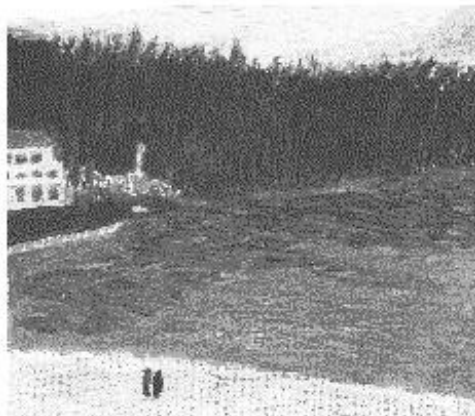


Martin O'Rourke

RetuRn



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“I wipe it off on tile, the light is brighter this time
Everything is 3D blasphemy
My eyes are red and gold, the hair is standing straight up
This is not the way I pictured me
I can’t control my shakes
How the hell did I get here?
Something about this, so very wrong
I have to laugh out loud, I wish I didn’t like this
Is it a dream or a memory?”

Corey Taylor (8)

one

Johnny liked it when people accused him of being weird. He thought it added another dimension to his character, made him appear more interesting. He took great pleasure in recounting some of his more bizarre dreams and thoughts, exaggerating as necessary, treating his listeners' usual weirdness-approval responses as a personal compliment. As if what they meant to say was "wow, you have a great mind, Johnny, you're deep." He envied his friends when they had dreams wilder and stranger than any of his, even with exaggeration. They didn't seem to care about the audience they were stealing from him, they didn't appreciate the rush. If there was a drug Johnny could take to speed up his overactive imagination, he would take it. The cheese-before-going-to-sleep routine did fuck all for him. And it wasn't as if it was a problem he could share with the medical community.

Something told him this morning that the hazy residue from his night's work could be well worth remembering. As with all his dreams, the recollection began with a spark. Something seen or said that returned his mind to the place it had been while he slept. It was on the walk to college that he began to remember. Unaware of the laughs his puzzled face was earning from the secondary school kids along his path, he concentrated hard, focusing on the colourful visions washing back into his brain. He saw the street he was on, also in his mind. But the colours were all screwed up. The sky was a murky shade of swamp green, and the tarmac road was a dirty yellow hue. He was alone on the street, which was odd, considering its usual bustle. A quick thought consulted him – perhaps it was night, and he was seeing some sort of photo negative? The sky above was usually a cold mix of dark night and the fluorescence from the town's street lamps, and the road should be pitch black. Having explained this much to himself, he found himself drifting past the entrance to the church, which was eerily dark, and not the welcoming red-brick building he was used to. He passed one row of houses after another, each block distorted, and seemingly melting and swaying with an invisible breeze. The railway bridge loomed over at the end of the street, its warning markings an alien pallor. Passing under the bridge, the bright shades of the Post Office jumped out at him. Gone was the dull green that dominated the

shopfront, and in was a delicate pink. Johnny had always harboured a thing for pink.

It's not a fucking girl's colour...

He found himself drawn to the new shades, and came to a stop at the letter slot. And pulled a white envelope from his coat pocket. Without checking that the stamp was secure, as was his norm, he slipped the letter into the mouth and heard it drop to the dry floor below.

His eyes were a mixture of hate and disappointment as he left behind the colourful dreamed images, and trudged once more through the grey December morning.

“That’s fucking it?”, he muttered incredulously. Big deal. He had thought that it was going places. Like bringing him further into the town, where he would note the changes, and congratulate himself on his mental ability to join fact with fiction. But posting a letter? Shit, he didn’t need to dream to do that.

College was its usual monotonous, uninformative self. It wouldn’t be so bad if he had a couple of people to talk to, but it seemed to him that he had missed the section on the CAO form which had said “this course is strictly for arseholes.” Which made him the only non-arsehole in his class. There was a fabulous range for him to dislike – the arrogant Dublin fucks who knew it all; the idiot country boys who fought, ridiculed, and paid little heed to their own hygiene; the naïve jumper crowd, just in from secondary school, with mothers who cried when they left the roost each Sunday; and a stack of the most pompous, self-inflated bitches on the go. He couldn’t lie – he’d give it to one or two of the girls, but the chance would not arise. The full extent of his conversations with any of them had been “what class are we in next?”, or “where’s room 313?.” And he was fucked if he was going to do the whole social thing. All his friends were in college elsewhere, and hardly any of them bothered to come home at the weekend. Not that he blamed them – he wouldn’t if he had the choice. So most of his social time went on travelling to these magical other places, where the women were good, plentiful, and willing to talk to him.

The freezing drizzle had reduced his ears to numb flaps by the time he got home that evening. He would have worn his hat but for the fact that it was bright green - immediately recognisable – and he had been wearing it the night one of his shithead friends had kicked a car’s windscreen in. Dez had been inconsolable after Spurs had lost to Arsenal, and a little alcohol had only compounded his problems. Which was fine, but as they ran from the screaming car, Dez could return to his cosy little flat in Dublin, while Johnny was left to roam the home streets in disguise. His hat was the first thing any witnesses would have seen racing down the street, so it made sense to retire it. He couldn’t relay this story to his mother, naturally, so he put up with the scoldings.

There were two letters thrown liberally on the desk in his room. He recognised the gaudy envelope from Telecom Internet, looking for more money. It partially obscured a plain white envelope, which he naturally reached for first. His name was printed on the front in bold type – a thing he himself had started doing lately to fool people into thinking that it was something of importance, rather than a simple tribal exchange of insults and kudos. He tore at the back flap, cursing it for not being one of the user-friendly envelopes, which opened fully with only the slightest encouragement. It was a messy opening, but his thoughts were on the odd shape of the contents. It wasn’t a regular letter, but of a more rigid nature. The envelope came apart in his hands, and he immediately recognised the unmistakable flipside of a Polaroid photograph – a shiny black square bordered in white. He grabbed the photo, and turned it over. His first reaction was to smile. And then his hormones subsided, and he frowned.

Why would someone send him a picture of a topless woman? More to the point, a *Polaroid* of a topless woman? That seemed to suggest something of a more personal design – if it had been a clipping from a magazine or newspaper, there would not have been the same amount of puzzlement. But a photograph, an original snap? There were more questions – the woman’s face was not fully visible. Her head appeared to be twisted at an odd angle, and the part of her mouth in view offered a strange, tired leer. She seemed to be draped over a nondescript armchair, and it was the split seconds following the outline of the chair that led Johnny to the strangest discovery. The woman was wearing a pair of football shorts – light blue, with darker blue shades running through, and three white

stripes along the visible thigh. Johnny could not make out any logo, but he recognised the shorts straight away.

He had worshipped the Belgian goalkeeper Jean-Marie Pfaff as a young teenager, and taken in every single detail about his hero. To him, Pfaff was unique, in that he took so much pride in his appearance, he never looked dirty, or messy, but always immaculate. Pfaff was helped in this regard by the fact that Adidas, the kit manufacturers who supplied both the Belgium national team, and Bayern Munich, Pfaff's club side, were at the pinnacle of their designs. And their kits always looked the best on Pfaff. One of Johnny's favourites had been a light blue shirt, with darker blue shades, and white trim. It was the matching shorts to this jersey that the topless woman in his Polaroid was wearing.

His father was humming some Kinks song at the dinner table, and the bastard thing kept interrupting Johnny's thoughts. As it was, he was being hounded by his mother for not touching his steak.

"What's wrong with you, are you not hungry?"

He realised that it would be mentally more convenient to just eat some steak, and then try to work through the things in his head. Was that merely a coincidence? He had seen pictures before of women posing in football gear, but never in those shorts. Shit, they hadn't been worn by any team in ten years. So where the fuck did she get them? And how did she know to wear them in a picture for him? Fuck, why was she sending a picture to him anyway? As he sliced through his meat once more, he paused the questions to take note of the fact that he was being remarkably cool about the whole thing. After all, if some chick wants to send pictures of herself with her tits out, how bad? But who is she, and why send it to him? Fuck, those shorts....

Poring over the picture again that evening, he made very little headway in attempting to further understand its meaning or its source. And Johnny was never happy until he at least had options as to what his answers could be. No matter how much he racked his mind, he did not see how anyone could have meant to puzzle him. Sure, some of his older mates would have been around when he waxed lyrical about Jean-Marie Pfaff, and maybe they even still remembered. But where the fuck would they get those damned shorts? He fell upon the assumption that it could only be coincidental. Some picture taken years ago. Someone had taken this

picture of their girlfriend, or mate, or something. And one of his mates had come across it, seen the shorts, and thought it was appropriate for Johnny. Yeah, that was good for him. It was the only explanation he could muster. He'd email Dez, or Brian, or maybe Stan, and see if they knew anything.

There were highlights of some Italian Serie A game on late that night, and he stayed up to watch it. He had no real interest in the league anymore, seeing as his adopted team, Bari, had long since been relegated. He decided against listening to a few tunes on the headphones before he hit the sack, and instead climbed straight into bed. He checked once more that he had removed his new Polaroid from the desk and hidden it, and switched off his lamp. Having had a long strenuous day listening to shithead lecturers, walking to and from the college, and puzzling over some topless girl in a Polaroid, sleep was not that far away. But as hard as he tried, he could not drop off. He swung his legs out of the bed, and walked dazily to the bathroom. He poured himself a glass of water, took a piss, and suddenly decided to check his emails. He padded back into his room, and switched on his ageing P.C., quickly pumping the volume back down, so as to not wake anyone else. The system loaded up, and shortly he was moving around his South Park desktop. He doubled-clicked on the Outlook Express icon, and the mail program sprang up on screen. He hit the "Send & Receive" button, and the "Checking Mail" window popped up. A message appeared, telling him he had one new message to be received. The speed at which it moved along the progress bar told Johnny that there was some attachment to the email, a file of some sort. The progress bar inched slowly towards the end, and disappeared. A further window appeared, proclaiming that the program was "Combining Partial Messages." Then, the familiar error box popped up. There would have been an accompanying annoying click, but Johnny had disabled the sound.

"Error retrieving attachment. Message returned to sender."

"Dumb shit", muttered Johnny. He tried his mail account again, but this time there was no message waiting for him.

He opened his eyes, and the panic he knew all too well gripped him. He was paralysed; his eyes darted around the room, and he tried unsuccessfully to jerk his shoulder in loose retaliation.

“Hey!”, he blurted, but nothing came out. His own silence, coupled with the booming sound of the intended word inside his head, was terrifying. He shook his head from side to side, but in the real world, he was as rigid as a plank. Then, it suddenly registered itself with him. He knew where he was. He’d been here before, and he was immediately ashamed of himself for letting panic exert her influence. The first couple of times he’d experienced sleep paralysis, he had been convinced that he was dying, that whatever power was above him, was taking his body back from him. But then he had stumbled upon an article on the subject in some sci-fi magazine. It was simply the Old Hag paying him a visit once more – the Grey Ghost, the Kanashibari, the Popobawa. A mythical visitation, to explain the reality of dreaming whilst awake, silently screaming while waiting for the body to catch up with the brain. Johnny had found himself becoming more and more accustomed to the sleep paralysis as time went on – once the initial panic had passed; he enjoyed the feeling of complete paralysis, and the heightened sense of perception that his brain enjoyed while his body still slept. He would rate each occurrence with the last – each one would increase slightly in length. With his body returning to normal, his heartbeat levelling off, and his breath slowing, he turned over and closed his eyes once more.

two

The next morning, he was able to recount his latest experience of the waking dream to his breakfasting family. None of them had ever known anything like it, so they listened politely while Johnny dramatically relayed his tale of struggle with the night demons. After the twelfth explanation, they had more or less exhausted any interest that they may have had in the subject, but there were enough manners to spare Johnny this fact. This one was especially lame – instead of an interesting dream to go with the paralysed part, all he did was drink water, piss, and play with his computer.

“Don’t forget, you have to go into work this evening. Jim is sick.”

“Yeah, I didn’t forget.”

He didn’t mind the job so much – the bigger of the two record shops in the town, and he worked there Saturdays and the occasional weekday evening. He got to work with music, which was cool – and also the nearest he’d get to the music business, seeing as those other bastards had kicked him out of the band. What was the fucking point in having a female singer anyway? The music they had been doing was too heavy to have some girl singing. Bastards.

College came and went in a surprising flurry of artistic talent. Johnny had it all laid out in his mind – he was going to finish this two-bit shithead course in 2 years, and then fuck off to America, where he’d start another band. His band. He’d work with the poxy diploma he was going to get, and use his spare time putting a band together. He already had a name – Clinch. He spent a very productive day designing a logo for his band, and even went as far as to throw together a detailed cover sketch – probably only a single sleeve, though. He didn’t like complicated album covers. And he had enough lyrical content to fill a Queensryche-style double concept album. All he needed was a few like-minded musicians to work with, and he’d be sorted. America was where all the good bands were coming from anyway, and in 2 years, they’d be ready for something new.

“Fucking great.”

He'd only been behind the counter thirty minutes when she walked in. Susan fucking Welch. The new singer, his replacement. He turned his back on her, and appeared to busy himself with an order of Celine Dion singles. If she was fooled, she wasn't paying any heed.

"Hey, Johnny, alright?"

He may have been many things, but he wasn't rude. He turned around, holding back on smiling. She was the enemy, after all. She stood before him, her head to one side, tugging absent-mindedly at a long strand of brown hair caught behind her ear.

"Hi, Susan."

"You're not normally here on Fridays, are you?"

"Yeah, I'm just in 'cos Jim's sick."

"What's wrong with him?"

Why did she care? Jim wasn't in the band.

"I don't know, I just got a call to come in."

"Are you here until nine?"

"Yeah, I'm locking up."

"You doing anything after?"

"No, not really."

He had every intention to call to Dez when he got back at ten – Dez usually brought down a healthy bag of grass, whenever he bothered to come home. But a part of Johnny was interested in hearing what Susan fucking Welch had to offer as an alternative.

"I'll be in Dolan's if you want to call in for a pint?"

For a brief second, he was taken aback. What was this? She'd never bothered her ass to ask him to go drinking when he was the singer, and she was a mere hanger-on, with no connections to him or to the band. But like any red-blooded male dropped into the act, he saw through the querying bitterness to the wonder as to why she wanted to see him. He saw through to her wet blue eyes, the T-shirt with "Snot" emblazoned on it, jutting out quietly from her breasts; her hips, barely outlined by the slightly over-sized trousers she was wearing.

"Yeah, I'll call in for one when I'm done here."

"Cool", she smiled, and turned on her heels. He watched her hair sway as he left the shop, the last traces of her scent leaving his senses. He stood there quietly for a moment before having to turn to deal with another customer.

He locked the shop at nine, and walked the short distance to Dolan's. For a Friday evening, it was remarkably empty, and he spotted Susan with no difficulty. He took his jacket off, threw it beside her, and headed to the bar. She had three-quarters of a pint in front of her, so he decided against offering her another. He ordered a Carlsberg, took a greedy gulp, and made his way back to her table. She moved her legs to make room for him, and he slid into the seat beside her. Surprisingly, for someone who had never more than the odd pleasantries to exchange with him, she got straight to her point.

"Look, I feel shitty about the whole band thing. It probably seems really bad to you...."

She left an inviting pause, and Johnny let himself in.

"No, I'm not the happiest about it, but what can I do?"

Her frown deepened as he said this, and he thought she looked even better like that. Heart-tuggingly disturbed, and pensive.

"I know that we weren't exactly the best of friends before, but I don't want us to fall out, or not talk, over this."

Her sad tones pulled him in like a magnet.

"I don't blame you at all, I've no qualms with you."

"No? So you're not mad at me?"

"No, it's the others I don't want to talk to", and he managed a smile.

"Well, I understand if you're pissed with them, but as long as we're cool, I'm happy."

With that out of the way, the two moved on to how college was going for them respectively, what new bands were worth checking out, and what their mutual friends were up to, before she left for her lift at ten, and he headed to Dez's place. She parted with a loose promise to see him later, possibly over the weekend. It was a proposition he found himself liking more and more as he hunched his shoulders against the cold night air.

Johnny had the foresight to pick up a packet of Rizlas and some Pepsi from the petrol station en route to Dez's, just in case. Needless to say, his long-haired friend had a small amount of gear left over from the week, and he was delighted to see Johnny bearing gifts.

"Man, I'm all out of skins, and I can't leave the gaff 'cos Munchkin is asleep."

Munchkin was his younger sister, and if he was baby-sitting, it was apparent that his parents were on the piss. The two settled in Dez's room, and he span "Master Of Puppets" at a reasonable volume, so as not to wake the sleeping child. As Dez threw the first of the night's joints together, the two of them swapped what little had gone on in their lives since they had last met. The room was turning foggy by the time Johnny got around to asking about the Polaroid.

"No, man", said Dez, exhaling, "it wasn't me. Could have been Bri or Stan. Don't know what they're at."

Johnny's brain was starting to melt nicely, so he didn't really give much of a fuck who was responsible. He went on to describe his encounter with Susan. Dez was already licking a second set of skins.

"She's a fox", he offered. Johnny fended off accusations that he was "well in" with her, and the two shared their opinions as to what exactly they'd like to do to Susan Welch.

"I wouldn't mind if she was a total bitch, 'cos then I could hate her for taking my place."

Dez, who had never been more than a glorified roadie with the band, grunted, his mind consumed with a contrary roach.

"But the thing is, she's so cute, and sound, and everything."

He signed off as a second large spliff came his way, with orders to spark it up. Some minutes later, their conversation topic had moved on to why the Muppets kept allowing the overly-critical Statler and Waldorf into their shows.

three

The long walk home, with fresh cold air passing through his well-stoned head, was most pleasant. He mumbled away to himself, something about a Polaroid camera and Susan Welch, and blue goalkeeper shorts. He made it as far as the 24 hour service station, and bought a generous array of cheap crisps, to combat the growling hunger in his stomach. He wolfed four packets straight down, and then pocketed the rest, with a view to enjoying them while he watched a video at home. *The Crow* seemed like a good idea. You had to be in the right frame of mind to watch *The Crow*, and he reckoned he was.

It was a remarkably still, clear night, and the brightness of the stars seemed to go hand in hand with the biting chill. He was proud of himself for this romantic thought, and wondered if Susan would like it. He decided that she wasn't the Shakespearean type. And tried in vain to remember any Snot song.

"She had Snot on her shirt", he declared out loud, and then laughed when he realised what he had said. He thought he'd avoid the front way home – the night-clubs would be getting out, and there was always boys in from the country, looking for fights.

"Dumb redneck fucks", he agreed with himself. He jumped as he heard a sound ahead of him, but it turned out to be an extremely drunken old guy, who hailed Johnny, and needlessly informed him that "it's a cold one."

He turned past Mitchell's Corner, and headed towards the old schools. Besides the two boarded buildings, only the basketball courts remained, and were a haven for idiots who had seen *White Men Can't Jump* too many times, and spent most of their free time shooting hoops. "They're harmless", Johnny scolded himself, "so don't call them idiots. You're the idiot." He felt a faint glow of righteous pride as he corrected himself. The courts were empty, as were the dark buildings further up on the opposite side of the road. Something ahead of him caught his eye. He squinted, and faintly focussed upon the yellowing outline of a man. He was too far away to make out properly, but had a strange glow around him. Johnny stopped dead a little further on, seized by a mild, interested force.

The shimmering shape stood completely still, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his long overcoat. The effect of the glow on his face was such that Johnny was having great difficulty in zooming in upon his features. There was a sense of superiority, of higher authority, about the way in which the man stood before him. If Johnny hadn't been so childishly puzzled, he would have indignantly pressed the stranger on what exactly it was that made him so much better. But he was a long way from being able to summon any of his petulant, confrontational swings, the ones that had got him into minor scuffles on a handful of drunken occasions. His mind was all at once frustrated at not being able to make out the man's face, and also urging him to hold back, to keep his silent position, to allow the immediate development of the scene before making any judgements. His breath distorted the space between them, the yellow glow flashing gently between the steamy clouds. Still the man-shape remained motionless; still his face refused to focus. Johnny felt the gentle, cold hand of panic snaking its way around his neck. Forcing his addled brain to reason, asking him exactly what the fuck was going on. What did this yellow fucking thing want? But there were no answers forthcoming. His jagged breaths were a mixture of rising fear and disbelieving incomprehension.

For the shortest second Johnny had ever known, the man's face came into focus. Johnny's eyes were inadvertently trained on his lips, catching a glimpse of a thin smile, and nothing more. As the yellow face dissolved into the glow once more, Johnny felt a wave of patient heat on his face, warming his skin, and tugging gently at the tight terror-grip around his neck. Bringing comfort to his cold body, and asking him to let go of the fear. Something told him that by obeying them, by making the fingers happy, he would bring forth great rewards. And then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, the warm fingers were gone; along with the shimmering image that had sent them. What little was left of Johnny's panic slowly subsided, and he waited for a few seconds before continuing up the road, pausing deliberately at the point at which he thought the shape had been. There was no sign, no trace, nothing unusual. His heavy, shrugging feet took him the short distance home, where he scribbled some muddled words in his diary, and collapsed into his bed, crisps still in his pockets. There was no visit from the night demons this time, but there were strange dreams

about coloured man-mists, which, like all his stoner dreams, were long forgotten by the morning.

four

He was working all day Saturday, and longed for five thirty, when he could lose the garish shop polo shirt, and get ready for another night on the rip. He amused himself by spinning a couple of albums that he knew Gary the manager would not approve of. Hell, he wasn't there, he was gone to rectify some order problems with the suppliers, and it's not as if anyone was going to complain, was it? Only a few schoolgirls wrinkled their noses up at the industrial poundings, and one annoying little shit got him to play a Steps b-side before she decided to splash out four quid on the damn thing. Dez called in during the afternoon. When his assistance was not required elsewhere in the shop, Johnny told him of what had now become his "trip" on the way home. He was convinced he had been hallucinating – it was too weird to be anything else.

"Cool. I just panned out on the bed after you left."

"Usual tonight?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Dolan's at ten?"

"Cool with me. Are the others home?"

"Dunno."

Some middle-aged bat dropped a Corrs C.D. loudly on the counter, loudly enough to grab Johnny's attention. He hoped the dark glare he flashed her got the point across. He turned away from Dez to attend to his customer.

"Call in for me on the way down, alright?"

"Yeah, sure. Take it easy."

His dinner wasn't ready by the time he got home, so Johnny took a quick shower. He shaved the dark shadow from his face, and threw on clean trousers and a blue T-shirt. He flicked on his computer, and waited, drumming his fingers on the desk. He opened his mail program once more, and clicked on "Send and Receive." There were five messages waiting for him. They took a bit longer than usual, so one of them probably had an attachment – could be Brian or Stan sending him shit. The receiving window disappeared, and he scanned the five senders' names. Anonymous, Telecom Internet, RealPlayer G2, twice, and another Mail Returned message. He quickly read through the advertisements, and

checked to see if Telecom Eireann were offering anything worthwhile, before returning to the first message.

“Anonymous my ass”, he smirked. That was one of the advantages of owning your own P.C. – you tend to learn a lot, and Johnny knew how to determine, at the very least, the internet provider of any anonymous mail. From there, it was usually a short step to working out who exactly was the perpetrator. He opened the message, and was informed that the attached file was also being opened, for preview. It was a JPG file, an image of some sort. He waited patiently for the picture to load up. There was no message, no title even, just the picture. Which itself was titled “Image.jpg” – not exactly the most helpful.

“Come on”, he muttered. His mother hollered down the hallway, calling his sister for her dinner.

“Yours will be ready in a few minutes, Johnny”, she added.

The picture had loaded, and Johnny scrolled down to view it.

“Cool!”, was his immediate reaction. It was a picture of Susan Welch, in an anguished live performance pose. She was squatting on one knee, one hand supporting herself, the other pressing a microphone into her face, her features contorted into a scream of hate or passion, he couldn’t decide which. Her hair was matted against one side of her face with sweat, and what little eyeliner she had been wearing was tricking down her cheek in the tiniest of streams. He didn’t recognise the venue – there wasn’t enough of it shown. But he recognised the band – Finn, the drummer, had a unique way of arranging his cymbals, and Johnny remembered this from his days as their frontman. Here was a picture of his old band, with their new singer. Shit, he didn’t know that they had played any gigs with her.

“Nice of someone to fucking tell...” He trailed off as he noticed the frontwoman’s T-shirt. It was green, darkened in places by sweat, with a large yellow logo. Her left arm, partially wrapped in microphone cord, was covering the last letter, but Johnny could make the rest out – C,L,I,N and C. Clinch. His band’s name. Not only that, but written in the same gothic flourish that he had spent so long designing in college the day before.

“Shiiiiit.”

How had he managed to do that? He had, unwittingly, copied the band’s name *and* their fucking logo. Bastards. Who the fuck were they? He’d never heard of them. Probably another of these asshole punk bands who were good for nothing

other than taking all the decent names. With a sunken mood, he turned his attention to seeing what wiseguy had sent him the picture. He consoled himself briefly with the thought that no-one could have intended to burst his bubble like this, seeing as he had told no-one of his new band's name. No, it was probably Dez, acting on Johnny's praise of Susan the night before. He clicked the right mouse button, brought up a menu of options for the message, and clicked on Properties. If "IOL" was mentioned anywhere, it was Dez. He was the only person he knew who used Ireland OnLine as a provider, so it had to be him.

"Doink!"

He frowned at the error message that appeared on screen. Some shit about kernels causing internal errors.

"Piece of shit!", slapping the side of the monitor. The system insisted that it had to close down the mail program, so Johnny closed it down. He reopened Outlook Express, and went once more to the properties of the new message.

"Doink!"

"God fucking damn!"

His patience fried, he reached for the power button and pushed it as violently as possible. It meant having to check for errors and all that shit the next time he used it, but fuck it, it was worth it. It was only a damn picture of that young one singing, who cared who sent it? It's not as if it was.... Remembering the Polaroid, he jumped across the room, and reached behind his stereo. The first sweep of his hand brushed off a broken tape case, old id cards, but no Polaroid.

"Work with me", he breathed, pulling the stereo out from the wall. There was enough of a gap to hook his entire arm around, and he trawled through the crap for the photo. He still could not feel it. Already frustrated from the shithead computer, he yanked viciously at the stereo, but taking sufficient care to avoid ripping the cables at the back. The pile of vinyl lying lazily against the sound system slid into life, and one by one, the records skated off the desk onto the floor.

"FUCK!"

He heard his mother's footsteps as she approached the door. She knocked, and forced her head around.

"Are you alright?"

"No, I'm not."

“Are you looking for something?.”

This was not said with the air of someone who knew damn well what Johnny was looking for, and was just waiting to snare him.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Well, your dinner’s ready.”

She closed the door behind her, and Johnny crashed the stereo back against the wall. Where the fuck was that Polaroid?

He ate his dinner in a sulking silence. No-one *ever* went into his room without asking, apart from his mother, to tidy what needed to be tidied. So what had happened to the photo? He was damn sure he had thrown it behind the stereo. One more sweep of his arm, just before he left the house, again proved fruitless. He rummaged in the wicker bin by his bed, to see if he had accidentally thrown it out along with the envelope, but there was only the crumpled remains of an orange juice carton staring back at him.

five

Dez had a thing about arriving into a pub on his own; he just did not do it. Every time he would organise the troops into a swoop on the town's amenities, he would be sure to arrange that at least one other person would be calling for him before hitting the streets. And Dez had a handy card up his sleeve in this regard. Almost every Saturday night, he would have a modest supply of beer stashed in his room, enough to entice even those who would have had a much shorter trip had they proceeded straight to town, instead of a detour past Cromford Gardens. Johnny, however, never had a problem with going slightly out of his way to meet up with his awkward friend. For Johnny too disliked arriving to a group on his own; he always felt the eyes of everyone in the damn place burning into his hide. It was much easier to enter with another, and in particular, another more conspicuous sole. Like Dez. Who would people be more likely to stare at, the boring guy with the short hair and the non-interesting clothes, or the long-haired git with piercings?

True to form, Dez had a neat pile of Royal Dutch sprawled on his bed when Johnny pushed his head around the door. Dez's mother, still blatantly feeling the effects of the night before, had let him in. He settled on a corner of the bed, and cast a scowl at the poundings of Roni Size on the stereo.

"One more tune", nodded Dez, understanding the gesture.

The 2 cracked open cans almost simultaneously, and took the first of the evening's mouthfuls.

"You going to the Green Room tonight?"

"I am in my shite. You?"

The question didn't need to be answered – Dez hated night-clubs even more than Johnny.

"Nah. I've only got enough for a few after this lot," nodding at the depleted can surplus.

"Did you ring anyone else?"

"Yeah, Bri said he'd be in about ten, and Stan's not home."

"You got any smoke left?"

"Enough for two or three. I'll skin up before we go."

A crafty smile spread across his lips.

“Is Susan Welch gonna be out?”

“Dunno.” She had better be. He’d spent the entire day banking on her being out.

“What are you smiling at?”, beginning to smile himself.

“Man, you were talking some shite about her last night!”

“Fuck off!”

Not that he needed to be reminded.

After three cans, and a lot of loud, energetic music, the two were sufficiently pumped up to relocate to the pub. The sharp, cold air only heightened the tingling in their muscles, their breath carrying the stain of what they had been drinking. The town was almost dead until they turned the corner at Super Valu, which served as a checkpoint, separating those who set out for a night of debauchery, from the families in the estates on the outskirts of town, settling in for a quiet night. Taxis flew past, ferrying groups of lagered-up men, and dolled-up women. Youngsters scurried along the far wall of the town square, doubtlessly heading for the old park, where they could drink illegally in relative seclusion. Once more, Johnny marvelled at the fact that in a town of this comfortable size, he did not recognise one person in the social hub before him. He was standing outside a small newsagents shop, waiting for Dez. As one pub door after another opened to let some new patron in, short bursts of loud dance music were let out. As if the music was making room for the new arrivals. The town was a completely different place at night, and Johnny had long since decided that he didn’t like it.

The two nodded their greeting to the large bouncer on Dolan’s door. His name was suitably sarcastic for a man of his vocation – Brains, or Prof, or something. Johnny couldn’t remember, he had never required the man’s assistance, and had never given the man something to remedy. Dolan’s, by law, was a good-natured place. It had nothing to offer that any other pub in the town couldn’t match – it didn’t serve minors, and didn’t offer late drinks. It was essentially a student pub, frequented during the week by those in the college, and at the weekend by those returning from college elsewhere. The jukebox reflected average student tastes, but also catered for those whose tastes were of a heavier persuasion. The manager, Tom, never saw any reason to remove albums, and updated his selection by

adding more, and, when necessary, another jukebox cabinet. As such, there was an extensive history of student musical tastes from the past decade, from The Cure and R.E.M., right up to The Verve and Placebo. There was never any trouble in the pub, but the odd weekend would see an altercation involving drunken shits who waited outside to get a slap at any student at all.

As Johnny followed Dez through the narrow channel between bodies which led to the back alcove, he noted Susan Welch at a table with three other girls. She didn't notice him, which was fine. He didn't want to have to halt his momentum. He could come back a little later. Dez had found Brian, who appeared to have equalled the new arrivals, at the very least, in the alcohol consumption stakes. He was seated at the corner table, the table that was unofficially the property of their group on a Saturday night.

“Boys!!”

“Evening.”

“Alright!”

The three exchanged their simple handshakes, and Johnny turned automatically towards the bar. The complicated design of the place saw one bend of the bar snake almost as far as the corner alcove, which meant that they never had far to go. That had been a winning factor in choosing a regular spot. And with the toilets a mere five feet to the left of the alcove, they were sorted. Dez settled in beside Brian, and nodded at Johnny, who had turned to face him from his position at the bar. Johnny attracted the attention of the nearest barman, and ordered for them both.

Even though Brian was offering some mildly interesting story about his latest failed sexual conquest, Johnny's mind was elsewhere. Even from the bar, he couldn't see past the smoked glass partition to the front of the pub, where she was sitting. And he wasn't the confident type to stroll up to her table, to her group of friends, and ease himself into the conversation. And he couldn't sidle around the curve of the bar, in the hope that she might spot him and approach. What would the other two say?

“Where are you going?”

“I'm going to the bar.”

“What’s wrong with where you normally stand?”

“Nothing....”

Then there would be knowing laughs, and a prolonged period of piss-taking. That he could do without. It was hard enough in his own mind, never mind outside. He was fighting inside, a part of him reminding that she essentially replaced him in his band, another part pleading with him to accept the strange feelings in the pit of his stomach when she crossed his mind. There was a tiny voice of reason waiting to be heard also, telling him that he had absolutely no chance with her whatsoever.

Fifteen minutes later, he had a second reason to enjoy the proximity of the toilets. She was climbing the short series of steps leading up to the back of the pub, leading to the toilet. She was closing in fast. Her eyes focused on the ground.

“That’s good”, he thought to himself. He wasn’t really sure why. She hadn’t looked up by the time she reached his alcove.

“Susan.”

Except it wasn’t quite loud enough. She passed into the dark corridor, disappearing into one of the doors.

“Shit”, he cursed himself internally. He found a new determination in his gut. She’d fucking hear him when she came back out, he’d make sure of it. He glared at the very edge of the dividing wall, ready to pounce as soon as she reappeared. He would hear the oil-less squeak of the toilet door lazily closing over, which gave him a half-second warning. It’d be enough.

“Here, which Jane’s album was “Been Caught Stealing” on?”

Fucking typical. Here he was, in the middle of an enormously stressful manoeuvre, one which required full attention, and he was being asked stupid questions. He glared at Brian’s hand, tugging at his T-shirt.

“Ritual’, I think.”

He turned his head quickly to his pint, and then back to the door. He felt a small wave of relief as Brian picked back up where he’d left off with Dez. The brief distraction, and the desire to return to his post, had shot adrenaline through his body. The toilet door squeaked. He tensed. She emerged.

“Susan!”

Louder this time, it had the desired effect. She stopped in her tracks, and turned. Quickly scanning the other two, with no trace of recognition, her eyes met

Johnny's. The smile was enough for him. He could have gone home there and then, a happy camper.

"Johnny! I didn't see you come in. You in long?"

He could feel the other two bastards looking at them, and some whispered comment from them broke her link with him briefly. He would have no peace talking to her there.

"No, a half hour or so. Going to the bar?"

She rummaged briefly in the side pocket of her combats, and turned towards the bar nodding. He ordered, she ordered.

"Are you in long? Who are you in with?"

"About an hour. I'm in with a couple of girls from college, they're down for the night."

He asked how college was going, again, and she asked him the same. He told her who Dez and Brian were, and she discovered that she had been in secondary school with Brian's sister.

"That's something I meant to ask you, only I don't know if you'd mind. I can't work out some of your lyrics, and I was wondering if you'd write them out for me?"

She didn't smile at him, but rather displayed the awkwardness he felt she was feeling. A part of him wanted her to feel awkward, another part wanted to marry her on the spot.

"You're gonna keep all the old lyrics, not write your own?"

"No, I think the stuff you wrote fits perfectly. And I like them. As long as you don't mind...."

"No, no."

Shit, she had smiled at him, she was drinking with him (again), and she liked his lyrics. God was being good to him today.

"Well, I can't work out "Gill" properly. You sing too fast on the demo to make the words out."

He didn't take it as a criticism, for it wasn't. "Gill" was a particularly fast song.

"I'll copy them for you. You might want to change bits here and there, a "he" for a "she", and so forth."

They went on from there to discuss some of the finer small gigs that had taken place in the town, and moved on to further musical topics. Johnny suddenly remembered the photograph he'd received with the email.

“What are Clinch like, or have you ever heard of them?”

“Clinch? Never heard of them..”

His brain turned this over at a faster pace. What the fuck was “Clinch” doing on her T-shirt in the photo then? Could be a clothing company, or something. She was ordering from the bar once more, allowing him to ponder the fact in temporary isolation. She turned back to him.

“Why, where did you hear about them?”

“Oh, in a magazine, I think.”

“What are they supposed to be like?”

He remembered her other T-shirt....

“They're a bit like Snot.”

“Could do with another band like Snot. They've split up, singer killed in a car crash last week.”

“Shit. Were they any good?”

“Yeah, really good. I'll do you a tape if you want.”

Anything she wanted to give him would be gratefully accepted.

“Sure.”

As she sipped from her pint, he returned to the photograph in his mind.

“Where have you played so far?”

“What do you mean? With the band?”

He nodded.

“Nowhere. We haven't even practised fully yet. Finn broke his wrist, it'll be January before he's able to play. I've just been getting used to the stuff on the demo. And Greg gave me a couple of new songs to work with.”

“Oh.”

Except what Johnny was thinking wasn't “Oh.” It was “If you haven't played a gig yet, how the fuck do I have a photo of you playing one, wearing a T-shirt of a band that (probably) doesn't exist yet?.” His good sense stopped him from asking this question out loud. Damn, it didn't make sense.

“You alright? You're frowning like mad.”

Johnny managed to laugh at himself.

“Yeah, I'm grand. Too much beer, I reckon.”

“You and me too. And I have to bring these other fuckers to the shitty Green Room. I’m not finished yet.”

She was nodding in the direction of the three girls she had been sitting with. One caught her eye, and made her way towards her.

“Sue, are you ready?”

Johnny took an instant disliking to her.

“Yeah, give me a minute.”

Her friend moved on in the direction of the toilets. Johnny was still confused, but at least not frowning anymore.

“Listen, when can I get those lyrics off you?”

“Why, when are you around?”

“I’m not going back up until Monday evening, I could meet you in the afternoon?”

“Yeah, sure, say just after three, here?”

It meant skipping Communications, but Johnny had no great problem with that.

“Cool. I’ll have that tape for you. See you then.”

“Have a good night.”

He wished he was going to the Green Room.

“In that place? Yeah, right!”

One more smile and then she was away. Johnny slid back mournfully to his cackling friends, fully prepared for the abuse to follow.

“You’re some bastard dark horse!”

“Well in there, my friend!”

He ignored them, but it was pointless. He was now the focus of conversation.

“What’s the story there?”

“Nothing”, he mumbled. “She just wants some of the lyrics.”

“Typical”, slurred Brian. “They’ll be all fucking over you when they want something, and then they’re nowhere to be seen. I’d tell her to go fuck herself.”

“Johnny won’t tell her that, man.”

Dez the bastard was wearing a smug drunk face. He didn’t have to say anymore. It was understood.

“I’m telling you, that’s all she wants.”

Brian was enjoying his advisory role. Johnny forced himself to nod sadly, but hoping otherwise. The three ordered one more before time was called, and were among the last group to leave the pub. Nothing more was said of Susan Welch, and Johnny appreciated the change in subject. His head was swirling, and he knew damn well it was the wrong time to be asking himself all kinds of stupid questions about stupid females.

It had started to drizzle rain once more as they stumbled along the main street. The wet roads were bustling with the sounds of taxis shunting tired revellers homewards, and closing doors behind others on their way to the night-club. The three stopped at Harry's, which had long since been voted the finest fast food establishment in the town. Johnny elicited half-hearted complaints from his companions as he asked for a burger without the dressings, which meant that one of the Italians behind the counter would have to prepare a new burger. As opposed to taking one of the roughly wrapped specimens stacked on the heated rack. The rain had gathered momentum, so they decided against taking their food across to their usual supermarket wall, walking instead, their conversation muffled by mouthfuls of burger. A neighbour of Brian's pulled up in a battered station wagon, offering him and the others a lift. The other two declined; he was going a different direction to them. Johnny decided against joining Dez in his back garden for a quick joint, and as he trudged slowly through the darkened estate, he reckoned Dez himself would skip the final chapter, and embrace the dry heat of his house.

Johnny liked walking in the rain. Especially in winter. It seemed to him that the rain came from a warmer place. The bite that had hurt his ears some hours earlier was gone, the light drops instead were a cool, numbing friend on the way home. He took the remainder of his chips from his pocket. Within minutes, the brown paper bag was a soggy mix of water and vinegar. At least the thick salty chips weren't so hot anymore. He'd tried wolfing them down as soon as he'd got them, to satiate the ache in his stomach, but almost keeled over with the sharp rush to his chest. Now, he could shovel them into his mouth as fast as he liked. He struggled to focus his mind on one single item – at the same time, he was thinking of what work he needed to get done for college, what to get his father for

Christmas, and whether or not “Been Caught Stealing” was actually on “Ritual de la Habitual.”

The house was quiet and in shadows when he got home. He let himself in, and locked the door behind him. He threw his wet clothes into the bathroom, lazily neglected to wash his teeth, and fell into bed.

The oddest thing was that he knew he was dreaming. He knew he was asleep, he knew that what was before his eyes did not truly exist in the woken world. Yet this was like no other dream he had known. It was as though he was watching what was unfolding on television monitors, as though he was preparing to commentate on what was before him, positioned on a gantry high above. And he was having some immediate trouble in understanding exactly what it was before him. He could not see his physical self as he stood above the dream, but felt the presence of another unseen individual beside him.

As he looked down upon his imagined scene, he saw his second self appear. He was standing on grass just beside a dark gravel path. It was night, or rather approaching it. There was still a faint orange warmth left in the sky, which disappeared to blackness over the shore of trees that lined the river away behind Johnny's image. His double's eyes were focused on a part of the scene Johnny had yet to discover. Beside this figure stood a man. The man's eyes were trained on Johnny as he peered down from his commentary position. It was then that he realised that the man too was a double, and his twin was the unseen other beside Johnny. The man he could see was middle-aged, possibly elderly. He had a kind, offering face. He was dressed in an old light suit, covered with a slightly darker overcoat. There was a Trilby hat on his head, tilted sharply to one side. He blended into the scene smoothly, despite the fact that he had stepped into it from a departed time. Everything about the man, his clothes, his skin, his shoes, it was the faded mustard haze of old newspapers. As though the man's photo had been cut from an ancient periodical, and pasted into the quiet colours of Johnny's dream. The man cocked his head ever so slightly, as if to show Johnny that he was no photograph. His eyes were still locked on the dreaming Johnny, who felt a sudden, duplicated reassurance that the image was real. The reassurance was coming from the man he could not see beside him. There were no kind words, no pat on the arm, he just felt it. In some bizarre manner, it appeared that he and his companion were about to commentate on the actions of their mirror doubles in the scene below.

Having established this much in his sleepy mind, he returned his eyes to his own ghostly image beneath him. His double's eyes were still trained away, and Johnny followed this line of vision. A short distance across from the gravel path there was a bench, green wooden planks across concrete supports. Johnny briefly made out another likeness of himself on the bench, before he found himself pulled sharply from his observation point. He screamed without sound as he was projected physically towards his first image, passing through the transparent body at a sickening speed, his wide eyes somehow noticing that he was being pulled about a small glade, surrounded by looming trees.

He felt nauseous for a brief second, squeezing his eyes together to stop the squall in his brain. When he had settled, he opened his eyes, and found himself in the position of the second Johnny-image he had seen. He was seated on the wooden bench, his eyes the only control he had over his body. His double was looking directly at him, without movement, but Johnny could feel more than one pair of eyes on him. The old man was still looking skywards, to the invisible gantry, to where the unseen Johnny and his companion gazed downwards; the only thing that had changed was Johnny's physical position. There was a girl lying on the bench beside him, her head resting lightly on his lap. He watched as his hand stroked her long straight hair back from her forehead. His other hand was tickling her woollen stomach gently, and she was talking to him in a language he didn't understand. There was a level of excitement in her voice, the speed at which she spoke, the high pitched laugh. Her face, though not known to him, was one of beauty. Her voice suddenly fell to a murmur. His new-found ability to hear brought him the sounds of birds away on the river. Distracted from the person beside him, his eyes moved back to the doubles in front of him. There was a dim smile on his own image, the happy grin of a simpleton. The old man's expression had changed too, he now seemed to asking the Johnny above *what do you think?*

The Johnny in the commentary position began to speak. A wind had picked up, and seemed to loop back and forth, obscuring parts of his speech from Johnny as he sat on the bench, his hands involuntarily brushing strands of his companion's hair, rubbing her stomach rhythmically.

"...night fading from dull orange to black...still air holding faint sounds...both murmuring nonsense...feeling the effects of too much cheap wine..."

Johnny felt approval from the colourless man in front of him. As though his role was to prompt the Johnny above in his efforts to describe the scene in suitable words. And something about the scene screamed of romance, of flourish, of happiness. It seemed as though it would be wrong to describe the picture without matching flourishes of language. His eyes darted from person to person, from his own likeness, still sporting that dull, contented smile, to the old man gazing skywards, to the young woman lying across him, her eyes concentrated on her own fingers as she twisted his playfully together. More than anything else, he was aware of the two shapes above him. Unseen shapes, but together they radiated a sense of kindly authority.

The girl suddenly swung her legs off the bench, and jumped to her feet. Her eyes met his, and she spoke loudly, again in an unrecognisable tongue. Yet Johnny heard the words “come on” inside his head. She turned away to face a small gap in the trees, waiting for him to grasp the hand she held out behind her. Once more, his body acted without his instruction, and he slid off the bench, taking her hand and falling into stride with her. As he moved, he noticed that they were alone. The two figures opposite had disappeared. There was a small stone fence to climb at the edge of the glade, the narrow path on the other side leading to the left and right, and its grassy border sloping gently into the lazy river. The girl let go of his hand to climb the two rungs, and jumped nosily to the ground. Johnny’s body fell to a stop, and he watched as she linked arms with him on the other side of the fence. His double had reappeared, and was bumping against the girl gently, hip to hip, speaking in the foreign tongue once more, as they moved pacily away from Johnny. What little light there was faded into blackness just beyond them, and within seconds they were a part of the inky blanket. Johnny felt a long, sinking feeling in his stomach, and also one of preparation. Somebody was clearing their mental throat, ready to explain. His body was turning him away from the disappointment, seemingly assuring him that there would be a point, that he hadn’t missed it.

Once more, the soundless voice appeared in his head. He was alone in the glade, still being watched from a height. The words were without emotion, impatience or any variance in tone.

You see what is before you, yet you don’t understand.

Johnny felt the urge to nod, but his body was not under his control. The man in the hat seemed to understand his desire to respond positively.

This can be more than a dream. This can be real.

Johnny hoped that his furrowed, questioning stance would be detected. It was. *It does not all have to be done alone. None of it has to be done alone.*

Something in Johnny's head told him to drop the first of the dilemmas he was probing. Maybe he wasn't supposed to understand what the fuck this voice was representing. He was being pushed to try and comprehend what the whole charade with the girl and the bench meant. He wasn't getting it. His companion spoke, summing up in short, coercing sentences, each one flowing into the next, without any pause.

When she lay across you, it felt real.

When she left with the other, it felt alien.

This much is simple.

This is but one example.

It can apply to anything.

This is a good beginning.

Take this much, and there will be more.

Then you can do something for me.

Johnny felt a grip of puzzlement, an annoyed clarity, a reaction to being told that he could do something for this confusing, bullshitting stranger. It was quickly forced to let go of him as he began to drift gently away from the quiet wooded cove, its friendly smells and sounds falling beneath him, slipping slowly into a blissful nothing. Still not understanding, but no longer caring.

seven

Sunday, traditionally a day of rest, especially for those suffering the excesses of the night before. Johnny, although not reaching the peaks of healthiness, found his brain in good working order, and got a reasonable amount of work done for his impending exams. He had needed no prompt to be reminded of the wicked dream – it was the first thing on his mind when sunlight shook him into waking. Having given his body the necessary few minutes to adjust, he crawled out of bed into the toilet, taking his diary so as to chronicle his night's work. His head, not fully operational, dragged him on a brief tour of recent events – he frowned slightly as he remembered the Polaroid, and vowed to find the fucking thing later. And he still hadn't found out who had sent it. He cursed himself for binning the envelope it had arrived in – the postmark could have provided him with a basic lead. Then he remembered Susan Welch, and flicked through his journal to the back, where assorted lyrics, poems and pieces of drunken prose jostled for space. He could give her a print-out – he had all his shit on disk as well, but he figured she'd prefer his handwriting. And there was something about making an effort for her that felt good.

Celtic were taking on Dundee United in the afternoon, and Johnny's entire day was moulded around studying, and the match. He spent what was left of the morning copying "Gill" carefully onto a new sheet, and enjoyed his Sunday dinner. He alternated between the build-up to the game, the clash between Fiorentina and Lazio on Channel 4, and some western on BBC. The game itself was a disappointment, with Celtic only managing a draw, Larsen equalising with eight minutes to go. There were a couple of episodes of The Simpsons on after, but Johnny had seen them both before. He took to the books for an hour or so, before remembering the Polaroid. The bastard thing was still nowhere to be seen. He pulled the stereo out again, went through the pile of magazines, forms and shit beside it, and scoured the floor. Nowhere. How the fuck could he have lost it?

He decided on a quick game of Grand Theft Auto before he split to bed. After switching the computer on, he left to go take a piss. When he returned, instead of

the Windows booting screen, there was a DOS prompt, informing him he had a “non-system disk error.”

“There’s no disk in the fucking drive, you prick.”

And he checked the floppy drive again. He hit the reset button, and thumped the side of the monitor. The system restarted, and the error message reappeared. He hit “Reset” again, and pushed the F8 key as soon as the computer beeped. A simple menu appeared, and he chose “Safe Mode” from the booting options. That seemed to do the trick, until it stopped at the familiar “c:>” prompt. He typed “win” to begin Windows.

“Cannot find file himem.sys.”

“What the FUCK??”

He knew this all too well. Before, he had stupidly moved some of the system files, and the operating system could not load up. Since then, he had avoided all contact with the system configuration files. Now, for some reason, it appeared to be happening again. He browsed through folders frantically, searching for the missing file. He cursed himself for lazily not bothering to make a systems disk. Then, he went looking for blood.

Needless to say, no-one in the house knew anything about it. His mother claimed nobody had been in his room since Friday, and was backed up by each of the bastard siblings. Someone had been fucking around with files they knew nothing about, so why should they admit to it? After another wasted thirty minutes coercing the computer, Johnny reached for the master c.d., rebooting the system completely, restoring it to the original factory settings. Most of the stuff on his hard disk had been backed up on floppies, but that wasn’t the point. He spent an angry hour rebooting the bastard p.c., trying to remember what cool stuff he was after losing as a result.

There was a surprising spring in his step on Monday morning, one that carried him into college, and through the first two lectures of the day. He had a free period from 11 to 12, and headed for the computer labs whilst the majority of his classmates sat in the canteen, smoking, drinking coffee, talking shite. By the time he’d found a terminal that wasn’t being used, he realised that he didn’t actually have anything to do. That was one of the advantages of using free time to fuck around in the labs – all projects and assignments got finished long before they were due. He connected to the Internet, and opened the Altavista search engine.

His fingers drummed out an irregular pattern on the keyboard as he mulled over what to search for. He typed “clinch” into the text box, and clicked on “search.” A few seconds later, the screen changed, and he was presented with the first ten results of the thousands of sites containing the word “clinch.” He vaguely remembered doing this before, checking to see if the name had been taken by some other band. There were still no musical references as he scrolled through the list, no clothing companies either. He thought back to the photo – did it say “CLINCH”, or could the last letter have been anything else? Hold on – hadn’t she said that they hadn’t even practised yet, never mind done a gig? He’d check the photo again when he got home.

No you won’t.

There was a sharp, acidic jab in his stomach, that spread upwards towards his heart. The familiar pain of sudden disappointment, this time cocktailed with a little something else. The fucking picture would have been scrubbed from his hard drive when he rebooted. He only got it the other day, no time to have backed it up. He felt his cheeks burn, and his eyes dropped to the floor, suppressing the desire to curse loudly.

The spring in his step had long been replaced by a frowning disposition by 3pm, and he debated whether or not to make the effort to overcome his blind rage. For some reason, his eyes were now tuned to Brian’s way of thinking, and he scowled as he walked heavily into town, seeing Susan Welch as a manipulative bitch, using him to get his lyrics, and fuck all else. She was at a different table in Dolan’s, a cup of coffee in front of her. Johnny was relieved – he knew damn well if he started drinking now, he would not want to finish. It was that sort of mood. She smiled at him, moving her coat, (“what sort of habit is that?”, he thought to himself), and his anger was pushed to one side.

“How’s it going?”

“Shite, to be honest. College doing my head in.”

“It’s the same everywhere”, offering him a knowing, sympathetic nod. Maybe she wasn’t so bad. She reached into her coat pocket, and fished out a blank cassette, its inlay card decorated with an attractive shade of blue.

“Here’s the tape I said I’d do for you”, handing it to him.

“Oh, nice one.”

He took the cassette, and ran briefly through the track-listing. *Snot, Stoopid, Joy Ride, The Box...*

“It’s only forty minutes, so I put some other stuff on side b.”

A lot of bands he’d never heard of. He delved into his own coat pocket.

“Here, see if these help you.”

“Cool.”

Her eyes met his as he looked for a deliberate, greedy glare on her part. Maybe she wasn’t so bad. Maybe the lyrics weren’t all she wanted. She took the neatly folded sheet, and opened it out. For the first time, Johnny noticed the silence in the pub, finding himself oddly content as she pored over his handiwork quietly.

“They’re good. They’re not blatant, they’re nicely disguised. Are you sure you don’t mind me singing them?”

He’d almost forgotten that she was in his band now. That’s why she wanted the lyrics.

“No, go ahead. Just do a good job.”

Grinning, searching for her eyes once more. She obliged him.

“I’ll do my best!”

A disarming smile.

They sat and talked for a short while, filling each other in on what had happened after they’d said their goodbyes on Saturday. She had ended up on the brink of some huge street brawl outside the museum, having to drag one of her college mates away, as she appeared to have a hair up her ass regarding one of the brawlers.

“Listen, I gotta go catch the half three bus. The landlord’s calling this evening, and I owe him for two weeks.”

“Bad buzz.”

Although he was referring to her having to leave.

“You’ll be around at the weekend?”

“Yep, more than likely.”

Especially if there was even the remotest chance he’d bump into her.

“Well, I’ll see you sometime then.”

She got up, and edged around the table, pulling on her scarf as she went. Johnny didn’t rise; he didn’t want the awkwardness of walking out with her. He was briefly amazed at this realisation.

“Oh, I nearly forgot, my sister rang last night, and she said she had the maddest dream, and you were in it.”

“Your sister?”

He wasn't aware that she had one.

“Yeah, her name is Claire. You probably know her to see. Listen, I have to run, I'll tell you about it next weekend, alright?”

“Sure, see you.”

He watched her again as she swept out through the double doors, feeling the cold plastic cassette box in his pocket. He took it out, and fell in love with her handwriting once more. Soft, lavish, maybe even sprawling. And she had written it for him. A pity it wasn't Susan herself who was dreaming about him. Who the hell was her sister anyway, and how did she know him? He decided that it wasn't really relevant, grabbed his bag, and left the pub.

eight

Johnny was shaken into action by the sound of the wooden door clicking shut behind him. His brain struggled to process the new details as his eyes adjusted to the dying light. He was in a large room, which immediately reminded him of a small hold in a wrecked ship. The room was bare, the walls were of some kind of metal, and there was a cold dampness probing at his bare arms. Two staircases fell away from yawning holes at both corners on the opposite wall of the room; one leading down, and the other disappearing upwards into darkness. The descending stairs glinted through the black, and there were small puddles, increasing in regularity as they neared the steps. Green clumps of slimy vegetation were scattered about the room, some snaking up the walls towards the water mark which surrounded them. The rusted metal of the walls still bore the mark of the water's last visit, which had covered the room to a depth of around five feet. The distant roars filtering up from whatever lay down those stairs, and the quiet lapping of gentler waves at the lower few steps led Johnny to believe that the waters had every intention of returning to paint the walls once more. This was no great understanding of aquatic science on his part. He just *knew*.

He had not moved from his spot in the time he'd spent assessing the new surroundings. Either had the woman on the other side of the room. She pulled herself up from her base roughly halfway between the 2 staircases, pausing her sobbing only briefly to kick viciously at the green slime falling from her leg. As she stumbled into what little light there was, Johnny took stock of her bedraggled appearance. Her blonde curls were blackened in places, damp as the walls, and fighting for space on shivering shoulders. Her tears had cut a salty channel through the dirt on her face, which was contorted into the crying features of a child. She was barefoot, her thin frame draped in a brown cloth dress, which also bore the dirt of the room. Her arm swiped across her mouth, steadying herself to speak. She was handcuffed. Or rather had been – one of the cuffs still spanned a thin wrist, while the other hung loosely beside on its chain.

“You have to help me, please.”

It was not a panicked request, more despair than anything else. A soft, quiet insistence.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Just.... help me.”

Johnny listened as the roar from downstairs increased in volume. There was a gentle splash as a wave hopped over the steps and landed in the room.

“Is that it? Is the water coming back up?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I just want you to help me.”

There was another roar, as if the water appreciated Johnny recognising its ability to strike such fear into this woman. Regardless of finding out what her problem was, he was getting the fuck out of that room.

He took the woman’s arm, and strode towards the ascending staircase.

“NO!!”

She pulled back on him with such force that he lost his balance, and only regained it by falling against her.

“Not up there.”

The body contact seemed to have calmed her slightly.

“Why not? What’s up there?”

Her eyes had narrowed somewhat.

“Why can’t we go up there?”

She dropped her head to her chest, and paid no motioned attention to the latest roar from downstairs. He *knew* the waters were coming.

“Look, we have to go now. Come on.”

She stood rooted to the spot, and he released her hand. Shit, he had no idea what he had to do to save himself, never mind some reluctant woman. Come to think of it, he had no idea *what* he had to save himself from, or even if he *needed* saving. But there was water, and it was coming. He reached the staircase, and bounded up it, two steps at a time. There was a rail, and he used it to pull himself up all the quicker. He heard another muffled roar, and a louder splash, and a scream.

“Come on!! There’s nothing up here!!”

There was a series of lighter splashes as she ran through the puddles to the staircase. He made out her shadow beneath him, and continued on up the stairs. Already, the handrail was getting warmer. There was an orange glow just up

ahead, which became a corner as he neared it. He heard another scream from below, and assumed that the waters, which were now nothing more than a distant groan to him, had moved up a gear. As he swung around the corner, he bumped against a small table. There were some small clear bottles of Evian mineral water on it, and something told him to grab one as he passed. So he took one, and slowed down ever so slightly as he unscrewed the cap. The cool water seemed to have a stimulating effect on him, and he began to climb the steps at a greater speed. He threw the empty bottle aside, and screamed backwards at the woman.

“TAKE SOME OF THE WATER!! IT HELPS YOU CLIMB!!”

The dampness gradually left the air as he continued the climb. He reached a small landing, with one door, and a short series of steps leading to another. He tried the first door, but it appeared to be locked. The panic had disappeared, and he felt safer in this warmer place. The walls were wooden and friendly, and even in the half light, seemed to be consoling him. He covered the few steps to the second door, and pushed it. As there was no gap at the bottom of the heavy wooden frame, his eyes were not ready for the shock of brilliant sunlight that greeted him. He shirked back away from the rays, shielding his eyes, slowly letting some light in. The room was large, with rows of windows to his left and right. Straight ahead, mounted on the wooden wall, there was a dusty blackboard. There were also some small desks shoved against the wall to his left. He walked slowly into the centre of the room, listening to the voice in his head which forbade him to look directly out the window. In the corners of his eyes, he could see rooftops just above the window ledge on both sides, but he had no desire to see any more.

There was a commotion on the stairs behind him, which filtered through the wood of the closing door. The woman crashed into the bright room, with all traces of fear and despair missing from her face. Her eyes were blazing, her teeth clenched, and her cheeks blushed with rage.

“HERE’S YOUR FUCKING WATER!!”

She flung an unopened blue plastic bottle of water at him, the same type of bottle he had used. *The same type of bottle he had told her to drink, not fucking throw at him.*

The bottle bounced painlessly off his chest, and landed on the floor. Johnny thought briefly about rebuking the woman, asking why she had not listened to his advice, but decided against it. What the fuck was her problem? He had just saved her. And now she's throwing all these shapes?

“What the shit is going on here?”

“Sure, like you care.”

She stood with her hands on her hips, and the beginnings of a sneer on her face. Again, he was simultaneously baffled and annoyed with this woman's attitude. The rising anger overrode the reluctance on his part to look out the window. How else was he to find out what was going on? It's not as if the cooperative bitch he had just saved was going to help him. He shrugged the last of the forbidding voices from his mind, and walked the short distance to the window on the right hand side of the room. The woman screamed, and covered the ground between them in a flash. She tried to pull Johnny away, but his eyes were already fixed.

Beneath him, there was a quadrangle courtyard, the type he'd seen in documentaries about Cambridge and Oxford universities. A narrow concrete path surrounded a lush green lawn, and the walls were dotted sporadically with great wooden doors. The doors on the eastern and western walls obviously led to other parts of the building, with old tiled rooves easing themselves down from similar heights to rest on both walls respectively. The north-facing wall had a much larger door in the centre, with no roof stretching behind it. This door appeared to lead to the outside, serving as an exit from the compound, or whatever this place was. Having exhausted his interest in the quad, Johnny's eyes skirted over the top of the wall, passing the high wooden rooftops on the outside that he'd already noticed, and passing the rest of what seemed to be an inconspicuous small town. Just past a rust-coloured network of railway lines, the land slid away into a shimmering lake. The sun glinted mischievously off the water, which pulled halfway to the horizon. On either side of the lake, dark green mountains, their sides pierced by forests of pine trees, rose away sharply into the clouds. Even through the clouds, he could make out grey rocky summits, covered with snow. As his eyes darted from one side to the other, he caught a large wooden house on the shores just to his right. The smallest wave of recognition swamped him gently; he *knew* this place.

The woman beside him made a small gurgling sound in her throat, and pulled Johnny back from the lake. She pointed to one of the doors on the eastern side of the quad, which was opening slowly. All around the courtyard, the other doors opened lazily. Johnny noticed the first of the people to emerge, and he recognised the lank figure of Dez. His friend was moving almost mechanically, his long machete glinting in the sun, sending short sharp bursts of light towards Johnny. Even at this distance, he could make out the eyes. Gone were the green eyes that never betrayed Dez's feelings. In their place were huge, black nothings. Surrounded by the whites of his scleras, they gave the effect of a cartoon character. But there was nothing comical about the growing panic in Johnny's stomach. The woman was still making terrified sounds. From every door around the quad, people were emerging. Johnny knew most of them – it seemed like the men were coming from the doors to the right, the women were coming from the left. His friends were all here – Brian, Stan, Ger, Jamie, all armed with long, shining knives, all sporting the same cold, black eyes.

As the woman continued to let out the smallest screams possible, Johnny figured that she too was suffering the sight of her friends, armed, with black eyes, and moving with rhythmic intent towards their vantage point. He confirmed this with speed – each of the women were holding similar blades, staring ahead with those cartoon eyes. Dez was the first to reach the door beneath them, and they heard it creak as it opened. Except this was not Dez. The hordes of black-eyes filed through the door beneath, and the first of the metronome steps on the stairs rang out. Simultaneously, Johnny and the woman fell to the floor, curling ever so slightly, giving up before they had even begun. Her eyes met his, and their shared despair only heightened their respective silent panic. There was no escape, there was no explanation, there was only what was to happen. Another time, Johnny would have been disgusted with his resignation. Now, it was the only option.

* * * * *

There were no bright flashes, no explosion, no swirl of psychedelic lights as he and she were whipped away to a new surrounding. He simply blinked and found himself in a warm, bright bedroom. The walls were painted orange, with

dashes of purple around the room. There was one large window, and two doors, one leading to another bedroom, the other closed behind him. The window offered another view of the dark blue lake, as it lapped at the feet of the looming mountain. Again, he knew where he was. The wooden house. She was here again, her image only just blurring into view. She walked from the second bedroom towards him, a smile on her face as she combed her hair. It was not the matted, dirty mass of curls it had been before, but now clean, still damp. She was wearing only her underwear, matching light blue pieces, which blended smoothly with the whiteness of her skin. She sat on the edge of the bed, still combing, and nodded towards a small dressing table behind Johnny.

“Throw me over that hair thing, will you?”

Johnny turned, and picked up the green hair bobbin on the table. He turned back to hand it to her, and froze. She was now sprawled across the full length of the bed, the comb still in her hand, her torso decorated with a dozen wounds. Deep red poured from each inch-long laceration, dripping from her pale body to the patterned duvet, mixing with the light blue of her underwear. His eyes fell to a solitary strike to her chest, jagged edges of darkened lace unable to decide whether or not to dive into the gaping hole beneath. There was no blood on her face, her features left in an untouched serene acceptance. A faint smell of copper reached his nostrils, the jabbing chemical odour of blood. Still he stood, horrified, scared, not able to understand.

He didn't jump, or even rise from the bed. That was the norm on dramatic television, but he had never experienced it. His eyes opened quickly, bypassing the usual slow, waking process. His heart pounded at a ferocious pace, his mouth was dry. His knuckles stung from where he had lashed out at the wall, a mere reflex action, a consequence of his rapid awakening. It took his pulse a few seconds to ready itself, aided by the cool consolation that he hadn't just witnessed the murder of a damp-haired woman in her underwear.

nine

As part of a school tour some years before, Johnny had spent a week in the small Swiss town of Brient. The village gave Johnny the eerie feeling that it had once fallen from the tip of one of the huge mountains around it– the Brienter Grat, the Trachdenzbach, or the Mühlbach, (the former more likely because of its shared name), and then floundered in the waters of the Brientersee thousands of feet below. The sodden village had then pulled itself from the lake, and settled right on the shore, unable to go much further. Having performed a terrifying freefall, and having to pull itself from a brooding lake reluctant to give up any possible victims, this exhaustion would have been expected. The village stayed put, eventually learning to get along with the dark waters and the darker mountains, harnessing them as tourist attractions, growing into a small town. But never losing sight of the fact that the two natural beauties had once conspired to try do away with her, Brient always held a silent fear, always looking back over her shoulder, giving the impression that she was a scared little village. In the company of such vicious murdering gorgeousness, Johnny reckoned that was kind of cool. Needless to say, no one believed him.

During his stay there, he had fallen in love with the place. At the time, most of his peers, classmates and friends were discovering the delights of alcohol. Being away from home for two weeks provided ample opportunity to satisfy their curiosity, and as the magazine racks in the railway station allowed most of them their first look at a porno mag, it was a great time of awakening for all concerned. Johnny had developed his theory about Brient whilst under the influence, but also found a heightened sense of appreciation of the surroundings, which did not deteriorate with the cold light of day. He did not need to reference the many photographs he had taken of the lakeside to be sure that it had been the quiet, apprehensive Swiss village that had been in his dreams the night before.

Dez too had fond memories of the place – his eyebrow now sported religiously the ear-ring that some cute native had given him as a memento of their

three days of romance. There had been something about the girls in Switzerland, they were magnetically pulled towards the visiting schoolboys, just as all the guys back home fell over themselves in efforts to impress the Spanish teenagers who made the summertime trek over to Ireland. Cradling hot whiskeys in Dolan's the following Friday, Johnny stumbled through the smalltalk, holding out for the opportunity to slip his dreams once more into the spotlight, to get his friend to join him in a happy reflective.

"Are you finished now?"

"Yeah, had the last exam today. Finished at eleven, the rest of the class went out, I couldn't be bothered."

"Making up for it now, then."

Dez raised his steaming glass, arching one eyebrow.

"How'd your exams go?"

"Shite, if I'm lucky I passed. They're not that important though, only a couple of per cent. You?."

"Grand. A bit rough in places, but it was ok. Same story though, worth fuck all in the end."

Johnny actually reckoned he had done really well in the pre-Christmas assessments, but if he himself didn't cover his own ass, who would?

He had debated over how exactly to introduce Brient to proceedings. Just coming out with "I had a dream about it..." sounded pretty stupid. Then again, wanting to talk about it at all seemed pretty stupid. But there was something in him that wanted to get this out, not to display his awesome dreaming powers once more, but to speak proudly and excitedly about the place, just as he once wanted to talk about Ann Greene (when they were seeing each other – and for a long time after they had split up), just like he wanted to speak highly of Ride when he discovered them long before anybody else.

"There's a guy in my class says he used to live in Brient for a couple of years."

It was a lie, but as good a way as any to see if Dez would take the bait. He needn't have worried.

"Mmmm, nice place."

There was a slanting smirk on his face as he rolled his eyebrow ring through his fingers. It looked the same as any other damn ring, and Johnny had often

wondered if it was indeed the one that had been given to him that rainy evening by the Kantonale Schnitzerschule, or rather a cheap replacement for a long lost piece of jewellery, its only purpose to allow him to preserve the triumphant tale. Knowing the nonchalant stance Dez adopted with most women, the last option was a distinct possibility.

“Yeah, I’d love to go back.”

“Seriously?”

“I had a mad dream about the place, I’d forgotten how cool it was. Got out all the old photos, the maps, all that shit.”

He felt better now, urged on by an unknown energy source, wanting to outline his daft craving to get back to the misty lakeside.

“It was a bit cool, I guess. All those mountains. You want another?”

Shit, forget about the whiskey. We’re on a roll here.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

It was too late. Dez hauled his skinny frame from their seat and ambled towards the bar. The rush had died as quickly as it had gathered pace. He couldn’t bring it out again, he didn’t want to now. It had been taken from him.

Shit, shit.

Johnny drained the last of the lukewarm whiskey in his glass, and slammed it down on the table with just a little too much force. He glanced around quickly for a disapproving soul, someone to scowl at. His head swirled briefly, snapped back into settling by Dez as he returned from the bar. He shoved a frothy pint in front of Johnny.

“I’m warm enough, don’t want any more whiskey.”

“You’ll hear no complaints from me.”

“What’s with the frown?”

Johnny’s face was obviously reflecting his puzzlement regarding his sudden hostile outbreak. Just like the rush before it, his anger had swelled and deflated in an instant.

“Nothing”, laughing it away.

“Check it out, my son, it’s on!”

Dez was smiling over Johnny’s head, towards the door, towards Susan Welch as she breezed efficiently past the window tables. Johnny turned, his heart taking the slightest of jumps, catching her eye, aware of the look on Dez’s face, and the smile on hers. Her hair was tied under a knitted hat, which she paused briefly to

pull from her head. Johnny took immediate stock of what she was wearing, and how she was wearing it. Another different combination of clothes – it had been different every time since he'd noticed his interest in her. How big was her damn wardrobe?

“Not cramping your style, am I?”

The amused smile let Johnny know that even if he told Dez that he was in the way, his friend had no intention whatsoever of leaving. So he saved him having to be a prick.

“For what?”

Johnny had turned his eyes back to Dez, and was smiling as he answered. That would look bad, he quickly decided, wiping the grin away. Might make her think that he's being teased about her. Which he is. But should she know? Fuck it, mind games...

She reached their table, and waited for Johnny to move slightly, his body language suggesting that she sit down. She greeted them both, and addressed them both. So as to not make Dez feel left out. Like that'd happen.

“You in long?”

“No, just this and a whiskey.”

Dez was immediately enjoying his role, taking quick control. The bastard.

“How's the flat going?”

“Fine, everyone's easy going. The landlord still hasn't got us connected to the cable yet.”

Dez was now leaning forward, abandoning the usual bored splay he adopted in pub conversations. The complete *bastard*.

The two of them continued for a short while, talking rubbish about flats, student pubs, college. All rubbish. Johnny felt a surge of annoyance that grew with every passing second that she wasn't spending talking to him. He sipped methodically from his pint; Dez was too busy jawing to drink, and she had yet to go to the bar. He contemplated going for a piss. Not that he needed one, but it made a statement. A “don't mind me” kind of statement. Fuck it, too strong. He'd play the patience card. The willing, calm, patient guy who didn't demand constant attention. Even though he wanted it.

“What did you think of the tape?”

Shit, she was good. She was able to shake off the piss-taking intentions of Dez, jumping with both feet into the gap provided as he drank quickly, some much-needed lubrication for his strained vocal chords, no doubt. Johnny ignored the stupid voices in his head telling him to play it cool.

“It was ok, some of the songs were good. A bit too heavy in places. The singer’s voice is cool.”

In truth, he had not appreciated Snot’s noisy mix of punk and metal at first, and the singer’s voice had bugged the shit out of him. But some of their more diverse tunes had appealed to him, so he didn’t feel so bad about the little white lie. Dez looked bored already, giving up the fight. By the time Susan had worked her way through asking about Johnny’s exams, if he was on holiday, and what he intended to do with his three free weeks, Dez had returned to his uninterested recline. Johnny caught the smallest frown out of the corner of his eye, but he could not have cared less. Simple Minds were bouncing from the speaker just above them, one of their minor hits he could never remember the name of, and she was sitting across from him once more. He was about to offer her a drink, but she beat him to it, pushing herself back from the table, and walking to the bar. Dez leaned over, as tactful as ever.

“Man, I’m bored off my tits. You two are gonna be at it all night. I’m going down the back to see if there’s anyone there. I’ll be back in a while.”

“Alright.”

Johnny wasn’t going to argue with him, or insist that he had no reason to leave. His mind wandered while waiting for her.

“Where’s he gone?”

“Looking for someone down the back.”

“Three’s company, I guess.”

His eyes darted speedily towards hers, but she was focused on the table, drinking. Good. It was only a throw-away statement, it meant nothing. Anything else, she would have been looking at him, he figured. And that would have been bloody awkward. Too quick for him.

“Yeah.”

His voice was nervous, but he managed to turn it into a small laugh.

“Did you hear any more about that band Clinch?”

He was glad that she had moved on from that last exchange so quickly, but as she mentioned the band again, the same chilled breeze shot through his stomach.

In an instant, he saw the photo of her, and winced inside as he remembered it was gone.

“No, I haven’t. I can’t even remember where I saw them.”

They talked through another couple of pints, by which time Dez had reappeared into view, chatting up some underage girl in a black hoody. Johnny watched as she carefully lifted Dez’s eyebrow ring, and held it briefly between her fingers. The sly smile was spreading across his face, glaring expectantly at his tormentor, who was a good deal shorter than him. As Johnny watched, his mind passed over his dreams again, his urge to talk as strong as before. But whatever point there had been in asking Dez to join him, there was even less in asking Susan.

“Man, what is he at?”

“Huh?”

She had a half-amused frown on her face, which looked even better than the full effort.

“Dez. That girl is only sixteen.”

“Do you know her?”

“Yeah, she lives in my estate. She’s in my sister’s class. Ciara Maher, I think.”

The name meant nothing to Johnny. But it provided ample opportunity to take the piss out of his lecherous friend later on. And another sister he hadn’t known she had.

“Shit, that reminds me, you know I told you my sister, Claire, had a dream about you, and I didn’t get a chance to tell you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she phoned last week, she rings every two weeks, and she said that she’d had this dream about you. You went over to see her, and all this mad shit happened. She says that she knows you to see, and she told me about it when I said that I was getting lyrics off you for the band.”

“Over to see her?”

“Yeah, she’s over in Switzerland, working for some school. Part of her college placement – she did German, so it was either there or Germany.”

Johnny felt the beginning of the cold wave in his stomach once more, and the beginning of a frown on his forehead.

“Whereabouts in Switzerland?”

“Uh, place called Brient. It’s supposed to be really cool. Mountains, lakes.”

In a flash, the stabbing cold tide burst from within him, spreading over his skin in a blanket of pins and needles. His heart sank and rose simultaneously, lurching around his chest in tandem with its beats. He felt sick, yet at the same time, there was a massive relief released somewhere inside. His face revealed nothing, neither did time, she was sipping once more from her pint, not aware of any change in him. He didn’t understand why his body was reacting in this way, but the same relief forced its way into his mouth, and he spoke. To his surprise, calmly.

“I know the place, we went on a school tour there a couple of years ago.”

It was as though his body was separated from what was going on inside, going about its business in complete ignorance. Or else it was controlling his body as well, choosing his actions so as to not alert others to whatever it was. And what the fuck was it? A dart of reason poked through into his mind.

“That’s a bit mad. Maybe you left some part of your aura there or something, and she picked up on it.”

Another time, he would have willingly discussed such a far-fetched concept, but now he had full control once more, as though the danger had passed. His mouth could not speak at such lengths if his mind was still struggling to understand. He’d never seen this girl before, so how could *he* dream about *her*?

“It’s possible.”

She excused herself to go to the toilet, leaving him alone. He buried his head in his hands, and cursed the swirling alcohol in his brain, mixing things up, not allowing him any clarity whatsoever. He failed to see what the big deal was, now that the cold and the spasms had receded. Who was to say that it was Susan’s sister in his dream? Maybe she even had him mixed up with someone else. Even if she hadn’t, so what? Still images from the night before flashed before him, mostly ignored. He felt a different kind of relief, and a sudden sheepishness. Like all other minor crises, he had over-reacted like a clown. Stupidly. He smiled to himself, hidden under his hands. Fucking weird.

She came back, briefly, to grab her coat.

“I’ve gotta go catch my lift. Will you be out tomorrow?”

“Probably.”

“I have to go do some stuff for my aunt in the evening, but I should be out after. I’ll see you then?”

He got the smallest suspicion that she was waiting for a hug, but he was not going to risk it. He turned towards his dregs, just to make sure, and picked up his glass.

“Yeah, see you then.”

He turned back as he said this, giving and receiving a smile. Anything more wouldn’t be right. He watched for a moment as she walked away, and then made his way towards the back. Dez was now seated in one of the smaller two-seat alcoves, his new friend sitting across his knees. His face was obscured by her head. Johnny turned on his heels, grabbed his coat, and left. It was drizzling again, so he enjoyed the walk home. There were too many things on his mind, but ahead of all of them, a smile on his face.

ten

There was something about Christmas that always pulled him in, even now as a maturing man of the world. At a place where he should be worrying more about his qualifications, career prospects, women, beer, he still found himself wrapping warmly in all that the season had to offer. Even the town looked well, the same old tacky coloured lightbulbs strewn carelessly across most of the streets, Band Aid blaring constantly from speakers, shop fronts and charity collectors greeting all with an undeterred cheer. Everyone seemed happier, and all those who had been away during the year had returned. It seemed that today, the day before Christmas Eve, there were small reunions taking place in every corner of Dolan's. It was a Saturday, and the place would have been packed regardless. But with the overflow of casual last-minute present buyers, bundling bags of slippers, cheap perfume and chocolates under tables, the pub seemed blacker than ever before. Johnny had the second of the afternoon's pints in front of him, most of his friends were around him, and he had just noticed Susan walking in with a group of her friends. No Doubt's cover of "Oi To The World" – the bar staff's donation to the Christmas spirit, was still audible over the loud hum of conversation.

"What's this I hear about you and that Welch one?"

Dez had wasted very little time in passing on the necessary ammunition, and Jamie did not need to be encouraged.

"Fuck off. Ask him about his little schoolgirl."

"Man, she was fine! Fuck her age. She's old enough."

Dez had the rueful smile of someone who knows they've been caught, but doesn't rate the crime as being all that serious. As could have been predicted, he was not going to allow himself to be rebuked by any of those around him.

The group continued to drink into the evening, pausing only briefly to wolf down a feed in the Burgerhouse next door. Normally, they wouldn't touch their crummy food, but their taste buds were long since numbed, and no-one wanted to brave the sizeable trek to Harry's. It was in the middle of his Super Burger that Johnny was informed by Dez that Susan had just walked by.

“Which means she’s not in the pub anymore.”

“So?”

“Poor Johnny, his woman’s gone home.”

If it had been Dez on his own, it wouldn’t have been so bad. But with the rising laughter coming from the other five, he felt a new annoyance, as though the joke was now getting stale. That’s what he told himself.

“She’s not my fucking woman. I haven’t done anything.”

There was enough venom in his tone to get the feeling across. Which was stupid. Giving Dez some more rope to play with. The others responded with tantrum calls, backing up the bastard. The Bastard And The Five Pricks, now playing in Johnny’s head. One night only, but they can be persuaded to extend their residency.

“Alright, alright, calm down.”

Dez’s Scouser impression was brutal, but it offered Johnny the chance to laugh his way back onto their side. Which would be easier in the long run. Dez could be a proper asshole in company, and he was damned if he was going to be the object of his attention.

Back in the pub, they managed to reclaim their seats– it was still early, about a half hour before the night-time crowds would filter in. They moved onto shorts, beginning with whiskey, then tequila. Stan was the first casualty, shoving Johnny out of the way in his fervent rush to the toilets. He emerged minutes later, a shade whiter than before, but with a victorious grin on his face.

“That’s out of the way then. You fuckers still have it coming.”

They placed bets on the identity of the next person to puke. It was to be Jamie, followed some time later by Dez.

“It’s the food, man. Has to be.”

Brian had a concerned look on his face, which morphed into laughter. To Johnny’s delight, Dez was on his knees in a cubicle when Susan walked back in, again flanked by three of her friends. Different friends, ones he recognised from somewhere. She knew instantly where to find him, smiling across, waving. She must have noticed him earlier on. He didn’t blame her for not coming over. As he waved back, his eyes squinting as the light changed from dark to brighter, he realised just how drunk he was. His eyes were always the first to go. It was a good

five minutes before she caught his line of vision again, and he seized upon the opportunity, ignoring the catcalls, making his over to where she stood.

“Jesus, you look hammered!”

“I’d want to be, I’ve been in here all day.”

He smiled once, then shot his eyes to the floor. Straight away, from what she had said, he was conscious of his appearance. He squirmed under the glaring, hot red lights that hung over the bar. The sweat began to seep through the pores of his skin. She looked damn good, but he could not look directly at her. He had forgotten his pint, and there was an annoying void in his hand, and also in his mouth. The sudden movements of his relocation had not helped his head either. He felt himself sway ever so slightly. Something told him that if he talked, he would not notice it so much.

“You were in earlier?”

“Yeah, just for a while. I had to go home to throw some stuff in a bag.”

She trailed away as the barman returned with her drink. What? Packing? Johnny’s brain instructed his heart to sink, but the message got lost somewhere along the way. It found its way out in the form of a low moan.

“You going away?”

“Mmm. Going to my grandmother’s for Christmas with the family. We usually go every year, but we didn’t last time, so we’re kinda making up for it. Claire’s coming over, but she’s only got three or four days off, so it’s just as handy for her to stay up there.”

“When will you be back?”

“The 27th. Dad’s back in work the next day.”

That wasn’t so bad. She’d be gone for the Stephen’s Night piss-up, but she would be back for New Year’s. Unless she had something else planned. Did she? Shit, one disappointment is enough for one evening. That’s be a good way to start the year.... His mind was wandering, spending some time with itself as she took a mouthful of beer, and communicated with her friends across the floor. She made no immediate moves towards returning to the little group, so Johnny ordered himself a pint. He was still melting under the burning lights, still unable to look her in the eye, and more than happy to let her do all the talking. Dez and company had lapsed into a mumbling, incoherent commune in the corner, and he’d only

have to face their half-enthusiastic piss-taking if he went back over. Fuck them. Besides, his legs weren't feeling the best.

She had launched into a tale involving some party that one of her friends had thrown. The police had showed up, and dragged four guys away in a van. It turned out that the cops had been tipped off about a drug-infested party in the area, but in their infinite wisdom had raided the first noisy house they came to; the wrong party. The four guys they arrested had argued their innocence in an over-exuberant manner. Johnny had one ear on her, and another directed inside his head, where he sulked silently. "Blue Monday" was pounding from the speaker just above the bar, its electronic pulses stabbing him teasingly. He was angry, but not sure where to focus it. Her? Her Granny? Damn, he wouldn't get to meet Claire either. That could have been cool. Someone in Brient. She probably looked like Susan as well. His mind turned from one point to another, still with the awareness to read when he was supposed to be smiling in response to her story. Each time he smiled, he remembered that it would be a week at least before she was around again. And this was supposed to be fucking Christmas.

eleven

The more he walked, the further he was getting from where he wanted to be. The city was becoming more and more decrepit, the shops and storeys of loud, happy apartments above them had been replaced by abandoned brown-stoned warehouses. There were no more bright side-streets with station wagons full of kids nosing their way out onto the bustling main street. The only diversions from this street were dark, unwelcoming alleyways. Even the river had pulled itself away from this part of town, taking the courting couples away with it, its banks no longer forming the opposite side of the street. The traffic too had eased away, and the hum that had before sang of prosperity was now the eerie drone of distant cars too scared to come this far. No, he would find nothing this way. It was time to turn back.

He switched direction and took his first step in one swift movement. He walked with his head down, his eyes trained away from the buildings and the scattered miserable people. At the first street corner he came to, there was a small man. He wasn't exactly a midget, but considerably smaller than Johnny, perhaps four feet in height. Again, Johnny left his eyes trailing along the ground, so as to not establish any eye contact. A sharp glint of sunlight flashed off something in the small man's hand. As he passed him, Johnny noticed the blade, and glanced in panic at the man's face. His face was mildly distorted, the dimensions of his features pointlessly fighting for space on his over-sized head. There was an excited, child-like grin of anticipation on his lips, his eyes burned with intention. He began to move once Johnny had walked past, sending short shocks of terror racing through Johnny's body, which automatically dropped his hands from his jacket pockets, in preparation for self-defence. The two of them were now walking across the mouth of a sloping street, which hauled itself back away from the main thoroughfare. Johnny had his eyes curled to his right, using the corners to keep track of the little man with the blade.

The little man veered off suddenly to the right, the same intent on his face, adjusting his stride slightly to cope with the steep hill. Johnny's mind flowed with a thousand suggestions, each one rebuking him for his unnecessary panic.

You stupid shit, it wasn't you he's following.

Just in the wrong place, but no harm done.

You could have taken the little prick anyway.

As he reached the opposite side of the entrance, he swivelled his body to visually follow the path of the little man. Who or what was he going after anyway? After his brief misguided role as the object of the little man's attention, he figured it was his right to find out. The knife glinted rhythmically, each flash interrupted as a tiny thumb ran itself along the cold metal. His dirty black overcoat trailed along the ground, its natural swing upset by the motion of his climb. He was staring straight ahead, the strange leer on his face spreading. Johnny noticed a movement a short distance up, a figure emerging from the shadows by the wall. A woman. With her back to him, making her way slowly up the street. Even though the cowering rooftops overhead blocked out most of the sunlight, her pale white skin still shone, heightened by the tones of her light blue underwear, the only clothes she was wearing. She was barefoot, her hands swinging in time with her hair as she stepped. Her steps were delicate, unrushed.

She doesn't know...

The little man was moving at a greater pace, and was gaining on her. His gait was almost comical, his short legs pumping, his arms limp by his side. Johnny was still frozen in position, stung by the horrified anticipation of what was to happen. The same thousand voices that had been mocking his panic a few short seconds before now filled his head with questions.

You're not going to just fucking stand there, are you?

Help her!!

Are you watching, Johnny?

Don't get involved. You'll be next.

You can take the fucking midget, don't be stupid.

Johnny allowed each of the voices its turn, unable to decide, looking inside for someone to make the decision. He remembered the fear, and the relief which followed. Would it be stupid to intervene in something that was entirely none of his concern? Fine, something was probably going to happen to the girl, but it was her problem, not his. Maybe she deserved it... But could he stand and watch it happen? His leg twitched, announcing the end of his paralysed state. He could move again. He was flushing the last of the questions from his mind when the

little man, now within five feet of the oblivious woman, turned back to look at him. And his eyes spoke.

What's it going to be, Johnny? Are you going to get involved? You'd be helping her.

That was fucking it. Johnny swung around and walked quickly around the corner. His legs would not run, he had to be satisfied with a pacy stride. His ears burned, straining to hear a woman's scream on a side-street behind him. It never came. Terror mixed with shame. A well-built man in a red lumber shirt began to cross the road slowly, pointing a disapproving look towards Johnny. He didn't say anything, he didn't have to. Johnny felt tears welling up, and his lower lip began to tremble, but defiantly screamed "you didn't do fucking anything either!!!" The man shrugged, and continued on his path. Johnny too did not miss a step, and propelled himself further and further away, in the opposite direction. He glanced over his shoulder at random intervals, scanning in panic for a midget with a bloodied knife. The man in the red shirt had walked right past the entrance to the side-street. Pretty soon, he had disappeared from view. Johnny could now barely make out the street corner where he had first met the midget. The street was easing itself back into the more pleasant part of town, taking itself safely away from knife-wielding midgets. His heart began to steady itself, deciding that the crisis was truly over. Relief and biting shame fought for his attention, and shame was starting to get the upper hand.

twelve

Christmas Day was its usual bizarre self in Johnny's home. After the ritual exchange of presents and the annual family outing to Mass, his mother had disappeared into the bowels of her kitchen, preparing the kind of feast that she never even attempted to recreate on any ordinary day of the year. His father had taken over the stereo, wading his way through the small pile of compact discs that his wife, son and daughters had bought him. Ann was engrossed with the art set that Santa had dropped down the chimney, whilst Niamh bravely stepped over her teenage festive cynicism to offer guidance to her sister. Johnny, still nicely chilled after the quick joint he'd squeezed in after Mass, was idly flicking through a Bunty annual, one eye on the World Cup review which was reminiscing quietly in the corner. The morning was lazy, peppered with chocolate and wine, only heightening his hunger. By the time his mother had proudly called "dinner!" from the kitchen, he was starving. His plate was filled with great hills of potatoes, both mashed and roasted, hundred of peas and carrot slices, swimming reluctantly in gravy, and enough turkey, ham and stuffing to constitute a meal on their own. The wine was still plentiful, his mother taking the opportunity to indulge now that her work was done. They ate in silence, savouring the food that somehow tasted differently on this day. There was a long pause over tea and coffee, allowing digestion to take its course before they commenced the massive cleanup operation.

Johnny spent the afternoon in front of some Disney movie, his stomach too bloated for much else. His parents went for a walk around five, leaving him free to throw another spliff together. He went into the back yard quietly, settling in his appointed place behind the shed, his ears cocked towards the back door in case either of his preying sisters felt the need to incriminate him. Naturally, they would only accuse him of smoking cigarettes, but upon being informed, his parents would be a touch wiser. He had a glass of red wine with him; a lame excuse to be out in the chilly evening air, but it had to do. The sharp intake of his first pull brought water to his eyes, before finding its way to his stomach, his nose, and his brain. He felt the beginning of his light-headed sways soon after, and rested his head against the wall. The sky above him was a vibrant grey, he could see the cold

in the air. His breath had an extra depth as he exhaled again and again, sweet fumes ticking his nose. A cool, wet drop splashed onto his hand, another fell into his glass. Drips fell randomly around him, but without the urgency to suggest that he should retreat indoors. It was as though the sky was deciding whether or not to rain down on him alone. He took another mouthful of wine, swallowed, and inhaled once more. His entire body shivered with the sensation. All at once, picture after picture flashed in front of his eyes, like a personal slide show. His brain struggled to keep up, attempting to put words or labels to each image. He saw a lakeside town, shuddering upwards at huge green mountains; Susan Welch, in a live action pose, the photo he had seen; a woodland glade, with the strange man staring at him; a topless woman in those goalkeeper shorts; a slowly moving woman in blue underwear being pursued by a midget in a trenchcoat. When the slide show had ceased, Johnny raised his smoky head once more to the sky, wincing as another great raindrop caught him square on the cheek. There was a sudden surge of puzzlement, his failure to understand what it all meant.

What had been a dream?

All of it, wasn't it?

Fuck it, it didn't really matter, it was all just weird, random shit.

No – he *had* seen that Polaroid, and the picture of Susan. Shit, if he hadn't been so stupid, he would still have them. So why was he seeing them with the other stuff, the things he'd dreamed about? It made no sense. Was it supposed to? The questions were lost in his drifting mind, forced out by an uncaring laziness.

The rain had begun to pick up, and he was starting to get wet. It was getting dark – how fucking long had he been out here anyway? He stubbed what little was left of the joint, and tossed it over the wall. The last of the wine moistened his ragged throat, and he ambled slowly back through the freezing wet rain. There was no-one at the door, no-one in the kitchen, so he smiled in the face of another perfectly executed truancy.

In comparison to dinner, tea was a modest affair. Johnny nevertheless wolfed down whatever was going, his hunger having returned. The early evening family movie was *Jurassic Park*, and all five relocated to the sitting room as it began. Even though Johnny owned a copy of the video, and had seen it a dozen times, it was a film he had never tired of, so he took his place by the fire. Another bottle of wine was opened and passed to him. By midnight, he and his parents were the

only survivors, nicely pissed as *The Remains Of The Day* drew to a close. The sheer magnitude of the day's drinking had taken its toll, so Johnny said his farewells and hit the sack. His stomach was full, his mind dizzy from the wine, so sleep was well within reach.

The next day was traditionally given over to experimentation within his little group of friends. In years gone by, this had translated to a bizarre riverside camping expedition (seen as a major success, even though the sub-arctic conditions had meant that the four brave campers had slept in the car as opposed to their tent), a house party in Dez's parents' loft, and a well-insulated session drinking flagons in the park. This last effort had been a once-off, with the resulting bouts of flu enough to deter any such stupidity ever again. Brian had been responsible for this year's suggestion, which had been greeted with roars of approval three nights earlier.

"Let's all go to the Green Room! It's been fucking years since I was there."

The Green Room was the town's largest night-club, which bustled regularly with locals and those shipped in from the surrounding areas. Johnny and his mates avoided the place as a rule – there were many reasons – egos still bruised from refusals at the door, hearts still torn by memories of furtive lustful scrambles at the wall by the toilets, or simply the fact that it was religiously full of shitheads dancing to shit music. However, having spent the majority of the preceding day knocking back pints, the irony of making their traditional extreme jaunt a visit to the hated night-club was lost on nobody. Yet in the cold light of the evening of December 26th, there were moans to be heard.

"This is a stupid idea. It's always a shit night in here."

"Not if we're hammered going in."

"They won't even let us in the fucking door then."

"And it'll cost a fortune."

"Don't be such a miserable bastard. We'll get nicely pissed, go in, grab a table, and get completely twisted in there."

Even Johnny, who was leading the opposition voices, had to admit that this was a reasonable idea. Or at the very least, the best of a bad bunch of options.

Having loosened themselves up nicely in Dolan's, the group made their way through town to the downtrodden walls of Green's Hotel. The night-club was

nothing more than a converted ballroom, but yet still held onto its title as the number one venue in the area. There was a small queue, held up as the bouncers refused entry to three hopelessly underage girls, shivering as their jackets failed to cover the bare skin their dancing regalia exposed. The three were waving false id cards, insisting in shrill voices that they were eighteen. As they turned past the queue, their excessively made-up faces contorted into bitter defeat, Dez and Brian exchanged quiet giggles, well aware of the fact that anything louder would not go down well with the bouncers. (Not to mention the likelihood of the three girls returning when the night-club finished, with many large, aggressive hoodlums eager to protect the honour of their innocent little sisters). As it happened, the bouncers were finding great amusement in their latest triumph, and were of cheery dispositions as Johnny and company whisked past them.

Inside, loud monotonous dance music was pounding, the vibrations shaking the floor slightly. It was still early, with only a few dedicated souls making moves on the dancefloor. After leaving their coats with the bitter employees in the cloakroom, the group laid claim to one of the red velvet couches, which swung in a $\frac{3}{4}$ circle, giving all a perfect view of the floor, if they so desired. They moved as one to the bar, before taking Johnny's order, and sending him back to guard the seats. He sat on his own for a few brief minutes, his head happily sailing, well prepared for the thralls of warm well-meaning bullshit he would be expected to talk.

“Is that woman of yours gonna be in here? Does she come here?”

Johnny was in too good a mood to allow Dez to wind him up this time.

“No, she's off with some relations for the week.”

“She is aye. She's off laying into some other bloke!”

They were again the focus of attention, and there was a round of laughter.

“Let her on. She'd only wreck my head.”

A concept he was only too happy to risk, but they didn't have to know that.

They moved on to comparing how the patented family Christmas Day had gone for each of them, to laughing about Liverpool's miserable performances over the Christmas period, to exchanging early vows as to which women they were going to bed before the evening was over. As the place began to fill, the selection grew stronger. After an hour or so, Brian happily announced that he had noticed a

group of girls he knew from college coming in, which would be a guarantee for at least two of them. Sure enough, after he had strutted across the floor to the corner that they had commandeered, he returned ten minutes later with three of them, one arm in arm, silently but blatantly announcing to his friends “this one’s mine, go for the other ones!”

They were introduced, and filtered into the conversation streams easily, outdoing Stan and Jamie in their knowledge of Monty Python scripts. Some time later, Johnny began to weigh the situation carefully, deciding whether or not he had a chance with either. He had forgotten their names already, but the one with the black hair appeared to be broadcasting to Jamie. She addressed him more than the other two, and a smile was never far from her lips whenever he spoke. Her friend, who was a little quieter, was evidently well pissed. Despite the fact her eyes rolled as she spoke, and she kept spilling her tall glass of vodka and lime, she was extremely cute. Long brown hair fell lightly across her shoulders, some of it brushing his arm as she moved. Her bare navel was pierced, always an appealing sight to Johnny. The cogs in his brain turned ruthlessly. She could be an easy catch, being this drunk, a small bit further down the path than him. At the stage he was, it didn’t matter to him whether she could string two words together or not. A piece inside him scolded such a hormonal notion, and a twinge of something else pointed his mind’s eye towards Susan. Sure, she wouldn’t approve, but she wasn’t fucking here. In a way, it’s her fault that he’s even contemplating this. He turned this all over in his head, as she continued to rave about *The Life Of Brian* beside him. Stan edged past him, and delayed ever so slightly on his way past her. He had been doing his own mental deductions. Johnny observed the ritual exchange between them, deciding that she was anyone’s. It was simply a question of who went for it. Now would be an ample opportunity to move in while his opponent was briefly out of the picture, but the piss he had been holding off for ages was now screaming to get out. Besides, it was safer to go now whilst Stan was also gone. She looked up at him with pissed doe eyes as he sidled past.

“You’re going as well? I must smell or something.”

“No, no, I’m just going to the toilet.”

He allowed himself a small congratulatory smirk, noticed Stan jostling at the bar, and vowed to be back in his seat before him.

Needless to say, there was a queue in the toilet. Two fucking shitheads blocking cubicles, arguing about fucking horses. By the time Johnny had forced his way past, relieved himself, and turned the corner back towards their seat, Stan had moved in. The cause was not completely lost : he only had his arm around her naked shoulder, but she wasn't exactly pulling away. Johnny debated whilst walking, deciding that it would be stupid to retreat, sulking. He mischievously made his way back to his own place on the couch, stubbornly determined to make it as difficult as possible for his friend.

After a long and drawn ten minutes spent swigging Carlsberg, and offering the cute drunk girl the opportunity to exchange Stan's affections for his own, Johnny gave up. Brian had gone somewhere with his woman, as had Jamie, and Stan was evidently heading in the same direction. The jammy bastard had worn down his defiance. Neither of them had the grace to look up as he left, fuming quietly, facing the further dilemma of now having to find someone else to talk to. He was fucked if he was going to traipse around this shitty place on his own. He seized upon the safest immediate option – the bar. As he crossed the edge of the dull wooden dancefloor, he noticed Dez leaning against a pillar just to the right of the counter. Chatting up the same girl of dubious age that he had been with in Dolan's. Johnny racked his brain temporarily for her name – someone had told him – but his interest in that fact faded. Ordinarily, he would avoid his friend, giving him the space to do whatever it was he did with these schoolgirls. But this time, he was smarting from one rejection, and quickly figured that he owed Dez an interruption. The bastard had been giving Johnny a hard enough time of it lately, time for some of his own juice.

Oddly enough, Dez did not appear displeased. Maybe the fucker was so confident of the outcome of his reunion with Young Girl he could afford a few sidetracks. Smug prick. Johnny conjured a smile, and feigned a drunker state.

“Hey man, how is it hanging?”

“Not so bad. What are you at?”

“Nothing much. I can see what you're at.”

Johnny had what he believed to be a knowing smile on his face. Dez dropped his eyes, grinning, and she looked mildly annoyed. Looked like he wasn't good enough for this one either.

"Johnny, this is Ciara. Ciara, Johnny."

"Alright."

"Hi Johnny."

She sounded older than she looked. And appeared to be looking *down* on him. What the fuck?

"What's going on over there? The boys still there?"

"Nah. Brian's scarpered, Stan is laying into some young one, I dunno where the rest are. I'm hitting the bar."

He was already tired of this role reversal—Dez was a much better interfering prat than he'd ever be. Dez was peering over Johnny's shoulder, a smile beginning to spread.

"Before you do, you might want to check this out."

He pointed back towards their original seats, past the now vacant couch, to the small alcove beside the cloakroom. Johnny spun around and followed the directions. His heart leaped, ignorant of the tardying effect that his numbed brain had on his external organs. Susan. Stuffing the bright yellow coat receipt into her pocket, pulling at her wallet. What the fuck was she doing here? Wasn't she supposed to be away?

"I thought you said she was gone away?"

"Yeah, yeah, she was supposed to."

"Why, is he into her or something?"

Shit, he had Schoolgirl on his case now.

"Oh yeah."

Johnny moved ever so slowly away from the smiling couple, his eyes still fixed on the girl at the other end of the club. Now fiddling through her money, setting herself for a trip to the bar, no doubt. He moved in against the bar, pushing in beside the same two fools who had blocked him in the toilets. Pulling his eyes away from her briefly, he stole the barman's attention, and ordered a Pernod. He took the cold short glass, pocketed his change, and edged past the two arguers. She had her back turned to him now, oddly, still in the same position. Waiting for somebody. In an instant, she turned back, dragging someone by the arm, laughing, happy. *A bloke.*

No, no, it's not. Some friend, a relative maybe. Her cousin. Not a *bloke*. His mind was speeding, asking him to ignore the horrible sinking feeling. A giant lump had formed in his chest, right above his heart, and had slowly sunk, dragging him down with it. He slipped back out of view, aware of his face, still frozen with some feeling he couldn't recognise. They were still visible through a scattered line of people. *His* arm still in *hers*. They stopped, she went through the money in her hand. He leaned across her, kissed her cheek. She *smiled*. The same lump rose again, and fell. That was it.

He was gripping his class so tightly, it began to burn with coldness. He gripped it a little harder, wanting to feel pain. Words were flying about his head, lilting voices telling him that he knew all along. That he was stupid to let her in. That it was only to be expected. *He* was standing back, waiting for her to return from the bar. Rubbing his mouth with the sleeve of his poxy jumper. He was nothing. A throwaway poser fucking nothing. Sideburns, cropped gelled hair, nothing. A fucking nobody. Staring around like some kind of a fucking monkey. A fucking monkey who had *her*.

That's real funny. Look at who beat you.

Johnny turned away, unable to look at him.

"You ok, my son?"

He had moved on to his third Pernod, and hadn't noticed one of the dickheads beside him leaving. The other was now looking at him with bloodshot eyes, a strong, nauseating smell of beer on his breath. Something spurred Johnny to shove all else aside, and to humour the fool. Tonight's project—pretend that everything is brilliant... Or something like that. A little role-playing to pass the time, perhaps.

"Yeah, man, cool. Nicely wrecked. And you?"

His new companion took the enthusiasm as an invitation to converse, and swivelled his bar stool.

"Fuckin' hammered. But sure it's the best way to be."

"You're not wrong there."

Johnny raised his glass in a salute, and swallowed a mouthful of the sweet dark liquor. His friend followed his cue.

"And what has a young fella like you out on his own like this? Woman?"

There was a sudden dart of similar dismay under Johnny's brave exterior, but quickly covered over. He was more grateful for this bizarre strength than he had ever been of anything before.

"Yeah, something along those lines."

"She don't want to know about it?"

"Nope."

His friend took a dramatic slug from his pint, dragging the moment. It would have looked good in a film, Johnny thought. Yeah, a film probably would be a better option. At least they end.

"Been there, my son. I mightn't look it now, but I've done all this shit."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I was married before, with a kid, now it's all down the shitter."

Johnny had no great interest in this man's history, but he equally had no interest in talking about Susan fucking Welch. The greater of two evils. It made no difference, his comrade in misery was on a roll.

"I was working abroad for years, all over Europe. Spent ten years in Switzerland. Beautiful country. I was married there for the last four years. Came back here when it ended. Never been really the same, but I guess life goes on."

Johnny's brain clicked, images from past days shooting before his eyes.

"Brient."

"What's that, son?"

"I said 'Brient'. It's a town in Switzerland. I was there a few years ago."

"Don't know the place."

"Course you don't."

Why should he? It's all bollocks. Not connected. He smiled to himself. As connected as he would be to Susan fucking Welch. This drunk cynicism was fun. It held no prisoners. It had no room for stupid feelings. Much more fun.

Shortly after, his friend was reunited with his warring companion, and the two left, the former assuring Johnny that he was "a good sort", and that it "doesn't rain all the time." A strangely poetic flourish from a drunken idiot, he thought, and very close to a sentiment from *The Crow* that he himself had held on to.

Johnny finished off his drink, and slid off his stool. The night was well and truly over. He stumbled across the edge of the floor, head down, aiming for the

cloakroom. The staff were notably more jolly at the end of the evening, obviously happy that the end was in sight, when they could join their peers on the other side of the counter. He took his coat, and struggled it on. The first of the happy couples made their ways past him, happily bidding farewell to the bouncers. Johnny felt like getting sick.

“Johnny!”

Shit, shit, shit. Not anger, just a rush of sad resignation. He had almost made it to the door, but *her* voice was calling him back. He fixed his face once more, and turned back. She was covering the ground at great speed, alone. Where was Monkey Boy?

Still happy.

“I didn’t know you were here!”

“Yeah, I was over there all night.”

He was swaying, his words were mumbled, he knew his eyes were gone.

“I’m only in a half hour or so. Just got back from my grandmother’s. Turns out my cousins from England are coming over, so we only got to stay ‘til today.”

He wasn’t sure if that counted as a plus – she hadn’t been lying, then. No, he decided that there weren’t any pluses. All negatives. All rain.

“Good night?”

“Yeah, alright. I’m a bit gone.”

“You look it.”

That disarming smile hadn’t lost all its power just yet. Shit, this was sore. The same stubborn strength was summoned, and the smallest of smiles entered his brain. He wanted to make it awkward. Would she squirm if she knew that he knew?

Ask her who she’s in here with.

That’s good. She was rambling away, he wasn’t listening. Her eyes were trained on the pattern of his jacket, still smiling. It hit him softly. *She doesn’t know, or give a damn. Why should she squirm?*

It was time to go.

“Listen, I have to go. See you again?”

There was a flash of surprise on her face as he cut her off. Reliable Johnny, the patient listening man, turns on her. She didn’t see that coming. Yet he himself was surprised to find himself unable to break out without a friendly signing off. For what, asshole?

She still looked puzzled. Let Monkey Boy console her.

“Yeah, sure. See you.”

He pushed through the broad wooden doors, muttered something curt to the bouncers, and gritted his teeth as a freezing wind blew drizzle into his face. His stupid Swiss-married drunk asshole friend at the bar didn't know shit – it was fucking raining now.

thirteen

Just as before, when he found himself awake, dreaming of a wooded glade with faded old men and doubles of himself, Johnny knew that he was flying in sleep. There was a horrible, humid heaviness in his head, the blossoming hangover that would rebuke him for his evening's over-indulgence. Yet through the hazy pain, he could make out the images that his brain was amusing itself with, whilst his body was supposedly asleep. Above it all, there was a huge feeling of timid expectancy, of a desire to learn, of the knowledge that something was about to be explained to him. This in itself was enough to hold his attention.

He found himself walking on a dusty dirt path that ran alongside a slow quiet river. Far away in the distance, there was the outline of a large town, shimmering in the sticky heat, steam rising. Behind him was another town, and it became apparent that he was travelling from one to the other. He had a clean, white football with him, and was bouncing the ball as he walked, its gentle navy patterns blurring as it rolled. The path was uneven, and he could feel its contours through the soles of his runners. Suddenly, the ball hit a clay divot, and bounced away from his reach. It rolled slowly across the rough grass that separated the path from the river. Johnny followed it, increasing his pace as it neared the edge. He was a split second too slow – his fingers scraped the soft warm leather as it slipped into the water with the smallest of splashes, his intervention causing the ball to roll over itself. It drifted lazily away from the bank, still spinning slowly. Johnny lay down quickly on the grass, the long blades tickling his face. He reached out across the water, feeling its coolness on his arm. Again, his fingers were not long enough, merely scratching the very edge of the sphere, setting the ball off spinning again. He changed his position, moving his body to face the evading football, his legs stretched out behind him. With one huge lunge, his T-shirt skimming across the water, he managed to get a hand on the ball. It took the majority of his weight, dropping briefly into the cold river, rising back up again just as quickly. He took his other hand from the bank to steady himself, and moved to grab the ball. As he did so, the ball began to spin again. His hand slipped off, the sudden sharp loss of balance causing him to roll over on his side, into the freezing slow water.

He was only under for a brief few seconds, his mind allowing itself to recover from the shock before putting his basic swimming knowledge to use. He kicked himself back to the surface, gasping as his heavy, wet clothes vied with the burning sun on his face for the honour of most extreme sensation. He was breathing heavily and quickly, attempting to push the cold away. The bright sun scorched his eyes, the cool water began to sting his skin. Using his legs in circular movements, he kept himself afloat, raising his heavy arms from the water, brushing his eyes dry. He was back at the bank's edge, reaching for the green slope to pull himself up.

He was just about to raise himself from the water when he noticed the man standing before him. The brief surprise caused him to loosen his grip on the bank, and he slipped back a little. He didn't remember seeing anybody on the path, in either direction. The man was motionless, his hands hidden in the great pockets of a beige overcoat which came halfway down his legs. His face was bland, his head covered by an old Trilby hat. Johnny knew him. His mind raced back to another dream, seeing this man, without the colour that he now possessed, watching him, watching as his unseen double confused Johnny with lyrical bullshit. His companion was now a lot nearer to him than he had been before, and his face was clearly visible. He had a kind disposition, but eyes that shot cold, and tight lips that gave him an equally depraved look. He vaguely reminded Johnny of Peter Kurten, a German serial killer who had fooled many of his victims with his kind features. Who had terrified Johnny even as a black and white photograph.

He continued to kick his legs beneath him, bobbing afloat. The man was standing perilously close to the edge, directly in front of Johnny, therefore making it more difficult for him to leave his watery abode. A sudden rush of indignation struck him. Why wasn't this smiling stranger offering any assistance? Do people normally go bathing in rivers, fully clothed? Do willing swimmers normally look as annoyed as Johnny did? He glared at the motionless man for a split second, quickly quenching any aggressive thoughts, beaten down by the silent authority the stranger was emitting. The water was cold, but it wasn't the only thing making Johnny shiver.

When the smiling stranger spoke, his voice matched his appearance. A soft, friendly lilt, backed with a restrained menace that barked of warning.

“Is it making any sense yet?”

Johnny was surprised to learn that he could speak, and all at once was rushed with scores of voices, giving him the questions he needed to ask. He felt a quiet fear rise in his chest, and huge excitement.

“Is what making sense?”

His heart was pounding, at odds with the slow ripples around him.

“All of this. Your dreams, what goes on inside and outside them.”

His mouth appeared to flesh out when he spoke, the tight lips now filled with colour. He didn't look so bad anymore. Johnny felt sleepy, dreamy. Comfortable.

“They're joined together, aren't they?”

The thought popped into his head, and he passed it out without considering it. The man on the bank smiled.

“Yes.”

Johnny felt his eyes closing. The water was getting so much warmer, he was drifting into sleep. He felt good. The questions still came at him, there was still a part of him resisting the sweet warmth, a part wanting to find out more.

“But why? What's the reason?”

The words were mumbled, his head now turned to the sky, the sun no longer burning but sweeping his face gently.

“I can't say. There is no gain in you knowing now.”

There was a rise of childish petulance in Johnny's stomach. It struggled past the dreamy waves, fighting to be heard.

“Why not? I want to know.”

“It's not here. It won't be here when you wake. You have to find where it is.”

That sounded much too like hard work. Especially when he felt so sleepy.

“How do I find where it is? What is it?”

“You will find it with open eyes. And there you will be shown.”

Now that sounded reasonable. Open eyes. Not like now, closed eyes. Warmth. His legs didn't want to move anymore. The water was pulling him down like a gentle cloak.

“You won't be alone. I'll be along too.”

Company. Help. Just like the water wanted to help him sleep right now. Something told him that the man was leaving. He could not see, his eyes were shut tightly, feeling the warm lapping action of the river on his face. It didn't

matter, he had been told all he needed to know for now. So he could rest, he could sleep. He gave in to the persistent warmth, and slipped slowly beneath the surface.

* * * * *

There was a sickening mixture of fear and excitement in his stomach the next morning, each emotion clawing at the other through his skin. He was sitting upright in bed, his head resting on the headboard, the chilly morning air curling around him. The dream was as vivid now as it had been during the night. He side-stepped his hangover completely, turning over huge new facts. His dreams were *connected*? Which dreams? He racked his brain in a dazed panic, found himself unable to focus on anything for any more than a split second, and turned to his diary where he had loosely catalogued them. Where did it start? Was it just the dreams that were joined, or was the Polaroid part of it? The email with Susan Welch's picture? He scoured through his daily entries, passing one dream after another, discounting some, pausing at others. He came to where he had first mentioned the Polaroid. Who the hell had sent it? His eyes carried to the page across, the day before. His dream about *posting a letter*. No, that's fucked up. That can't connect. The picture was *real*, that was a dream. His body ignored the rationale, allowing itself a cold shiver. He moved on. *That fucking thing on the way home from Dez's*. He could barely make out his inebriated scrawl on the page – "...mad ghost-thing. I felt some weird shit while looking at it." He had no details, no recollection of what the vision had done or said to him, so he flicked on another couple of pages. A lot of stupid shit about Susan Welch. The picture attached to the email. *Remember the dream about checking your mail*? Something told him that he could connect this, but he didn't know how. The dream about the girl in the wooded glade – *that's* where he'd seen that man before. Stills from the previous night rushed before him. He could make no sense of this one either. The adventure in Brient. The girl, who was also in the dream with the midget and the knife. *Susan's sister, in Brient, dreaming about him*. The chill that had lodged in his chest had grown and seeped around his body. He gripped the hard-backed copy, turning pages fervently, allowing the thought to fester.

It won't be explained here. You have to find it elsewhere.

Brient? No, it wasn't. It couldn't be. Not that simple. He had to *find* where it was, so it wasn't written for him already. Was it? His eyes were wide, throwing coloured blocks of "yes" and "no" around behind them. *It was all connected*. Yet

none of it was explained. He had to find it to understand, yet he was not sure what to look for. Again, excitement whipped through him, the massive desire to put it all together destroying the fear that held him back. This is *fucked up*. His hands were shaking, his brain rushing him to gather more details. He would be shown where to go, and he had to go there? This was big. This was unreal. This was a *mission*.

* * * * *

Later that day, as the afternoon gave itself over to his hangover, it had all passed. Replaced by the grumpy decision that his mind was *really* getting fucked up. Sure, go jump on a plane to Switzerland. He was bitterly scornful of his eagerness to get carried away. To believe some stupid dream. Yet the same cold freeze gripped his heart each time he thought of it. He passed it off, denying himself the drama.

fourteen

He settled back onto his bed as the music kicked in. Moby's instrumental e.p., "Little Idiot", was about the only thing he owned that he could play right now. Its soothing soundscapes traditionally gave him an escape route from whatever was bothering him; he could lose himself in the swirling mazes, breathe as his mind was flushed and freed. Now, more than ever before, he needed the break. He stretched back, his head resting on the wall, his fingers scraping the glossy surfaces of the photographs strewn on his duvet, his feet crunching over empty plastic bags on the floor. Exhaling deeply, the sweet smell of alcohol on his breath, allowing the music to take him. His relief lasted mere seconds. The inevitable could not be avoided.

Three days had passed since the episode involving connected dreams, a kind-faced stranger, and the promise that it would soon be explained to him. Johnny had shunned it all in due course, but was now faced with the possibility that it was so much more than an amusing creation of his own mind. As quickly as he had scoffed at what his dream was telling him, he found himself going backwards, embracing all that he had initially believed, in a frightened attempt to take control of what was now controlling him. It was real. What the strange man had been speaking of, an incomprehensible link between Johnny's bizarre dreams, reality, perhaps even what a girl in a distant country was dreaming about – it was all connected. And could not be explained until Johnny discovered where it waited for him. Just as his companion had prompted, "it" had found Johnny. He knew now where the answer lay. It was something he had already considered, and ignored. But now, he could have no doubt.

The first instance occurred on the morning of the second day after his dream. He couldn't get back to sleep once the dog next door had woken him, so he got up at nine. Needless to say, with people still on Christmas holidays, there was no-one else stirring in the house. He made himself some breakfast, and flicked through the channels, finding little besides children's programmes. If it wasn't *Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory*, *The Wizard Of Oz*, or one of the Muppet movies, Johnny had little or no interest in watching. He decided to take full advantage of

the unused phone line, and hooked up his computer. He opened Netscape Navigator, and waited for the prompt to enter his internet provider password. The program sprang nosily onscreen, retrieving the necessary data. His usual starting point was the Altavista search engine, but as the computer waited for the full page to download, the caption displayed at the bottom left corner of the screen read “Host switzerland.tourism.com contacted.....waiting for reply.” It should have been waiting for a reply from the search engine. His frown deepened as the legend “Brient, Switzerland – Switzerland for visitors” appeared on the title bar. The webpage continued to load, raising a dark green background with white text, and a small image of an old-style steamer boat on a lake. The detail in the photograph caught his eye – the sharp white paint of the vessel, the dark blue swirling waters, the bright happy shades of flowers in the foreground, and brooding grey mountains glaring dominantly down from behind. The legend “Brient (Bernese Oberland)” was splashed across the top of the image, and the side scroll bar shot into movement, indicating the length of the page. He was still slightly groggy, not fully awake, and only half processing what was going on. Why was he starting up on this page? He didn’t recall changing his preferences. He slowly reached for the mouse, dragged the cursor to the top of the screen, and clicked on “Edit”, then “Preferences.” Shit, there it was. The home page was set to open at **<http://switzerland.tourism.com/region/brient.html>**. No, he definitely didn’t do that. Who the fuck did? He absentmindedly scrolled down through the rest of the page.

Lots of text, some German, some French, a little English. A small map, showing the village as it curled around the lake’s contours. Who set this as his starting page? His parents knew his internet password, and used it from time to time, but why change his settings? More to the point, why the interest in Brient? Once again, he considered the possibility of himself falling home twisted drunk, and engaging in a little mumbled nostalgia, but he was pretty sure he hadn’t.

Dez had called some hours later, and displayed an unusual amount of tact, saving Johnny from any painful questions about his Stephen’s Night in The Green Room. He too must have noticed Susan with the monkey. In return, Johnny offered no teasing about Dez’s rude schoolgirl. He wasn’t in the mood anyway.

“What are you at tomorrow?”

“Nothing.”

The childlike buzz of Christmas had passed, and he was not looking forward to New Year's. As a matter of fact, he wasn't looking forward to anything. A couple of hours worth of moping, and everything had been exaggerated – college, women, and no band. He needed cheering up, badly.

“You on for Dublin?”

“For what?”

“Albums, clothes, beer, the usual.”

Much to his disgust, the majority of Johnny's Yuletide gifts had been of the hard cash variety. True, money was always handy, but there was something grown-up about waking up on the morning with little more than a bundle of notes to get excited about. He'd much rather presents he could play with – a new Playstation game, or something. However, with his untouched stash now burning a hole in his pocket, an opportunity to throw some of it away seemed like an excellent cheering-up option.

“Yeah, I'd be on for that. Anyone else going?”

“Nah. Lazy fuckers.”

They met at the railway station early the next morning, their faces already pink as a cruel wind whipped around the town. As per usual, their first stop in Dublin was one of the smaller, independent record shops, where Dez religiously managed to pick up some obscure eighties thrash album. An hour had soon passed, and they had both satisfied their musical appetites for the day, and turned to the second hand clothes markets. Dez had spent the journey up declaring his desire to find a petrol pump attendant shirt, complete with erroneous nametag. Johnny had responded with his intentions to trawl through the arrays of second hand replica soccer shirts. In the second shop they visited, he found a vast selection, and got to work. He marvelled silently at the range – the simple red and white shirt that Notts Forest had worn in the 79/80 European Cup Finals, the white Polish away shirt from the '82 World Cup (a definite purchase), the original Admiral England shirt, also from '82, and many ancient replicas of obscure foreign teams whose crests he couldn't even decipher. One or two caught his eye – a vivid blue shirt with yellow trim, with “FC Verona” stitched above the crest. Another red one, with the old-style collar that he preferred. He pulled it from the rack, admiring the darker shades that ran through it. There wasn't any kit manufacturer's insignia on the chest opposite the badge; a simple badge, like a coat of arms, with the logo “SV Brient” incorporated. Johnny's heart leapt at first,

recognising and registering the opportunity to further his dedicated homage to the pretty village. He remembered a framed photograph in one of the small pubs there, depicting the local footballing heroes. They were blatantly an amateur team – as they posed proudly in matching all-red kits, small crowds visible on the touchlines behind them, some of them were decidedly overweight, a trait not likely to be noticed in anything other than a small, local team. As quickly as he found himself excited by the thin red garment in his hands, Johnny felt a familiar chilling sweep from his chest, causing him to shiver violently. *Brient*. It was all soaking back into his mind. Connections, answers. *Not here, somewhere else. It'll find you*. Was it finding him? He shook his head slowly, almost dream-like. He felt sleepy, dazed. Amazed at his calmness. The sharp smell of the industrial washing powder used on the shirt was raiding his senses, pushing him to sleep. He couldn't sleep. Not now. Someone was pulling him. Pulling him out.

“Hey, wake up. You done here?”

Johnny shook his head quickly, driving the questions away. Dez was beside him, already wearing a light blue working shirt, with a Shell patch sewn above one breast, and a nametag reading “Mike” above the other.

“Check it out!”

“Cool.”

He was as good as new. Alert, quick, not slow. He smiled inside, aware of something taking a backseat, knowing its job was almost done. He ignored it. For the time being.

“You getting those?”

He was reaching for the three shirts in Johnny's hands. Johnny handed them over.

“Yeah, might as well. They're cheap enough.”

“Polska?”

“Poland, man.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Who are Verona?”

“Italian. Crap team.”

“So why get their shirt then?”

“It's a nice shirt.”

Dez was now smiling. Johnny knew what was coming.

“Man, you’re getting obsessed with this whole Brient thing! Come on!”

Johnny had to smile with him. It did seem ridiculous. At times.

“Do you remember the team photo we saw in that pub just down from the hostel?”

Dez snorted, handing back the shirts.

“No. Man, you remember the weirdest things. Come on, pay for them. I’m dying for a pint.”

Five minutes later, they were sitting down in a bustling pub, cold pints freezing their hands, the first mouthfuls chilling their guts. Radiohead were battling with the babble of conversation overhead, and were losing. There was a live band setting up on a stage in the corner, all wearing either heavy woollen jumpers or cardigans. Johnny noticed two acoustic guitars, and a drum kit without rack toms. One of them was playing pained air guitar along to the P.A., flopping his substantial fringe in time. Dez cast a laughing eyebrow at them, and picked up a newspaper that was lying beside him on the seat.

He browsed through its pages laboriously, leaving Johnny to gaze into his pint, rummage amongst his purchases, and check out the clientele. There was an abundance of fine women. He found himself staring at one group, convinced that he recognised one of them from somewhere. He gnawed slowly at a fingernail until it hit him. One of Susan’s fucking friends that night in Dolan’s. The one who had asked her if she was leaving. He really did not need this reminder. He had been doing so well all day long, not allowing himself even a thought, grateful that Dez had enough decency to leave it out. A tight twinge of sadness fell on him. He frowned, and reached for his pint, wallowing briefly in pity. He was distracted by a low, forced laugh from his friend.

“Here, psycho, get a load of this.”

He was offering the folded paper, its tabloid ink already darkening his fingers. Johnny took it, and scanned the page. A small blonde woman smiled into space, her back to the camera, with an unseen companion pulling at her black vest, exposing the side of her breast.

“Heather Locklear?”

“No, shithead. The headline at the bottom.”

Johnny's eyes moved down to the bottom of the page. A mid-sized heading read "Crew Survive Crash Landing." There was no accompanying picture, so he began to read the report. It was short, four columns of an inch each in length.

"The four man crew of a privately-owned jet were involved in a dramatic crash landing in central Switzerland yesterday afternoon. The jet, which is owned by businessman Alain Borgosse, was on its way to Lucerne to collect Mr. Borgosse when it experienced technical difficulties. The crew were forced to make an emergency landing in a field just outside Brient, made all the more difficult by the fact that the jet's landing gear was also malfunctioning. It was only the quick thinking of pilot Stephene Grille that saved the crew from total disaster, as he manoeuvred the stricken 'plane past Lake Brient, over the small village, and to an awkward but safe landing half a mile away....."

There was more, but Johnny had taken so long just to get this far. He was aware that Dez was waiting for a response, and whatever it was that had imploded inside him once more was graceful enough to allow him to respond. *I can wait.*

"Shit, that's weird!"

He managed a small, weak laugh. Dez didn't notice his nervousness.

"It's not all roses and bells in your dream town, is it?"

"No...."

Johnny held on to the paper, not to read, but to use as a cover as he attempted to slow the race inside his head. *It keeps turning up.* His heart pumped fiercely. *And why does it keep turning up?* It could not simply be chance anymore. There could only be one explanation. The one that he had shunned and ridiculed. The one that filled him now with such overwhelming fear and excitement. There was a question he didn't know of, and there was an answer to it. He now knew *where* the answer lay, and he was going to be shown why. He was shut off completely from the pub, retreating back inside himself, enjoying the calm. There were no fanfares, no celebrations as he accepted, just massive waves of relief as he stopped rejecting. As though the voice that had been asking him to believe all along was now silent in victory. There was no resistance anymore. There simply couldn't be.

In his dreamy solitude, great day-glo strands were connecting everything for him. He saw still images from all his recent dreams, each one wrapped in bright colours, each one swirling and dropping before him. He felt a dull, simple smile as he watched, dazed, stunned. He was sleepy once more, his tired eyes ignoring

all but the happy knowledge that it had found him. He told himself that he had wanted to believe, and that now he could. It was so bright, so warm. He felt stoned, dozy. Again, some fucker was pulling him away from this special warm place.....

“Hey, quit the Twilight Zone crap, come back to me, bitch!”

Dez was whacking him with another section of newspaper, a highly amused look on his face. This was the second thing Johnny noticed, the first being the terrible headache that wrapped itself around him.

“What?”

“Man, you’re fucking falling asleep with your eyes open again! Get it together.”

“Shit, sorry.”

He managed a smile again, feeling the pain that viciously grabbed him, a pain that was managing to combat the whirling thoughts. There was so much to understand, but it was running away from him, realising that he could not give his full attention right now. It demanded his all. He gave up reluctantly, drank from his pint, and busied himself getting more beer in. He’d deal with it all later.

An hour later, they left for their train home. To their delight, there was a buffet car that stocked beer, allowing them to continue the session they had unwittingly commenced. After making plans to extend the spontaneous theme as soon as they got home, Dez made his way through the crowded carriages, scoring four cold bottles of Bud, which drew disparaging looks from the elderly couple sharing their seat. Dez was in fine spirits, almost dragging Johnny with him, not allowing his friend to stop to consider what it was he had recently accepted. His mind was flowing with colours, some caused by the happy alcoholic buzz he was enjoying, the others subtle reminders that he had other matters to attend to. As though whatever was causing this whole dream thing was gently rebuking him for neglecting it. Each time he paused to sip from his long necked bottle, each time there was a pause in the scattered conversation, he found himself drifting to consider the silliness of it all. *Dreams intertwined with reality*. Which was bad enough. *An answer lying in Switzerland?* He felt himself holding back, not allowing himself to fully investigate, to go through all that he had learned. *Sure, right here, right now, with Dez and some beers on a train, it does seem ridiculous*. Yet his stomach lifted violently whenever it entered his mind. He forced himself

time after time to push it to one side, to delay himself from considering it all until he could give it his full attention.

They left each other at the railway station, cursing the freezing drizzle that was falling. Dez had no great desire to go home, opting instead to go get some food, round up the others, and hook up with Johnny in Dolan's an hour later. Johnny trudged home through the rain, clutching his purchases to his chest. Still nicely pissed, still refusing to allow himself investigate what he had learned. He had forgotten his keys, so his mother let him in. She fanned her nose at the smell of alcohol, and asked if he'd eat a fry. He declined, followed her into the kitchen, and emptied his bags on the table. She shuffled politely through the small pile of c.d.'s, and held each one of the soccer shirts up to the light in turn.

"I don't know why you're buying all these jerseys when you don't even play football any more."

"You don't have to play football to wear the shirts."

It was a parting shot as he raced for the toilet. His mother called down the hall after him, something about photographs. He crossed the hall, pushed open the door to his room, and dropped his luggage to the ground. Strewn across his bed were photographs, and the wallets they belonged in. Photographs of his school tour, all but a few lying face up, the white reverses of the others stark in contrast, scribbled upon in fading marker. He had once spent a happy summer afternoon dating them, dreaming up punchy catchphrases to describe the glorious pictures. The insignias had never before seemed so funny. He felt a smile rising on the insides of his lips, and a warm, happy stroke across his stomach. The smiling man was happy, and Johnny was happy. Staring back at him from his patterned duvet were images of a quiet lakeside railway station, waiting eagerly for the first arrival from the city. Of a dark, evil lake, surrounded for as far as the camera could see by giant green firs, eloping backwards along a mountainside. He became vaguely aware of his mother's steps in the hall outside. She knocked briskly on the door, and forced her head around.

"Your sister wanted to go through your Switzerland photographs. We're thinking about going over for a week at Easter. I hope you don't mind, but you weren't here to ask."

Any other time, Johnny would have been most vocal in the fact that he did mind people rifling through his stuff. *Especially* when he wasn't there. Didn't

even have the manners to tidy them up. But his mind was elsewhere. Something told him that his mother was waiting for him, like an actor waiting for a line, waiting for Johnny to play his role, to fulfil the part of the normal son. He could do that much.

“No, it’s alright..”

She withdrew her head, and was gone. He covered the few short steps to his bed, and moved his hands mindlessly across the shiny surface of the pictures. Again, he felt extremely sleepy. And confused. Aware that there was this huge thing that he was being asked to carry out, but unable to do so at that time. He was being given time to regroup, to recuperate. He turned slowly back towards his desk, forgetting about the urgent sting in his bladder. Scanning the rows of c.d.’s, he found what he was looking for, and pulled it from the rack.

fifteen

As always, she watched, frozen as each of the expected dull pastel colours fell into place : the blue, flapping waters of the brick canal, connecting the small picturesque fishing harbour with the great disappearing sea; the gaunt green shades of the hillock on which she stood, tumbling slowly towards the water. The sky was tainted grey, each ominous distant rumble of thunder a stark pointer to that which always followed. Despite the relentless sunshine, there was a chill in the air, probing at her bare arms, causing the hairs to stand to attention. Right on cue, *she* appeared. A small, slim, familiar girl, her age betrayed by the childish way in which she wrapped her blonde curls around her fingers. She was facing the canal, her other arm raised aimlessly above her head. The breeze carried the girl's words without fracture : they were determined, as though she was decisively repeating them, yet uttered in an adult's tongue. Her own adult tongue.

"Why did I do it?"

The words began to loop, each time buffered with a short silence, as though there was a missing sample of sound, one to make the insistent, lilting song complete. The child withdrew her arm from the sky, and pointed a small trembling finger. At the end of the renewed line of her vision, where before there had only been the horizon peeking over the sea wall, *he* stood. She recognised him. They both did. He had his back to them, dressed all in an odd light brown shade, his shoulders hunched quietly, standing at the bank, mere inches from where the stone gave way to nothing. His unseen eyes were focussed on the water below, his words also spoken in a familiar foreign tongue.

"Because he's bad."

The child's words pushed themselves forcefully across, intertwining with the man's, randomly forming new sounds and sentences.

"I did it because he's BAD."

The blind anger of the girl collided in mid air with his soulless tones. And then she moved. Following an unwritten script, releasing her hair from her fingers, bringing both her hands into a pushing position in front of her chest. She was stepping slowly down the slope, her eyes locked on him. He was physically oblivious to her being there, his eyes still fixed on the lazy waters, yet his words appeared to be shrieking on the wind. As she reached him, she placed her palms

on the small of his back and pushed. He didn't have time to look around. Instinctively, his arms flailed out from his sides, and his scream disappeared with him as he fell. The whispering breeze carried away the sound of his body hitting the water, leaving behind a deafening gap in silence. On the other side of the sea wall, the waves roared in pain as they threw themselves onto the rocks. And with each passing second, their cries began to sound more and more like cries of laughter.

There was an uncomfortable sickness in her stomach as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. It took her a few moments to equate the drone of the aeroplane, remembering patchily where she was. In every possible sense of the word, her holiday was over. She was pretty sure that the rest of her family had not guessed that there was anything wrong. There had been no concerned parental questions, no "I'm here for you" speeches, even her sisters had seemed too wrapped up in the celebrations to notice anything. As it was, she had passed on a simple lie, concerning the end of a tumultuous, fictional relationship, a false reason designed to account for her silent moods. Topped up with "I really don't want to talk about it", it afforded her the opportunity to be a moody bitch. It wasn't as if she could give the real reason behind her distracted behaviour. How could she explain something that even she didn't understand? As the view from the cabin window to her left changed from the lush green of rural England to the cold, grey North Sea, it became frighteningly apparent that she was flying from the safe hands of her home into the face of uncertainty. There was a constant knot of worry in her stomach. She could find nothing but apprehension. No excitement, no desire to understand any more than she did. She just felt that it was all bad.

She hadn't even wanted to take part in the stupid college work placement scheme in the first place. To her, it was a foolish exercise, breaking the excellent routine she had been enjoying, sending her and her classmates to different corners of Europe on pointless experience programmes. She had figured that Switzerland would be the lesser of the available evils, and chose a job teaching basic English in a small secondary school. A small shitty school in a small shitty town. She found Brient to be a miserably quiet place, full of depressed people, with hardly anybody sharing her zest for an active nightlife. Nature had never been a huge

interest of hers, but even she found the scenery breathtaking at times. Which still couldn't make up for the fact that it was a boring hole full of boring people.

Now, she found herself hating the place out of fear rather than boredom. She was completely stuck. She couldn't leave, or she would lose a whole year in college. She had to see out her contract, or risk screwing up her career plans completely. She was being forced to return. She dismissed the stewardess who was offering her a drink, and found herself chewing away on her nails. Just like the animal that was gnawing away at her brain, reprimanding her for not saying anything. She vowed silently that she would carry out the suggestion that she'd fallen upon as an afterthought. Just as soon as she got back. Her sister's face floated before her, a happy smile lighting the darkness in front of her eyes. How could she have warned her? How could she have prevented that which she now waited to happen? She knew that she would have been branded a mental patient. Not that she found herself in the best of mental health anyway; shackled by an unseen force, one that promised an explanation. And warnings. She curled her legs to her chest, and stared sadly out at the clouds beside her. It was something she didn't comprehend, but it was so bad.

sixteen

There was every chance that he would have remained in his warm, safe cocoon for days if the fuckers had not telephoned from the pub. As he pulled his head from the pillow, grunting a response to his calling mother, he felt nauseous and dizzy. There was a stinging pain above his temples, and an excited twist in his stomach. He made his way slowly into the hall, yawning deeply as he took the receiver from his mother. He was suddenly aware of the voices, graciously but silently offering him some more time away from the matter at hand. The pictures began filtering slowly into his brain, not as dramatic or as insistent as before, but merely serving as a gentle reminder. He saw the kind, smiling face of an old man, generously handing out more leisure time. He shook his head free of the images, and breathed reluctantly into the phone. Dez was on the other end, his voice shrill and tinny against the thumping background music.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“I fell asleep, sorry.”

“Well get the fuck down here now!”

“Why, who’s down there?”

“Everyone, man. The place is *pumping!*”

Johnny was then afforded an uninhibited sample of the conversation, laughter and music. He felt like crawling back into his room, but felt equally aware of a smiling, fatherly presence, insisting that he take this opportunity to *unwind*.

“Give me twenty minutes, I’ll be down then.”

“You’d better.”

The phone clicked in his ear, leaving Dez’s half-threat echoing freely in the silence. Johnny replaced the receiver, and plodded back into his room. The c.d. had finished, and the stereo hummed patiently, waiting for his next move. He switched the power off, grabbed some money from his desk, and closed the door behind him.

He poked his head into the sitting room, wincing as he felt the sudden blast of heat on his face. His father, open paperback on his lap, was dozing quietly in the armchair by the fire, which had reduced itself to a smouldering liquid orange. There would therefore be no lift into town. He announced his intentions to the

room, ignoring his mother, who, wine glass in hand, half-jokingly intoned that he had already had enough. The freezing drizzle had returned, and he was grateful this time for his incriminating hat as he stepped into the cold. The estates were virtually empty, with dull silhouettes of families happily playing games clearly visible through the curtains and blinds of many of the sitting rooms. Games that Johnny himself had been a willing participant in just a few short years beforehand. He felt an unusual angry, bitter gathering in his chest, and he found himself frowning uncontrollably at the first of the couples who appeared on the street ahead of him. The usual drunken, eager-to-please Johnny would have greeted them all with a smile and a friendly word, but this new, strange Johnny just didn't give a fuck, either way. He thrust his hands even deeper into his jacket pockets, eyes fixed on the slithery path as he trudged savagely towards town. The bouncers outside Dolan's also fell foul of his humour, as he ignored their over-zealous welcome, brushing quickly through the double wooden doors. They sent some good-humoured retaliatory parting shot after him, but he wasn't listening. His face, happily numb from the cold, did not feel the full brunt of the hot pub air. The warmth returned to his cheeks as he stood, allowing his eyes to adjust to the harsh lighting, and attempting to locate the source of the voice calling his name. He picked out Stan, waving energetically from his post at the bar. There were two girls on seats either side of him, each one turning briefly to observe whoever it was who had stolen away their new plaything's attention. Each one careful not to show any more than the accepted casual interest. Johnny ignored the backs of their heads, waved a greeting to Stan, and followed the direction of his pointing finger. As Dez had promised, almost everybody was there, dotted around their usual table, which groaned under pint glasses of varying levels. Dez's shopping bags were piled in one corner, a small pile of vinyl and c.d.'s on top. The net result of excited pride on the part of Dez, or polite curiosity on the part of the others. Dez turned back from the bar, and handed Johnny a cold Carlsberg.

“Get that into you. You've some catching up to do.”

Johnny mock-groaned his thanks, and took his seat as two others moved along the bench. As with practically every new arrival, the individual pockets of conversation dissolved briefly, and he found himself temporarily the centre of attention. He hated this part. One of the disadvantages of not arriving in a small group. Dez's multiple arrival tactics had an awful lot going for them.

“So what the fuck happened to you?”

“I fell asleep.”

He grinned his response, and raised his glass in a salute.

“Good day in Dublin?”

“Yeah.”

“This Switzerland thing is getting out of hand, seriously.”

Johnny looked up, and found a dumb grin on three separate faces. Dez turned sheepishly towards nobody in particular at the bar. He had a big fucking mouth. As he retaliated, Johnny felt a familiar cool probe at the pit of his stomach.

“Fuck you. And how come none of you lazy fucks went up?”

He was greeted with a series of non-committal shrugs and lowerings of heads.

“No money, man.”

“You’ve plenty of money to drink, though.”

“I have to fucking live there all year around. Why am I gonna go back on holidays?”

“As good a point as any.”

“I just couldn’t be arsed. And any way, even if I’d wanted to go up, I couldn’t have got in this morning.”

Jamie lived four miles from the town centre, which proved to be a constant nuisance when the others were trying to get him in for indoor soccer, or drinking sessions. Hence he relied heavily on his parents for lifts, and his mother’s car had been out of action ever since a drunken neighbour had mistakenly ploughed into their driveway.

“Why not? I thought your father was off this week?”

Jamie’s father was a policeman, stationed in Castlefort, a small town about twelve miles away. As such, Jamie and his crew of friends had avoided any altercations with his father thus far, even on the handful of occasions when they had accompanied Johnny to Castlefort for gigs, during his short tenure as vocalist with the band.

“He is, but he was doing some emergency relief work at a crash down the road all morning. Car skidded under the trailer of an artic, got badly mashed up. Truck hit a wall and took it out of it.”

“Serious?”

“Yeah. The guy in the car is in a coma, touch and go. Not a bother on the truck driver, needless to say.”

“Do I know him?”

Dez moved his head forward, pushing it level with Jamie's, furrowing his brow as he spoke. There was the faintest hint of a smile on his thin lips.

"You could say that."

Johnny caught the grin, and felt the sudden urge to break Dez's fucking face. Throughout the many years of their friendship, he had identified *this* as Dez's most annoying trait. His unflinching ability to tease out the unnecessary drama, especially at moments of importance, when Johnny anticipated the unveiling of some highly relevant information. *Like now.*

"He won't cross you again, that's for sure. What did you do, put a hex on him?"

Johnny felt the bitter taste of bile in the back of his mouth, and forced it back down his neck, swallowing quickly. Measuring his momentary hatred of his friend against the grip of a frozen dawning around his throat. All around him, people chuckled, and took mouthfuls of beer. As before, Johnny realised that he had lines to complete. Yet this time, he wasn't sure of the ending. He wasn't sure *which* of the other characters were involved. But he had a feeling.

"Who fucking is it?"

Dez had his glass raised to his mouth, so it was left to Jamie to finish the play.

"Robbie Moore."

The curtain stayed up; the name meant nothing to Johnny. There would be more lines.

"How do I know him?"

"Your woman knows him."

Surprisingly, Dez's words carried sufficient gravity, considering where he was leading Johnny by the nose. Johnny felt his inner eyes shutting as he played out his role. He was already leaving the stage.

"Susan?"

"Yeah, he's her, you know....."

Johnny grudgingly acknowledged the late display of tact, and breathed some responsive words of condolence. The others had been waiting for him, and treated his light-hearted-but-serious utterance as the cue to return to normal proceedings. Alone for a few brief seconds, his pity saw not a Monkey Boy in a coma, but the sad, worried face of his alleged girlfriend. His own lightening computations deduced that while he was humane enough to care for the mental welfare of the

girl who cared not for him, he couldn't give a fuck about the innocent, injured object of her desire.

Fifteen minutes later, he was on his way past the two bouncers on the door, leaving the others with the announcement that he was starving, and paying a visit to the newsagent shop on the corner. His conscience had gnawed away at him in the pub, and he found himself drifting uncontrollably away from whoever was trying to engage him in light conversation. He was lucky in the sense that they were all half pissed, and perfectly capable of carrying a debate on their own, without any contribution from him, for minutes on end. Unlike the distant voices inside him that had offered him some time away from their agenda, this new probing thing lodged in his brain was demanding an immediate response. Not that it required major consideration on Johnny's part. Her face kept spinning before his eyes, and he could already feel the righteous pleasure he would earn himself by offering his services as a humble, caring friend. A shoulder to cry on, an opportunity to sell himself as something more than just the dumb fucking ex-singer in her stupid band. He didn't enjoy the image of her as being unhappy, but he enjoyed the calculated image of himself, offering his support, feeling so good about doing something for her, and embracing the opportunity to let her see the real Johnny.

There were two good reasons to not use the public phone in the pub – how sympathetic would he sound, roaring down a faulty line with laughter and pounding music complementing his every word? And who the fuck would the others believe he was ringing? The phone boxes at the back of the Post Office were a good three minute walk, but he thought little of it. He was busy rehearsing his script, eager to impress, well aware of how easy it would be to fuck it all up. All he intended was for her to be made aware of his caring nature, and how he was making himself available to her if she needed a caring, friendly person to talk to. To his surprise, all four of the booths were free, and he pulled open the door of the nearest coin phone. He had looked up her number – just in case – the day after the first night he'd been talking to her in Dolan's. And instantly memorised it. He punched the five numbers in on the keypad, and waited before hearing the other end click before dropping a pound coin into the slot on top. A mature, hearty female voice repeated the number he had just dialled, and waited for him to speak.

“Hello, can I speak to Susan, please?”

“You can indeed. Can I say who’s calling?”

“Yeah, it’s Johnny.”

The woman’s voice faded dramatically as she lowered the receiver.

“Johnny. Right. Susan!!”

There was the sound of a door opening and closing, and the dull smack of shoeless feet on lino approaching the phone. He heard his name mentioned again in a low whisper, and the sound of her inhaling as she brought the phone up to her face.

“Hello?”

“Susan, it’s Johnny.”

His tones were almost undecided, neither joyous nor grave, but at an unspecified point in-between.

“Johnny? Hi, how are you?”

She sounded a little surprised, with her voice giving away little else. If anything, her question seemed to request some extra information, more like “how are you, and why exactly are you ringing me?” Johnny had already marked this stage as the explanatory one.

“Grand. Listen, I heard about Robbie, and I’m just ringing to say I’m sorry.”

He cut himself off sharply, leaving a small pause. He had found himself struggling for a split second to remember the name of her significant other, and very near to calling him “Monkey Boy.” She adjusted herself rather quickly, having determined the reason for him calling.

“Thanks, that’s really nice of you.”

Nice. It was a start, he figured. Her voice had taken on a weary supplement, and she exhaled deeply as she finished the sentence. As though she appreciated the freedom to release the emotions that were bubbling under. Johnny wondered if he had imagined the quiver in her breathing, or if she really was approaching tears. He picked up on the brief silence, and brought it to an end. It was too soon, he didn’t want her crying just yet.

“How is he doing?”

There was no detectable break in her voice as she answered, no tremble, and no sound of moisture. She just sounded tired. Maybe she wasn’t going to cry after all.

“Not so good. He’s still in a coma, so it’s touch and go. He could go either way.”

“So all you can do is wait?”

“Yeah.”

“Where is he?”

“Saint Brigid’s.”

“Have you been down yet?”

“Yeah, his mother brought me down this afternoon, and I’m going back again in the morning.”

“That’s rough.”

“Yeah. And I was supposed to be going over to Claire in a few days time.”

The tiniest of bells began to sound inside Johnny’s head, but he ignored it.

“No way.”

“She sent over word that there’ll be a ticket for me at the airport on Tuesday. She says that she had it all organised before Christmas, but forgot to say anything.”

“She’s in Switzerland, right?”

Even as he said it, he felt himself shuddering violently, a mixture of excitement and cold. This was *it*. His opportunity. He didn’t need any more time away from it. He was ready, and he was going to go for it. Cannons of relief exploded inside his chest.

“Yeah.”

His brain began to move at a speed he had never witnessed before. He could feel the efficient delegations, as various parts of his cerebrum were given problems to solve, and instructions to pass on the solutions immediately. *How do I ask for her ticket? What excuse can I give?* He was essentially working on nervous response, buffering the situation with sympathetic nothings, waiting for the input to allow him to move in for the prize. He was a yuppy fucking prick, switching the car to auto pilot while he listened to his mobile phone, waiting for directions. And then the voice in the phone told him to take the next left.

“I take it that you’re not going over?”

“God, no. I couldn’t.”

“Have you told your sister yet?”

“No. I rang her about an hour ago, but there was no answer. I’ll try again later.”

Johnny swallowed hard, grateful for the surge of adrenaline that gave him the balls to pounce.

“Listen, I know it’s probably the last thing on your mind, but if you don’t want the ticket to go to waste, I could buy it off you.”

The dull thud of his heart in his ears disguised the short silence that greeted his words. Hence he had no idea of just how insane he sounded to her.

“You want to *buy* the ticket? But.... no, it wouldn’t go to waste, she could cancel it.”

It was falling away from him. He gritted his mental teeth, probing for more directions, needing an *exact* location in order to arrive safely. It was given to him.

“She’d still lose money on it. No, honestly, I was half-thinking about going over myself. Liverpool are playing Neuchatal Xamax in a UEFA Cup preliminary game on Tuesday.”

It was a hopelessly bad excuse. For one, there was no competitive European football whatsoever during the continental winter break. Secondly, the preliminary rounds had been over and done with since late September. Liverpool had beaten Neuchatal Xamax 4-1 on aggregate. If she even took the smallest steps to verify his reason for travelling, he would be caught. Except he wasn’t thinking about that now. He was only interested in prising a precious air ticket from this sad, worried girl. He didn’t care what she found out once he had the ticket in his hand. His friendly voice of reason, the one that could have told him that it would have been considerably easier to walk into Bolton Travel Agents and buy his own ticket, was hidden way down in the acoustics of his mind. For some reason, he wanted *her* ticket. And he knew exactly why - it had been bought for her by her sister, who lived in Brient. Another connection. He saw a thin female figure in light blue underwear in his mind’s eye.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I have the week off, so why not?”

“That’s a coincidence.”

The weariness had returned to her voice. He figured that he had overstayed his welcome as Johnny The Ex-Vocalist. It didn’t matter, he was very near.

“Mmmm. But like I say, I feel bad about asking you, what with Robbie and all that.”

Similarly, she had told him that she “felt bad” not so long ago. The only difference was that Johnny presumed she had been telling the truth. And he barely

remembered Monkey Boy's name again. Play the name card, turn the emotional wheel, and she'll give in quicker.

"No, no, you're right, it's no use to me. If I get through to her, I'll ask her to change the name on the ticket. I'll give you a ring sometime before Monday with the details."

In his inner jubilation, Johnny was allowed to revert back to the caring, sympathetic friend who had started the phonecall.

"Great. Listen, I'm really sorry for annoying you about it. And I'm sorry about Robbie. I hope he pulls through ok."

He thought better about wishing her a good time on New Year's Eve.

"Thanks. And thanks for ringing."

"See you."

The phone clicked in his ear, and his heart leaped. He pushed the door of the booth open, and stepped back into the chilly night. He was dazed – possibly a reaction to the amount of alcohol swirling about inside, but definitely a reaction to the fact that he had just taken the biggest step possible. He was happy. There was *something* – he wasn't sure exactly what, but something fucking with his mind. Dreams connecting, interlacing with small pieces of reality. One dream in particular had pointed him in the direction of an unnamed place – since determined as being a small town in Switzerland – where he would have these strange occurrences explained to him. It had gotten to the stage where this was all believable. He could see no other way of understanding. If it was bullshit, fine, he would be a couple of hundred quid out of pocket, nothing more. But if it wasn't, he figured that a couple of hundred quid was a small price to pay if he was to learn the meaning behind it all.

As he made his way back to the pub, his over-active mind unearthed some minor faults in his planning strategy thus far. Where exactly in Switzerland was his newly-obtained flight going to touch down? Where the fuck was he going to stay in Brient? And how was he going to get there? He assumed that the flight was to Zurich – a more international airport than Bern, which was nearer to Brient. It was unlikely that there would be regular scheduled flights from Dublin to the latter. For his sketchy alternative excuse to travel, Bern would have been most convenient, being just a short distance away from Neuchatal. If questioned, he could give Susan some shit about trains and buses. He was going to have to take

one or the other from Zurich to get to Brient, so he could just as easily check out routes to Neuchatal at the same time. He could look up hostels and bed and breakfast joints in both towns at the same time. Nothing like detailed plans to fool the foolish.

An hour later, Johnny had reinvented himself as the cheerful, shite-talking, whiskey-gulping Johnny of old. Hell, he had a reason to celebrate, and the others were only too delighted to welcome him back into their happy functioning group. He put it down to the pints killing off his sleepiness, and they believed him. There was no longer an endorphin reminding him that he was being graciously given some social time off from the pressing matter at hand. He had *addressed* the matter at hand, and achieved all that was immediately possible. In his pride, he felt like spilling the top layer of beans, and telling his friends about his upcoming trip. But on minor reflection, he decided that the simple football excuse with which he had blinded a naïve grief-stricken girl would not suffice for those with average to excellent knowledge of soccer trivia. No, he needed a further excuse, but it would do some other time. For now, he could detach himself completely, and simply enjoy the happy rush of fulfilment.

* * * * *

Approximately eight hundred miles away, in an uncomfortably warm one-bedroomed apartment within crawling distance of the lake, she felt a glorious surge of relief as she slumped to the floor, the tone in the receiver beating the same rhythm as her heart. The twinges of sadness she had drawn as she heard the tears in her sister's voice were long gone, and in their place overwhelming balloons of relief. She was relieved that she had misunderstood what had seemed to be a simple warning. Relieved that she hadn't made a fool of herself. Relieved that her sister had not been in the car with him. In the back of her mind, she saw the horror, the realisation that it was real, and not just her mind playing the cruellest tricks. She saw the sullen-looking man from her dreams, and thought of him taking her sister's place on an aeroplane in four days time. She saw understanding as a colour, one that she might add to her palate soon. For the first time in a month, she smiled without forcing it.

seventeen

The days that followed were happily busy in Johnny's world. Firstly, he searched through his wooden chest of personal letters, cards and forms until he found his passport. Noting that it was only valid for a further seven months – it had been issued as his entire family prepared for their first and only trip abroad together – a hellish week of camping in the South of France. The individual student card that he had been forced to carry during the school tour was no longer of any use to him. Secondly, he took his sacred Credit Union savings book, and withdrew the last six hundred pounds in his account. He figured that would cover the plane ticket, food money, whatever lodgings he needed for a few days, and the miscellaneous costs that he always seemed to incur. He vowed to return the money using his grant payments over the following months. If his parents ever found his account details, there would be blue fucking murder.

He racked his brain for a viable excuse that would allow him to be absent from his family and friends for a couple of days in early January. Poring over concert listings in music magazines and websites, he determined that Orgy were scheduled to play at Highbury Garage, London, on Friday, the 5th. It was as near as he could get. He couldn't choose to lie about anywhere further away – his parents would become immediately suspicious about the costs involved, and just how exactly he was going to fund the trip. London was cheap – forty quid on the bus and boat, and he could invent a friendly ex-college mate with a floor he could sleep on. If anybody bothered to check up on the exact date of the gig, he could say that the band arranged a low key secret show, to make up for having cancelled three dates the previous summer. A secret show which would not be listed or reviewed. He was pretty sure that none of his friends would have had the money or the interest to travel with him, but even so, he refrained from letting slip his plans until the night before he left. Dez feigned hurt, but did so unconvincingly.

He told his parents that he had some money still left over from the last grant, and Christmas. His former college colleagues, Barry and Jane, had moved to London the summer beforehand, and had been asking him over to visit ever since. His parents were shown that this was an excellent opportunity to kill two birds

with the one journey – he could stay with them, fulfilling his social duties, and check out this new band that he was so keen about. He assured them that all college work had been taken care of before Christmas. In an unrehearsed move of authenticity, he greedily accepted his father’s offer of some extra money – “just in case”. He pocketed the forty quid, stating that he could change it into sterling on the boat. As his father moaned with him about the ridiculous state of the exchange rate (“what the fuck are those banker bastards doing?”), Johnny’s thoughts were with the airport Bureau de Change, and whether or not they’d have sufficient Swiss Francs for his transaction.

At one stage, he worried briefly about the discrepancies that would arise if Susan was to engage any of his friends in conversation while Johnny was away.

“I wonder if he’s enjoying himself in Switzerland.”

“Switzerland? No, he’s in London, at a gig.”

“*London?* I sold him a ticket to Zurich, to go see some football match...”

A possibly awkward situation to return to, but his concern passed. A horrible thought, one he was not happy with, told him that perhaps Susan Welch would be too occupied with a certain hospitalised motorist to be exchanging small talk with any of Johnny’s friends. Regardless, he would be able to come up with something by the time he got back. Maybe the match was cancelled, so he trekked back to London to catch the gig, to salvage something from his trip. He dismissed it all with little more than a light sketching over each dilemma. He was more interested in getting *away* without questions. Getting away to what awaited him in Brient. The explanation, the understanding that he craved. His excitement was continual; he couldn’t give a fuck about the repercussions when he got back. Damn, he wasn’t even that worried about getting back.

Susan had called him, as promised, the day after their first telephone conversation. In familiar weary tones, she informed Johnny that Claire was going to change the name on the ticket, and arrange for him to collect it at the Aer Lingus desk at Dublin Airport. In return, Johnny took her bank details, with a view to lodging the £220 ticket money in her account, at the airport. She gave him the address of Claire’s apartment, and extended her sister’s offer of a couch to sleep on. What she couldn’t pass on was the enthusiasm with which Claire had insisted that Johnny meet up with her, at the very least. Johnny assured her that he would look Claire up, thanked her, and set the sympathetic ball rolling once more.

Susan's significant other was still in a coma, but there had been some positive development concerning brain patterns that he wasn't listening for. He was busy making more mental deductions. His flight left at 12:45, which meant he'd have to check in an hour beforehand. He would probably make it on time if he took the 9am bus, but he decided to take the train. Just in case. When he voluntarily rejoined the conversation, he probed her gently to see if she had any plans for New Year's Eve. The dark side of his mind, the one that he was beginning to see a lot of lately, the one he morally rebuked but secretly respected, offered him the image of Johnny The Physical Shoulder To Cry On, the solid, caring friend, holding and nursing Susan as she sobbed her way into the New Year.

"I suppose you're giving New Year's a miss?"

"Yeah. I'll just stay at home."

There was little point in pursuing it.

With all his carefully made plans and cunning excuses made, Johnny was free to enjoy himself as the old year drew to a close. In a characteristically uninventive move, he and his group of friends made their way to Dolan's just after 6pm on the 31st, with no definite plans to move from the pub. All except Brian, who was making his way to some college mate's house party, where the cream of the rural punk scene were scheduled to play short, noisy sets. The invitation had been extended to some of the others, but Stan and Dez had voiced their shared preference to stay away. The two had managed to antagonise a small group of punks one balmy summer evening in Mourne Grange, when local anti-heroes Social Scream System were playing with Johnny's old band. Stan hadn't exactly endeared himself to anybody by chatting up the cute girlfriend of the guitarist, while he was on stage. Dez's drunken wobbling on the floor in front of the band was mistakenly interpreted as sarcasm by their loyal followers. The resulting scuffle was enough to dissolve any interest the two may have had in live punk music, regardless of the quality. As such, the group decided on a Musketeer approach, and vowed to all stay together, in Dolan's. Brian was half-jokingly labelled a traitor wanker for breaking ranks, and told to go fuck himself when he suggested that he give his midnight hugs and kisses just before he left at seven.

Much to his delight, Johnny returned from one satisfying trip to the toilets to find that his table had been joined by four girls, all unknown to him, who were in the process of pulling their chairs over, each one of them wearing dark jeans and

skimpy coloured vests. Stan was settling back into his chair, so Johnny correctly presumed that it had been him who had purloined the company of these delightful specimens. The most forward of the four explained to all that in their ongoing quest to find new and exiting things to do on New Year's Eve, one of them had suggested that they all relocate to some distant, random town, get a hotel room or some B & B, and just go on the absolute piss.

“What the fuck made you decide to come to this shithole?”

Stan's laughing question hid what he was truly thinking – “thank fuck you came to this shithole!” All around him, the others were starting to offer their own silent thanks. All four girls were loudly confident, and extremely attractive, and moved from person to person, introducing themselves in an efficient fashion, and slipping easily into conversations. After a few minutes, Johnny had already decided that three of them were completely out of his league, and happily found himself establishing eye contact with the fourth girl with warming regularity. Soon enough, she introduced herself as Tuiren, and followed the musical chairs pattern to sit beside Johnny. He enjoyed himself talking freely about his interests, the town and the college, spurred on by his cosy drunkenness, and his glowing excitement – in what he now hoped to achieve that evening, and what he was undertaking over the coming days. She announced that she was a little cold, and called to one of her friends to pass her bag, from which she pulled a white T-shirt with glitter fleckings. Johnny's eyes did not leave her as she pulled it on over her tight lime top. She was small- petite as far as he was concerned, with short brown hair held in place by clips. He'd heard her name somewhere before.

“Do you know who Dominique van Roost is?”

“No”, shaking her head, adjusting her T-shirt.

“She's a tennis player. You look a lot like her.”

For some reason, Johnny felt himself cringing, and he raised his glass to his mouth, just in case she was going to hit him. But her manner didn't alter.

“Riiiiight. Do I take that as a compliment?”

Johnny almost tripped over himself in his rush to reply affirmatively.

“Well, I don't know who you look like.”

Her eyes had narrowed, as though she was scrutinising him scientifically. There was still a playful smile on her lips, so he refrained from panicking. And laughed with her.

“I'm a science unto myself.”

“I guess so.”

Some time later, he remembered where he had heard the name Tuiren before. It was brought on by a distant jab of childhood remembrance— it had been one of his favourite stories as a child, *The Birth Of Bran*. Tuiren was Fionn MacCumhaill’s aunt, a vision of beauty and grace, who had married Iollan. Prior to his marriage, Iollan had been the sweetheart of Uct Dealv, a woman of the Shí, a fairy. When Uct Dealv learned of Iollan’s betrayal, she flew into a terrible rage, and transformed Tuiren into a dog. She then took the dog to Fergus Fionnliath of Galway, who hated dogs more than any man or woman in Ireland. He only took the dog into his home because Uct Dealv told him it was Fionn’s wish, and Fergus would do anything that Fionn asked of him. But even he could not mistreat the dog, as Uct Dealv had planned, and became inseparable from Tuiren. Many months later, with his wife still missing, Iollan was summoned before Fionn and the Fianna. He was blamed for Tuiren’s disappearance, and given only a short time to return Fionn’s aunt, so he travelled to the Land of The Ever Young, to seek out Uct Dealv. He had suspected her involvement, and he was right. She promised to return Tuiren to her human form if Iollan promised to keep Uct Dealv as his sweetheart for all time. Iollan made his promise, and Tuiren was transformed back into a woman. For some reason, the two pups that she had given birth to, Bran and Sceólan, could not be given human forms, so Fionn took them, and cared for them more than any of his other dogs. Because the two new pups were, in fact, his cousins. Fergus Fionnliath was heartbroken at the loss of the dogs, and fell ill. Fionn sent him the pick of his legions of hounds, and within a week, Fergus was back to full health. Tuiren remarried later, to a man of the Fianna, trusted by Fionn.

“Where does your name come from?”

“It’s an old Irish name, but I’m not sure what it means.”

“Have you ever heard of *The Birth Of Bran*?”

“No, what is it?”

“It’s an old Irish story. The main character’s name is Tuiren. I knew I’d heard the name before.”

“It could be worse, I suppose. You could be telling me that you’ve met me before, that you know me from somewhere. Now *that* would be approaching corny.”

There was still a smile dancing in her eyes, so Johnny dismissed the niggling notion that he was already being “corny”. He decided to drop the subject.

“Shit, I love this song.”

Then Jericho were blasting hard rock noise from the speakers behind them, the bouncing bass of “Big Area” coming as a pleasant surprise after three of The Cure’s quieter moments.

“I don’t know it. Can you remember that story?”

“Most of it, yeah.”

He had been too quick to drop the subject, apparently.

“Tell it to me.”

She shifted her body, focusing her attention completely on Johnny, the mildly dramatic move of a child requesting a bed-time story. He was only too happy to oblige. His glass was almost empty, and he saw that hers was too. Leaving to address the bar would have left his seat open to one of the other scavengers, but to his relief, the self-appointed head girl stood up, and started taking orders. He put in a claim for two Carlsbergs and two vodkas, one of each for him and his small audience. And then he launched into his version of *The Birth Of Bran*.

Ten minutes later, she was telling him that he was a great story-teller, and under the giant wooden table around which they all sat, he could feel her hand on his leg. It was this praise that he held in higher regard. Her eyes had lost the playful flirting smile, and gained what she obviously thought was seductive smoulder, but came across more as an assured arrogance in her own abilities. Johnny wrestled back the distinct feeling that he would not be such a fan of this girl were she not immediately within his grasp. Her manner changed slightly, to that of Queen Seductress, a character she had evidently had some success with in the past. He wasn’t having the same effect on her laughter as before, and he found himself inwardly debating the pros and cons of leaving this dual-personalities girl high and dry. Sure, he would enjoy seeing the look on her face as she was forced to chalk down a failure, but damn it, it had been so long since he last had a woman. And she *was* undeniably cute. For the time being, he was not going to alter the course of their evening. He was simply going to sit there, happily pissed, and let her happen to him. At midnight, they were locked in a deep embrace, her hand snaking closer and closer to his crotch, but shooting across to reprimand him when he attempted to replicate her ministrations. It didn’t bother Johnny – in his

deteriorating physical state, he was having enough trouble trying to co-ordinate the over-exuberant presence of her tongue in his mouth.

To his surprise, she made no efforts or suggestions regarding the consummation of their brief liaison, and moved to rejoin her friends as the group broke up at the extended closing time. One furtive discussion later, she came back to him, announced that the four of them were going back to their hotel room, that their night was essentially over. With her coat in her hand, she said her goodbye, and slipped into his mouth once more. Johnny felt the eyes of others on him, and cared little. Stan and Dez were already making similar farewell gestures with their respective friends, and Jamie paused awkwardly before the last girl, waiting for her to lean forward. Ger stayed in his seat, fumbling with jackets, feigning disinterest in what was going on, cursing himself for being the fifth man of four.

“Will someone tell me what the *fuck* we are doing here, and not back in that hotel room?”

The group of five were on their own again, idling slowly along the street towards Harry’s. Stan had somehow smuggled two double whiskeys out in an empty Coors bottle, and they took turns at swigging from his achievement.

“The four of us, and the four of them, in the one room? Man, I’m not big on orgies myself. The sight of your naked ass is the last thing I need right now.” Johnny perked his ears up that little bit more when he heard Jamie say the word “orgies.” Of course – Orgy, the band he *wasn’t* going to see in London in a few days time. His happiness gave him some lines to say.

“Fuck it, I’m too hammered to do anything anyway!”

“So just sit there and let her do all the work!”

“I don’t know what you’re moaning about. I didn’t get anything thanks to you fuckers.”

“You must be gay, man. Sorry.”

“Fuck you!!”

Upon reaching Harry’s, the five found that it was closed, and had been since seven the previous evening. Somebody suggested the twenty-four hour shop, but Dez had a much more appealing offer – spliffs and pizza in his place. His parents were gone until the next day, and his sister was staying with a friend. Having

embraced the idea heartily, Stan then loudly lamented the fact that they could just as easily have brought the four girls back to Dez's place.

"You fucking *goon!* Why didn't you say anything?"

"I only remembered when you started talking about food. You think I would neglect to suggest it if I had remembered?"

"I never know with you. We'll ring them from your place."

"How the fuck are you going to ring them?"

"We'll ring the hotel."

"Do you know their room number?"

"No."

"Their surnames?"

"No."

"Well how the fuck are you going to ask for them then?"

"Just ask for the four sexy chicks."

Stan had a half-serious look on his face that pressed the others into hysterics. They counted their losses, and continued the comical theme en route to Cromford Gardens. The five of them trudged through the town and the estates, vowing to place Ger in front of some high class porn, to determine whether or not he was, in fact, gay. He now had a second reason to be pissed with his friends, but hid it carefully, well aware of how much harder it would be if they knew they were getting to him.

Back in Dez's place, a sudden creative surge of energy led to the construction of a make-shift pipe from an old cardboard tube. As he started on a complicated series of punctures, the others sipped slowly from cans of his father's sweet cider, pausing every few seconds to ask Ger if he was enjoying *Soreity Sisters*. Their attention fell away when Stan announced that "*we could be doing that!!*" during one particular scene.

"Turn it off man, I can't watch any more."

"Yeah, now who's gay."

Johnny enjoyed his turn on the pipe, drifting happily with the swirling smoke. He shuddered softly, a combination of the beer, the smoke, and the excitement. With his teeth, he pressed down on his lower lip once more – the girl in the pub whose name he couldn't remember had lightly bruised his lip, and he felt a soft

pain each time he put pressure on it. But it was a good pain, and one he enjoyed repeating.

eighteen

Unsurprisingly, the town was deserted as he walked through it at 8:30, devoid of the kind of early morning bustle he had marvelled at in Liverpool and London, as shopkeepers prepared themselves for the coming market day. There were only a handful of people waiting for the train, which was ten minutes late. He had skipped breakfast – too excited to keep any food down, but felt probing pangs of hunger as clouds of coffee-smell wafted down from the buffet car. He helped himself to a chicken sandwich, which went down easily enough, but did little to calm the rumbles in his stomach. Someone in the seat behind him was listening to Rage Against The Machine’s first album on a walkman, at an unfeasibly loud volume. Johnny found himself racking his brain to try remember the running sequence, humming along with the tinny squeaks whenever he recognised a song. Every fifteen minutes, he would quietly jam his hands into the pockets of his combats, checking that his passport, timetables and money were still all there. He had a small backpack with him, some extra clothes, a change of footwear, basic toiletries, but he didn’t want to risk leaving any of the important stuff in the bag. The carefully folded foolscap page with Susan’s sister’s address and phone number was deep in a secure, fastened pocket, tight to his leg, wrapped in the train and plane timetables that he had printed out from the Internet.

There were a dozen or so people waiting patiently for taxis outside the station, so he ambled across the road to check the bus timetables. There was a feeder bus due in twenty minutes, which was listed as taking three quarters of an hour to reach the airport. Plenty of time. The brightly coloured bus arrived on cue, and the surly driver scowled at Johnny’s ten pound note.

“Have you nothing smaller?”

“No, sorry.”

The driver sighed heavily as he was forced to leaf through the assorted notes in his shirt pocket. Johnny had a reasonable amount of change on him, and the driver’s attitude reinforced his opinion that he was right to not have bothered sorting through it for the correct fare. On the stop-start journey through the city, Johnny was amused to find himself the focus of attention for two shy German girls, who paused every now and then to whisper their findings into their attentive

parents' ears. At one point, the father clapped his hand gently over one small mouth, reprimanding the child kindly with words that Johnny's Junior Cert German failed to recognise.

At the airport, Johnny made straight for the Aer Lingus desk, offering his passport as identification, along with his college student card, which provided a more recent photograph. The smiling man behind the desk tapped some keys on his computer, pulled Johnny's ticket from a drawer, and hoped that he enjoyed his journey. Johnny noted that the queue for the check-in desk was only beginning to take shape, so he walked across the terminal to the bank, where he transferred the ticket money to the account number Susan had given, and exchanged three hundred and fifty punts for seven hundred and ten Swiss Francs. He checked in, enjoyed a hearty late breakfast in the cafeteria, and joined the sleepy crowds in the departure lounge.

Breakfast had been a mistake. Because his seat was three rows from the front of the main cabin, he was among the first to receive one of the carefully wrapped airline lunches. Being used to shorter distances between Ireland and Britain, Johnny was not aware that flights to mainland Europe occasionally incorporated light meals. Not wanting to appear ungrateful, especially considering the stewardess had been so damn cute, he peeled open the hot tinfoil containers and picked at his food. As he munched mindlessly on a buttered bread roll draped with thin strips of bacon, he peered through the small window, enjoying the strange sensations as fields of snowy clouds rolled away from the plane. Once more, the magnitude of what he was doing hit him. *How fucking mental am I?* He wasn't feeling pure excitement in his gut, but rather a dart of the cynical unbeliever, the person who had shunned all this crap at the beginning. Flying to fucking Switzerland because someone in a dream told him to. There was literally no going back at this stage. He shook his head from side to side, attributing these niggling sane doubts to the fact that he was feeling tired. Following the lead of the unfriendly businesswoman in the aisle seat, Johnny placed his tray on the empty seat between them. He returned the fold-down table to its original position, settled back in his seat, and closed his eyes.

Over the sound of the humming engines, and the familiar clink of the duty-free trolley, Johnny could hear an insistent plink-plonk, the irregular sound of water on water. The rhythms appeared to be gently coercing him to open his eyes. He did so, still acutely aware that he was on the plane, but gasping in surprise as his mind dropped him in a different place entirely. The first things that struck him were the muggy heat, and the smells. His face was wet as he breathed in, cataloguing the new odours one by one. Flowers. Forest. He was perched on a seat at the back of what looked like an old summerhouse, round and wooden, barely lit by the reluctant light steaming lazily in through the door. Through the gap, he could see the rain, the tiny drops dancing in rainbows as the light caught them. He pushed himself from the bench, making for the door, to where the splashing sounds of the rain became slightly louder. He paused at the edge of the wooden hut, allowing but a few drips to fall on his forehead, mixing with the sweat, and running in salty streams down the side of his face. The river in front of him was a living mass of activity, each single drop of rain commanding its own ripple, and the thousands of circles that covered the water's surface squabbled and argued, making their individual ways to the banks, where they would rest. Looking around him, he noted that the river flowed past on his left and on his right, meeting in front of him where the land ended, and disappearing around a bend a short distance away. Great lines of trees saluted the river as it passed, bending over in their eagerness, hiding the left-hand bank completely. Behind him, more huge trees, craning their necks over the top of the summerhouse, giving the impression that they were checking Johnny out. To his right, a small stone bridge spanned one river branch, connecting the mildly isolated forest-island with a hidden mainland of some kind. He turned back to watch the river, its hypnotic swirlings accompanied perfectly by the soundtrack of raindrops. Losing himself completely in the dozy light of early evening. Losing himself happily until the musical score changed, until a further sound was introduced. The hairs on his neck shot to attention, absorbing the cold chill that crept across his skin. He ran out into the rain, swivelling his body in the direction of the scream. On the other side of the bridge, with his view now uninhibited, there was a great white building. A huge, old stately home of some kind, rows and rows of windows angrily rejecting the sun. On one side, the tall building was joined to a series of smaller, less gainly structures, partially hidden by trees. The house was on a rise, its deep green banks falling in three waves to a great lawn, which covered the remaining distance to the

river. The lawn itself was dissected by a wide grey streak, alternating as a gravel path when the grass was level, and granite steps when the lawn crawled up an incline. It was on this path, as the rain pummelled him playfully, that he found the source of the scream.

She ran in jagged lines down the gravel path, holding one of her arms to her chest, draped in a transparent yellow plastic raincoat. Behind her, on the face of the imposing building, a window banged itself shut. The rain maintained its slow pattern, falling on her as it fell on him. Johnny heard no further noise from her as she ran blindly towards him, and decided against crossing the stone bridge to intervene. There was something in the air advising him against involving himself in something that was not his concern. And yet the nearer she got, the more he realised that it could be his concern. His eyes pained him as he squinted viciously, surprisingly registering no more than mild satisfaction as he positively identified her as the distressed young woman from previous dreams. He was amazed to find himself *pleased* at making the connection. And amazed to find himself shrugging inwardly, *nothing fucking surprises me right now*. Still he remained rooted to the spot, still she crunched softly on the stones. There was a large square fountain, surrounded by flagstones, at the end of the path, just across from the bridge. She made it as far as the fountain, and turned to one side, to run around it, breathing loudly, still not aware of Johnny's position. In a flash, her legs seemed to go from beneath her, slipping on the wet ground. She fell awkwardly, spinning as she fell, landing on the wide concrete lip of the fountain, and following through the motion to roll into the water. The splash was barely audible because she had hit the water with little force. Johnny waited for her to emerge, soaked and shocked, cursing her ill fortune, ready to explain. But she wouldn't achieve any of the goals he was setting out for her. There was a muffled scream, and the thrashing waters began. Johnny was still paralysed, unable to lift his little finger in protest or assistance. A further piped shout, more foaming water. The ledge around the fountain was of sufficient height to conceal all doings from Johnny where he stood. Small white leaps of water cleared the lip, followed shortly after by a bare arm. The arm wasn't beckoning, or designed to draw attention – it was raised in the dull fashion of a child who really doesn't want the teacher to call on her to answer. There was a sharp glint as the sun noticed the rings on her fingers. The hand slipped slowly back behind the ledge, and the thrashing water became silent once more. The rain,

the river, the trees, they all carried on regardless. They hadn't noticed anything. They, just like Johnny, hadn't moved. The woman in the aisle seat loudly ordered a litre of Bacardi from the duty-free trolley, and hauled Johnny, without reluctance, away from the summerhouse island where he wasn't able to move.

Even without the verification that he could have easily prised from Susan, he knew exactly who the young woman in his latest dream was. She was the same girl who had shared his twin traumas of rising water and sinister friends in a strange building in Brient. The girl who would later lie dead in her underwear, who would also face a murderous midget in an overcoat because Johnny wouldn't get involved. And now, Johnny was within twenty minutes of touching down in Switzerland, a short journey away from where this girl *really* waited. The first of the promised links between his dreams, and what went on outside them? It had to be. The first explanation. Was *she* the explanation? Why would she appear as a man in his dreams if she was the reason? He found himself drawing up mental lists of questions, leaving the majority unanswered, constantly prodding himself with the fact that for the first time, he could *see* the answers arriving. It seemed to be all coming right.

nineteen

He paid 70F for a return ticket to Brient, having happily noted that the American tourists immediately in front of him had been able to conduct their business in the ticket office in English. Johnny had precious little confidence in his ability to hold anything more than the most basic conversations in German or French. He boarded the 16:01 InterRegio train, walking through the carriages until he found two empty seats, and adjusted his wristwatch to local time. The train pulled reluctantly out of Zurich, offering a crackly stream of guttural information over the tannoy, and panoramic views of the railway goods yard. The engines and carriages were all daubed in bright colours – red, blue, green, colours that Johnny wasn't used to seeing on trains – another exciting reminder of the fact that he was in a foreign country.

The computer-printed ticket in Johnny's hand alerted him to the fact that he would have to change trains in Lucerne. There was a delay of six minutes scheduled, which had somehow extended itself to fifteen by the time the 2484 Interlaken train screeched to a halt on the opposite side of the platform. He whiled away the minutes by browsing over the tourist maps and advertisements dotted around the station. All but one boasted a snapshot of some kind of enclosed wooden bridge. Johnny was momentarily perturbed by the destination displayed by the 2484 as it pulled in, but quickly remembered that Interlaken was reasonably close to Brient. Besides, the journey number matched the one on his ticket. To his annoyance, there was no mini-bar on this train – he had opted against having a couple of beers to relax him on the first leg, deciding instead to wait until the two hour stretch from Lucerne to Brient. At least the countryside was becoming more aesthetic – great lush fields carrying on endlessly, the dark blue veins of irrigation streams, with distant mountains painted in behind, almost as an afterthought. He mentally ticked off the towns on the fold-out railway network map that he had picked up in the station – Alpnachstad, Sarnen, Giswil. With each stop, he was getting nearer and nearer. He could practically smell the spicy pine trees that covered the mountains around his lake.

It was almost seven when the long red train snaked around the final bend, following the contours of the lake, braking violently as it edged its way into the small station. Johnny had been silent for some minutes, glued to his window, his stomach jumping to punch his heart happily, as the pixels of his memory banks stood aside, allowing him to greedily absorb the huge picture before him. Ever since they had passed Meiringen, he had been preparing himself. And yet he had happily felt the full force of surprise as the train inched out from a gap between two mountains, curving dramatically to align itself with the lake, beginning its long journey around its edge. It was dark, and the moon was hidden from view, denying the chopping waters the silver gleam it so often provided. Johnny could see the lights of two towns across the huge lake – the first, nearer and brighter, was Brient. Even in the darkness, he could feel the mountains behind him. And now he wasn't imagining the smell of the pines.

He was one of only a small group of people who got off when the train had stopped. The lakeside station was unusual in the sense that it appeared to have been spliced in two by the rails – half had dropped miserably into the water, while the other half remained intact. On one side, there was a long platform, complete with waiting room, ticket booth, shuttered shop, toilets, and a payphone. On the other side, there was nothing. No platform, no wall, nothing but a short decline leading down to the stones that formed that lake's shore. He fought the desire to stay behind and soak up each new detail, and joined the small crowd making their way out into the street. Finding somewhere to stay was his immediate task. As he remembered, the hostel he and his schoolmates had stayed in was directly behind him, and the bulk of the town lay about half a kilometre away, in the opposite direction. In that regard, the railway station was essentially in the middle of nowhere. The path on which he and the others were walking was narrow, tight to a small brick wall. On the other side of the road, a sheer rock face was contentedly contained by a higher wall, which stretched back as far as Johnny could see.

He followed the directions that Susan had prompted him to scribbled down – left at the station, the next right after half a kilometre, past the school, into the tree-hidden estate on the left, and the last house on the right. Johnny walked cautiously and quietly past the house, around the side, towards the converted garage which supposedly housed Claire's self-contained flat. There were lights

beaming out from inside the house, but not from the garage. The curtains were pulled back, but the interior was too dark for him to make anything out. He rapped sharply on the green wooden door, now sure that this was her place, and no longer worried about attracting the attention of the inhabitants of the main house. No noise, no movement, no answer. He tried again, ignoring the wash of panic that asked *where the fuck are you going to stay now?* Still no answer. He turned tightly on his heels, stamping in annoyance back onto the street, calmly addressing the fretting voices in his head, and cursing Susan's sister for not being there for him.

Passing a rack of public phones in the centre of the town, Johnny remembered that he also had Claire's phone number in his possession, but decided to leave it for an hour or so before ringing. Perhaps she was still at work – there had been lights on in the school as he fumed back past it. But he wasn't going to take the risk of her not returning to her home. A signpost at the edge of the small square pointed to "Chalet Hotels Schöneff & Spychepf", allegedly one km away. Johnny walked out the quiet road, turning to enjoy the elevating view as the land twisted and climbed. The hotel itself was split into three buildings, each one lashed to the dark hillside, with gentle orange lights warming their black timber facades. All three buildings were at different heights and angles, towered over by more pine trees, each one visible behind the other as Johnny approached. The first house seemed to have a ground floor reception area whereas the others did not, so Johnny correctly surmised that this was where he would conduct his business. He pushed through the heavy glass doors, savouring the spicy smells, and making his way towards the smiling middle-aged woman behind the desk. To his surprise, she addressed him in cheery French.

"Salut."

Maybe he wasn't going to need any of his pigeon German at all. Thankfully. He had taken French for his Leaving Cert, and as such, it was fresher in his mind. And yet the last time he had been in Brient, it had been German everywhere. Not a fucking French word to be heard.

"Salut. Je voudrais retenir une chambre. Pour un nuit, s'il vous plait."

He hoped that his grammar was sufficient, and that one night would be enough. Surely Claire couldn't elude him for a second night. Where the fuck was she? He moved into auto-pilot once more, translating the dictated cost of rooms per night, pulling some notes from his pocket, and signing the register. His head jerked viciously as his eyes turned inwardly to view the slow slideshow, each

picture from his dreams, each one portraying his would-be host in varying degrees of death. The woman at the desk finished scribbling in her check-in book, handed Johnny his change and a key chained to a small wooden block, and directed him to the second chalet, the third of the buildings he had seen from the road.

His room was on the second floor of the Spychepp chalet, necessitating a short climb up a creaking timber staircase. The predominant colour in his chamber was the glowing heat of the varnished pine that covered the walls and ceiling, complemented superbly by the deep red carpet, and the quiet creamy shades of green and blue that danced upon the wooden furniture. To Johnny's disappointment, the window faced in the wrong direction, offering a view of the wild hills behind him rather than the lake beneath him. There was a brightly dotted painting of a steamboat out on the water above his double bed, but he would have preferred the real deal.

Having relaxed his moaning muscles, and flicked through the channels on a small portable television set, Johnny felt a gnawing desire for beer, something to let him drift and swirl. He wanted to get completely pissed, to be able to lie on his gloriously soft bed in his hotel room in Brient, feeling the exaggerated sense of happiness that he often enjoyed when drunk. He was *here*. He wasn't acknowledging any of the trepidation, any of the anticipation at learning whatever it was he was here to learn, he was simply feeling the exhilaration at having finally returned here. Fuck, he wanted to *heighten* it, to highlight it with drunken cheer. There was blatantly no hotel bar being offered, so he accepted that his cravings – which had begun on the journey from Zurich to Lucerne, would require a further trip into town. He took his bag and jacket from the dresser, and made his way back into the night air. It wasn't cold, but his breath was still visible in front of him. As he approached the town square, and the rack of phones, he remembered Claire. He would need change to call her. There was a newsagents shop beside him, so he picked out a small selection of unfamiliar crisps, and hoped that his change would incorporate damn coins. He ate as he dialled, quickly comparing the bitter, tangy crisps to a similar brand back home. The phone at the other end rang itself out. Still no answer. There was another twinge of worry gathering itself in his stomach. Where the hell was she? He was quickly relieved to hear himself calmly computing precautionary options for tomorrow – if there

still was no answer, call to the school, call to the house beside her flat, call Susan to see if she had given him erroneous details. She was probably working late anyway. He replaced the receiver, and returned to the matter of beer. His backpack was in place, an excellent hiding place for cans or bottles, but he wasn't seeing any off licences or supermarkets in the immediate vicinity. There may well have been either or both down one of the sidestreets that led away from the square, but there was a welcoming pub a mere hundred yards from where Johnny stood. The tables outside were deserted, but muffled music and shining lights were calling him in. Maybe he'd enjoy a pint in an authentic Brient pub, help himself to some take away cans, and get nicely twisted back in the hotel? As good a plan as any for the moment.

The pub was furnished in the style of an American diner bar, with the left hand side divided into individual booths, almost like large church confessional boxes, with the priest's door missing, and the divisions between sinners and absolvers removed. The bar itself covered three quarters of the right hand side, with a long row of stools, sparsely populated by elderly men hunched over their pitchers and newspapers. There seemed to be an odd mix of ages – Johnny noticed a reasonably young couple in matching jackets cuddling in one booth, while another young female walked across behind the bar at the back, towards what Johnny presumed were the toilets. He himself wanted to head down towards the toilets, to curiously observe the pub and its inhabitants, but he was wary of the likelihood of that drawing unnecessary attention to himself. He was a stranger in a strange land as it was. He would have a pint, take an observant leak, get his take out, and leave. The barman, perhaps a little older than Johnny himself, put down the vodka bottle he was fitting a short measure to, and raised his eyebrows inquisitively. Here was Johnny, waiting for the barman to speak, to indicate which language he would be expected to order in, and all the fucker did was ask with his face. He rescanned the taps in front of him hastily.

“Uh, ein Carlsberg, bitte.”

Given the time, and the correct pronunciation, he would have sampled one of the excitingly named Swiss brews. Instead, he played it safe. Maybe some local beer for his one man session back at the hotel.

“English?”

The barman's accent was English, heavily regional, and not that of somebody who had learnt English as a secondary language. Johnny was genuinely taken aback.

"No, Irish actually."

"Oh right. My name's Ian."

He was offering his hand as he directed golden beer into Johnny's glass. They shook hands firmly, Johnny finding himself pleased to be involved in a simple civil exchange.

"Johnny. You're English, right?"

"Aye. Newcastle, a Northerner. What has you in this kip?"

"Just visiting a friend."

It was the first time that his motive for travelling to Switzerland hadn't been a complete lie.

"You work here?"

As Ian the barman scraped froth from the top of his pint, Johnny realised the stupidity of his question. The barman passed on his God-given right to be bitingly sarcastic.

"I do, aye. I stay in Interlaken, it's about fifteen minutes out the road. I have the use of a car, so I don't mind. It's quieter here, and the women are smashin'."

He placed the bubbling pint on a coaster in front of Johnny, who wriggled in his pocket for money.

"Four francs eighty. Ta."

Johnny pulled in his first mouthful, enjoying the chill as it passed down his chest into his stomach. His services weren't required elsewhere, so Ian the barman turned back from the till, slapped Johnny's change on the bar, and sipped on a bottle of mineral water that he had pulled out from under the counter. Johnny kept the small talk moving.

"How do you manage with the language?"

"Most of them know a tiny bit of English, enough to order a pint. I'm livin' with a girl who studies German, so I've learnt the basics."

Johnny pointed mentally to his knowledge of another girl who studied German, who also could be found not so far away. For a brief second, he wondered if Claire and the barman's housemate were one and the same, but good sense stopped him from asking, pointing out that Claire had passed on an address in Brient, not Interlaken. There were less direct ways to ask.

“Are there any other English or Irish people around here?”

“Aye. There’s a lad from Liverpool who works on the cable car, Rick, his Dad built the fuckin’ thing or something. And there’s a girl from Ireland, really cute. She only ever comes in with the teachers from the school, then sits on her own, drinkin’. I tried it on with her one night, but she was havin’ none of it.”

Johnny ignored the rush of bile that greeted his projected image of this over-confident twat from Newcastle coming on to a frail, unhappy girl in her underwear. And instead embraced the first definite proof that she *was* in Brient. All he needed to do now was find her.

“Who are you over to see?”

“A guy in Lucerne. I’m only stopping over the night here.”

The truth wouldn’t bring anything worthwhile to their brief conversation. Apart from maybe giving Mr. Ebullient Barman the opportunity to recommend his services once more to the moody Irish girl. As it happened, the doors behind them opened with a commotive clatter, and a dozen or so people brushed into the warm pub. Ian the barman moved in a regimental manner away from Johnny, towards where the group would settle, about halfway up the bar. Johnny was concentrating on his half-empty pint, and on the hordes of bottles shelved behind the counter. With his back to them, he hadn’t noticed the individual members of the group, and in particular the young woman in the black overcoat and brightly knitted hat. By the time they had happily relocated to the largest of the enclosed booths, drinks in hand, Johnny was walking past at pace, making for the gloriously clean toilets around the back. Noting that his new friend had temporarily left his seat at the bar, Ian the barman, having completed his immediate serving duties, was forced to hold back on broadcasting that the cute Irish girl he had only just been speaking of, had just taken over Booth 4 with a group of her teacher friends.

Having dribbled his bladder empty, and tried successfully to remember the name and exact location of the pub in which he’d seen the framed photo of Brient’s amateur footballers, Johnny turned the corner by the bar, finding that his barman friend had moved back to his previous position. There would undoubtedly be more bullshit to be heard, which Johnny would clinically penetrate with his own queries regarding take away beer, hence making his exit plans known. He’d give Claire’s number another go on the way back, see if she’d turned up yet. He peeked into the booths with skilful tact, coming slowly to realise that the barman

had not been exaggerating with his prognosis on the aesthetic values of the women in Brient. In comparison with the twos and threes so far, there was a much larger crowd in the booth marked “4”. Happy, loud people, holding their drinks and laughing. Almost straight away, he noticed the slight gap between this smiling gibbering mass, and the thin quiet shape at the corner of their table. She was unbuttoning a great black overcoat, struggling to get her arms out without knocking over somebody’s drink. Without instruction, Johnny’s feet stopped. He stood stock still, aware in the corner of his eye that the barman was looking at him. But Johnny’s eyes were focussed on the girl in the corner of Booth 4, who was now adjusting her hair, skinny arms wrapped in a bright red sweater, with flashes of a white shirt poking out over the cuffs and neckline. *Still* she wouldn’t look up. Johnny hadn’t moved, his eyes fixed, watching in mild paralysed impatience as she sipped from her glass. As he mouthed her name, she replaced the beer on the table, and looked up. Johnny found that he could move again.

Her eyes were wider than any he’d seen before, her eyebrows were the mix of a frown and a wondering. There was the merest suggestion of a frightened smile on her lips, which disappeared upwards into her tight cheekbones. Her comrades weren’t offering any resistance or comments on her departure as she edged her way around the table and through the priest’s door. To where Johnny had been shuffling his feet, in an attempt to soothe the juttering noises in his stomach, the voices approving of this, the next natural step. She fixed herself to wear a nervous child’s face; he wasn’t aware of what his body was doing. His hand appeared in front of him, taking hers, feeling the cold clammy flesh against his trembling warmth. They unnecessarily exchanged names quietly, a formality – they didn’t need to. He let go of her hand, missing the soothing softness almost immediately. Still they stood in the middle of the floor, oblivious to the fact that the terrifyingly reluctant sheens across both their faces were earning some serious interest from the barman, and a host of his customers.

“What are you doing here?”

“I had to come.”

Without thinking, he automatically answered her in the same type of code that she appeared to be using. Even after hearing the first few words she had spoken, he knew that this was more than a civil exchange between mild acquaintances.

Her tone had given it away, soundlessly begging him to admit. He knew that this was what he had expected, perhaps even what he had feared. And yet he was calm enough to hold back on blurting out the whole damn story. He just needed *confirmation*.

She knew why he was here, but needed to hear that he knew. Her voice was gentle, fighting back a tiny quiver, swinging her questions softly, seemingly encouraging Johnny to push past the gates of timid fear and confusion. The same gates that she was battling past right now.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I was told to come, and I would be told why here.”

“Who told you?”

He hesitated, trying to practice the words inside before he let them out. And they sounded fucking ridiculous. But there was a shimmer in the eyes of this painfully beautiful girl that forced him onwards. She was hiding behind an efficient interrogator persona, but she too held the scared flag of disbelief that he was flying. Maybe she saw it in him. And yet still he stumbled over his words. His crazy, unbelievable words.

“I’ve...had these dreams. And all...this other stuff happens. It’s like my dreams are linked. Not just to each other, but...with what goes on in real life.”

As he spoke, a familiar wash of relief soaked him, pleasure endorphins shooting about his body like wayward bullets in a cartoon. He realised that this was the first time he’d ever mentioned any of this to anybody else. And here he was, in a pub in Brient, telling it to the sad-faced girl who had appeared alongside him in his dreams. Perfect. Her eyelids fell quickly over her eyes, and he could feel her clean odourless exhalation on his face. Relief? Unlike before, there were no inner selves prompting him with the questions that he needed to ask. He was entirely on his own.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just I’ve been experiencing something like that.”

An invisible metallic connecting bar materialised between them, and Johnny saw it lock painlessly to his chest and hers. He was trembling violently, this time with excitement. He was doing a damn good job of finding the questions.

“Have I ever been in your dreams?”

The shades of blue in her eyes swelled momentarily, as she fought back huge tears. Her lips wobbled unsurely before settling on a joyous defiance. She half-snorted nasally as she answered, a nervous display.

“Yes.”

Johnny didn't need any more answers. It was being written on a great scroll behind his eyes. Her, him, and whatever it was linking them together.

“You've been in mine.”

“I guessed that.”

She had succeeded in holding back the tears. Whether they were sourced in happiness and relief at finding that she was not alone, or fear at realising the experience was ongoing, Johnny wasn't sure. If she felt as he did right now, the former option was most likely.

Their shared gait had relaxed, and as such they had lost the interest and attention of the more nosy locals. Even Ian the barman had disappeared for the time being.

“We need to talk, seriously, about this.”

“That's a mild understatement.”

He felt himself grinning, bringing a little light relief. He wasn't sure if it was the right thing to do, but he was feeling happier in himself. And he wanted her to feel the same way, to loosen the frowning sincerity. Alright, so he didn't know what exactly was going on, but he could feel in his bones that the explanation was around a corner. And there was a part of him refusing to let go of the happiness he had enjoyed earlier on, as he breathed in the fact that he had returned to his favourite place.

“But I can't really talk now. It's too big, and I'm supposed to be going for dinner with that lot.”

She arched her head reluctantly back towards the crowd in Booth 4, the misery having returned to her face.

“They're leaving for Interlaken at ten. I really should go, one of them is finishing up. I don't know if I could handle this right now.”

Johnny refused to let his disappointment be detected. There was tomorrow, right? It still seemed like a sudden end after they had been on such a roll. But she had a tint of resignation in her voice. *That's all for now.* It was enough, he shrugged. A start.

“What about tomorrow?”

“Yes, please. I’m finished at three. Although I won’t be able to keep my mind on anything.”

There was a sad honesty etched across her face. Not for the first time, Johnny wondered how she could be so apprehensive, when he was facing into this mind adventure with such excitement.

“Do I go to the school, or your place?”

“Shit, I forgot, where are you staying tonight?”

Concern, sadness, and honesty.

“I have a room at the hotel out the road. I called to your flat earlier, but there was no answer. So I didn’t want to risk you not turning up.”

“I was working late. Fuck, Susan told me you wouldn’t be here until tomorrow or the day after. Weren’t you going to a match or something?”

Johnny blushed as he remembered his lie, quickly allocating the cost of his untruths to the cost of the damn wooden hotel room.

“No, that’s what I told people back home. What was I going to say – “oh, I had some dreams, and now I’m going to Switzerland?””

He held back on the sarcasm, asking instead for a small smile from her. She obliged, but it fell away within a second.

“I see what you mean.”

She breathed out deeply, weary after their brief but intense exchange. On the contrary he was bursting with good-time energy.

“So do I meet you at the school, or the flat?”

“The flat. About half three.”

“Right.”

She looked back towards the group in Booth 4.

“What are you going to do now?”

“Maybe get some beers, head back to the hotel.”

“You don’t mind staying there?”

“No, it’s cool.”

“I’m going to go back to this lot, finish my social duties. It’s the last thing I want to do right now, but…”

“I know.”

You don’t, she thought sadly to herself.

“Look, I’ll leave you alone, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Right.”

“About half three?”

“Yes.”

He thought briefly about adding some patronising comment – “*we’ll sort this all out then, ok?*” – but decided against it as she turned back towards her workmates. Why the hell wasn’t she sharing his excitement? A niggling itch in his brain asked if maybe she knew more about it than he did. If so, why didn’t she say anything?

He made his way back to his stool, finishing off the last lukewarm mouthfuls of beer. Ian the barman sidled along the counter, asking about the extent of Johnny’s relationship with the attractive Irish girl who had inexplicably rejected his own advances. To his delight, Johnny immediately and effortlessly concocted a complicated tale involving college friends, concerts and parties, which left him and Claire as having shared a couple of delightful evenings together. With some unsevered emotional attachments. An unseen projector played him back the stinging consequential outcome of the last major lie he had told, but he was too wrapped up in his own imaginative pride to give a fuck. He quizzed the barman on what beer was available to take away. Ian toyed momentarily with the concept of harnessing his sudden jealous streak to deny this lucky Irish bastard any bottles to take away. He settled instead by ridiculously overcharging him for six bottles of Griëlsbânt, which tasted like piss anyway.

Johnny almost skipped along the dark road back to the hotel, edging up the hillside backwards, so as to not lose a single second of the marvellous view. If the moon had been brighter, and the air not so chilly, he would risked the wrath of the local law enforcers, and settled into the inviting ditch with one of the brown litre bottles that clinked in his backpack. As it was, he was back in his warm wooden chamber within minutes, constructing a makeshift bottle opener between his room key, his hand and the bathroom sink. He lay on the double bed, numbing his tastebuds initially against the foul-tasting beer, which at least boasted seven per cent, enough to get him nicely toasted. There was nothing on the television, no sports, no adult channel, so he switched it off, allowing his mind to drift. Many new images, words, and a voice to the face that he had fallen for. He was giddily

excited at the prospect of going through whatever this was with her. If only she would come around to feeling the same way.

twenty

Johnny was crudely woken by the sound of a small aeroplane overhead. There was a horrible taste in his mouth, and sunlight teemed viciously in through the loosely pulled curtains. As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, his malevolent brain pointed to a newspaper article he had recently read, and he angrily cursed the disappearing jet with a minor mechanical fault of some kind. He didn't remember crawling into his double bed, or polishing off the last of his six litre bottles of Griëlsbânt, which lay scattered on the dark red carpet. No wonder he felt like he was fucking dying. His stomach began the first of a series of warning rumbles, so he relocated to the bathroom, to camp by the toilet bowl, just in case. He reprimanded himself in disbelief, wondering how he had managed to get so drunk, all the time waiting for the long gush of vomit that eventually arrived. It was relatively painless, and thankfully devoid of the type of noises that may have alerted his immediate neighbours to his self-induced distress. When he had finished, he rinsed his mouth repeatedly with cold water, before shedding his clothes and clambering cautiously into the shower. He was forced to lean on the tiled wall with one hand, still suffering from acute dizziness.

An hour later, having gathered his senses while lying naked on his bed, thrown the empty foul-smelling bottles into a plastic bag in his backpack, and flushed out his bile-drenched sinuses with the clear, sharp morning air, Johnny was back in the main reception area, following the gloriously warm food smells. There were only a dozen or so tables in the small restaurant, and Johnny took one of the untaken window seats. More hills to look at, but no lake. There appeared to be a choice of three breakfasts, and the first, after some painful translation, seemed to incorporate a fry, coffee and toast. He ordered one from the waitress, and played absent-mindedly with a bowl of jam while he waited. He was absolutely famished by the time his hot food had arrived, having cleaned his innards entirely out in his en suite bathroom. The sausages were huge, spicy, a culinary distance from what he was used to back home, but tasty. He ate all on his plate, bar a runny egg and some shrivelled black meat. The coffee was strong, and drove the last of his lethargy from his system. People began to leave all around

him, chattering in a variety of unspecified foreign languages. Johnny checked his watch – it was only approaching ten thirty. He was free until three.

He returned the chalet key to reception, and picked up a handful of the tourist pamphlets that remained from the previous summer. Being early January, most of the natural attractions around the town and surrounding countryside would be closed. There would be no steamboat crossing on the Brientersee across to Interlaken. If he had the time and transport, Johnny would have eagerly negotiated a trip to one of the many cable cars that crawled up the hills into the white tipped mountains. The weather had been too unpredictable last time around to consider navigating the Jungfrau or Schilthorn summits. He didn't even bother researching buses or trains – he didn't envisage being back in time to meet Claire at three. Besides, the cable cars probably wouldn't be running. As he reminded himself of his reason for being limited to a three o'clock curfew, he enjoyed a chilled shudder of pleasure. Right now, he couldn't give a fuck about whatever it was that had drawn him to this magical Swiss lakeside, to an intense tête-à-tête with an achingly attractive sad-faced girl, who held down a regular starring role in his dreams. He had forgotten all about the horrible contexts in which she had been appearing in his dreams. He was just happy to be here, almost grateful to whatever or whoever had summoned him.

He ambled lazily back towards the town, making for the amenities map that he had noticed at one corner of the square. There was a series of black dots curving through the green areas around the town, marking out a hiking trail, leading up to the Giesselbach Falls. Johnny mentally marked off the route on one of his pamphlet maps, and headed back past the hotel, to where a small stile led onto a well-worn path, weaving itself up the rocky hillside. He vaguely remembered something about waterfalls from his previous visit, and decided to make his way along the trail, whiling away his free hours in a leisurely fashion. He picked up a cheese and ham roll, along with some crisps and soda water, in one of the shops on the square, planning to enjoy his lunch at the Falls. Along the carefully-marked walk, he passed a small funicular, usually employed in hauling the lazier tourists up the hill, abandoned until the summer months came back around. He picked his way slowly along the more difficult of the climbs, feeling the changes in altitude in his breathing. Within thirty minutes, he was at his destination, turning right at a wooden signpost in a dripping, secluded hollow,

directing him to the Falls. He walked along the fenced path, adjusting his ears to the roaring waters. The air was suddenly colder, the light breeze carrying the first drops of moisture. He came to the clearing, which widened out to his left and right, sturdy timber fencing separating him and the thousand foot drop to the unseen bottom. The water dropped and howled away beneath him, the noises and the white foam a stark contrast to the calm greeny-blue pools away on his left. On further exploration, he would find the unvandalised board which graphically informed him of the seven layer, nine hundred and eighty feet height of the Giesselbach Falls. The green vegetation all around him was hiding the complete descent, and even as he leaned over the protective barrier, he could not see the bottom, because the water curved and snaked its way down the hillside, darting in behind trees, leaving nothing but the roaring thunder. Johnny would have preferred to have been able to see the angry water hammering down into the lake, but the view before him was a more than adequate substitute. He removed the food from his backpack, found a dry patch on the gravel stone clearing, and sat himself down in view of the first spitting waterfall. Letting the vibrant sounds and the cold spraying air wash over him, closing his eyes. Unable to sleep because of the incessant noise, but half-dreaming in the dull early afternoon sun. Struggling gently with the remains of a hangover, and the constant disbelief at where he was, and what he was doing. Or rather what it was he would be doing in a few hours' time. It still didn't bear serious consideration. It had dominated his thoughts and his actions until he had actually decided to go, and now that he was here, it was practically the last thing on his mind.

“Bring it on!!”, he defied out loud, once more feeling the forgotten stab of anticipation. Asking again why his partner wasn't adopting such a cavalier approach. Smiling broadly when her face matched up with the word “partner.”

In total, Johnny spent an hour at the Falls, resting his mind and satisfying the weary hunger that the climb and the energy-sapping waterfall had given him. He placed all his empty wrappers inside the used soda bottle, recognising without hesitation the crime involved in littering such a glorious area. It was now one thirty. He set back out along the winding hillside trail, revitalised by his meal, and adopting a sudden professional efficiency as the hour drew nearer. There was still some time to kill, so he turned down one of the eastern square sidestreets, leaving behind the town, stepping cautiously over the open railway tracks, making for the

rocky lake shore. There was a heavy mist clinging to the water, hiding the majority of the mountainous shoreline pine forests from view. Looking high into the sky, he wasn't sure if he was gazing at the clouds or the snow-crested mountain tops.

It was approximately twenty minutes to four by the time Johnny had made his way across town, past the school, and into the small, secluded estate. He walked past the main house once more, his attention grabbed by squealing children indoors. There were also sounds coming from Claire's flat—a door of some kind closing, and running water. Johnny tapped on the front door, managing to incorporate a small degree of the gravity he was now feeling into his knock. She answered within seconds, greeting him with the same serious contortion of her features. Despite his new understanding of the growing importance of the minutes, he was still irritated that she couldn't rise above it to give him a fucking smile. What was he, a harbinger of doom?

“Hi.”

“Come in.”

He squeezed past her frame as she stood by the door, seemingly not trusting him to shut it properly. The brightly-painted room was cold, and the water continued to run away somewhere to his right. The garage appeared to be divided in three—the room they both now stood in, a recreational or living area, complete with couch, silent television, and a table scattered with magazines; to his right was a small kitchen, with a humming refrigerator the only appliance visible through the half-shut door. To the left, he assumed, was a bedroom. She strode purposely past into the kitchen, and turned off the tap. Her voice carried through the light timber walls without muffling.

“I'm sorry about last night, but I couldn't avoid it. I'm in enough trouble with them as it is.”

“How come?”

She moved back into the living room, lowering herself slowly onto the edge of her couch, taking one of the cheerful yellow cushions, and holding it to her chest. Johnny remained standing.

“I've missed a couple of days.”

“Why? Sick?”

She sighed deeply.

“No, I slept in a couple of mornings. I haven’t been getting much sleep.”

“And when you do sleep, you’re having fucked up dreams, right?”

Johnny sat down on the couch, at the opposite end to her, holding onto the serious edge to his voice for the time being.

“Some of the time, yes.”

“Do you know what this is all about?”

There was a part of him that wanted to sit there patiently, listening to all that she had to say. She could lie with her head on his lap, letting him in on all her dark secrets, perhaps at the same time offering him a little enlightenment on what exactly was going on. But there was also an impatient devil at work, one that wanted to skip these simple exchanges, to get right to the heart. He hadn’t allowed himself to speculate about whatever he was here to learn, mainly because he had been too wrapped up in either getting here, or enjoying the fact that he *was* here. But now, he felt the urge for answers. She stopped fiddling with the yellow cushion, and ran her hand across her brow.

“What exactly do you know?”

It was probably the biggest question she could have asked him. She wasn’t asking him when it had started, how, what his dreams had been about, what had drawn him to Brient – she was asking for it all. He dismissed the childish reluctance to be the first to go, and gathered his sources together.

“I started having weird dreams. They seemed to be linked to reality. I had proof, but I somehow lost it, but I *know* it happened.”

She nodded gravely.

“How many times?”

“Uh, two, I think. And after that, I started having these dreams about you. There were other people, a man, he’s the one who told me to come here.”

He was conscious of the fact that there was no internal monitoring or censorship going on, and for this he was thankful. He could hear the words as he spoke them, and they were insane. But his attentive audience was not laughing, but physically understanding with her frowns. Besides, he was telling it *exactly how it happened*.

“What were we doing in your dreams?”

“Running from danger. I always got away, but...”

There was a pause as she processed this new, half-expected synopsis.

“I didn’t?”

He shook his head slowly, biting his lip, keeping his eyes on hers.

“That’s all we did?”

There was an surprisingly incredulous dip in her tone. A thought dived before Johnny’s eyes.

“Yeah. Why, what did we do in your dreams?”

Judging by her reaction, it was the right question to ask. It garnered no new information, but was the right question to ask. She visibly squirmed, and dealt with the awkwardness immediately.

“Nothing much. Who was the man?”

“I don’t know. He was kinda oldish, in an overcoat and a hat. I’ve never seen him before.”

“Oldish? How old?”

“Maybe fifty, sixty. “

She waited a second, the puzzled mask spilling across her face.

“And he told you to come here?”

“Yes. Actually, no, he told me to go *somewhere*, and that I would find out where myself. All this stuff happened in real life, all pointing to here. I knew then where to go.”

“What stuff?”

“The name just kept coming up. Three, sometimes four times a day.”

“Why didn’t he tell you directly to come here? Could you talk to him?”

“Yeah. I don’t know why he didn’t tell me. Maybe I was more likely to believe it if I saw these things happen in real life.”

It was an explanation that only fell to him as he was asked the question, and he was immensely proud of his reflexive deductive skills.

“And so you jumped on the first flight out here?”

He wasn’t sure if he appreciated the sceptical undertone. He was fucking *dedicated* to this shit. Maybe half the reason he was here was because of her, and the startling ways in which she had ended some of his dreams. This was a hell of a way of showing her appreciation.

“Of course I did. My head is half-fried with this. There’s some weird shit going on, and I can’t explain it. I’m not imagining it, and I want to know what the fuck it is.”

“What weird shit?”

“I just fucking *told* you. How am I having dreams about you dying when I’d never seen your face before?”

“I just wanted to be sure.”

Her face had receded into sadness once more, a dry, miserable sadness. She was too unhappy to cry. Johnny allowed himself to feel the pangs of guilt, regretting the force of his voice, and the harsh content. His voice lowered itself considerably.

“Sure of what?”

“That you were involved.”

“I’m pretty sure that I am.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Ok, all of this is strange, and I am a small bit freaked out about it, but you seem to be scared shitless. Why?”

He arranged his best concerned face, coercing her with his eyes, gently informing her that it was her turn on the explanatory podium now. She breathed in, holding the breath as she searched for the words.

“Like I’ve said, I’ve had the same thing. Dreams, strange things. You’ve been in some, along with another man.”

“What was I doing?”

His interest in his own role was increasing, but she wasn’t giving anything away just yet. Which only made him more hungry.

“I can’t say. And the man was different to the one you described.”

“How so?”

“He was younger. All in black, tight black hair, a little shorter than you.”

“And what did he say?”

“That somebody else would be part of it, that I wouldn’t be on my own.”

“Fuck, I was given a line exactly like that.”

“By the old man?”

“Yes. What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

The way in which she dropped her eyes to the bright yellow material in her lap spoke volumes. She knew damn well. Johnny tried again.

“Why can’t you tell me what I was doing in your dream? I told you.”

She shivered in her own warmth. It was cold in the converted garage.

“Ok, you died too. But I can’t say any more.”

“Why not?”

Johnny felt indifferent to being told that he had suffered a similar imaginary fate to hers. There was more, and this was all he was interested in.

“I had another dream last night. Warning me not to say too much.”

“Who warned you?”

“The same man.”

She seemed hideously troubled, scratching aimlessly at the back of her neck. Johnny adjusted his voice accordingly to soothing.

“What was his warning?”

“I’d rather not say.”

There were a few seconds of silence between them, each one unsure of exactly how to proceed. Playful shrieks filtered in from the main house. Claire put the cushion down on the couch between herself and Johnny, and stood up.

“Come in here.”

She was making for the closed door, the one Johnny had accepted as leading into her bedroom. Any other time, he would have been greatly excited by her invitation to join her in her quarters, but a frank gremlin inside his head laughed off any notions of amorous developments. If anything, he had a feeling that he was not going to enjoy what she had lined up for him.

The room was bathing in bright afternoon sunlight, streaming through the lace curtains that adorned the window at the other end of the room. Her bed ran almost the entire length of the far wall, the door only just clearing its corner as it swung inwardly. There was barely three feet of space between the end of the bed and the near wall. A small dresser wardrobe graced the corner by the window, complimented on the opposite side by a green felt armchair, and a wicker basket. She made for the dresser, pulling out a drawer, and rooting through its contents. Johnny followed, inexplicably drawn towards the shining window. He edged past her, running his hand along the soft green armchair.

“I’m just trying to find something here.”

“Ok.”

He scanned the view through the large window, which turned out to be little more than a neighbour’s carefully cultivated garden. Suitably disappointed, he turned back into the room, his eyes falling into the wicker basket. It was evidently

her laundry basket, filled with scrunched-up clothing. Black underwear, the smoky red sweater she had been wearing the night before, dark navy jeans. Something shiny, trapped down the side of her unwashed garments caught his eye. Without hesitating, Johnny thrust his hand into the basket, brushing past the rough denim and something a lot softer, grabbing the cold blue material, and pulling it free. She was still searching. He stretched the elastic waistband of the shorts, pulling them into full shape in his hands. Shiny blue Adidas goalkeeper shorts. Claire's face drifted quietly onto the indistinguishable face of the topless woman in his Polaroid. Just like the sleepy haze that was creeping across his chest.

"Where did you get these?"

She had found what she was looking for, and was reading to herself from it. She turned around, shrinking her eyes in puzzlement.

"Uh, some second hand clothes market in Interlaken. Why?"

"No reason."

The white Adidas stripes were peeling off in places. The difference in sensation between the nylon shorts and the rougher stripes was huge. He could smell *her* in the shorts. She seemed to have forgotten about the sheet of paper in her hand, marking out embarrassment and indignation in her speech.

"I used to wear them in bed."

"With what else?"

"*What?*"

"With what else? A T-shirt?"

"Yes. What's this about?"

"Did you ever sleep topless?"

"No!!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! What makes you say that?"

"Somebody sent me a Polaroid picture, a couple of weeks ago, of a topless woman, wearing these shorts, sitting in that armchair."

He was amazed at just how fierce his voice sounded. She too looked horrified.

"No, no fucking way, you *can't* have!"

"You mean you *know* about this?"

She placed the sheet of paper back on the dresser, and steadied her racing heart by pressing on it and breathing deeply. Still approaching remarkable calmness, considering the circumstances. An incredulous weight on her face.

“Before Christmas, a friend of mine came down from Freiburg. We went out, got drunk. She slept on the couch, I woke up the next morning ...in that chair.”

“With no top on?”

She nodded slowly and heavily.

“Wearing these shorts.”

“I mustn’t have made it to bed. I don’t remember anything, either does she.”

“So how the fuck did I get a photograph of you?”

She looked sadly at the blue shorts in his hand.

“You’re sure it was me?”

“I am now.”

“No way. It couldn’t be....”

“Are you still wondering if I’m involved?”

He tossed the shorts back into the basket. She turned slowly back towards the dresser, picking up the sheet of paper, seemingly regaining her scattered composure, moving onwards.

“Please, look at this.”

She handed over the sheet, ripped from a foolscap copy, scribbled on in a blue flourish not dissimilar to her sister’s. The page was divided into four sections.

“I started to write down the details of some of my dreams. Read the third one.”

Johnny did as he was told. The sounds to accompany the words popped into his head. *Early morning, car & truck, Robbie????? Susan????? Serious, warning, accident?!*

Claire was talking again, bravely fighting against the sobs that threatened to take her voice.

“I was warned about the crash and I didn’t do anything. He caused it, said it was to prove how serious he was.”

With this, her resistance finally broke, and the tears began to flood from her. Johnny covered the short distance between them, and locked his arms around her. She ground her face miserably into his chest, bringing her hands to her face, crying openly.

“I wanted to warn Susan but I couldn’t. I thought she would be in the car. The ticket that you used was for her, to come over here. I was going to tell her then.”

“But in the meantime the accident happened. Without her being involved.”

“And now he’s in a coma, and I could have stopped it.”

As she whispered these last few words, she moved her head to one side, leaving wet tears on Johnny's bare neck. He was secretly enjoying the trembling bundle against his body, leaving her sobbing quietly for half a minute.

"It's not your fault. Who would have believed you?"

"That's what I thought."

She breathlessly expended the last of her outburst, seemingly comforted by the fact that Johnny shared her outlook in this regard. Wiping her red eyes dry, she pulled herself away from his arms, deeply angry with herself for losing control. Her mouth quivered as she exhaled.

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I can see why you're scared."

"He is deadly serious."

"I know."

She reached for the sheet of paper, which Johnny politely handed back, annoyed that he hadn't taken the opportunity to check up on the other three dreams, to see what exactly he had been up to. She excused herself to go to the bathroom, and left him on his own in the bedroom. When she returned, dabbing her face with a clean white towel, Johnny was perched on the edge of the bed by the window. His face was paralysed, holding the kind of disbelieving fear she had expected to see ever since he had arrived. His unblinking eyes were trained on the wardrobe, in front of which stood silently the black-clothed man from her dreams. She felt herself within range of losing control once more.

"Claire, come in, join us."

He had turned to greet her, his arms stretched wide, his welcoming smile at odds with the prickling freeze that clawed at her skin. She moved slowly into the room, sitting carefully on the bed, her eyes never leaving the stranger in her bedroom.

"Aren't we a cosy threesome. Well, my friends, first things first, I should explain, you are not both seeing the same person. I have a separate visual being for each of you, and a separate voice. But the words will all be the same. Compare notes, if you wish."

For the first time since she had returned to the room, Johnny moved. His eyes had met hers momentarily as she sat down, but he hadn't moved. He hissed at her in panic through the side of his mouth.

“Who are you seeing?”

She replied in a similar low-key manner, her whispered voice reflecting a little more anxiety than before. All traces of her crying had disappeared, she was dry and quiet.

“The man I told you about. From my dreams.”

Johnny too was seeing the man from his dreams, the matured gentleman in overcoat and Trilby hat. He ventured a brief description to Claire while the stranger looked on patiently, eyebrows raised and lips pursed in waiting.

“Done? Fine. I would like to stress at this point that contrary to what you may believe, I am not here to harm either of you. There is no need to *worry*. I will explain myself clearly and thoroughly, and if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to stop and ask.”

“How the hell did you get in here? I just turned around and you were *there*.”

“That will become apparent very shortly, dear boy.”

There was a kindly grin on his face that was at once both maddening and hypnotic in Johnny’s eyes. He wasn’t sure if Claire was seeing the same thing, but she remained silent on the bed beside him, breathing normally.

“Shall I press on? Good. In very broad terms, you have both been experiencing some odd occurrences in your daily lives, and also while you dream. Am I not correct? The simple answer is that I am responsible for these occurrences. I have my reasons, and will outline them to you in due course. Johnny, as you can probably tell, part of my involvement with you was to draw you to this place, specifically to this little explanatory meeting. And Claire, I did promise that you would not be alone, did I not? Have we any questions at this stage?”

The voices that they heard were confident and charming, efficiently colouring in the shapes on the line drawings that had appeared in their eyes. All the panic and fear had fallen backwards, leaving them helpless in front of him, but still with the power to sift through the questions that flew past their minds, thick and fast. Claire spoke first, asking a question that Johnny himself had been preparing, her voice trembling slightly.

“What are you?”

The black-haired man turned to her and smiled.

“As good a question as any. I was human, and still probably am. Except my original time as flesh and blood has passed. I have died once before, and now retain all but the physical being of my former self.”

“So you’re a ghost?”

He chuckled quietly, moving in front of the dresser mirror. Even with his prior knowledge of spirit physiology, Johnny was numbly shocked to see the lack of reflection. There was absolutely no denying it now. It was real.

“A ghost, a spirit, these are silly human terms and descriptions. I shouldn’t laugh, I apologise. If it helps you to understand, by all means, call me a ghost.”

“Why are we seeing different people? Why aren’t you the same for both of us?”

“Another fine question. Essentially, it was an error on my part. I had to try different personas on you both, in an attempt to grab your attention as you slept. You both responded more favourably to two separate individuals—the two people you are seeing respectively at the moment. By retaining the two individual visuals you are now mildly familiar with, I had hoped to make this a little less *obscure*. And I assure you, I do grasp exactly how strange this all must seem.”

He left off with a blank fatherly shrug, inviting them to shrill exactly how strange it seemed to them. But the girl had no such interest. Still she peppered him quietly.

“Why can’t we see your real face?”

“Did I not explain? I have no physical being, I have no real face, as you put it.”

As Claire drew breath, Johnny found the space to ask his own question.

“What do you want with us?”

“Direct and to the point, the best way. Firstly, let me address what will be your next question – why did I choose to interfere with you two above anybody else? Believe it or not, but your shared advanced mental development is the major factor. You see, only a tiny percentage of the human race are receptive to the kind of signals that I employ. It is something of a nuisance in the sense that there is no more efficient process than trial and error to sort the wheat from the chaff. Consider the simple cucumber – some schools of thought have it that you can either taste it, or you can’t. There is no way to determine this without trying a slice of the vile vegetable. Similarly, there is no way to determine whether or not somebody is open to spiritual persuasion without testing their perception.”

Johnny was still filing the clear words in his head as Claire interrupted again. He could hear belittling disbelief in her voice, and bubbling anger.

“So we’re the only two people you could find?”

“Not the only two, but the *first* two. Despite what you may believe, I do not have an endless supply of time. In truth, my selection was made that bit more easier. I chose you, Claire, and within days, you had inadvertently pointed me towards Johnny, who proved to be perfectly receptive.”

Claire made a slight volcanic noise before speaking. If Johnny had managed to shed the soothing blanket that tired his mouth and eyes, he would have asked the same question.

“How did I point you to Johnny?”

“He appeared in a dream you had, without any influence from me whatsoever. I was routinely checking your dreaming patterns at the time, and systematically tested each and every one of those who appeared with you. Frank was a complete non-starter, by the way.”

He tilted his head slightly, flashing a warm, knowing grin. She wanted to blush, but for some reason, the receptors in her face were not online. Frank was the rugby-playing weightlifter who lived with one of her friends at college. His only recorded appearance in any of her dreams had been an active one in a particularly passionate encounter with Claire on the kitchen table in Frank’s apartment. Johnny, naturally knew nothing of this, and was using the time to make his own careful deductions.

“So the only reason I’m involved is because she dreamed about me?”

Some time ago, he had hoped that the extent of his involvement in any of Claire’s dreams had been similar to that role actually taken by Frank, the weightlifting rugby player. When Susan had told him about Claire’s dream that Friday evening in Dolan’s, she had been considerably vague, perhaps sparing him any embarrassment. It didn’t appear that it was fucking embarrassment she had been saving him from.

“No, that’s not the only reason. Remember, if you hadn’t been as receptive as you are, I would have passed.”

He was trying to make it sound as though being selected for whatever stupid game he was playing was an honour, a reflection of one’s mental prowess. Johnny noted the sudden appearance of disgusted frustration in the pit of his stomach. Claire returned from her brief silent sabbatical.

“Why did you pick me in the first place?”

“I didn’t *pick* you, I studied you, along with a selection of others. You came top of the class, so to speak.”

“What made you select me, along with the others?”

The impatience crept back into her voice. Johnny turned to look at her, as the old man shuffled his position to turn and face her completely.

“The strength of your emotions, my dear girl. You arrived here with such anger, such hated rejection, that the conviction of your magnetic radiation upset the surrounding aura of this area. We tend to notice such things.”

“We?”

“I am not the only one of my kind. There are others, who have been given the opportunity to follow up these projects.”

“*Projects?*”

He turned back to address Johnny, happily.

“Yes, *projects*. That is probably the best description.”

“Who gives you the *opportunity?*”

The old man laughed quietly to himself.

“That would be telling. I’m not sure exactly of what your respective religious convictions are, but I assure you, the afterlife is not as straightforward as a white bearded man in Heaven, and a red pointy-tailed man with a pitchfork in Hell. Try to think less in terms of black and white, and more in shades of grey.”

“What the *fuck?*”

“I do apologise if this is confusing you, but I cannot go any deeper into this particular area. There are certain rules enforced on me, ones which would render my work useless if I was to transcend them.”

“Rules?”

“Yes. We are not the decadent, carefree heathens that you see portrayed as ghosts in horror movies. We prefer to do things by the book.”

The two young people on the double bed remained in complete silence for seconds, processing these new ridiculous words slowly. He seemed to respect their difficulty, and left them quietly compiling. *Rules, projects, the afterlife*. He smiled again, beginning to understand just how fucked up this must appear to them. Not that he had been in any doubt beforehand, but he was damned sure of having their attention now.

“I can see that you are both having difficulty in understanding this. However, I don’t consider this as being vitally important to our development together. I will move slowly onwards. I know that given the time, you will ask me to explain what exactly your dreams have been representing. This is a slightly lighter subject, and should ease you back from your mildly apoplectic states.”

“Claire, I’ll begin with you. My first goal was to earn your attention. This I achieved with the dream about the little girl at school, and also the incident in Interlaken. You found these actual occurrences more potent than any *déjà vu*, I believe.”

The little girl at school had drawn a picture of Claire, in crayon. It had been a loose snapshot of the horrible recurring dream that she had suffered ever since she’d arrived in Brient. Claire had been too petrified to ask the girl where she had imported the other characters from, and somehow completely mislaid the portrait two days later. The incident in Interlaken referred to her finding a pair of second hand football shorts, which almost matched the blue and white shorts that the strange little girl in her class had grafted onto Claire’s thighs in the crayon landscape. She had neglected to tell Johnny this – for fuck’s sake, he already claimed to have a photograph of her *wearing* them. The man in black continued.

“The dream with Johnny was of your own doing, it had nothing to do with me. My next involvements were simply to assure you that you would not be alone, and also to vaguely outline what would be involved. It then appeared that I was losing you, so I regretfully had to resort to something more intense. I apologise for the trauma that you encountered as a direct result of the car crash dream, but it was necessary, to retain your attention, and to prove just how serious I am.”

His voice had taken on a graver bounce, but his eyes remained kind.

“As you know, your sister was not harmed, and the boy will make a full recovery.”

She didn’t feel the need to question exactly how the fuck he knew that her sister’s boyfriend was going to be alright. She was feeling a little better in herself, feeling the warmth as more of her line drawings were shaded in.

“I have also shown you what benefits you can expect if you co-operate.”

“Do you honestly think that one cancels out the other?”

Her tone was angry once more. Johnny was lost. The old man was turning back to him.

“That remains to be seen. Johnny, stop me if you have any questions. The Polaroid photograph and the email picture served to arrest your attention. I then attempted to slowly introduce the idea of there being a point to it all, without giving too much away. I also tried to outline what I could do for you in return – you remember the girl in amongst the trees. You will also be aware that I developed the involvement of Claire, in varying degrees of danger, to awaken your desire to help her. And in the process, help me.”

“How did I get the photographs?”

“You didn’t get them. If you were at home right now, could you put your hand on either? Of course you couldn’t. They existed only in your mind. And the possibilities within a mind are endless. I could have shown you pictures of *anybody*.”

“What do you mean when you say you’ll do something for me in return?”

“Like I’ve said, I need you here, to do something for me. In return, I can offer you my assistance in certain quarters – that girl you’re interested in, your band, whatever.”

Johnny quickly appreciated the fact that the smiling man had not mentioned Susan’s name. It was not an opportune time to admit his somewhat damaged feelings towards the grieving girl, especially not in front of her equally disturbed sister.

“But *how* can you help me?”

“You are familiar with the concept of a butterfly flapping its wings on one continent, and affecting a change in weather in another?”

It was a notion Johnny had struggled to believe during his extensive viewings of *Jurassic Park*. Nevertheless, he understood, and nodded.

“Well, sometimes that’s all it takes. You just have to know where the butterfly is, and when you want him to flap his wings. Trust me.”

It seemed like an odd thing for him to ask of Johnny.

“I was also forced to make a late change to my plans. The original hope was to bring you two together at Christmas, when Claire had returned to Ireland. You would have made a cosy foursome – together with Susan and Robbie.”

Johnny was genuinely surprised to hear the old man make this suggestion, especially considering he apparently knew who the object of Johnny’s affection

was. Perhaps he was merely authentically pulling more wool over Claire's eyes. Regardless, it hadn't happened.

"But as you both know, things conspired, out of my hands, to ensure that Claire unfortunately returned to Switzerland without even leaving Dublin. I was forced to re-evaluate my plans, and to quickly point you in the direction of this place. I had neither the time nor the patience to wait for her next trip home."

"Did you arrange the crash, so as I would buy Susan's ticket from her?"

"No, not at all, that was a happy coincidence. I had no idea that Claire was going to bring her over, or that you would have the drive to ask her for the ticket."

"Did you arrange the crash?"

Claire had been quiet while Johnny was having his dreams analysed.

"No, I did not. It was going to happen anyway. But by warning you, I made it appear that I did."

Johnny realised that they still were no wiser about what lay ahead of them.

"So what exactly do you want from us?"

The man in black rubbed his hands together in front of his chest, and smirked.

"And so we get to it. I want you both to listen, and I will tell you."

twenty-one

Somewhere in the estate outside, a car rolled slowly by. The rising breeze caught the first small drops of drizzle, and bounced them playfully off the bedroom window. Apart from these mild sounds filtering through, the room was in absolute silence. Johnny had managed to shake himself free of the soothing sheets of calm that had threatened sleep upon him. He had been consciously storing all this new information, all these explanations, putting them aside for another time and day, when he could offer his full attentive self. For now, there was more to learn. The simmering panic and disbelief, the tiny voices squeaking at him, asking him to display the appropriate behaviour that *they* would associate with an audience with someone like this, they too had subsided, almost as if they held the same interest as the rest of him. He glanced across at Claire on the bed beside him, but her features were committed to the old man standing in front of her. Clearing his throat without a show, making his way around the final bend.

“What I want, my friends, is to be complete once more. I have been given the opportunity to return to this life, and all that currently eludes me is a physical form. In layman’s terms, I need a body.”

He paused, allowing the two white-faced young people the time to absorb his words. The boy spoke first; the girl remained sadly quiet. Then again, if she had taken on board all that he had hinted at through her dreams, she *knew*.

“You want to fucking *possess* us?”

Disgust, fear and a scared lack of comprehension on the boy’s face. The familiarly infuriating smile on the kind-faced old man.

“No, no. If that was the case, why would I have the two of you here? Would not one suffice? It *is* an option available to our kind, but quite a far-fetched one. I mean, what sane person is liable to offer themselves up for possession by another? Would you? I didn’t think so. And it is incredibly tricky to forcefully possess an unwilling host. Besides, there are certain rules and regulations, making it all the more difficult as an exercise.”

“There are *rules and regulations* that apply to possession?”

“Of course. I told you, it’s not the disorganised orgy of chaos that you’ve already decided it is. For one, I am not allowed to assume the physical human form of anybody not receptive to certain probing signals. This, in a sense, goes without saying – he who will not receive me mentally cannot ever know of my presence, and therefore cannot receive me physically. How can I buy a newspaper if the newsagent doesn’t see me coming, and his shop remains shut? Secondly, although this more by choice, I would have to spend months, perhaps even years, studying the personality, behavioural characteristics and social mannerisms of any proposed host. There is very little point in me arranging to transfer back to human form if I cannot convincingly fool those immediately around me into thinking that nothing has changed internally with their compatriot. Where is the future in my new human host being locked up for mental evaluation, after his or her parents notice countless changes in their offspring’s behaviour?”

Somebody, somewhere told Johnny that he was lying uncomfortably on a bed in Brient, beside the girl from his disturbing dreams, listening to a ghost outlining the rules imposed on potential spiritual possession. And still he failed to grasp how bizarre it sounded, he was more interested in tripping up this maddeningly relaxed old bastard. He wanted to reach the flaw in his well-woven story, to expose him for the bullshitting nothing that he was. So what if he had managed to loosely link Johnny’s dreams, and all that shit with the photographs. Maybe he *was* some kind of spirit – Johnny had as open a mind as any in that regard. But he wasn’t going to stand there and talk about rules for fucking *possession*.

“I can see that you’re having difficulty in believing me. If I could, I would prove it to you, but alas I cannot. You’ll just have to trust me.”

Again, he was asking Johnny to trust him. Not fucking likely, he thought to himself.

“There are many more of these regulations, an entire section concerning blood relatives. But I’ve confused you enough, and I really should press on.”

“No, try me about blood relatives.”

Give him the rope, and let him hang himself. The old man’s smile changed, surprised.

“Well, firstly, there is no direct transfer from spiritual to physical form allowed between original blood relatives. If I had a child, for instance, who had

survived me, I could not directly possess him or her, if I so chose. Instead, I would have to assume the form of another human, and hope for a period of prolonged physical contact with my child, at which stage I would be allowed to move across. Essentially, I would require a medium through which to pass if I wished to possess any member of my bloodline.”

“What kind of physical contact?”

“It varies. It depends on the resistance. If I had a willing host lined up, a prolonged handshake between humans should allow me time enough to make the crossing. If there is resistance, it would require something a little longer. And it’s hardly likely that I’ll find a blood relative willing to donate their body. This is one instance in which I am unlikely to *keep it in the family*.”

“This is all highly irrelevant. I have said that my intentions do *not* revolve around possession.”

He offered his hands out, palms facing upwards, in a mock display of exasperation. Which only served to annoy Johnny even more.

“Well what the fuck *do* you want, then?”

“I want you to *make* a new body for me.”

Johnny ignored the sickening gurgling sounds in Claire’s throat. He was getting more frustrated by the second.

“How do I *make a body*? What am I, a fucking plastic surgeon?”

The old man shook his head patiently, aware of the approaching finish line.

“No, but you are a healthy male. And she,” nodding at Claire, “is a healthy female. Together, you can make a healthy child.”

The swirling, jabbing pains in his stomach began to make their presence known, and Johnny found himself hating that over-heated bedroom more than any other place in his known world. It was too warm, he was having difficulty in breathing, and in place of sweat on his boiling torso, a hideously itching coat slid silently across his skin. The old man had relaxed his facial muscles, darting his eyes from the boy to the girl, scanning them for their real-time reactions. Claire had her face hidden in her hands, but was making no sound. Johnny suddenly understood her, and all that lay at her end of the bargain. She moved herself slowly off the bed, mumbling.

“I have to get out of here.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, I want to be on my own.”

“I’m not staying here with *him*.”

If he hadn’t been looking half-pleadingly at the back of Claire’s head, Johnny would have seen the comical flash of mock indignation on the happy old man’s face.

“Yes, it’s probably best if you both go, get some air or something. I’ll still be here when you get back.”

They walked in deathly silence, making little or no noise on the gravel path, as they passed the school, and made absent-mindedly for the lake shore on the other side of the main road. Johnny was feigning the range of concern, shock and anger that he presumed appropriate in Claire’s eyes. In truth, he was only mildly disturbed by the old man’s suggestions, he still had a hundred questions that he wished to ask, and would reserve further judgement until he had the answers. On the other hand, Claire seemed genuinely upset, so Johnny adjusted his mood accordingly. They reached the main road, and followed its curve until a small narrow lane pulled itself away. There was a level crossing at the end of the lane, segregating the last few cottages and sheds from where the lake’s shore began. The waters were clear, reluctantly reflecting the dark green shades of the pine forests. Claire stood, her arms folded violently across her chest. Johnny debated on how exactly to begin.

“I’m sorry.”

No answer, no change in her body.

“Look, you could refuse to do it.”

“I don’t think that’s an option.”

The wind whipped a lock of her hair around into her face, and she moved one hand slowly to brush it away. Her voice was low and sad, resigned.

“Why not?”

She simply lowered her eyes, and blew softly through her nose, seemingly unsurprised that Johnny was playing the naïve fool. He changed his mode to incredulous.

“So you’re going to do it?”

“I’m going to have to,” shrugging miserably and flexing her lips.

“Well excuse me for saying so, but for someone who’s just been asked to bear a possessed child, you don’t seem too worried by it.”

Unmoved by his words, she left her eyes where they were, fixed on the rippling waves, following the paths of imaginary skimming stones.

“I’ve known about it for a while. It’s not news to me. I just wasn’t sure if it was *real*.”

“*What?*”

“Just like your dreams told you what to do, mine told me what I would have to do.”

“When?”

“All the time. Ever since this started.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. I was warned not to. And I wasn’t completely sure.”

“How could you *not be sure?*”

She closed her eyes, and opened them again.

“All I saw was you fucking me, and him standing over us.”

The crudeness of her language smacked him in the cheek, and he was forced to re-gather his thoughts. The wind whistled mischievously in his ears.

“So how did you make out that he wanted a child from that?”

“There was other stuff. I just put two and two together. I was right, wasn’t I?”

“So you’re going to do it?”

“I’ve no choice.”

“Of course you do.”

“No I fucking *don’t*, alright? All you have to do is give up ten minutes of your time, and you’re through. I have *nine months*. And then what do I do with it? *I don’t want a baby*. Do you think I’m looking forward to this? My life will be *fucked* from now on. Am I likely to go through with it if I thought for one second that there was any way out?”

She retained her composure throughout, never raising her voice above a comfortable level, or allowing any emotion to shine through. Johnny was deeply alarmed.

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. There’s nothing you can do.”

She plunged her hands viciously through her open overcoat into the pockets of her jeans, and swivelled on the thick layer of stones. Looking for all the world

like an upset child. Johnny felt his heart sinking, realising that with each passing moment, he was helping her less and less. In his desperation, he battled against giving up, lowering his voice.

“Have you thought everything through?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you go through with it, what are you going to do?”

Their tones were hushed, seemingly echoed by the lapping waves mere metres from where they stood.

“With the baby?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I can’t keep it, not when...”

She turned to him, catching his eyes, begging him to finish the sentence mentally and save her from completing it. Her eyes had taken on a dull greyness.

“I know.”

“There’s all this other shit as well. College, work, my parents. I can’t get my head around it.”

“When are you finished here?”

“The end of June.”

“And when... is he taking about *doing* this?”

For the first time, Johnny actually realised his brief role in the upcoming drama. What he would have to do, and who he would have to do it with. After the initial split-second excitement, he saw the larger surrounding picture, and felt acidic bile in his throat.

“I don’t know. Soon.”

He returned his assets to the immediate dilemma, actually *negotiating* around this ridiculous suggestion.

“Is there any way you could stay over here until it’s over, and not say anything?”

“For nine months?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve thought about that. But I’ve only got a job until July. And it’s too risky to be on my own in that flat, especially towards the end.”

“You can always get another job. And I’m part of this too. I’d come back over for the last month or two.”

In equal parts, a selfless and a selfish offer. And he knew it. He wanted to help her, he wanted to be more than the person who clocked in ten minutes compared to her eternity. And he also wanted to be the loving husband, returning from work each day in a gorgeous Swiss town, to wait hand and foot on his beautiful, heavily pregnant wife. After it was all over, there wouldn't even be any baby to look after – he would get to enjoy his bastardised projection of a pregnant partner, without the lifetime of nuisance that invariably followed. But she didn't appear to be playing ball – her eyebrows lifted, and a tiny sneer sneaked across her lips.

“You want to play Daddy?”

How the *fuck* did she manage to read him, and call him out? He hastily fought the panic.

“No, that's fucking stupid. I'm involved in this too, and I'll do anything I can to help. How do you think I'd feel, lying at home, knowing you were doing all this on your own?”

“Maybe I could go to one of the girls in Germany.”

“And what if they say something back home, and word gets around?”

“They wouldn't.”

“Do you want to risk it?”

Silence, and a lowering of her eyebrows.

“Look, if you want to keep this quiet, you're better off staying here. I'm finished college in May, I can take out a loan, come over here, get some stupid job, and help look after you.”

She seemed to be giving in to him, breathing deeply, considering what he was offering. He was processing it himself, and branding it no more insane than anything else he had been subjected to lately.

“I suppose it makes sense.”

“Well, it's an option for you to consider.”

He crunched across the stones, and took her arm, linking it to his own. Staring straight ahead, she didn't appear to mind. But after a few silent seconds, she became disturbed by his closeness, and shook herself gently free, turning noisily on the shore.

“I'm going back.”

“Already?”

“What good is standing here going to do?”

twenty-two

They walked quickly back up the softly steeping hill, turning into the estate, and down to the end. Johnny probed her carefully, earning himself a promise that she would at least seriously consider his offer. Whenever she got her head straight. She couldn't tell her parents, that was one definite conclusion reached. Even if they learned that the father was a respectable, unmarried Swiss businessman, and his brief relationship with Claire had ended before she had discovered that she was expecting, they would not believe that she had felt disgraced in her family's eyes, secretly borne the child, and put it up for adoption. They were the kind of family who helped each other, and there were no secrets. At least not until recently. She meekly conceded that perhaps the risk involved would be too great, even if she did swear her very best friends in Germany to secrecy. It meant physically avoiding all of the girls, at least while she would be showing a significant change in size. Maybe she could get all the visits out of the way in the first couple of months, and then invent a second part-time job, or some other bullshit reason to cry off any proposed meetings later in the year. Johnny marvelled at just how efficiently she was trawling through these points. Especially considering what she was being asked to do.

The silently intruding man was eerily still standing in the same position in front of her wardrobe when they padded timidly back into the bedroom. There appeared to be something approaching concern sprawled across his features. Claire and Johnny sat on the bed once more, noticeably, in the black-haired man's eyes, closer together than before. When he spoke, his voice matched his appearance perfectly.

"I trust that you now understand a little bit more about our situation?"

No answer, but a rather intense glare from the boy. Playing the protective hero, no doubt. He had foreseen such a misguided reaction.

"Well, I'm sure that you're flowing with questions, so I'll open the floor once more."

"You are serious about this?"

"Deadly."

"And what if we don't...do it?"

“Believe me, I do hope that it won’t come to that. But if you remain stubbornly refusing, I will have no other option. Rather than explain it, I can offer you a graphical representation.”

He blinked, and Johnny gasped deeply as he was pulled away at speed from the warm bedroom. He was tumbling in a huge shimmering cone, like the interior of a tornado, the very eye of the storm. The wavy, solid walls around him were coloured orange and purple alternatively. There was no sound. As each new wave rose up to greet him, he was sucked in and out of moving images, each one already familiar to him. Black-eyed mechanical figurines of his friends hacking away at the bleeding body of the girl somewhere beside him. A bright-eyed midget slashing viciously at a semi-naked girl in a sunlit alleyway. Thrashing waters spewing foam, as an unseen force held the same girl underwater in a shallow stone fountain. And a new picture— a girl wearing the clothes that Claire was wearing today, frozen in position on the main road by the railway station, trees overhead swaying and laughing, egging on the heavy orange dump truck that hurtled towards her. He shuddered powerfully, shutting his eyes as her limp body bounced elastically off the truck, falling beneath the wheels. The front of the truck bounced lightly as it passed over her, bones cracking brightly like twigs underfoot in a forest. The rear wheels barely left the ground. The colourful tornado pressed on, dropping Johnny heavily back into his body, his eyes popping open as he gagged for breath. The old man looked directly at him with mildly reprimanding eyes. Claire was making similar adjustments to her breathing on the bed beside him.

“And that, my friends, is a loose visual promise of what will happen if you do not help me. Rather than threaten you personally, I place the consequence of the other’s life on your shoulders. Statistically just as effective, believe me.”

Both Claire and Johnny were still breathing quickly, their pulses returning to normal.

“Naturally, that’s the dark side of this particular moon. If you *do* assist me, I will of course reward you. A much better proposition, I think you’ll find.”

“*Assist* you.”

“Yes, my boy, *assist* me. I need this young woman to bear a child for me, and I need you to impregnate her. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I can hardly fuck her myself, now can I?”

The first display of crude language from the mild-mannered old man in the overcoat, but the relaxed context and tone left it unlogged by a macabrely curious Johnny.

“How does that work?”

“Very simple. Once the egg is fertilised, it is a living thing, but without the capacity to think for itself, or to refuse me. All I need is a pass, so to speak, and I can enjoy a warm amniotic home for nine months.”

“A pass?”

“Yes, a willing acceptance to allow me in. No resistance from the mother.”

“How could she resist?”

“Claire cannot resist. Only those who unconsciously resist by not being receptive to spiritual probes can prevent this happening.”

“Wait a minute, do you mean that *anyone* who hears you can have their baby possessed?”

“In theory, yes. But there are restrictions – after two weeks, the foetus begins to develop its central nervous system, which means it begins to develop its own brain. I cannot willingly possess any such entity without prior communications with it. So therefore, I have to get to my host within the first two weeks. And have you any idea of the likelihood of me finding a suitably receptive mother, still within the first two weeks of pregnancy? It is much easier this way.”

“You mean this has been done before?”

“Oh yes. Many times. You are by no means the first.”

Claire had not spoken since they had resumed their summit in the warm bedroom. She cleared her throat by swallowing slowly.

“What do you want me to do with the baby?”

“That’s entirely up to you. I would naturally prefer a solid, happy home life, but I cannot expect or ask of you any more than to bear this child. If you wish to give it up for adoption, by all means. I really won’t know any difference for a couple of years – I’ll simply be an infant.”

Johnny’s curiosity was now rampant, over-riding all else temporarily.

“Will you know who you are?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you know that you were a human once before, and that you’ve done this?”

“Of course not. I’ll be a simpering child. There is every chance that I will retain some knowledge, to be remembered at a later age, perhaps. If I was to directly possess somebody, say you for example, without foetal development, I would replace your mental traits with my own. But not this way.”

An inquisitive flame flickered in Johnny’s mind, sending smoky shots of possible hope to his mouth. He held on to the thought, offering instead a throwaway comment while he worked internally, turning over the mental suggestion.

“So why do you want to be born again, if you’re not going to remember who you were?”

“Believe you me, it’s a far more interesting prospect than the other options lying ahead.”

Johnny wasn’t fooling the kind-faced man with his crafted face of interest. His eyes gave away the distraction, the fact that his mind was temporarily elsewhere. The old man gambled, and his horse came home with furlongs to spare.

“And just in case either of you are contemplating terminating the foetus once I have taken up residence, I *wouldn’t*. The likely end product of such stupidity is that I would cross over to the nearest available host – the expectant mother. And you don’t want that, right?”

It was a brave lie, but yielded great fruits. The anguished look of horror on the foolish boy’s face was priceless. *How does he know what I’m thinking?* I don’t, you moron, I just got lucky. It was all he could do to prevent himself from smiling; the moment demanded that he stay firm and serious. The girl looked genuinely surprised – it hadn’t crossed her mind, then. And Einstein mustn’t have shared it with her.

This last setback hit Johnny harder than any of the previous smacks. For the first time, he actually *believed* that he and Claire were going to have to do this. There were no more clauses, no more rays of opportunity around it, none that he could see. The old man had asked Claire how she proposed to carry out his request, how she forecasted navigating the difficulties that undoubtedly faced her. Once again, apologising for the scale of the upheaval, assuring her that he understood and appreciated the magnitude, and promising to *help* her, and her assistant. She was talking slowly and quietly, repeating more or less exactly what

she had been discussing with Johnny a little earlier. Johnny moved his eyes from the old man to her, fixing his stare on a red blushing patch at the base of her neck. He shivered with an unrecognisable emotion as his mind's eye offered a projection of the physical act he would be asked to undertake in the not-too-distant future. In perfectly symmetrical parts, he was excited and horrified.

He wasn't listening to them, hearing only sounds and not words. If they had something of importance to share with him, they would turn to him, he was sure of that. He felt an indignant twinge as he stumbled upon the realisation that the old man was engaging in more depth with Claire than Johnny himself. And then he remembered the theoretical extent of his involvement, and savagely accepted it. His eyes skirted between the two conversing. Claire's expression did not change, and indeed hadn't since they had returned from the lake shore. She still bore the heavy sad lethargy, devoid of any of the surprise and disbelief that still arched over Johnny's eyes. The old man nodded gravely, his thin lips jumping into slight smile at scattered intervals. He was fiercely happy with the girl's attitude – almost workmanlike. She faced the impending events head-on, efficiently arranging and rearranging to make room for him and his plans. She had long since accepted. Which was more than could be said for the boy. Who, when all was said and done, was being asked to do little more than get laid with this extremely attractive young lady. Asshole. Given half the opportunity, he would have fucking *jumped* at it.

Johnny lost all track of time as the others spoke in words he wasn't listening for. The curtains on the windows at the end of the room had not been drawn, and it was dark outside. Nobody had moved to switch on a light or lamp in the bedroom, so all three sat in the black sticky heat. He felt tired, unsure of whether or not he had drifted off to sleep. That would have looked great, he thought angrily. But quickly conceded that the other two probably hadn't even glanced his way once. Claire moved on the bed, shaking Johnny's mind with the effect. The old man was rubbing his hands together. She turned to look at Johnny, the expression on her face hidden by darkness. Her eyes gave nothing away.

“I am in two minds as to which is the more suitable procedure – to offer you further time to discuss among yourselves, or to get directly down to the brass

tacks, so to speak. We have, of course, decided to go ahead with this, haven't we?"

He was looking at Claire, at not at Johnny. He sadly contemplated his diminishing importance compared to hers, before flushing it away with righteous guilt.

"Well, do we press on, or shall I leave you to your own devices?"

Johnny hoped that he wasn't being asked to make the decision.

"I don't know, maybe you want to talk about it some more, alone?"

Awkward, awkward silence.

"Well? What's it going to be?"

Claire cleared her throat, to Johnny's overwhelming relief. He had a slight leaning towards asking the persistent old man to fuck off, as he was offering. But seeing as Claire had the balls to decide for them, whatever she came upon was fine by him.

"Give me another night."

Me? What about *us*? More burning disappointment for Johnny.

"Certainly. I don't mean to rush things, you realise, but I do have a clock, and it is moving at pace. And you also have a clock of sorts – we can't just do this any old time."

Fuck your clock, thought Johnny, and fuck you. Fuck it all.

"Shall we say tomorrow?"

Claire nodded.

"Any particular time? After you are finished at the school?"

"I have a half day. I don't know if I'll go in."

How the fuck could she go to school when faced with this? Oh, at lunch break, I have to go home to screw this guy, and a ghost is going to possess our baby. It got more ridiculous by the second.

"Then we'll say two, just to be sure."

Johnny stewed silently, no longer grateful at having all these decisions made for him. Even his interest in observing exactly how the bastard spirit left them that evening was sold short – he simply walked out the door, like any normal person would have.

twenty-three

He pulled the sleeping bag tighter around his torso, shivering as the freezing metal zipper brushed gleefully off the small patch of exposed skin above his hip. In retaliation, he stretched his faded Zig and Zag T-shirt down over his boxer shorts, shielding the rest of his gullible warm body from the cruel cold. The sleeping bag was one of Claire's that he had taken from her room, his own lay underneath him. Her distant fragrance remained in the deep warmth of the bag, which he had unzipped, and wrapped himself in. The couch was no more comfortable than it had been the night before, and once again he weighed up the pros and cons of relocating to the floor. He twisted and turned, with no desire to sleep, but wanting to find a reasonably decent posture in which to lie and wonder. It had been the single most fucked up passage of events he had known in his nineteen years. Now *it* was over, and the rest began.

The night before, he and Claire had been left alone, and Johnny's deteriorating mood left him unable to drum up the interest or the concern to go any deeper into what she had shared with the ridiculous old man. However, he acknowledged the filtering courtesy which her change in manner had drawn in him. She seemed unhappily occupied, busying herself by attempting to understand more and more, restraining her mind from peering forward into the worrying future that lay ahead. Wordlessly begging Johnny to join her, to neglect their respective stagnant nodes. Nodes that refused to consider their situation seriously, to honestly contemplate what it was they were preparing to do. Johnny obliged her. His mood lifted when she virtually accepted his offer to come back over to help her out towards the end.

He already knew the answers to most of the gentle questions that he posed her, but it seemed like a good idea to keep her talking.

"Why is there such a rush?"

"Like he said, there is a clock. There's only a certain number of days per month when I am ready."

His days spent giggling at the back of Mrs. French's first year Biology seemed light years away. And yet she seemed more at ease and relaxed than Fretty French had ever been. Even given her current predicament.

"Tomorrow?"

She nodded, closing her eyes.

"I guess it'll be worse if we put it off."

He did not see her point, but agreed non the less.

"And when is he, you know..."

"Sometime during the week, I suppose. Before two weeks are up."

"How do you feel now?"

She paused, as if to stop and consider how she actually did feel.

"I'm alright. I don't want to do it, but I know there's no point fighting. You know how serious he is. So I'm just trying to find ways to get away with it."

"Get away with it?"

"Yeah. I'm not worried about myself. I can probably do it, it's only nine months. I just don't want anybody else to know about it."

"So you're more or less ok with it?"

"More or less."

As much as he listened to her, and the *professional* manner in which she was tackling what they had learnt, Johnny could not reach a similar stance. He had absorbed the disgust and apprehension that she had displayed on the lake shore, and indeed had been displaying ever since he had got to this fucking place. He saw what he was being asked to do, and labelled it clearly insane. Yet his role was tiny compared to hers. And here she stood, accepting that it was already a done deed, that all her concerns now centred around *getting away with it*. It was as weird as fuck. But still, arrowing past the efficiency of her planning, he was sure that her original fears and worries remained. And rather than pull her up on the absence of such human projections, he continued to walk with her, sharing in her miserable strategy discussions.

"And how is he going to help you?"

"Tell him what you want, he'll tell you if he can do it."

"How can he do that if he's... inside you?"

"You have to tell him before."

"What are you going to ask for?"

“The only thing I want is for this to be over.”

She shrugged slowly, her eyes never leaving the carpet. Johnny quickly concluded that he wouldn't be asking for anything either.

He had slept on the couch that evening, his sleep intruded by bizarre dreams, of which he remembered nothing when he woke. It was bright outside, and Claire's bedroom door was open. She had left a brief note on the kitchen sideboard for him – “*Johnny, I've gone to work. Back at one.*” As good a distraction as any, he figured. He would have extreme difficulty in passing his morning with a similar distraction, but when it came down to it, he had fuck all upcoming stresses to be distracted from. He slept some more, having angrily determined that she had taken the front door key with her, essentially confining him to the house until she returned. At half past ten, he ran back into the kitchen, retreating crestfallen when the back door yielded no key whatsoever. There was nothing of interest on the small portable television, her musical tastes extended little further than a selection of colourful chart compilations, and he had exhausted the small pile of women's magazines in no time. He buttered some toast, brewed coffee, and settled back onto the lumpy couch with a Carl Hiaasen novel that he'd found on top of the refrigerator.

She arrived home shortly after one, and declined Johnny's offer to get her something to eat. In return, he didn't ask her how her morning had gone. They spoke very little – she busied herself in her bedroom, in the bathroom, and finally in the kitchen. Johnny continued to read, before taking her keys, and announcing that he was going for a short walk. She didn't need to remind him to be back before two. He made his way quickly into town, his twisting insides a mash of confused emotions. By the time he had returned, it was seconds past two. She called to him from the bedroom in a broken voice. She wasn't alone.

Johnny automatically switched himself off as the gravel-faced old man and Claire, now bundled in a navy cotton dressing gown, lying tightly on her bed, sifted through the technical details in short, tepid sentences. He heard random words, things about home testing kits and fertility, but he pushed them from his ears. His only interest was getting in, getting the job done, and getting rid of the third party member. After an indeterminable time, the old man left, offering

Johnny the same encouraging smile that he had left Claire with. The girl had dropped her eyes to her bosom, the boy snarled with his eyes. Big deal, he wouldn't need him again in fifteen minutes time.

“He's leaving, right?”

“He might be back.”

“*What?* I don't want that *thing* watching!”

“Why, because that'd make it weird? What difference does it make? You won't be able to see him.”

“Why?”

“Because he won't assume any form. So you won't know whether he's there or not. Does it really make much a difference?”

Johnny felt like arguing the point – why exactly did the fucker have to be there? - but there was something about her impatience, and the superior tone of her voice that scared the shit out of him.

“Look, let's just get this over. No bullshitting around, just do it.”

He struggled mentally for seconds before arriving at what exactly she meant. She was already hiking her pants down over her knees, her thumbs in the waistband. Black, soft underwear, not sky blue. She placed them on the small dresser beside her bed, and stretched her dressing gown down as far as it would go. In a cloudy, sweet-smelling daze, Johnny began to inch his tan trousers down. She looked at him, frowning.

“There's no need for that.”

He quickly pulled the scraping trousers back up, feeling hotly embarrassed and useless at the same time. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

“Come on.”

Again, impatience and annoyance. Why was she doing it all right, and he making all the mistakes? He sidled sadly over to the bed, cautiously, for fear of doing something else incorrectly. She made no attempt to help him, or to soothe him. This was not the way it was supposed to be.

It was warm, painful. Despite her bullshit, business-like approach, she was physically reluctant, clamping her cool inner thighs tightly together. The dressing-gown remained in place, hampering his view completely, and reducing his approach to blind navigation. She was forced to assist him, and assist him savagely, grabbing him roughly. Her arms returned to remain strapped across her

chest, her eyes closed. He placed his arms on either side of her, well away from any part of her, feeling them as taut as every other muscle in his body. He would not be enjoying himself. On two separate occasions, he fought hard to keep the vomit in his throat. Her face beneath him remained expressionless, defiantly ignoring all that was going on. He searched desperately for the presence of the spirit in the room, as if to find the one missing piece which would make this the funniest jigsaw of all, one that he could laugh at instead of screaming at. He felt a chill on his back, and opened his eyes to hope that maybe she had moved her hands to accept him in her reconsidered embrace. But still she lay motionless, her breathing not noticeably altered. The chill in Johnny's back spread, reaching out through his chest, moving upwards and downwards. An unseen rash coated his skin as the cold front pushed up into his skull, and down into his groin. He felt relief, more comfort than he had felt in minutes, pushing his hands into the mattress. Her eyes opened, wide and bright, and she exhaled sharply through her mouth. The cold seeped slowly away from Johnny, leaving in its place darting pains. Her eyes clamped shut, her lips moved rhythmically without making a sound. Shunning his usual stamina concerns, Johnny finished just as quickly as he could. His arms gave way, and he fell slowly onto her. Crushing her arms and chest with his own beating trunk. She moved her hands to place them on his shoulders, and pushed him viciously off her, rolling him onto the other side of her bed.

“Get the *fuck off me!!!*”

She levered herself off the bed minutes later, and walked heavily into the bathroom, without a word to him. He remained in a frail knot, shocked and sorry. What was wrong with her? What had he done wrong? She was the one *willing* to do this – he had been trying to deter her. And somehow he ends up with the shitty end of the stick, the blamed end. She didn't even come back in to tell him that she was leaving – he just heard her scoop the bundle of keys from the living room table, and the front door closing behind her. He was the one left feeling *violated*. He was the one who had bent over backwards, trying to soothe, accommodate and reassure her, only to have it harshly thrown back into his face. Johnny lay quietly on the bed, sore and strangely exhausted, his muscles still tense and tight. Wanting desperately to believe the chirpy young man inside, who was telling him that Claire, in all fairness, was not acting out of character at such an obscene and

awkward moment. He wanted to soak in the righteous guilt, and to reprimand himself back into the understanding Johnny, willing to offer her the benefit of his doubt. Then again, he was beginning to lose track of the amount of times he had searched purposely for the justifiability of her moods, and adjusted himself to operate alongside her. No, maybe it was her turn to rise above. His vulnerability was fermenting itself into a deep, dark stubbornness.

She was gone for about an hour or so, and on her return, asked meekly if he wanted to go for a drink. There was an odd pleading in her eyes, at odds with the semi-playful smirk on her mouth. A brave face, thought Johnny to himself. Her cheeks were tainted pink by the cold, and she had pulled her hair into a clumsy ponytail at the back of her neck. He wasn't sure if he wanted to drink, to speak about what was fast approaching unspeakable whilst under the stuttering influence of alcohol. But at least she wasn't shunning him, or angrily finding fault, or pushing him away. They walked briskly through the freezing late afternoon air, making for the pub in which they had first met. The talkative barman from Newcastle wasn't working, so Johnny ordered two pints in German from a serious-looking young man. Claire had moved across into the first booth and removed her coat.

“That was weird.”

She wore what he presumed to be a false smile, her disposition was far from the one that had shoved him roughly from the soft comfort of her arms. He went with her.

“Yeah.”

“I'm sorry about, whatever.”

“That's alright.”

He paused, wanting his face to display the requisite concern.

“How are you feeling?”

“I'm fine. You?”

He was taken aback by her dismissal, but followed.

“A bit weird. I don't know.”

She answered him with the first true smile he had seen her offer, in the strangest circumstance.

“It is fucked up. But it's over.”

“Over? It’s only just started. And even at that assuming that it...worked.”

“It worked alright.”

“How do you know already?”

“I just know.”

She added a pinch of grim wisdom to the bubbling cauldron on her face.

“Anyway, your part is over. You don’t have to worry any more.”

“That’s *bullshit*. I *said* I’d help you.”

“Yeah, and I appreciate it. But I still have six months on my own before you can do anything.”

“I thought you were alright with it?”

“That was before. I am, but...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.”

They drank in silence, with Johnny looking up every now and then, failing to catch her eye. She seemed to be completely preoccupied. He asked, to keep her talking.

“What are you thinking about?”

“When have you to go back?”

Not what he had been expecting. He hadn’t even considered it since he had arrived.

“Shit, tomorrow evening, actually.”

She grimaced.

“You see, I don’t really want to be on my own for the first few days.”

He was sipping from his pint, so she could afford to pause briefly, knowing that he would not have the time to spew forth the heroic gesture that was undoubtedly festering in his mind.

“And I’ve been thinking – if I can’t get home to see my family until *after* it, I’d like to get to see them now.”

It was enough to pull a halt on Johnny’s heroics.

“What do you mean?”

“I might go back with you tomorrow, stay at home for a little while.”

It sounded absurd to him, but then again he was being forced to deal with a hundred flashing pictures, of himself, of Claire, of the two of them, Susan, his

friends, and an old man in an overcoat. No more absurd than anything else currently on his plate.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’d kinda appreciate having someone to talk about it as well. And it’s not as if there’s anyone else I can talk to.”

Those pleading eyes once more, with a little something extra mixed in. He couldn’t label it. He didn’t need to; he *loved* it.

“Sure.”

“But I’d need your help with something.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t find my open return ticket. I’ve got about a hundred and twenty francs in the flat, but I don’t get paid until the end of each month. I’d need a small loan, just until we get home.”

He was lucky in the sense that he had spent fuck all, besides the hotel room, and the train ticket.

“No problem. I should have more than enough.”

“Excellent.”

Another genuine smile, and she reached across to kiss him on the cheek. He could feel the minor elation in her lips. He shivered, dazed at her first act of tenderness.

twenty-four

There was a part of him that had wanted to be alone as he was leaving Brient. He wanted to be free to wordlessly soak in the last few details, still bitterly angry at himself for somehow leaving his camera back home. All he could do was stand on the small grey platform at the railway station, breathing great gulps of lakeside air, hoping that the stinging pine-drenched effluence would remain locked away in the pockets of his lungs, available to him on request, with the ability to trigger the digital images that he was fervently downloading. Everything stood to attention before him, giving him a military style send-off. The foamy chop on the crust of each wave in the lake. The tall swaying trees on both visible shores. The low-lying clouds which playfully hid the soaring tips of the mountains, bordering the lake reliably. Fiddling with the straps of the small bag that she had hastily packed, Claire did not seem to be holding similar court with the polite natural officers. Maybe she was used to them, seeing as she had spent a couple of months out here. Johnny had been loosely following the trajectory of the bright red train as it slid in and out between the forests away to his right. With a happy blast on its gentle horn, it swerved slowly around the last bend, and wheeled itself down into the station. In the dull early afternoon chill, Johnny felt his heart sink.

He said very little as they pulled away, instead focusing his attention on the fact that he was set to return in the summer, for all the wrong reasons. She too was quiet, interrupting his thoughts only to announce she was going to search for the bar. He sipped mindlessly on the bottled beer that she returned to offer, and turned himself mentally back to her, again puzzled by the range of emotions on her features. She was doing better than he was.

“What did the school say?”

“Not much. I just showed up, turned on the tears, told them I had to go home for a family matter. Which isn’t a total lie.”

She was calmer than she had ever been in his presence.

“How long did they give you?”

“I said a couple of days, and that I’d ring if I needed more. The kids aren’t back until this day week anyway, they’re just doing administrative stuff now.”

“At least they’re not firing you.”

“Uh, no.”

“What’s the story with maternity leave?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“No, it’s too much for now. I’ll ask when I get back.”

Having changed trains in Lucerne, and used the thirty minute changeover to grab some cold food, they located the bar carriage once more, and picked up where they had left off with beer. Johnny became acutely aware of the loosening of their respective tongues, and fought to hold back on asking the boiling questions that had formed in his head while she banged away in the bathroom, with him prone and in shock on the warm double bed.

“You seem a lot better, a lot happier.”

“What’s done is done. There’s no point dwelling on it.”

“Sure, but the *next* part isn’t done.”

He was reluctant to remind her of the upcoming months, seeing as she was smiling so much, and catching his eye with a warm glint every few minutes. Her cheeks had adopted a pinkish glow, the kind he sometimes fell foul of when on the piss.

“I know. I’ll deal with that when I have to.”

Sure enough, her eyes fell, and Johnny kicked himself viciously. But he still had more questions. He wanted to ask about where she was going to place the child for adoption, if she would use her real name, but perhaps they were questions for a later date. Maybe for when she and he sat snugly in her garage flat, mere weeks away from the birth. For the time being, he settled for some less probing queries.

“How is that freak going to enter you if you’re at home?”

She tilted her head, considering.

“I presume he can still contact me there. If not, I’ll be back here before two weeks are up anyway.”

“So you haven’t seen the end of him yet.”

“I guess not.”

When they reached Zurich, he made straight for ticket sales, fretting silently about the likelihood of there not being any free seats on his evening flight. His

tongue was thick as he addressed the woman behind the desk, and he calculated quickly just how merry he was. To his relief, there were ample seats remaining on the 1940 flight to Dublin, and such was the meagre difference between single and return tickets, he chose the latter. A nice thing to do, he figured. Maybe he could tell her to forget about paying him back until he came over in the summer. Perhaps she could buy *his* ticket for him. Although on reflection, he could do with the money. He'd work something out when they got home. She thanked him profusely for his generosity, but intoned firmly that there had been no need to waste the extra money on a return ticket. He didn't care. She was smiling ruefully at him, seemingly happier by the hour, so he was happy.

They checked in just as soon as the desks had opened, and moved through the departure area to the bar. Johnny was truly enjoying the strange experience of being drunk in a foreign place—just like had had been in the hotel room in Brient. They ordered plates of toasted cheese, ham and onion sandwiches, complemented by crisp strips of bacon flavoured corn. The blushing patch on her cheeks had spread, covering the distance from her lips to her eyes. She was rambling carelessly, both in speech and in movement, leaving him on his own whilst she explored some nameless part of the airport, and returning to talk at length about her dreams, how she loved flying, and the superior quality of the beers they had guzzled on the train. Johnny was largely amused by her energy, and advised her to get drunk more often, if this was its usual effect on her demeanour. She agreed heartily.

The welcoming air hostess, waiting at the front entrance to the 737 jet, smirked in a way that Johnny found indignantly patronising. What he didn't see was his own bloodshot eyes, or the warm haze that had spread across his cheeks, matching himself to Claire in any observer's eyes. The flight was by no means full, and after the doors had closed, Johnny released his seat buckle, and moved stealthily back three rows, into the vacant seat beside Claire. Her eyes were closed, and opened only when he brushed against her as he shoved his jacket between them. She spoke in a lazy, cracked manner.

“I thought your seat was up there?”

“It was, but there's no-one sitting here, so I moved.”

“Cool.”

At least she didn't sigh and lament her privacy. She had said something about wanting to have somebody to talk with, hadn't she? So here he was. She interrupted his thoughts.

"I feel like shit."

"Me too."

"I don't know if I can drink any more."

"Me neither."

"Do they have anything else to drink?"

"I'd say so. They'll probably come around in a while."

He silently reprimanded himself for forgetting to pick up some hard boiled sweets to suck as the aeroplane ascended. And settled reluctantly for a series of strong swallows to counteract the ferocious build-up of pressure in his ears.

"So how well do you know Susan?"

"Not that well, really."

It was the first time she had asked about the extent of his relationship with her sister. Two weeks ago, he may well have smiled coyly, and muttered something about not knowing her as much as he'd like to. Now, in the dreamlike haze of all that had recently happened, he found himself miles from the Johnny who had fawned over his ex-band's new vocalist. Considering exactly what he done in Brient, and what he was offering to do over the coming months, he had bigger fish to concern himself with. Or rather *older* fish.

"Did you guys go out?"

Not once outside Johnny's mind.

"No. We only got talking when she needed some lyrics and stuff for the band. I was the old singer."

A wise man in Dolan's had warned him one evening that this was possibly the sole explanation behind Susan's volcanic surge of interest in Johnny. The bastard had been right.

"I wonder how that guy is doing."

"Robbie?"

"Yeah."

He had practically forgotten all about the miserable circumstances in which he had left Claire's sister behind. Again, he manoeuvred himself clear of actually

considering the medical prowess of the injured motorcyclist; he was speaking metaphorically of the mental unhappiness of the girl instead.

“I hope he’s doing better.”

Claire murmured her accordance, and rolled her eyes happily as the unseen flame-haired stewardess behind her began taking drinks orders.

“Did you ever talk about weird shit with Susan?”

“You mean like all this?”

“No, no, not this. Other stuff.”

Other stuff such as digital images of a girl performing at a gig that had never happened, wearing a T-shirt that Johnny himself had only just designed? Or Susan passing on information regarding Claire dreaming about Johnny in Brient, while he was reeling from dreaming about an unidentified girl’s demise in the same lakeside town? He slurped nosily from a miniature can of 7-Up as he considered.

“Not really.”

“So she didn’t say anything about our uncle to you?”

“Your uncle? No.”

He performed a precautionary sweep on his memory, returning an empty search on any important references to Susan’s family, present company already having being moved to a more accessible file storage area.

“Well, it’s kinda fucked up.”

“Go on.”

He was intrigued, eager to not pass up this opportunity to learn a little more. Come to think of it, she had always been a tiny bit distant, so whatever information he could prise from her half-drunk sister might well go some way towards explaining her sitting.

“Very few people know about this, so it’s not to go any further, alright?”

“Sure.”

Now she had his complete focus.

“We used to go on family holidays to Port Ard, it’s a small touristy kinda fishing village.”

“I know it.”

“Every now and then, we’d invite a couple of our relations along – uncles, aunts, cousins, whatever. One year, we had Uncle Steve with us. He was pretty cool, used to play with us kids all the time. I was twelve at this stage, and Susan

would have been eleven. Two days before we left, Susan went missing, and Uncle Steve went missing. She turned up, crying on the beach, and wouldn't tell us what happened."

She paused to swallow a mouthful of Coke, observing the creep of abhorrence on Johnny's face. Something bad was coming.

"They pulled his body out of the harbour later that evening. He had never been able to swim, he drowned."

Another pause. Johnny was allocating effectively all of his sympathy time to this family – to one member or another.

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, he was a good guy."

"What happened?"

"The official story was that he slipped, and fell into the canal part of the harbour. But later on, we got it out of Susan that she had seen it happen. That she had seen him fall in, and hadn't helped. My parents said it was the shock, or something. But I didn't believe her, and I still don't."

"Why not?"

"Because she never liked Uncle Steve as much as I did."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But she was always finding fault with him, asking me why I spent so much time with him. She was just a weird little bitch that summer. And I think she pushed him."

"What?"

"I don't think he fell. He wasn't stupid, he knew he couldn't swim. So why would he risk falling in? Why would she be so upset about him drowning if she didn't care about him in the first place?"

"That is serious shit. Did you ever ask her?"

"Of course I did. But she denied it, saying that he fell, and that she couldn't move to help him. How could she move to sit crying on the beach then?"

"Wow."

"I know."

Another pause, interrupted by the sounds of duty-free bottles clinking over the humming engines.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be telling you this."

Johnny wasn't sure how to respond. *No, go on, I want to hear more.*

“It’s just that any time I hear people going on about her, I think of this. She’s my sister, and I love her, but I have a major hair up my ass over this.”

“Have you asked her about it recently?”

“It’s been six or seven years, I guess. I don’t know how to bring it up again.”

He whistled through his teeth as he exhaled, a little louder than he would have ordered.

“Look, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m tired, drunk, and my head is fucked up completely. Please don’t say anything about this to anybody. It’s supposed to be kept in the family.”

“I won’t.”

“Can we just change the subject, please. I’ve already said too much.”

She stretched back in the seat, raising her closed eyes to the ceiling, reclining in a manner that suggested sleep. Johnny struggled momentarily with the concept of changing the subject. Here he was, barely twenty four hours after supposedly impregnating this alarming girl, promising to return in six months to look after her until she gave birth to their possessed child, which would then be given up for secret adoption. And now she weaves a tale involving her sister, as a child, involved in some unconfirmed way with the untimely death of their popular uncle, and he wasn’t allowed to talk about *either* subject? Whilst his mouth switched efficiently to auto-pilot, conversing at length about nothing at all, his mind was absolutely and categorically in two different places.

twenty-five

In his haste to organise Claire's safe delivery home from Switzerland, Johnny had neglected to double-check all the necessary details concerning his own journey. By the time the two tired travellers had made their way past baggage reclaim and through customs, it was eight-thirty. Even the most psychotic taxi driver could not get them back into the city in time to catch the last bus home. He was furious with himself for overlooking this, and held back on informing Claire until he had systematically exhausted all the immediate options available to him. As it happened, one of Stan's college flatmates had cut short his holidays in order to finish off some assignment, and loudly offered Johnny and his guest the use of one of the many free rooms. Stan himself had vowed not to return until he absolutely and positively had to, but Johnny rang his flat, just in case. He had already spent a number of blurred nights on the couch at 12 Guigean Square, and was on good drinking terms with Daly, who automatically suggested that Johnny pick up some cans on his way over. He returned to Claire with a sheepish look on his face, and owned up to his miscalculation, silently pleased at the prospect of spending one more night with her.

They took a taxi into the city, getting out at the off licence just down from Guigean Square. Johnny moaned about the loss he had made on changing his francs back into punts, and picked up some cheap wine for himself, and six cans of Carlsberg. Claire meekly whispered that she had forgotten to change any of her money, so Johnny handed over a twenty pound note, scolding her playfully for cleaning him out. He had shaken off the numb sleepiness that the beer had brought on, and found himself feeling energetic, and eager to see through the latest complication that he had successfully navigated around. On the other hand, Claire seemed a little jaded, and smiled wearily as Johnny proposed that it was going to be another long night. He pondered internally as they walked along the wet street, wondering how exactly to introduce Claire, so as not to allow Daly to come to any false conclusions. Quickly, he decided against saying anything at all, finding that he himself would have no complaints whatsoever if Daly was to fall upon the only natural conclusion.

Daly was on his own in the house, and welcomed his guests into the warmth of the huge living room. Empty vodka bottles adorned the mantelpiece over the boarded fire, and the walls were decorated sparsely with giant movie posters. After her initial weariness, Claire seemed to find her second wind, and offered just as many sharp comments as the others, moving quickly from the last hour of *Fletch Lives* to a selection of episodes of *The Fast Show* that Daly produced. The beer supply depleted itself at an alarming rate, enough to prompt Daly into proposing a further trip to the off licence, before it closed at eleven. Claire surprised Johnny by announcing that she had had enough, and was going to call it a night, if that was ok with their host. Daly practically fell over himself in his desire to be hospitable, and offered her the least smelly of the six rooms – ashamedly not his own. She said her goodnights, postponing any thoughts of buses or trains until the morning. Johnny walked back into the village with Daly, struggling once more with the explanation that Daly demanded.

“What the fuck are you doing with a girl like that?”

His eyes, cheeks and speech burned with an eager drunken cheer.

“I don’t know!”

“Are you doing her?”

Yes, and no. Only when a spirit tells me to. Only when we need to make a baby for him to possess. Other than that, not really.

“No, not yet.”

“How do you know her?”

A window of truth appeared.

“I met her while I was in Switzerland, just so happened that she was coming home on the same flight. Her sister is in my old band.”

“What the fuck were you doing in Switzerland?”

Where did he go now? Football? Concert?

“I was just over visiting a couple of mates. Met her at the airport on the way back.”

“I wasn’t sure whether or not you were together.”

“Not yet. Give it time.”

The mock-arrogance playing on his face was contrasting fiercely with the sinking feeling in his stomach. Sure, in a couple of months time, he and she would be together. But under the most ludicrous fucking circumstances possible.

They stocked up on extremely cheap imported beer, and sat up well into the morning. Johnny was constantly tweaked by the knowledge that she was asleep mere metres away from where he lay sprawled in an armchair. His last night with her for some time, and it hurt. The ebullient Daly would not allow any more than the odd second of self-pitying that Johnny could snatch in between slurred recounts of major sessions in the house, around the house, and about the house. Johnny tired of these anecdotes, and willingly submitted to the heavy sleep that was threatening to take him. His host remained glued to *Mallrats* until its close, before stumbling noisily from the room, towards his bed.

The next morning, Johnny felt sticky and shitty, more so than he had any morning in Brient, with the possible exception of his hungover breakfast in the hotel. The smell of stale beer hung dully in the air, and the floor was strewn with empty cans. He tidied the place to the best of his slow abilities, the noise he was making obviously sufficient to either waken Claire, or alert her to the fact that somebody else was up and about. Her face had taken on a strange roughness, and her hair remained loosely knotted around her shoulders. She spoke in a dry, rasping drone.

“What time is it?”

“Ten”.

“What time are we going at?”

“Whenever you want to. There’s a bus at eleven, and a train at quarter past.”

“Fuck the bus. Can we get the train?”

“Sure. Are you ok?”

“No, I’m as sick as shit.”

It’s too early for morning sickness, thought Johnny to himself. Fuck, it’s only been two days.

“There might be something in the bathroom. I’ll have a look.”

He found some mild painkillers, and some Alka-Seltzer, and brought them to her, along with a glass of cold water. Minutes later, he was poking his head around Daly’s door, waking his hungover host to thank him for his hospitality. Unlike others in the past who had lamented his departure, and insisted that he hang around for the hair of their communal dog, Daly was more than happy to grunt goodbye, and retreat back into his pillow. Unhappy with the weathered reflection the bathroom mirror had offered him, Johnny held open the sturdy

wooden door for Claire, stepping on the carpet of ignored junk mail, and bracing himself against another chilly morning.

His mouth was thick and dry, and his head still throbbed with the remains of a hangover. Therefore he summoned no silently disappointed complaints when Claire announced that she was going to try to sleep on the train. It afforded him the opportunity to rest his eyes, and to calm the swell of visions that were gathering in his eyes. His mind wasn't clear enough to sift efficiently through the brain storm, but he managed to retain a portion of the disbelief that such a slide show should command. He felt a slight rush of panic as he clocked himself failing to divert himself completely, but fawned it off with the promise that he would review all that had gone on in Brient just as soon as he had regained full control of his senses. She began to snore in a most unladylike fashion in the window seat directly opposite him. His eyes skirted across her body, foolishly searching for a determinable change in the size of her belly. *Two fucking days, asshole.* He mentally enhanced her image, attempting to predict what she would look like in six months time. Managing to resist the voices in his head, suggesting that he tug lightly at her cream sweater, to simulate the effect of a swollen stomach. He stepped outside himself, and observed exactly what it was he was thinking. How ridiculous it had been, and would continue to be. He shuddered uncontrollably as a goods train shot by the window.

At the station, he gave himself over to the horrible awkwardness that had been brewing ever since he had woken from a patchy sleep, his eyes never leaving her strange sleeping face until she too rose from slumber.

“Are you going that way?”

She lived in the opposite direction to him, taking the railway station as a reference point.

“Sorry?”

“Are you going straight home now?”

“Yeah.”

Cold silence, and then the train screamed sullenly away. He had long since decided that offering to walk her home would be certainly received with the diminished enthusiasm he feared. This was goodbye, for now.

“I'll see you later, then.”

She seemed to be struggling with the questionable weight of the moment, her eyes darting about the concrete platform, the station porter with his trolley of parcels, anywhere as long as she avoided catching Johnny's face.

"Right."

"Ring me if you want to talk, or anything."

"Thanks."

She turned on her heel, and walked through the marble entrance arch, pulling open the door of the last remaining taxi. Johnny remained on the platform until the cab had pulled off, and taken her safely out of sight.

As he stamped miserably along the deserted freezing streets, he realised that he was going to be bombarded with detailed, well-meaning questions from his family just as soon as he stepped through the door. He checked his bag for any trace of flight numbers – thankful that he had not checked it in as anything more than hand luggage. His maps and travel paraphernalia had been crushed down the bottom, left there until he could remove them in complete seclusion. He cursed himself for forgetting to pick up anything in the duty free, anything at all that he could have passed off as small gifts for his parents and sisters. Detouring past Cromford Gardens, he made his way to the petrol station, and gathered up a vast array of chocolate bars and sweets, asking for a paper bag in lieu of the station's own plastic efforts – the folded brown paper bag managed to hold at least the smallest amount of mystique as to its point of origin. Knowing that their gifts had travelled from a foreign land was usually more important in his sisters' eyes than the actual quality of the offerings. Upon reaching his home, he delighted briefly in the fact that the car was gone from their drive, doubling his happiness when a sleepy Ann informed him at the door that both their parents had gone shopping. He handed her his hastily compiled bag of sweets, receiving a half-hearted hug for his troubles. She padded into the kitchen, and divided the contents of the bag into four equal piles, lamenting loudly the fact that there weren't any unique or different pieces of confection, or at least none that couldn't be found in the shop down the road. Johnny gave himself over to a sudden flash of remembrance, and pulled open his bag, groping inside until he found what he was looking for.

"Here, fussy."

He threw over the two packets of crisps that he hadn't eaten the first night in Brient. She marvelled quietly at the new and exciting colours, revelling in her

authentic pieces of foreign merchandise. Johnny debated quickly over whether or not the German inscriptions on the bags would alert his parents to the possibility that maybe he hadn't just been in London, but he comforted himself with the invention of W.H. Smith's vast selection of imported snack foods.

Niamh needlessly intercepted her falsely forecasted scolding of laziness, citing the fact that she had but two days of her holidays left to enjoy as reason enough to stay in bed well into the afternoon. As it was, she brought good news, news of his parents' absence until early evening at the very least. And she inadvertently reminded Johnny where everybody else had thought he'd travelled to by asking how London had been.

"Not bad. Cold, wet."

She had already lost interest, but he was ploughing fervently ahead, plotting the lies and reviews of his mid-winter break in London with two fictional ex-classmates. He remembered the complication involving Susan and football matches, his friends and a concert, and wondered how he was going to explain himself. What was Claire going to say? Would he be mentioned at all? Wasn't it all a bit obvious, with Claire returning home just as soon as Johnny visits her in Switzerland? His body matched his brain in terms of pain and sticky heat, and he elected to take a long shower. As he peeled off his clothes in the bathroom, his unshaven reflection sombre and serious, his mind wandered backwards, to the over heated bedroom in Brient. Standing sadly and naked in front of the mirror, he asked himself for an explanation. His tired soul was accepting blame, for everything and anything. Even the shower head seemed to be in accordance, as the steaming water held itself back, giving Johnny all the room he needed to thrash himself clean.

An hour later, with fresh clothes on and a light feed in his stomach, it didn't seem so bad. He lay on his bed, eyes focused on nothing in particular, too tired to put on some music to drown out the happy squeals of his youngest sister and her friends in the sitting room. As always, with a calmed mind, he bunched each and every one of the niggling questions into a ball, and tore viciously at each individual querying strand as they made themselves known. He was happy with the sketchily detailed report he could give about London. If Susan asked about the football match, he was going to confuse her, by saying that the game itself wasn't

on until March, and that his intention had been merely to purchase a ticket. As long as he was ever mentioning that he was planning to travel to Switzerland in the first place, just to watch a football match, but it was the best he could come up with. At least it left him free to have been in London in time for the secret gig that supposedly took place, the event of which his friends would be expecting a report. His covering stories were by no means faultless, and he experienced sharp flights of guilt as his mind entertained the faces of those he would be lying to, but he cheered himself with the mournful conclusion that the truth was a certifiable no-no.

His mind ducked and dived, pulling itself back from a jaded haze every now and then to flirt with one of the many tearful conclusions Johnny was calling up. Claire's unhappy face was never far away, her features pulling relentlessly at his heartstrings, just as her sister had done. As his stomach had leapt happily at the mere mention of Susan's name, he found himself submitting to the painful ache that awaited thoughts of Claire. The S.S. Susan had sailed long ago— to a bedside vigil in St. Brigid's, beside an injured monkey motorcyclist. What of Claire's ship? Could she conceivably be interested in Johnny? Would she have had anything to do with him, outside of their ridiculous tryst? Then again, as he bitterly surmised, without the intervention of other forces, he would never have dreamt of her, he would never have travelled to Brient, and he would never have *shared* with her. A horrible, insistent bell at the front of his brain jangled defiantly, warning him that despite whatever appreciation she may show for Johnny and his desire to look after her in the summer, she was more than likely going to sever any connections they had just as soon as the birth had passed. Why would she want him as a constant reminder? She hadn't let him in to any great extent so far, why should it be any different in the future? He told himself that the strength of his painful feelings for her had everything to do with her, and nothing whatsoever to do with the horrible physical union they had suffered. With that, he too felt cheated. With her face looking on, it did not feel like he had done it. He was blocking it from his mind, refusing to believe that he had any recollection of it happening. Rather than deal with the sickening reality of just how awful it had been. What should, in all normal terms, have been the single hugest and happiest achievement of his years, was now turning his stomach as a scratched memory. He projected himself as a happy drunk in Dolan's, living a slightly different story,

boasting to his friends that he had bedded one of the most truly beautiful women in the town. Pointing proudly to one of those passport photo strips, with four depictions of he and Claire, in varying embraces, wringing the maximum affection from their last few hours at Zurich airport. At least until Johnny came back over at Easter, when they would once more walk hand in hand through their favourite place on earth. Stepping back to compute just how far he was from this promised land, he sadly concluded that he would have been better off having never met her. Even if he had travelled to Brient, and she had not been the other person involved, if she had rejected even the most subtle of his advances with a stinging slap to his cheek, it would have been better. Instead, now, he was, and would continue to be, forced to share her life, to remain in contact, to travel back to spend his summer caring for her, tending to her with reluctant force, knowing that the time she rated less than he did would soon be coming to an end. She had no interest in him. No more so than a fucking mid-wife.

twenty-six

He surprised himself by managing to get a couple of hours sleep during the afternoon, woken only by Niamh when she displayed her biannual show of good nature, offering to make dinner, and thumping on Johnny's bedroom door to ask if he would be joining them. Despite himself, his stomach watered as she reeled off her proposed menu – chicken fajitas and fried potatoes, and he groggily advised that she put him down for two helpings. Ann's friends had left, so he relocated to the sitting room, leaving the door slightly ajar, so as to warmly receive the first waftings from the clattering kitchen. There was nothing of any interest on the telly, so he challenged Ann on Crash Bandicoot. As she ran up a mildly superior score, he cursed himself for the hours spent on FIFA and Tomb Raider, leaving himself thus open to an evening of gloating. Having frowned at himself in this fashion, he quickly remembered the nasty home truths that he was avoiding, and suddenly became hugely grateful to the excited ball of energy on the floor, her hands wrapped around a joypad, celebrating loudly as the orange fox on screen leapt successfully across a stake-filled gorge.

He thoroughly enjoyed his meal, not even registering the slightest reprimand when Niamh outlined the devious reason for her helpful preparation of food. One of her friends – one Johnny had ashamedly held lustful thoughts for whenever they had crossed his inebriated path, was celebrating the absence of her parents by holding a small party for her closest associates that evening. Which meant nagons of vodka all around, and an open invitation to any of the cooler guys they could get their hands on. It could easily be disguised as an innocent slumber party affair, for parental discretionary purposes, but having been a sixteen year old himself not so long ago, Johnny managed to call the event with an alarming accuracy. Niamh quickly played down the scale of the evening, alleging that there probably wouldn't be any boys there at all. Still appreciative of the brief holiday away from having to consider once more the dark side, Johnny promised to say nothing to worry their parents, that they and they alone could decide her fate, whenever they returned home.

His parents returned shortly before seven, and were immediately, and tactlessly, bombarded by their eldest daughter, asking to stay over at Amy's that night. With this minor distraction, coupled with their own extreme tiredness, there was little more than polite interest in how Johnny had gotten on in London. He sensed their moods, and held back on his lies, offering merely a framework of happenings, one that could possibly be patched over whenever required. His father moaned about having to drive back across town to the Dunne's place, and decided that he was going to get it out of the way – if Niamh wanted a lift, she had to be ready in ten minutes. She ran to her room, quietly lamenting the unfairness of it all, thankful that she had spent her afternoon productively selecting her outfit. Rather than do a rush job on her makeup, she bundled her cosmetics into a bag, aiming to use the time in Amy's before the others arrived to fix herself up. In contrast, Johnny was enjoying the lazy pace of his early evening, focusing only on the James Bond movie, and nothing else. He had missed the opening credits, and wasn't that bothered about even calling for the T.V. listings, or checking the teletext for the movie's title. By the relative youth of Sean Connery, and the warm tropical setting, he was almost sure that it was *Dr. No* he was glued to once more. The phone rang, and he listened out for the sound of the kitchen door opening, hence relieving him of any secretarial duties. He scowled in annoyance as his mother called his name, and pulled open the sitting room door, eager to efficiently dispatch whoever it was before Ursula Andress made her appearance.

“Hello?”

“Johnny, it's me.”

“Susan?”

He genuinely wasn't sure if he recognised her voice. She didn't sound like the worried, distracted telephone girl who had helped him negotiate his way to Switzerland the week before. This time, she sounded like she had a solid agenda.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, how are you?”

“Fine. How was Switzerland?”

Something began clanging in a childish way inside his head. Uh-oh. She has asked about it too soon for his liking. *Let's dispense with the smalltalk bullshit, and grab a hold of the situational balls.*

“Great, cool. Have you been talking to Claire?”

He'd give her the rope. If she wanted to pull it tight around his neck, the opportunity was now hers. Nervously, nervously.

"No, not really. She just said that you met up on Wednesday."

He fought back the urge to breath heavily in relief. With the mouthpiece held to his lips, what would it have sounded like at the other end, in her ear? What would she take from it?

"Yeah, that's right."

"What did you get up to?"

Holy fuck, she *knew*. What had Claire said? How deep was he thus involved in her sister's eyes? Why didn't she just come out and ask? His voice was amazingly left distorted by the nerves that jangled his every other muscle.

"Not much, really. How's your... man doing?"

Changing the subject, slowly and unsuspectingly seemed like an excellent way to buy some time. If she had a true bullet point plan to adhere to with this phonecall, she would return to it, there was little he could do about it. But for now, even with MonkeyBoy's name a blank in his mind, he passed the onus back down the line.

"Better. He's out of the coma, he should be out of hospital within a week."

"Good, good."

Fervently striving to locate a reason to prolong the altered subject matter, but failing. She regained full, frightening control.

"I just wanted to ask you about Claire."

"Sure."

"Was she acting weird over there at all?"

No weirder than I could have expected, given her circumstances, he thought to himself, feeling the cold and the panic, but steadying his voice.

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know. Just *strange*."

"I wouldn't say so, no. Then again, I don't know what she's like ordinarily."

That was good - a solid, flippant, off the cuff remark. But where the fuck was she going with this? He had forgotten all about Ursula Andress.

"She just seems a bit weird, that's all. I mean, for starters, she comes back home, after only going over a week ago."

“I suppose that’s odd. Why, what else is weird? Why did she decide to come home?”

Another probing question. He suddenly wasn’t scared any more. He had reached the point where he was so sure of being rumbled and discovered, he couldn’t harbour any worry. No hope equals no fear.

“She just said that she had some extra time off, the school wasn’t reopening for another couple of days.”

“Right.”

“She’s being really dismissive, and quiet. And she looks like shit.”

“Really?”

He had noticed, but was reluctant to accept it.

“Yeah. And all of a sudden she can *drive*?”

“Sorry?”

“She mentioned nothing at Christmas about having learnt to drive.”

“So?”

“She took my mother’s car out this afternoon. There was no-one else in the house besides me. When I asked her about it, she said that one of the teachers in her school had given her a few lessons.”

“Well there you go.”

“How come she didn’t mention it at Christmas, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, I don’t know what happened, or even if she told you, but if you know anything, just fucking tell me.”

He raised himself indignantly at the strength and tone of her language, but lowered back down with the superior comfort of knowing more than she did. This was *not* the way to ask him. Not the way to butter him up.

“I’m sorry if she’s acting a little strangely, but she didn’t seem too affected when I was over there. I don’t really know what’s wrong with her.”

There was a long sigh in his ear.

“What was she like over there? Did you meet any of her friends? What did you two *talk* about?”

“I didn’t meet any of her friends. She didn’t seem to get on with the teachers all that well. We just talked about the town, college, you, whatever.”

“What did she say about me?”

“Not much.”

He was simultaneously trying to find something of value to recount to Susan, something to guide her away from the true difficulties. He could only talk about her injured boyfriend for so long.

“Come *on*. What were you talking about me for?”

He weighed the pros against the cons, agonising over whether or not blurting that he knew of the family secret would get him off this not inconsiderable hook.

“She told me about your uncle.”

He wasn't sure if the deathly silence could be gauged as having elicited a favourable response. Probably not. Probably a little too strong. Still, the focus had moved.

“Which uncle?”

Her voice had fallen to a whisper, having abandoned the force and menace of earlier questions. Johnny chalked down a small victory.

“The one who drowned on holidays.”

A tiny gulp, and a large intake of air. He pictured her lungs. He pictured her naked, her face on her sister's body. He flexed his racquet, bouncing loosely on his side of the court.

“What did she tell you?”

“That he drowned. That he couldn't swim. That you and him disappeared, and you were found on the beach.”

More silence, so he continued. There was a part of him registering exactly how serious this was, how fucking horrible he was being to her. But right now, it was grill, or be grilled. Sink or swim. He wasn't enjoying doing this to her, but he had enjoyed even less her getting very near to doing it to him.

“That you said you saw him fall, but you couldn't help him.”

Another strange sound in his ear, and a barely audible whisper.

“What did you say?”

She cleared her throat gently and repeated herself in a weak, lifeless question.

“How does she know that?”

“What?”

“How does she know that?”

“How do you mean?”

Susan's voice was still a fearful whisper, rasping playfully in the earpiece, in tones that Johnny could have listened to for hours. If only the words had not been so harsh.

"She was never told."

He stepped away from whatever it was that had been occupying his thoughts, finding himself truly intrigued.

"About what?"

"About me. The beach, me seeing him fall in."

"But didn't she see it?"

More puzzlement, and more industrial, whispered lethargy in his ear.

"No. She was off with my cousins that day."

"Well then someone told her."

"Nobody told her. My parents were the only ones who knew about me."

"They told her, then."

"No. They made me swear to never tell, and they never would."

"Why would they do *that*?"

She held herself, breathing slowly, unaware of Johnny festering at the other end.

"Why would your parents keep a secret of the fact that you couldn't save your uncle from drowning?"

No answer.

"He was your father's brother, or your mother's, so why all the secrecy?"

As the silence welcomed his words, the end of Claire's tale on the aeroplane swept back into his conscious. He suddenly understood everything about Susan's reluctance to explain the mechanics behind her family holiday secret. He would never stumble upon the exact reason for his next brutal utterance, yet carried it out with the air of a detached professional.

"Did you push him?"

The petrified choke was enough to convince him. All he needed now were the filling details. Claire had been right. Her sister *was* a child assassin. And here she was, ringing Johnny, interrupting *Dr. No* to ask if he thought *Claire* was weird? The irony practically commanded a smile from him.

When she spoke again, her low voice shivered, devoid of the comely chill that had endeared itself to her interrogator.

“What makes you say that?”

“Something she said.”

“What exactly?”

“That she believed you had pushed him, because you didn’t like him as much as she did.”

“What else?”

“That she hadn’t mentioned it in a while, but wanted to.”

“Johnny, she *never* mentioned it. We never spoke about it because she never *knew* about it.”

These last words were punctuated with a desperate quiver.

“Well how the fuck can she tell me about it if she never knew about it herself?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

He stopped himself, adjusting his voice to match hers. The readdressing of the question seemed to demand it of him.

“Did you push him?”

Surprisingly, she didn’t check, or break stride. He could feel her hanging her head.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he did things to me.”

Immediately, he knew where she was headed. His cheeks filled with prickly colour, and he battled to make an understanding noise, to save her from having to go into painful detail. All that came out was an embarrassed squawk, not enough to stem the tide.

“He ... just did bad things. Alright?”

With one word, she was pleading him to jump in, to not pass up the opportunity to stop her, just like he had fucked up the last one.

“Yeah. I get you.”

She thanked him with another huge sigh.

“That’s why I pushed him. I was eleven, I don’t know, I just saw red. Nobody saw it, I made sure.”

“Fuck. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

Except an angry, bubbling hidden part of him wanted to loudly berate her fucked up family, and to curse her and her sister for ever bringing him into it. But more than this, more than the surprisingly undisturbed way in which he was processing this new grave development – although what could possibly be deemed as surprising after what he had just been through – he clocked his heart melting once more in pity for the renewing object of his affections.

In hushed tones, perforated by suitably sounded understandings by Johnny, she explained the surrounding events. It was true that she had been found crying on the beach, telling the nice elderly couple who approached her that she had seen her uncle fall into the sea canal, and been too scared to help him. She was taken back to her parent’s rented holiday home, where her father had consoled her, and thanked the concerned couple, who ambled off to contact the police. In the time it took the police to arrive from the nearest large town, Susan had spilled her little heart, breaking her father’s in the process. It was his brother-in-law; his wife had gone with Claire and his nieces to a neighbouring beach. Susan’s father relayed the story to the police in the format she had presented to the elderly couple, with no mention of her involvement aside from her frozen watch, which was attributed to shock by the senior policeman. In truth, Susan had collapsed crying on the beach through mental exhaustion, well aware of the difference between right and wrong, but having carefully weighed her wrong against his. Her father coached her carefully against telling the policemen anything more than she had told the old people on the beach. The fact that Susan had pushed smiling Uncle Steve into the salt water canal would remain a tight, brooding secret. As would her motive, her reasoning behind her actions.

“How did you manage to push him?”

“He wasn’t expecting it.”

“What did your mother say?”

“She was more worried about me. It was my father’s idea to keep it between the three of us. She agreed, and so did I.”

“So who else knows?”

“*Nobody*. I’m telling you.”

“How does Claire know then?”

“I don’t know.”

Susan now sounded drained. Johnny too buckled momentarily under the weight of these new words.

“When did she tell you about it?”

“On the aeroplane. We were a bit drunk, I guess her tongue was loose.”

He stopped himself short once more, wanting to share the elation he had felt as Claire had finally opened herself up to him. Pissed, merry, and willing to talk *after* what they had just done.

“I don’t understand. How does she know?”

“Are you sure that nobody else knows?”

“Positive. There was me and my parents, that’s all. And I suppose *he* knows, wherever he is.”

“Come again?”

“I guess he knows, if it happened to him.”

“Who?”

“*Him*. Our uncle.”

Johnny let out a prolonged agreeance, masking the furious pace of his brain. His head shook involuntarily, and a sharp pain ringed his temples. He moved through situations and great slabs of information at a breathtaking stride. He felt the same push he had been inspired by as once before he had struggled to piece together the puzzle left for him by a confusing old man from his dreams. A push moving him. Towards ridiculous conclusions and theories. She was speaking again, more quietly incredulous questions, but he wasn’t listening. His inner calculations were insisting on maximum attention. And still he struggled. Pieces of data flew past like extraneous limbs. She looks like shit. She had looked like shit ever *since*. She was weird and distant. As far as he was concerned, she had been weird and distant *before*, and happily talkative *after*. She had spoken to him at length on a subject that she supposedly knew nothing of, also *after*. The only people who knew were Susan, her parents, and *him*. He was dead, he had drowned years before, therefore had no human form, and was a spirit. One capable of mental interference, and desiring another shot at living? A niece and her uncle, blood relatives, no direct approach allowed. A prolonged physical contact – nothing more prolonged than sexual penetration, right? She had not been the same *since*, for better or worse. And now her sister wanted to know why she was acting so strangely? It was a ludicrous notion, one that presented itself completely out of

breath, yet somehow, in the immediate climate, instantly believable. Honest and true, coloured plastic blocks. He switched slowly back from calculative mode, suddenly aware that she was waiting for answer of some kind. The strangest thing was, he could see himself telling her it all.

“Listen, is she there now?”

“No, she’s gone out for dinner with my parents. Even that’s not like her.”

“Who else is there?”

“Nobody. My other sister is gone to some house party.”

He had never even considered the possibility of his younger sister and hers being friendly. Another time, it may have tickled his attention. Now, it passed him by completely.

“Right. I’m coming over, there’s something I want to talk about.”

“What?”

“I’ll explain when I get there.”

“Hold on, what do you want to explain? I thought you didn’t know anything.”

“I might know, I’m not sure.”

“You *might* know? What the fuck?”

“Just listen to me. I’ll be over in ten minutes.”

twenty-seven

With his mother's shrilled advice concerning the lack of visible lights on his sister's mountain bike still ringing in his ears, Johnny pedalled fiercely around the side of the house. His cheeks stinging as great fronds of evergreen trees mischievously deposited freezing water on his face, his hands sunken in colour from pink to white, with his over-worked knuckles, wrapping around the handlebar grips, bright red in comparison. It was another cold night, and he could feel the icicles settling in his lungs as he breathed deeply. The thick wheels almost skidded out from underneath him, skating undecidedly on a patch of black ice just outside Griffin's. It was enough to curb his haste, and he slackened off the pace, making time to keep an eye out for any such obstacles on his path.

As he cycled, he churned and mixed the leaping fragments in his mind. His heart pained loudly, reminding itself of Susan's desperately whispered account of her holiday in Port Ard. And while he enjoyed a warm blanket of trust and deep bond in considering the enormity of what she had just revealed to him, he conceded willingly that had he not been the one to raise the subject matter from the sea bed, he would still know no more. He would not be able to knowingly attribute her current mannerisms and personality glitches to those summer afternoon events. He graciously accepted that of course she was going to pick a nothing MonkeyBoy as her lover – she had been twisted, like a sapling shaped by harsh winds. He wondered if MonkeyBoy even knew. Perhaps Johnny could don his righteous cape, and become The Consoler once more, offering to her the kind of understanding shoulder that she probably didn't even know existed. Maybe then she would begin to see him in a different light – a brighter, warmer and fuller ray than an inconsequential monkey could ever offer.

And yet at the same time, something inside him reeled up with the venom and the hatred of a wronged cobra.

“You stupid, braindead fucking asshole. How *dare* you? How the fuck can you even *think* these things? You know *nothing*. She spoke *only* because you spoke. And you jump up with your amateur fucking psychology, making all these

deductions about somebody and something you know nothing about. *Help* her, don't fucking *itemise* her."

With the panicked realisation that he was being called out too many times lately for any kind of comfort, Johnny swallowed hard, and burned. Whoever it was, whoever was speaking, had called him correctly once again. It was only with the cruel-to-be-cruel outburst that he saw and understood the disgustingly selfish error of his brain. He felt like leaning heavily on the right hand side of the bike, dropping his worthless fate into the hands of gravity, who would pass judgement and ruthlessly crash him to the ground, bicycle on top, waiting for the retributory procession of heavy trucks that were circling the roundabout just behind him. Despite his blind and overwhelming self-hatred, and bitter accordance with the angry voices, he couldn't end it yet. There was something left to be done, the reason why he was on a bike in the first place, hammering himself with insults and shortcomings. As his theoretical findings poked his attention gently, his mind switched patterns as quickly as a slide projector would. Gone was his raging self-rebuking, and in was the refreshed need to study each and every one of the ridiculous permutations that had drawn him to his deduction. While he would not need a foolproof, carefully measured and instantly believable account for his own purposes, he would need one in order to sell his story to anybody else. And in particular, to the sister of the possessed girl.

Apart from the obvious financial benefits that he had reaped, it was the first time that Johnny had genuinely been grateful for his teenage summer job of delivering advertising newspapers. The long days of catcalling children, dogs under the impression that they were worthwhile security guards, and cantankerous old women who complained if their freesheets weren't pushed all the way through their unoled, unmaintained and unnegotiable letter boxes, had afforded him a sizeable working knowledge of the layout of most estates in the town. He learnt little or nothing regarding the actual inhabitants of the houses, but became familiar with such details as where the three-hundreds began and ended, or which side of the street increased in integer value, and which side decreased. All of which became extremely useful when attempting to navigate his way around the sprawling eight-hundred house metropolis that was Ash Valley. As such, he was able to zoom confidently past the first, second and third entrances, turning in at

the fourth, knowing that a short trek along Ash Valley Drive would lead to a turn onto Ash Valley Court. His early morning scour through the phonebook in December had not just returned Susan's phone number, but also the confirmation that she lived at number twenty-two, Ash Valley Court.

He turned in the gate of number twenty-two, raising one leg back over the cross-bar as he slowed to a halt, brushing against the small blue car in the driveway. The frame of the bike objected noisily to being thrown against the hard dash of the garage side wall. He pulled across the sliding door, reaching into the porch for the doorbell button, and depressed it. The chimes clattered somewhere along the hall that he assumed led away from the door. No other sounds to accompany them however, no doors opening, or feet beating a regular pattern on the floor. He tried again, cocking his ears more alertly. Still no movement. Where the fuck was she? Hadn't he told her he'd be over in ten minutes? He checked his watch, and leaned away from the door, needlessly making sure that he was at the right house.

There were lights on behind the door, and behind the window to his right. He pushed the button once more, ringing twice, but answered by silence. Not good enough, he muttered to himself, and set off around the side of the house, passing his sister's chrome-painted bicycle. Even from the corner of the junction between garage and house, he could see bright orange light streaming onto the back lawn. There were also lights on in one of the back rooms, and the curtains were evidently not drawn. The grass directly under the shadow of the window shone bright green, cutting sharply to black wavings along the projected perimeter. The garage gave way to a small concrete landing, which offered two doors, the second of which appeared to lead into the house. The room directly behind the glass-panelled wooden door was in darkness, but thin orange wires bordered what he correctly assumed was another door, tucked away in the black background. If there was anybody in that inner room, the one that backed onto the rear garden, and they hadn't heard the doorbell, surely they'd hear him hammering on the back door. There hadn't been any signs of life in the upstairs rooms at the front, and he wasn't seeing any being reflected down onto the well kept lawn.

Before knocking, he skirted around the back side of the house, onto the narrow path of shaded gravel that ran between foundations and grass, falling some two feet short of the bright square of light that illuminated the garden. Maybe she had a stereo on, or something. Then again, she wasn't stupid – he had told her he was on his way. He inched his way along the rough wall, his back plush with the jagged dash, leaving great streaks of chalky white on his navy jacket. He stopped at the edge of the windowsill, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through the unpulled blinds, enough to allow him to abandon this cautiously intrusive piece of espionage. There was something about creeping around outside her house that seemed completely unacceptable, and yet he continued through with it. He was instantly terrified - of being caught, he told himself. But why wasn't she answering? He had to get to her, he had to explain something. Something...shit, yeah. Did she really want to know why her sister was acting in a strange way? Was she under the impression that her sister was a completely different person? Johnny had an explanation for her. But it'd be a little fucking hard to offer it to her if she didn't answer the damn door. He poked his head as far as he could dare, using the extreme pinnacle of his eye to peer in through the blinds. A warm-looking, cosily-coloured lounging room. Armchairs, a long dresser table groaning silently under the weight of a huge stereo system and neat, compact piles of C.D.'s, and a selection of family photographs adorning the ochre walls. There was a door at the opposite side of the room, on the same wall that Johnny now leaned against. It was open. It hadn't been when he had noticed it through the kitchen door. So there *was* somebody fucking home. She must have been asleep, and only woken by the last clap of the chimes. Gone to the door, found nobody there, and assumed that whoever it was had left. How does somebody fall asleep in ten minutes though? Especially with a guest's estimated time of arrival pencilled in as being similarly short. Stupid.

Having not moved while he considered her possible movements ever since she had replaced the phone, Johnny was still at the corner of the large window, deciding that returning to announce his arrival at the front door was considerably more polite than frightening her with an abrupt tattoo on the back door. And then she moved back into the warm, peach-flavoured room, the swinging door alerting Johnny to her return, allowing him to duck back out of immediate sight in good time. Through her dark reflection in the larger glass photograph frames angled on the left-hand wall, he could see her body – light jeans, a T-shirt and open hooded

top. He moved his eyes further up the wall, requiring higher hosts in order to make out her face. There was a small printed Beatles mirror hanging in the far corner of the room, and when she moved cautiously past, squinting carefully through the open blinds into the floodlit garden, Johnny could see her face. The fear that had disappeared on the telephone returned, and dragged his thumping heart heavily into the bowels of his stomach. His eyes doubled in size, swelling to diameters he wasn't confident of being able to accommodate in his sockets. It wasn't Susan's worried face he was seeing next to John, Paul, George and Ringo. It was Claire, and she was *grinning*.

Hidden away in the garden darkness, he turned the corner by the kitchen door, wanting to be sure that she could not see him. What the fuck was she doing here? Why wasn't she at dinner with her parents? Where was Susan? Why was she creeping around the house like that? Why hadn't she answered the door? Each individual question appeared in the physical form of a university professor in his brain, nodding decisively, and tapping the folder that Johnny had prepared so carefully only minutes beforehand. Each question answered satisfactorily. What other possible explanation could she offer? His heart thumped at an incredible rate, booming in his ears, demanding action of him, like the drummer beating a rhythm for the slave rowers on a medieval ship. But what could he do? What was Claire likely to do to him if he persisted in announcing his presence? What was she doing to Susan at that very moment? Would it be too late, by the time he had finished deliberating? Poring through the darkened door, he noticed that the garden-facing room had been quenched of light, the orange border around the now-shut door having been rubbed out. He had been facing in the wrong direction, not even registering the event as the floodlit lawn behind him lost its colour. Lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't seen the reflected light switch off, or Claire leaving the room, or heard the inner door closing. Which meant that Claire was no longer in the room, she had returned to wherever she had been when Johnny had called, doing whatever she had been doing when Johnny had disturbed her. The time is now, he moaned silently. Besting the crowing voices that mocked the very notion of him going out on an unstable limb, breaking into somebody else's house on a hunch, he arranged his vague plan.

The abuse continued, puncturing his thoughts as he moved stealthily towards the kitchen door.

Sure, break down the door, and save the day, hero.

The bottom glass panel was only inches above the keyhole. If he could break the glass, all he had to do was reach in and turn the key. Provided it was still in the lock.

Take your time, hero. You don't want to rush things.

He looked around for something to break the pane with. Television had told him that there was a way to break glass silently, but wrapping a fist-sized rock in the sleeve of his jacket was the best he could muster.

Go on, break and enter. You do it all, hero.

The voices were falling over themselves in sarcastic glee. He struck the bottom panel once, with restraint, testing for noise. Nothing but a dull thud. The second kitchen door was also closed over, maybe the noise would be sufficiently muffled. Ideally, he would crack the glass, dropping only small shards to the unseen floor beneath, leaving him to carefully remove larger sections, creating a hole for his hand to reach through without smashing any sizeable slabs.

Yeah, you'll be that lucky.

He rammed the covered rock into the mid-right section of the pane, stopping his motion as he made contact, blinking in elation as the glass cracked and spidered without loosening any mentionable pieces. He instructed the voices to go fuck themselves, and dropped the rock onto his instep, controlling it painlessly and rolling it gently to the ground. His action had elicited only a dry slap, one he was sure would not have been heard on the other side of either inner door. With one minor achievement behind him, he set about his new goal of removing a large enough splinter without making any more noise with renewed confidence.

His best plan of action was to remove the three-inch square slab that ran almost to the top of the panel. There was only a thin strip of glass above it, which would be sunken in putty, and unlikely to also fall should Johnny successfully remove the piece below it. He scraped quickly at the small bits of glass around his intended goal, wincing as one bastard splinter buried itself under his thumbnail. Within seconds, he had pulled enough small pieces free to allow his index finger space to grab hold of the large section. En route, he sliced the tip of his finger badly, with the resulting shake of pain only compounding his injury. In the

confined, razor-sharp space, his tremble raised his digit upwards, where he inflicted a further cut, and then downwards, where he widened the original nick. He gritted his teeth, pushing his bleeding finger through, pressing it to the back of the glass square. His blood smeared itself in a creamy crimson soup, drops rivering their way down towards the cracks, where they played a bizarre waterfall domino game.

To his pained delight, the thin slab of glass was most willing to move, and took only a few attempts at teasing to drag itself away from the caked putty on the side of the panel. Tiny dusts of glass fell away as the piece cracked free, with the jagged edges beneath it dyed red by Johnny's blood. He breathed in deeply, cradling his accomplishment before lowering it to the ground. He took stock of his wounded hand, sucking on the flowing finger, spitting the salty blood onto his jacket sleeve, no longer noticing the pain. He turned back to the door, carefully shoving through the gaping hole, keeping his fresh, unbloodied hand well clear of any hostile edges. He had to enter up to his elbow before he could bend his arm down towards the keyhole where, happily, the key still remained. Not confident in his ability to quietly open a locked door with such a posture, he tugged the key firmly from its hole, and hauled his arm back out, holding his breath in time. He paused briefly to wipe more blood from his hand, then placed the key in the outer keyhole, and turned it. It clicked decidedly, and he pressed down on the silver handle. The door groaned lowly, giving way to the tiniest of creaks as Johnny pulled it gently open, stepping quietly up onto the linoleum-covered kitchen floor.

The kitchen was warm, and smelled of freshly-cooked bread. There was also a hint of something spicier in the air, and a ticking clock filtered through from somewhere behind the door immediately in front of him. To his left, just past the tall refrigerator, decorated with PostIt notes, fruit magnets and stickers, was the second door, the one that he figured led to the room in which he'd seen Claire. Which meant that unless she was hiding in its darkness, she had left the room, passed through the kitchen, through the door that Johnny now faced. He cocked his ears, straining to hear any sound, but heard nothing over the dusty clicking of the clock. His feet made a slight peeling sound whenever he lifted them from the sticky floor, but apart from that, he was assured of his silence. He placed his hand on the round doorknob, twisting it slowly, feeling but not hearing it click back

from the socket. The door opened without noise, swinging breezily back into the kitchen, forcing him to adjust his feet. The hall in front of him was long – maybe twelve, fifteen feet, and led up to the door at which he'd had no answer. The overhead light was off, and a low humming yellow dropped down from a light upstairs. To his right, about halfway along the quarter-lit narrow passage, a flight of stairs began their short climb upwards, housing a small hollow underneath which was half-hidden by the connecting wall on which the kitchen door hung. A telephone sat on a small table at the far end of the hollow. He clocked a further two doors - at the far end, also on the right, closed, and another, on his immediate left, slightly ajar. This nearer door offered a warm glow through its cracks, and grabbed his immediate attention. It seemed like a good idea to check the downstairs rooms first – *secure* them, or something. He wanted to call out Susan's name, to hear her answer, to hear her logical and comical excuse for not getting to the door in good time to answer him. He could then apologise for his ridiculously over-the-top entrance, offer to pay for the minor damage, and then go about his equally ridiculous business of explaining why exactly he believed Claire was behaving so strangely. But he couldn't call anything out. Claire was in the house, Susan was not answering *anything*, and knowing what he thought he knew, he had every reason to feel as terrified as he did.

He inched his way into the hall, seeing his hands appear before him, readying themselves to push open the white silent door. As he edged his body against the door, into the room, there was a bright smashing sound, and the light blinked instantly to more coal darkness. He stopped, standing tightly against the wall which had lost its brief green patterned wallpaper, with the closing door shutting off most of the miserable remaining light. There was nothing visible through the window he knew was on his right, not even a glow, and the only light entering the room was what little of the dull hall pallor he wasn't blocking with his frame. His eyes tried in vain to adjust to the black space before him, and he quickly realised just how badly disadvantaged he was. Whoever was in here had seen him enter, and could probably still see him in the faint glow of the hall light behind him. He was completely blind, knowing not where anybody or anything was. He would be a fucking fool to go any further.

“Scared of the dark?”

The voice. It was Claire's, but more alive and energetic than he'd ever heard during their brief, distant liaison. He couldn't answer. Nor could he accurately pinpoint her position. Her tone seemed too assured to allow any such slip-ups.

"What's wrong, Johnny?"

He found his voice, sourced somewhere in reluctant pits of apprehension.

"Where's Susan?"

"Susan can't see you right now. She's otherwise engaged. What was it you had to tell her? Maybe I can pass it on."

"I know who you are."

"Really."

"You're not Claire. You're the spirit. You're the uncle."

He was almost childlike in his eagerness to prove that he had solved the mystery. To prove that he wasn't as useless as he now inexplicably felt. Except this particular mystery seemed to be far from over. And there was nobody around to congratulate him.

"You're not the stupid bastard I had you pegged for."

"What do you want?"

Johnny kept a close ear on the waverings of Claire's voice, with one hand on the barely-open door, ready to shoot back into semi-visible light if the maddeningly confident words came any closer. She was still on the other side of the room, maybe half-way along the wall, as far as he could tell.

"What do you think I want? She killed me, I kill her. An eye for an eye, right?"

It wasn't anything more than a confirmation of what he had suspected.

"And you gotta love the irony – Claire stands by and watches while the other bitch shoves me in, without saying anything. Now, Claire will be charged with the murder of the one who murdered me. Perfect payback all around."

"Claire didn't even know about it."

"And that's what gave it away for you, right? A minor mishap on my side."

Rather than a desperate bait of his detractor, Johnny genuinely felt he had already done enough to upset such plans. But the mood of the unseen girl was unnerving him.

"You won't get away with it."

A scornful laugh, still holding its position.

"No, Claire won't, but I will."

Silence, because Johnny somehow believed him.

“I do the job, pay a visit to a pub in a nearby town, pick up some fool, fuck him, and I’ve got myself a new body. Leaving Claire to explain the overwhelming evidence against her. A more than perfect acquittal of guilt, no?”

Immediately scared by the force of conviction and self-belief, Johnny struggled to find a meaningful comeback.

“I’m here now.”

“Please. Don’t flatter yourself. I’m too prepared to allow myself to be thwarted by little old you. How well do you know this house? You won’t even enter this room because you don’t know the layout. I’ve spent the day here, and I know my way around. Instant advantage. How do you know that poor Susan isn’t in a bleeding heap at my feet?”

A choke of terror swelled in Johnny’s throat, stifling whatever words he could have retaliated with.

“What are you going to do? Attack me? Listen for the club.”

A sharp metallic ring, as she snapped the club off concrete.

“Do you want to ring for help? The phones are out, sadly. Do you want to run and get help? By the time anybody believes and follows you, little sister and I will be gone in Mommy’s car.”

Johnny felt helpless, standing dimly before this *thing*, efficiently and calmly knocking back methods of action that he wasn’t even coming up with yet.

“Then again, you *could* help me. Give me the use of your body for a couple of hours, after which time I promise to hand it back. I realise that trusting me may not be high on your list of priorities at the moment, but believe you me, I have my sights set on a better model than you, no offence intended. Plus, you would get to fuck my terrific little body one more time.”

He couldn’t determine from the ebb and flow of her voice whether or not she was actually serious. No. No body, no more *loans* of bodies. He could only croak.

“No, no way.”

A knob of impatience crept into the hidden girl’s tone.

“Well if you’re not going to help me, and you’re not going to hinder me, I’d appreciate it if you’d get the fuck out of my hair. Time is of the essence. This is a long time to be gone to the ladies in a restaurant. I don’t want to have to do you as well, but I will if necessary.”

More confusing sentiments, dismissing Johnny as being useless, unable to intervene in any meaningful way. He was practically numb, aware of the nature of the *job* he was keeping Claire from doing, and aware that he had to stop her. But *how*? He was powerless in the darkness – she was familiar with the room and his starting position, and she had a weapon. He was blind, unarmed, and a sitting fucking duck. Without being able to see her, or Susan, he could affect neither. Maybe there was a torch or some candles, or even matches in the kitchen. He sidled carefully away from the door, pulling the latched knob, and slipping back into the slightly more cheerful hallway.

“That’s it, you fuck off with yourself. You annoy me again, and I’ll shoot you. Didn’t I mention, I have a gun as well?”

You don’t, thought Johnny to himself, *hearing* the lie. He was reaching for the kitchen door knob, unaware of Claire’s movings in the living room, picking up a small cushion, and throwing it through the doorway. A movement somewhere in the understair alcove behind him seized him, and he swivelled. His defensive, panicked response meaning that he caught first the full force of the titanium golf club across his collar bone, and then the confident, reprimanding words.

“You just can’t mind your own fucking business, can you?”

The incredible pain and the sickening dry-twig snap as the bone gave way arrived simultaneously, with his jump-started brain unable to properly digest either. Had he been capable, he would have sworn eternal gratitude to the shock, which shunted the pain in a fatherly fashion to one side as he stumbled backwards against a radiator. Her words had not been accounted either. His wide eyes caught sight of her raising the long thin club over her shoulder, and something screamed at him to move. He pulled his shoulder away from the wall, suddenly aware that his arm was behaving strangely. Great squashes of pain gripped his chest, and a loud metal clang exploded somewhere above his ear. He scrambled to his senses, turning to face Claire as she stepped into her third swing. By turning his body in an awkward painful arc, he avoided the raining blow, which rang soundly off the banister. Still not registering any more than the fact that being in the way of the silver club meant unthinkable pain, Johnny retreated back towards the door. Her eyes screamed annoyance, and her clenched teeth leant her a savage expression. She had been shouting and cursing each missed swing, but Johnny was hearing nothing more than animal noises.

With his swaying body pressed against the front door, her fourth attempt bounced shatteringly off the deep wood, the shaft of the club barely missing the shoulder on Johnny's injured side. The proximity was enough to call forth another eye-watering dart of pain, which brought with it a raged clarity. Using his uninjured arm, he lashed across as she recoiled, grabbing the handle of the club with a speed that caught her off guard. With her two hands gripping tightly, she was more than a match for his one-armed spoil, but it was enough to draw her attention momentarily. In a split second movement, he released the club, drew back his arm, and smashed his fisted hand into her face, catching her fully across her nose. She buckled under the force, her head jerking backwards, and her body using the top-heavy re-arrangement as an excuse to drop to the ground. She brought her hands to her exploding nose, dropping the club as she fell, practically in retarded motion. Still feeling the new but lesser pain in his striking hand, Johnny bent forward to pull the club from her heaving and screaming body. She kicked out viciously, her gargled bellow confused by the blood in her mouth, but not enough to stop Johnny from taking the club and hurling it up the stairs. Wheezing painfully, and clutching his right arm to his chest, he balled the fingers of his left hand into a giant pincher, and locked powerfully onto her shoulder.

“Where's Susan?”

He attempted to roll her roughly onto her back, but he was considerably weakened, and succeeded only in shoving her onto her side. He repeated his question as she gasped and wiped blood from her cheek with one hand, cupping her nose with the other. She roared at him again, anger and pain combining to huge effect.

“Fuck you!”

Johnny made a grave error in assuming that her pained state reflected a disablement of significant proportions, and relaxed his grip on her shoulder, gathering his own reserves to attempt a new line of questioning. It gave her the opportunity she needed to bring one of her bloodied hands down from her face, and angle it into a chopping motion, beating down in rapid succession on Johnny's cracked collar bone. The pain was sufficient to render him useless, drawing blood from his lip as he bit into it screaming, and falling onto his haunches, his good hand leaving her shoulder to pointlessly address the searing burn in his own. It was unlike any other pain he had experienced before – it felt

medical and clinical, a persistent dull throb, enough to bring tears of its own accord, perforated by red hot shots of nervous agony. Through his watered eyes, he could see her pushing herself from the floor, dripping blood from her chin, steadying herself by grabbing hold of the banisters. She spotted the golf club through the vertical rungs, and made for the bottom of the stairs. Realising the immediate consequences of her getting to the weapon before he did, Johnny dipped deeply into the bowels of his strength, angrily demanding of his body to give him one last effort, one more surge of energetic ability, and then he would attend to its crying wounds. She was already past him before he could move, and grunted responsively when she saw him shift. At the staircase, he could see her increase her haste, and he lunged forwards, biting terminally on his teeth to mask the pain that announced itself as he crashed onto the stairs. With his free hand, he grabbed her ankle, and pulled with all the force he could summon. Her leg shot away from the stair she had been lifting herself from, and the balancing foot slid with it, bringing her trunk heavily down onto the carpeted stairs. With her feet so close to his head, Johnny shielded himself as best he could against the volley of kicks and stampings that he saw forthcoming. His puzzlement at her seemingly relaxed response to being felled was quashed when she pivoted her body slowly, one leg raised over the other, and swung the golf club down at him, one handed. The club cut through the air with a clean swooshing sound. Johnny didn't have time to even wince as the blade screamed past his ear, denied of ever striking anything because instead the shaft came down on his uninjured shoulder. Mere millimetres from inflicting a similar outcome on his left collar bone, the club bit down on the muscular ball of his shoulder, commanding a pain that was considerably more negotiable than the previous strike. As the club slipped down off his shoulder in the space between him and the wall, he reached forward, gripping the shaft once more, and jerking it sideways to knock her elbow forcefully against the wall. She howled, refusing to let go until the third crack, by which time the pain was too unbearable to worry about holding on. With the club in his possession once more, Johnny reluctantly decided against raising it in retributionary rage against her until he at least had determined the whereabouts of Susan.

But still she wasn't finished. After nursing her shattered arm quickly, essentially allowing both parties a quick breather and injury check, she launched

herself downwards in a growling, clumsy barrel run. With her legs already entwined a short distance from Johnny's own, there wasn't a great deal besides her own body weight for him to concern himself with. And devoid of the crippling pain that had spread to warm his entire right trunk, he would have welcomed her bizarre spring with nothing more than mild amusement. Instead, he was forced to twist himself in such a way that she would land more on his back than anything else, thus reducing the risk of any more contact with his own bone worry. As she fell on him, he levered upwards with his leg, catching her under the thigh, and adding additional force and height to her sprawl. Her hands punched down around his head, for support and any damage they could achieve, and he raised his good arm, jamming into her breast, feeling the soft tissue squish and giving way. Even at such an opportune moment, his invasion of her privacy felt wrong, and somehow beneath him, but he minimised the groping by bringing his arm back over his head, guiding her flight pattern. With one final kick of his thigh muscles, he had deflected her from his own body, and she clattered in horrible music to the stairs below. There was one small gurgle, he watched as her head smacked heavily off one stair, and then slid without further noise as the rest of her body followed. When she had settled on the blood-speckled floor, within two steps of the bottom, there was a second of gale-like silence in Johnny's ears, which gave way to screams of pain that called him internally. Cringing as his paralysed side moaned and groaned, he lifted himself gingerly into a standing position, and stepped slowly and cautiously to the bottom of the staircase.

twenty-eight

He ignored the searing refresh of pain that darted through his chest as he bent over Claire's unmoving body. Placing two fingers on her neck, he detected a pulse, and a weak rise in her chest, happy that she was at least still breathing. But also relieved to confirm that she was unconscious. She wouldn't be swinging any more golf clubs at him, lying in a flopped heap at the base of the staircase, her wild hair sticking to loose patches of blood on her face. The impact had encouraged her nose to bypass what little clotting it had commenced, and tiny rivers of red trickled down her cheek, dripping onto the hand on which her head rested. Over and above the constant throb in his shoulder region that demanded attention, Johnny was aware that he still hadn't located Susan, and that he wasn't now going to be squeezing any assistance from Claire. Despite the overwhelming urge to jump to his feet and begin his furtive search – which was countered regardless by the fact he had been hugely handicapped by his injuries, he paused in order to find some way of holding Claire in position, to prevent her from coming after him, or running away, whenever she regained consciousness. It was a risk he was not going to take. He limped slowly back down the narrow, unlit hall, making for the kitchen. Stopping at the small telephone table, he found that the connecting cord had been snipped right at the input, leaving a sizeable winding length of beige cable in a neat roll on the ground behind. He leaned in over the table, snapping the connector free of the wall socket, and lifting the cable out. Using his left hand, his teeth, and his right elbow as a holding unit, he tied Claire's wrists tightly together, and then looped the smooth cold cord around the first three banisters, pulling the final circuit taut. Leaving her hands awkwardly pressed against the bottom wooden pole, out of reaching distance of the black knot that held her in place.

His first instinct was to check the living room, to ask to see Claire's bluff, to see if Susan had really been in a crumbled heap at her sister's feet in the dark, frightening room. He flipped the switch in the hall just by the understair alcove, illuminating the scene at the bottom of the stairs. Shoving open the living room door, he stepped through, his eyes now aided by the filtering light. There was no body in the room. A fractured milky glass lampshade on the thick carpet, pieces of clothing strewn over armchairs, a silent television, and numerous other trappings

too faint to make out. He turned painfully, moving back into the hall, and towards the stairs.

Claire hadn't moved in the moments that had passed, and the golf club lay where he had left it. He picked it up, and gritted his teeth once more against the shot in his collar bone. On the landing at the top of the stairs, he rounded a small corner, presented with four doors, two on the wall facing him, and one each at either end. The first, with the light behind it on, and cracked open enough to display a bath, evidently led to a bathroom. He poked the door open, saw no sign of life or disturbance, and withdrew his head. Of the three remaining doors, two were lazily closed over, just like the bathroom, while the third, the furthest away on the facing wall, was shut tightly. He moved towards the third door, and pushed down on the cold metal handle.

Sprawled on the double bed in a kind of twisted foetal position, was somebody. He didn't need to click the overhead light on to verify that it was Susan. As fast as his lethargic muscles would allow him, he swayed across the floor, bending over her as he had bent over her sister, with an altogether different agenda. So far, he hadn't made any distinguishable sounds, nothing that she could have heard over her low, muffled jaded sobbing. She jumped when he placed his hand on her bare arm, and lashed out with her shoulders at nothing in particular. As her eyes widened in ridiculously delirious hope, Johnny noticed the small cut on her forehead, the crude gag in her mouth, and the tributaries of tears down her cheeks. She screamed at him through the cotton wool and the binding blouse sleeve, her words dissolving into frantic moans and sorry noises. Her eyes deputised her vocals superbly, displaying real panic, despair, and the type of ghastly disbelief that Johnny was getting so fucking used to. He accidentally brushed her soaking cheek with the back of his hand as his fingers wrapped themselves around her gag, pulling it gently out from her teeth, and down over her chin. She gasped, sobbed and sighed in all the one movement.

“Johnny! Where's Claire?”

She had remained lying on her side, struggling to pull herself upright, losing her balance because her hands were tied roughly together just under her throat. Johnny felt the price of his exertion in his chest. His voice reflected his depleted state.

“She’s downstairs, tied up.”

It was all she needed to hear, affording her the opportunity to lose herself in the hysterics.

“She’s gone fucking crazy! She was going to kill me!”

“I know.”

“What the fuck is going on?!”

She was shrieking in an unsettling, grating tone. Enough to wake the dead. He was having enough trouble dealing with the overpowering sickness that had befallen him. He felt like vomiting, even more so after picturing himself hugging the gibbering girl on the bed before him, consoling her in his scripted, typecast way, and then puking all over her. He mumbled some apology, and a promise to return, aware of her heightened panic as he lumbered back into the hall, almost falling into the bathroom, releasing the mouthful of bile and vomit that had filled. He fought the instructions of his knees, who seemed hell bent on giving way, and cared little as the thick white stream splashed off the toilet bowl, onto the clean mat beneath, and onto his legs. She was screaming his name repeatedly, and somebody was ringing the doorbell. He wanted to drop to his knees, to embrace the cold white bowl, to give over to the pain and the sickness. Her legs must be tied, he reasoned, or else she’d be in here after me. A storm of poundings swelled out against the ding-donging chimes. Somebody was calling *her* name, inquisitively, and not without worry. It was a dreamy, sleepy pattern. *Ding-dong. Thump, thump. JOHNNY!! Susan?! Susan?! And then some clown broke something, glass, he reckoned. A window. Oh, the fucking fools broke my back door. After I’d done it so carefully, idiots. Two voices downstairs, doors opening. She was still howling, less words and more sobbing. Oh fuck, get upstairs, quickly! Susan?! She would be fine, they would look after her. He could rest. His chest, his legs and now finally his head, they all ordered him to rest. So he slumped to the vomit-stained carpeted floor, smiling ruefully at the last, victorious hail of agony, and closed his eyes to sleep.*

two weeks later

He had struggled daily with the notion of explaining everything to Susan, why her sister had returned from Switzerland a different person entirely, why she had turned on her in a homicidal spin, and would have killed her had not Johnny intervened at a most timely moment. The lies and the traps that her dead uncle had laid in order to snare the body of his other niece for the purpose of revenge. He *could* tell Susan, but Susan alone. Who else would believe him? Would she even believe him? In her fervent desire to understand exactly what the fuck had happened to her sister on that January evening, Susan had called him on a number of occasions. Checking on his recovery, and almost begging him to give her something to go with, some useable reason to plug the gaping hole in her ongoing reconstruction of the events. By her reasoning, he had spent time with her in Brient, immediately before she flipped – he must have noticed *something*. But as he turned the words over and over in his mind, even scribbling them on paper to see if they looked any less ridiculous than they sounded, he found himself reluctant to make the fool of himself. She asked why he had arranged to call over in the first place that night, what was he planning on explaining to her? He managed to belittle the drama he had built, claiming only that he had a few examples of Claire’s bizarre behaviour that he had documented while in Brient. Meaningless, terse accounts of imaginary things she had said and done in his presence, each one carefully fabricated as he lay in his hospital bed, fiddling and fiending his stories to get away with giving away what little he could. At this stage, Claire was in no position to argue his points, remaining in a coma for three days, before spending some time in recovery. The doctors recommended that Susan stay away, in case her presence retriggered the mental abnormalities that had obviously affected Claire. As such, Johnny’s lame accounts were sufficient to purchase him some time.

And time was something that he began to run out of one week after Claire had been transferred to St. Brendan’s for a detailed mental evaluation. Her parents hated the very thought of their daughter being subjected to such an ordeal, but Susan bitterly convinced them that there was something seriously wrong with her sister, and that having her checked out could do her no harm whatsoever. Upon

being informed, Johnny thought otherwise. In hospital, once she had regained consciousness, she hadn't been making a great deal of sense, flitting from crying despair to fierce anger in her desire to get out. Insisting that she remembered nothing, a not entirely unlikely circumstance, said her doctors. While he was confident in her inability to maintain anything more than extremely minimal physical contact with the few acquaintances she would have during a day in hospital, Johnny was completely unfamiliar with the workings of a mental institution. The extent of his worry boiled and doubled, with nobody else with whom to share his misgivings. On the evening that Susan had told him about Claire's transferral, he made an anonymous call to the hospital, insisting that it was imperative that people refrain from any protracted contact with her. It was a useless exercise, he conceded – with no name to accompany the advice, and no specifiable reason for such a request, how could he be taken seriously enough? Once again, he pained over spilling it all to Susan, but waited.

Five days later, Susan cautiously reported a remarkable change in Claire's condition. She was vomiting hourly, unable to keep any food or liquid down, but she was asking questions, holding lucid conversations, yet still remembering nothing of the past weeks. She couldn't even recall leaving Switzerland this time. Johnny speedily acknowledged the new, positive development, but cringed internally, holding out for the punchline. It didn't come. Whatever Claire knew, she wasn't saying. And nobody was telling her about what exactly she had done two weeks before. And, if what he now feared was true, nobody was telling him where their mutual friend had gone.

The punchline arrived two days later when local radio announced that the missing St. Brendan's orderly had been found, dead, in a car stolen from the hospital car park. The red Primera was parked at the secluded entrance to a forest approximately forty five miles away. A post mortem had concluded that the man, Gary Hall, had been an asthmatic, and died of a severe attack, possibly in his sleep. A thorough search of the man's clothing, the car, and the surrounding woods failed to locate an inhaler or medication of any kind. Johnny's mother queried tragically how someone could be so careless as to not carry medication for such an affliction at all times.

Johnny quietly considered the possibility of Uncle Steve choosing a new host at random, and inheriting a medical condition that he had not been prepared for.

Later that day, wrapped in the thinking confines of his room, his healing collar bone secured by the sling that strapped his arm to his chest, Johnny stumbled upon more possibilities for Uncle Steve. What if he had abandoned his temporary orderly's body before Gary Hall had succumbed to the fatal tightening of his airways? What if he was now moving about inconspicuously in somebody else's body? Keep an eye on the missing persons list, that's how you'll trace him, somebody laughed inside. It was a horrible thought, one that cancelled, with interest, the relief he had felt at making his own conclusions about the forgetful car-jacking orderly. His terrifying suspicion led him also to a place in which Claire had herself *willingly* lent the bastard her body, for some believable, false purpose that he had seduced her with. And paranoia took over to a new level, painting her as a knowing accomplice, swimming in many details that Johnny knew nothing of. Leaving him as the only true, honest cog in the wheel.

Later still, sifting through all that he had learnt over the preceding days, he trembled miserably at the confirmed belief that he was going to have to tell Susan the entire story. Whether it was to back up her frightened sister, fresh home from her mental evaluation, desperate to learn what had happened during the days that were missing from her memory banks, and driven by the horror of hearing what her *body* had been doing, spewing forth as explanation the tale of torturous anguish that she had been enduring for months. Or even if Johnny's motive was to alert Susan to the fact that whatever it was that had wanted her dead before was still on the loose. The first scenario was more likely. As Claire remembered more and more, she would bring him into it, unaware that he could easily fill in the large and unbelievable blanks. There was no avoiding it, he would be called upon. And it wasn't something he was especially looking forward to. How could he convincingly explain a sequence of events that even he couldn't believe had happened?