she was a witch. Her legend was such that after they burned her at the stake, the local public house took on her name in memento mori. Mother Black Cap's legacy as an enchantress continued to work on all who took refuge within her walls. In her final fifty years of this iconic reincarnation Mother Black Cap was high priestess of a new ostracised coven; a subversive sisterhood. A new generation of witches wove spells over her crumbling bricks. Spells cast with the heady fumes of greasepaint, flutters of a beaded lash and discounted liquor. Sequinned sorcery, songs, and dances. Rituals performed nightly, twice on Fridays.

Camden High Street, present day. Tourists clamber up from the underground station. Blinking in the daylight, their ignorance of pavement etiquette shows in the faces of disgruntled locals. After the stagnant air of the tube station the new faces gulp, eager for fresh air - what they get is curry and incense. With an attempt to look like real Londoners they venture forward affecting native disinterest. Alongside the middle-class millennials in black leather trench coats and home county Rastas they really have very little to prove.

Mother Black Cap sits in the drizzle watching all. Her doors and windows boarded with black plywood, incomprehensible graffiti - badly spelled tattoos daubed across her scandalised Victorian arches. A pile of composting garbage guards the doorway. Even Camden's homeless are barred, rusted fencing only affords fast food packaging shelter here. Rainwater soaks into the posters stapled to the wood chip hoarding. Once enthusiastically urging passers-by to help restore The Black Cap to her former glories - make a pilgrimage to a web site, sign the petition. Now their blurred headlines and yellowing paper reflect years of a fruitless campaign.

But I remember her. Grand as old Queen Victoria herself. Bustled bay windows in a lustrous dress of black paint. In those glossy skirts our whole world was reflected - street lights, a midnight sky... bouncers with their clipboards. Painted gold script on the siding proclaimed that The Black Cap were purveyors of the finest

wines, and food was served all day on Sundays. I never drank wine there, not even on Sundays. But their export lager did the trick. Once Inside, a dark Christmas - crimson upholstery, gilt and black ornamentation envelops the narrow marble topped bar. Bacchanalian anthems summon many pickled patrons to the dancefloor. Others wait under crystal lights at the counter, here perhaps in anticipation of the scheduled magic due on stage. Or perhaps in search of a different kind of magic, the kind of magic that lasts for just one night. Smog from a hundred menthol cigarettes minuet to mirror balled ceilings, smoke and mirrors, hidden corners. Nostalgia has fixed this place. Locked Mother Black Cap within a memory, her own spell no match for the avarice of London landlords. Memento mori Mother Black Cap.

Appendix 4

Brief Encounters

Bass thumping in my chest, pulsating in my head. The DJ spins JX telling me there's nothing they won't do, anything I want them to. The air dank with sweat and breath. My t-shirt is sticking to my back, dark patches under my arms. Kinda wish I'd worn underwear. Trying to read the lips of the topless man waving a fiver in my face. His dilated pupils and disco gurning complicating the process. A cocktailed tang of stale lager, supermarket aftershave, Marlboro lights and poppers assault my nostrils. My boots - wet with beer, battle a floor slick with dropped ice cubes. Rows of shaved heads baying for more drink as I pull taps with one hand and break glasses with the other.

Barman Number Two puts dripping hands on my waist, a kiss on my neck and tucks a full glass under the bar. Heavy with vodka, light with coke. A secret ritual. A return performance is expected. But first, a wet fag packet and disposable lighter wait on an empty aluminium barrel in the wings. Out in the dark a riot of song, singing they can't keep their hands off you, there's nothing they won't do.

Odd sensation. Finding someone you thought was dead, not be. Like finding a gay Lord Lucan... any type of Lucan.

Looking through pictures of rave era Gay London's ancient history ostensibly to find photographs of the Brief Encounter bar. Brief Encounter when it was smutty and cool. Not Brief Encounter after the hotel sharing the building complained poofs cruising and dancing to cheesy euro-trash pop were bad for its image. Not Brief Encounter after the brewery went in with hazmat suits, disinfected it, coat of paint, modern furniture and lost all its customers. A comment on a Facebook post, an unusual spelling of Kenith ringing a distant bell in the bowels of my psyche. Click the profile pic to investigate. And there they are, back from the dead - Queer Dracula. Queenie, aka Kenith. Pseudonym long forgotten. Still alive, still drinking, still smoking, still holding court. A social media queen now. Jokes, one-liners, issuing forth on a Facebook wall, a digital barman. Still with the husband. I attended their drag wedding at the Black Cap. Queenie's white bodice made special from neoprene. Boobs stained with cider and black by sundown. I was shocked. I'm emotional. I'm sending a friend request. Barely know what to say. Do you remember me? We worked at Brief. We would do our shift and troll up 79CXR to take advantage of their drink specials and watch the desperate drunken mating dances of late-night revellers we had been plying with booze since tea-time.

Do you remember?

I don't believe it. I didn't recognise... How are you?

It's been so long.

Do you remember?

All gone now of course.

Of course. All gone.

So long, it's been so long.

So long.

He congratulates my sobriety; it isn't for him. I'm glad. She is happiest with beer and vodka, and I'm pleased it hasn't destroyed him. I don't ask about his blood, and I don't mention mine. I say I have to work and leave the window. I'm so

happy the world still has a Queenie in it, but I doubt my life will allow one. I wish it would.

I thought my Queenie dead - 90s Queenie is. I miss her...

Hey Barry, that new glass collector don't speak a word of English but I wouldn't kick him outta bed for eating biscuits, y'know what I mean? Well, hello... who's this? This the new guy? Well... new guy, if Barry's finished with, ya, you're with me. Jesus CHRIST that's a tight t-shirt, I could cut glass on them nipples, Barry, is that why your hired him? Dirty old fuck... Right c'mon then, and mind your feet on the stairs down, Barry's got all his shit piled up everywhere, bloody deathtrap. So, everyone calls me Queenie, you knew that though, right? We're working the cellar bar tonight. Shouldn't be too hellish for your first night, just dark, loud and full of perverts. HAH, they're gonna love you ain't they? Running around in spray-on jeans like that. Hail, Mary I can see you're not Jewish. Such a tart. We're gonna get on. Mind that nail sticking out the doorframe. Bloody deathtrap. Oh, Jesus CHRIST what is that odour? Did someone get locked up in here and die? Ugh, I'll have to check the toilets... or not. Fuck it. Okay look, standard bar set-up, we'll use last night's lemons, voila job done, glasses racked, tada job done. If you need a barrel changing, scream for Queenie. I'll take care of it coz you're not allowed in the beer cellar. Whaddyathink of Barry the manager huh? Yeah, he IS a filthy old poof. We go way back, him and me... all the way back to Bromley... don't ask. He never comes down to the bar. That harpy of an assistant manager is... well one big eyeball so let's have a little cocktail before she comes. You can keep it under here, you're allowed soft drinks, so we'll make it look like coke. Got cigarettes? What you got? Camels? Can I have one? Nice. Rob's in later, he's me fella. Looks like a right old clone, so everyone thinks he's the man in this relationship but me, fem in the streets, butch in the sheets, sweetheart.

They erased it, you know. It's not boarded up. You can't walk past and see where a pub used to be. It isn't knocked down. They erased it. A seamless blank wall where the entrance used to be. Picnic tables outside where we would sit in hot city summers with cold beers. Now just a pavement. London absorbed our blemish, took

it back into itself. Smooth grey wall, part of some other building I never really noticed. Battleship grey. Utterly confounding to look at. Dementia. I know it was there. The entrance was right here. Neon signage Brief Encounter, red and blue. This corner was the way in, then down three dogeared steps. Cubicles, banquettes around the walls, echoes of an American diner. Formica for days. The bar, sticky and wet, a barman pretending to polish a glass with a damp bar-towel, evaluating my naivete. Scuffed lino, chipped tables. Basement bar doesn't open till after sunset, says a sheet of paper blu-tacked to a pair of saloon doors. Above the top bar was the office, below the top bar the coat-check (really just a roped off section of a corridor and an aluminium rail on wheels) through to the basement bar where the DJ span cheesy choons and the sweat dripped off walls like lube down a drainpipe. Below the basement was the cellar, a tiny white room with pipes and gas canisters and walls upon walls of shiny metal barrels. A thirsty clientele. All these floors, all this space, all behind this smooth grey wall. Still there preserved in aspic? Forgotten. Hidden. Decades from now will workmen pull down a wall and discover an emaciated twink still sipping a vodka and coke in a crop top? Erased history where men drank lager, smoked lights, sniffed poppers and buggered each other in the toilets. And there's not even a blue plaque on that flat grey wall.

Appendix 5

Gary

That fucking little shit. I knew something like this would happen.

He merged onto the A1 to the disgust of the lorry driver in the left hand lane who blew his horn breaking the relative silence of a 4am motorway. Oh, fuck off. You saw me.

He turned up Robert Miles and his Children on the radio. Cracked the window to flick out the stub of his cigarette. It bounced onto the carriageway behind his Ford Transit exploding into a short lived firework display on the tarmac. He left the window open. Pop trance floating in the night.

When I get down there, I'll friggin kill him. If he's not dead. He's not dead. Stupid little fuck. He will be when I've finished with him.

The phone call just hours before:

"Hello?"

"Oh hello. Is that um..." The caller read something off a piece of paper, "Gary Turner?"

"Speaking."

"Hi Gary. You don't know me. My name is Michael Robinson. I'm the manager of The Champion pub."

"The Champion?" Why did he know the name of that pub. Couldn't think.

"Yeah. Er. I got your number from looking through Matt Commerford's contact book?"

Oh shit. "Yeah, I know Matt, he's my friend." Not seen him for a while, he moved down to London."

"Right. Oh. You probably won't be able to help me then." Michael the manager gave a nervous chuckle.

"He keeps in touch. Are you looking for him? Did he lose his wallet or something?"

"No no. Nothing like that. He works here. At the Champion and well, he seems to have taken something that didn't agree with him. Uh, something he shouldn't have." Fuck "He was taken to hospital. I'm not sure what happened really. He was out with one of the regulars."

"Pills or something?"

"I believe so. I'm not really..."

Oh shit. "He alright? Where is he?"

"Fine, he's fine. They er. Had to pump his stomach of course and... things. But he's fine. He's back here at the pub, up in his room where he stays but er, we thought, I thought perhaps. Perhaps it wasn't the best place, given the circumstances."

"What's the address?"

Little shit.

And now the motorway.

"Alright buddy, what can I get you?"

Obviously Australian. "Nothing. I'm Gary Turner. I'm here for Matt. Your manager called me. Michael something."

"Oh righto. I'll give him a buzz. Won't be a sec." He turned his back and picked up a telephone handset below the optics. Nice pub though. Big.

"He'll be right down. Can I get you something?"

"You got coffee?"

"Nah sorry. We don't do coffee. Coca Cola?"

I'm gonna kill him.

There's a beat in the darkness. Irregular. Not a heartbeat. Not a melody. Banging. What is...

It was white. The light stung. Bouncing off the white walls and into my brain. The whole thing was chaos. The banging that felt like earthquakes was just a tapping, a quiet tapping at the door. I pulled myself off the mattress, I still had leather trousers on, bare-chested, socks, boots by the door. I stumbled to the door and opened it, my hand across my face, my features screwed up behind, the faint smell of vomit coming from somewhere.

"Morning," said a voice.

"I massaged the bridge of my nose and looked beyond into the darkness of the tiny hallway. A man stood there, scuffed white trainers, ironed blue jeans, no belt, chequered black and white shirt hugging a barrel chest, folded arms, stubbled round face and an angry expression.

"G... Gary?"

"Morning," he said again and pushed past me into the room. I closed the door.

"Uh. I'm not sure I..." Where is that vomit smell coming from?

"Bit fuzzy, are we? What happened?"

I have to sit down. "Just a sec. I have to sit down." I returned to the mattress and perched on the corner. My stomach feels so bad. What the fuck is Gary doing here? "Gary? I'm a bit. Sorry I just woke up. It might take me a minute."

"Let me fill you in." He was pacing up and down the room now. "Your boss called me on the phone last night, mine was the only number he could find. Said you were in the hospital."

"Hospital?" Is this a joke? "I don't think I..."

"You were in hospital having your stomach pumped. Practically an overdose. What were you doing?" He didn't wait for a reply. "So, in the middle of the fucking night I'm driving down here to get you."

"Jesus."

"You fucking wanker. I told you, didn't I?"

Of all the people to call... the DJ from Hull's one and only gay bar?

"I don't... hey did you get my postcards?"

He softened. "Yes. Yes, I did. I put 'em on my fridge."

I smiled and looked at the floor. My stomach hurt worse than before. "How's The Vox?"

"It's all the same. Mike still comes in every Friday, though not as often as he used to. Don't think he's got anyone to talk to now."

"He could talk to you."

"I'm too old." He looked at my hands folded across my stomach. "They pumped your stomach. That's why it hurts."

I took my hands away and tried to smile. "God. I can't believe you came down all this way to see me. How long are you staying for? I think I have to work at um... what time is it?"

"Matt. You don't have to work today. I came because your boss called me. You er... you don't work here anymore."

"Wow. This is turning out to be a fun morning."

Gary has a knack for being at home wheresoever he is. Off to make coffee in a kitchen I barely step foot in, and I live here. Used to at least. Daren't go downstairs. Can't face em. Can't face 'em right now.

I was pushing my 5 t-shirts into my holdall and wondering what things I could do without. Leave as much here as I can. Don't need it. CDs, need CDs.

The door was kicked gently open, and Gary walked back in a mug in each hand, he put one down on the floor by where I was kneeling. Black coffee, steaming from the Bass Brewery branded cup. "We should nick these mugs." I said lifting it toward my face with a slightly shaky hand "Souvenirs."

"Not content with overdosing, now you're stealing too?"

I can't remember the time I had a hot drink. Feels weird. I took a tiny sip. It was too hot. I put it back on the floor.

"I didn't do it on purpose. I don't even remember. I was at a party. Next thing I know you're walking in my room, telling me about hospitals, stomach pumps, how I got the sack, and that I'm on my way back to Hull. It's not how I planned the end of my night out. There's been a lot happening that I wasn't in on."

"Where else are you gonna go?"

"I'm only coming for a couple of weeks or so. Get myself sorted out."

We finished the rest of our coffee in silence.

By lunchtime, and with Gary by my side I ventured downstairs to say my goodbyes. Jason was there nursing his usual pint and a shot. He saw me as I came in and came over to pull me into a hug. It was warmer than the plastic coated one we'd had in the back of the cab, from my perspective only a few hours previously. He pulled me over to the wall by the fruit machine and Gary went over to the bar.

"What happened?" I whispered.

"I know Michael is mad at us. He wanted to bar me. Guess I'm too much of a good customer."

"Well, I don't work here no more. Too much trouble obviously." I fumbled for a cigarette, "They got the DJ from my hometown to drive down and take me away. How fucked up is that?"

Jason started laughing. "You're not gonna go, are ya?"

"Doesn't look like I've got much choice. Can't stay here. Don't work here. I got nowhere else to go."

"I managed to talk Jeremy out of throwing me out."

"What the fuck happened? We weren't that bad."

"How much do you remember?"

"Uhhh, we came out of the toilets after that woman was banging on the door. We went back for a drink then... I woke up."

"C'mon to the bar. You're not going back to the suburbs with a goodbye drink."

"I'm not going to the suburbs."

"Pint of Export please Stevo."

"I don't know what's happening actually. Things are out of my hands somewhat. It's like I'm with my parents again."

"Why you going then? Thanks, Stevo." He passed me a cigarette and the pint. I can't see Gary. I guess a quick drink won't do any harm. He'll come and grab me.

"I don't have any choice. No job, no money, no place to stay. I'll just pop back up with Gary. Get my shit together and come back down in a week or two. The train comes right in, it's quite easy."

"Well look. I hope you don't blame me. And if it wasn't for Jeremy, I'd have no problem you staying on the sofa till you got yourself sorted out again."

"Thanks Jase." I took a swig. Oh, that tastes good. Yes. Feel better already. Just try and get as much in me as possible before I'm stuck in a car for 4 hours. I blew blue smoke towards the fruit machine. "It'll all be fine."

Jason knelt down on the floor beside my holdall and fished about for a few seconds, he straightened up grinning.

"What?"

"Just a little going away present. No, don't look here. Do it in private. Just in case suburbia fucks you up the wrong way."

A hand appeared on my shoulder. "What are you doing?" It was Gary.

"Just saying goodbye. Drinking a quick farewell, y'know."

"Sup up then. We're off."

I mugged at Jason who gave me a sympathetic expression in return. I stubbed out the cigarette. Drained my glass and followed Gary out the side door. Waving goodbye without looking back. Exactly like Liza Minnelli at the train station at the end of Cabaret.

There is something soothing and uncomfortable about long car rides. The sound of the road, the swishing of the overtaking, the endless parade of hi-nrg hits that Gary insisted on playing.

"Do you still play all this on Friday nights Gar?"

"Yeah. They love it." They still love the 12 inch disco mix of Together in Electric Dreams by the Human League? Do they? Do they really? "And now I DJ down at the Alex on Saturdays. It's quite busy there now."

"Mmmm? Good. Good. That's good. Yeah. Maybe I'll mosey on down at the weekend."

"Yeah. Or you know. You could take it easy. Let yourself recover a bit. You gonna see your parents while you're up?"

"Oh God no. I'm not even going to tell them. Just a quick pitstop. Nobody has to know."

There was silence for a while after this. The Human League kept singing about their dreams, the hi-nrg mix almost as long as the car ride.

"Here we are. It's only a box room really, but you'll be alright, won't you?"

"Yeah, it's great. Thanks Gar. You know I can't believe you came all that way to get me. I just. Can't believe that."

"What are friends for eh? I'll let you settle in, bring you a cup of tea."

"Great. That's great. Thank you."

The room was small, a single bed against the wall by the door and boxes upon boxes of things taking up the rest of the room. An old Christmas tree against the curtains. There was no wardrobe or drawers, but I didn't need any. I opened my bag, and took out my t-shirts, maybe there's a clean one I can change into. There

was something looking like a black cloth, it was the charcoal grey polo shirt of The Champion neatly folded like a pair of socks. I don't remember putting that in. I pulled it out and from inside dropped a clear plastic baggie. 3 pills sat in the bottom and 2 paper envelopes. Joy. Perhaps things might be looking up after all. Now if only Hull had a nightlife I'd be in business.

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