



There's no telling

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“Beyond the territory of their neighbours to the north there are such piles of feathers, the Scythians say, that nothing can be seen and the land cannot be traversed either. They say that there are too many feathers filling the land and the air to enable sight to function.”

The Histories – **Herodotus**

*“So now I’m goin’ on back again,
I got to get to her somehow,
All the faces we used to know
They’re an illusion to me now”*

Tangled Up in Blue – **Bob Dylan**

“We all have to die a bit every now and then and it’s usually so gradual that we end up more alive than ever. Infinitely old and infinitely alive.”

The Skating Rink – **Roberto Bolano**

1. the second death

The snow never brought happiness. Not this Christmas Eve, not those since the accident. ‘Season’s greetings,’ he thought or said. He wasn’t sure which. Either way the words floated apart from him as if they were something to be looked at and glossed over, like the icy crowns of the trees or a scattering of rocks at the corner of his eye.

The wipers swished on, heartbeat slippery. The air con failed to clear the glass again. He pressed the driver’s side window down, cold air frisking him. Moisture cleared from the windscreen as if someone were withdrawing their dampened breath and leaving in a rush.

‘You’re gone.’

A voice, plain as day. He knew it. He heard it.

It was late afternoon. The low beams shone out and dissolved. It wasn’t that dark yet but Darcy Travers could see pale defining tunnels against the wet air, alerting other people to his approach, brightening tinges of ice on the road. The weather was about to shift, get heavy. You could feel the temperature dropping.

He took the high curve east of Thule, not far from the truck stop where Zel worked, glancing down over a frozen pond that appeared and disappeared in a patchy mist. Clouds of the stuff seemed to get hooked and torn in the bushes, droop from the trees, sneak and waver. The peak of Mount Jarratt and the coming night ahead were barely more than penciled-in bruises amid the strange softness.

A few crows stood on an old wire fence, cricking their wings, loosening their beaks like shiny jeweler’s pliers. They looked big and muscular enough to pick a fight with you. And win it. God, look at the fuckers. One of them flicked some icy powder off

its back with a feathery shrug. Its partner jerked into the air with a punch. An emptiness ricocheted into him and subsided as he watched.

He thought of Monet and his painting 'The Magpie', of the bluish shadows in the snow and the way the afternoon light angled in, of the potential for doing something more North American and expressionistic, a looser, wilder 'Crow' version, even a violent mirror to Monet's civilized and gentler world. It'd look good in oils: Prussian blue, midnight teal, some grays and silvers and tumbling whites, the smallest spot of red to suggest a tail-light disappearing along some half-invisible road in the mist.

Maybe he'd leave the crows out; they were too symbolic, too obvious as harbingers of a negative landscape mysticism. Then again they were there, voicing it, so why resist what was being said? He thought about it some more, wondered how the Mohawks might explain them as they brushed up against his mind?

Like a dream. The phrase came to him unbidden. Not bad for a title if people got the Edgar Allen Poe reference. But Darcy hadn't picked up a brush in a while and he would not paint that painting. It was just a habit of the eye working his mind over, old problem solving. He began refusing each part of the inspiration. Eventually it disgusted him to be having such thoughts at all. By now he had stopped the car in a siding on the crest of the hill. Old problem solving... wasn't that the truth? He sat there and let his fingers reach over the steering wheel, out towards the drifting scene and across the pond. Thought about his daughter deep and struggling there, three years ago almost to the day.

Darcy carried these images deep inside of him, a vague, cold wetness on his palms helping to summon them in vivid snaps: the act of finally holding her after hours of panic and denial and something suffocating and wretched and *running fast* boom-boom-boom in his standing-and-waiting heart, till the world had ceased to feel like it was moving at all, as if they were all underwater too, all of them sodden and gone. The way they hurled in a bag of potatoes with a flashlight tied to it, in order to read the currents feeding from an underground stream. The dead splash of the bag as it went in. How the rescuers called to each other so surely after that, dragging Izzy out first, her parents' cries abstract scrawls in an atmosphere he hardly believed he was

breathing. Then Sarah not long after, like one more fish being reeled from a hole in the ice, the cascades that poured from her, the slop of her body on the ground, her mop of black hair in an aura of water and webbed particles, the water bleeding from her and over Zel and he in some last inexplicable moment of energy, her lips blue, blue and gone as men's voices murmured and fell silent around them and Zel called out like her throat was being cut and somewhere, too, birds called out, ugly as any he had ever heard.

His cold hands hurt him now; his heart rippled double time at the remembered sounds. And then he felt himself crying. Darcy wiped the tears away, yellow house paint from his sleeve flaking onto his trousers. He realized his clothes were getting damp. Wound the window shut again. Shook the cold from his shoulders as he let the windscreen cloud over while he breathed and moaned – low, like a creature in a trap, but there was no trap, only his body containing him.



Darcy tried to tell himself there was no one to blame. But there were things he could not put to rest, least of all the way he felt forced to carry his ex-wife's grief as if there was a need to accept blame, and find a place for it somewhere in his life. Zel's downers... Jesus. Would he never escape from them?

His ex had blotted out so many things, or so Darcy believed, retrospectively adding up the friends who had faded away, her years of infectious pessimism before the last act in their lives brought the whole thing down forever. She'd always drunk too much; he should have stood up to her more. To what was behind it. Self-medicating? It didn't matter. After a while you got sick of someone's reasons and only cared about what they did, or didn't do. Sarah's death was the confirmation of something that had been going on in some filtered way he'd ignored for years. He'd been kidding himself he could get on top of things after that. Zel's drinking, the insomnia, the rare days

when things might have changed – even happy days, man, they hurt even more, sunk you deeper down when you saw it was just a glimmer and nothing had changed.

‘Ark. Ark.’ He thought he heard the distant drawl of the crows, but it was likely more a memory of them from just a few minutes before when he’d park the car and cried. A shadow flew into his mind. His throat tightened. Zel’s self-annihilation was just a form of revenge upon him in the end. That was the secret truth of it. It made him go cold. She could eat all the pain in the world and he would still have some left over to serve her.

‘It’s just a blank emotional cheque for you to cash whenever it suits you,’ he said. ‘You’re selfish. Being depressed gives you a reason to do what you want.’

‘What do you mean?’ Her voice came at him, false with confusion, but grabbing at him a little too, demanding he get more even more explicit, more ugly.

‘You know what I mean. Have another drink on me.’

He hated himself after. Those words. Those thoughts. They were too much. Zel won the argument by losing it.

Often he wished it were he who was dead. But no matter how much he willed himself to die he was still alive and there was no turning back to make a trade with fate. What he should have done; where he could have been on the day Sarah died.

Darcy’d contemplated even darker bargains, touching the shoulder of a child, wondering, as the girl turned to him with a toothy smile and strange blue-specked-brown eyes, if she could take Sarah’s place and his tragedy could become someone’s else’s?

Zel had caught him suspended like that at a party for one of her friend’s kids; they’d arrived like ghosts again, sombering the occasion, sitting on the sidelines while everyone laughed and talked on or pretended there was nothing to feel uncomfortable about now they were here. He’d reached towards the child out of a compulsion

beyond him. Only for a few seconds, barely touching. Not long. Zel had grabbed his arm – and led him away. It was the last time they'd been close: a time without words... He felt her guiding him through room after room, down the hall, until they were outside. He felt her let him go when he didn't want her touching him anymore. It was Fall, last year, yesterday, a century ago; he could smell something spicy in the air, New England Aster flowering by the roadside, crushed under the wheel of their Peugeot. Mid afternoon, broad daylight, but the moon was out, a fingernail in the sky. Zel got the message as he pulled his arm away from her; she had left him, gone back inside. No more trying to connect, no more pretending to care.

'We're finished,' he'd thought to himself that night soon, staring up at the ceiling, no sleep at all. She lay beside him, breathing not talking, her eyes shut tight against him. The emptiness of their lives swept him bodily. They would separate. He knew it. They were separate already; they just hadn't said it out loud. An image of Zel butting a cigarette out into an ashtray came to him from that very morning. A last gasp of smoke wisping upwards from the crushed tip as he watched it and tried hard to think of nothing at all, to just float away with the smoke and avoid what came home to him again later that night, as if the smoke had continued curling its way into him, carrying all that he knew and had avoided, deep into his heart. As he finally fell to sleep he stroked that remembered line of curling smoke with his index finger, smeared it over a field of deep blank black till it shone like silver and he lost all consciousness. The moon was...



He'd started fishing about in the muck of fate a lot; looking for signs in how he had lived and why he'd been punished? What filled Darcy most was a feeling of shame, along with the desire to go back and live his life again. He was a bad father, a bad husband, a bad human being – and this was why his daughter had been taken from him.

His paintings were a part of this disease in his personality. They showed what was wrong with him, told him the truth. Darcy had let his art diverge from all he had once believed in, what he'd thought was his basic optimism. Till his images had re-entered his world and taken everything from him, everything he thought he had been. He felt enmeshed in his own voodoo, unable to touch these premonitions and what they represented. After a while he shut the studio door and stopped going in.

His therapist had tried to take him through what he'd later become familiar with as 'the five stages of grieving': Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. But they weren't clear stages at all, she had tried to explain, so there was no point in him trawling the internet to try and define his progress accordingly. It was unhelpful, she said, to think too strictly in these ways.

He'd gone home that day and caught an old black-and-white Gregory Peck movie, *Moby Dick*, and watched as the bones were cast upon the deck, fore-telling the fortunes of the boat and crew hunting the great white whale. It made sense to him then that the five stages of grief were more like these scattered bones, a random arrangement from which he'd tried intuit a future. Except, of course, he had no magic eye to read them with. They were just bones, categories, and they broke up into so many smaller pieces of feeling he had no sense at all of any meaning whatsoever.

He had nonetheless read a saying among all the literature on grief he consumed and he knew it was true, felt it in his chest like something similarly swallowed and caught there: 'When a parent dies you lose your past; when a child dies you lose your future.'

Traveling half an hour through the hills from Thule to the Bereaved Parents Group over in Milton hadn't helped. All that way, once a month, to sit in a circle with twelve sorry souls like you were at an A.A. meeting. This 'sharing' wasn't bringing him up, it was taking him down. He couldn't keep going. Couldn't sit in those steel foldout chairs and that over-large room and say another word, listen to another lonesome cough as they navigated the sea of grief together. Looking for what? Forgiveness? Forgetting?

Darcy wanted something rawer to release him, if only for an hour. He yearned for primitive dissolutions, for no consciousness at all. For a while he had visited a prostitute in Milton after each BPG session, but the drone of these encounters depressed him even more. On the street afterwards, his hair and neck still wet from the brothel shower, he felt as if his misery made him translucent, his soul draining out of him like a fluorescence, telling the world what kind of man he really was.

He had often thought Dr Eletea was too sexy to be a psychologist, as he made his confessions to her during their one-on-one appointments and she responded in her typically subdued way. The soft hike of her skirt, the elegance of her body, that librarian fuck-me vibe she had behind those wire-framed glasses: all the clichés present and accounted for, right down to the respectable high heels. How he looked forward to visiting her in Milton, for all the wrong reasons. He had tried to suppress his fantasies anyway – mostly because there seemed to be no inner and outer him anymore, no walls, and it bewildered him to be so opened out onto the world. It was silly of him, him of all people, but he also had a notion psychologists were only a step away from mind-readers crossed with priests. That was her job, though, wasn't it? To open up his head and look inside and forgive him? He wondered if she knew he had stopped coming to her for healing reasons; that he was going out of desire? Dr Ursula Eletea... her name slid off his tongue like a dirty want.

In his imagination he dominated her, subjugated her, and the thrill he got from it was so intensely erotic he could not help but wonder if she did not, in some way, send him such messages? Then he would find himself plunging into despair again, appalled at himself and all his thinking, as if he had somehow bartered his daughter's life for a fuck, and a fantasy fuck at that. It was some 'talking cure' to have found himself subscribed to.

Lately, though, things had gotten better, for reasons he could not explain, maybe for no reason at all. Time, time is all it takes – he'd turned that word, that phrase, over more than once when Espy had said it to him. There was a deadness to his new defenses and coping mechanisms, a vast neutral field you'd be hard pressed to call 'a personality'. It bothered Darcy how much this neutral energy reminded him of how he had been *before* the accident.

He thought of Camus and *The Outsider* and something he could always identify with right back when he first read and loved it at university: the detachment and where it ended, whether you believed in a God or not: ‘I’ll tell you a great secret my friend. Do not wait for the Last Judgment, it takes place every day.’



Dr Eletea sometimes practiced somatic psychotherapy or ‘somatic experiencing’. An idea, near as Darcy could make out, that the body inherited feelings and could therefore be made to physically transform them. She’d have him rake over the traumatic events when he was capable of it, as well as other memories and feelings about Sarah, Zel and himself: good, bad, whatever they might be. She might make him stand, even walk about the room while he did this if he wanted to.

In trying to explain himself he would hold his hands in front of him, in a half-formed pushing motion, as if there was some weight pressing in around him. As Dr Eletea took him through his stories, she would make him complete this gesture – ‘push outwards all the way as you speak’ – and he had to admit it did release something, corny as it had seemed to him as a process. If nothing else it helped him to talk more and that in itself was a breakthrough.

It reminded him of why he had taken up painting, much as he had always been attracted to the idea of being a writer when he was younger. There was just something more connected and total about the act: the canvas, the oils, the brush, the hand, the arm, the body, the oneness of it all. Maybe this was how singers like Espy felt when everything was going well, when you were ‘on song’?

In Dr Eletea's office it struck him that *he* was the painting. That his body movements were about a reversal of some kind, as if everything in him could somehow be undone or reworked.

Then came the touching and covering of the mouth. The Christmas morning when it had happened, that was what he had tried to talk about. His throat jagging on the words, his breathing becoming thick, all the reflux syrup of bad emotion rising up in him. Till there he was again – in a white field he could not move across quickly enough, legs sinking, right up to his waist as if the land were swallowing him, every thought and emotion, slipping and reeling, ahead and behind like some unraveling of the soul. It was on the radio, two girls drowned at Crowleaf Pond. He knew straight away and he came running.

Darcy bent over and dry retched in Dr Eletea's office. He came back into focus with the present around him, looked down at his hands. They were pale and shaky, obscenely clean. But his mouth tasted like dirt, like the dirty snow he'd swallowed that day when he had fallen, face down, and stood and fell again. He was ashamed, he was so fucking ashamed.

He and Dr Eletea had talked about his suicidal feelings. About some sense of predestination to everything, then a corresponding hopelessness that... that what? Meant he should end it all? There was a space inside of him. It was like...like...

'Like nothing.'

'Nothing'?' Dr Eletea mirrored him. He hated being aware of the technique, but he went on anyway.

'Like I'm in my life, but I'm only walking around through it, like I'm not in it. I told you all this. Sarah...' His voice croaked; he pushed back tears. His own daughter's name had become unspeakable; it was rare he uttered it in company, even in the consulting room with Dr Eletea. And yet of course he longed to say Sarah's name, as if he might call her back and have a second life, another chance at things with her.

And sometimes, on his own, he did just that, an incantation that ran thin and faded into the silence he knew.

These conversations and the fleeting moments of catharsis with Dr Eletea, they weren't enough to change all that. Never could be. For some reason he fought against them too, as if he might lose whatever few links he had with his daughter by getting rid of the bad feelings that were tangled up with the good ones. 'Isn't black just all the colors mixed together?' he had asked her so bitterly it was comical. He was not unaware of the melodrama in his grief; his own absurdity. He felt like laughing at himself, that taste of dirty snow again in his mouth.

Dr Eletea smiled back at him. Understood what he meant about the dark side of things. Said it wasn't about getting rid of anything so much as what she called 'mindfulness': being able to recognize the negative emotions and what was triggering them and 'finding out how to turn the volume down on things. No one expects you to totally get rid of anything. That's not the aim.'

He'd tried talking to her about his skin and body, his sense of being covered in something disgusting when these emotions overwhelmed him. Whatever haunted him beyond what might be termed 'normal grief' had become strangely physical, inside and out. At night, on the verge of sleep, he sometimes felt as if his hands and feet were swollen like heavy balloons. That he could not lift them and might never lift them again. These moments were not like dreams, he explained. They felt more conscious, more awake than that. On some occasions the intensity of this feeling, the immobilization that seemed to be growing and weighing him down, could make him panic as he lay there, trapped between waking and sleeping. He wept when he realized he was afraid to die, that it might be possible to be conscious and dead at once. That killing himself was a self-indulgent fantasy; that he didn't want to live this way or die and end it all either, that he was caught between it all.

Dr Eletea had not got far with this. Mainly because he had begun to let their appointments slide away. He'd given up on the depressing drives to Milton for those miserable monthly B.P.G.'s. Yes, he was done with the group stuff and the name tags; and the can't-we-just-fuck-instead sessions with Dr Eletea would stop as well. He

could not sit in a tiny room with her for an hour every week any longer. The truth was the sessions were also starting to bore him. He was bored with being depressed, bored with his own story, even a little horrified with this bottomless well of pity he kept finding within himself.

Outwardly he *was* doing okay; he was a functioning human again; he was alright so far as 'alright' could be defined. Darcy figured it was time to get on with his life, which is what Espy had kept telling him in one form or another for ages: There's only so much you can see by always looking inwards, man. You got to be in the world and forget about yourself a little.

And how do I do that, he had asked Espy.

His friend looked nonplussed, suggested swimming, exercise, something physical rather than mental to break out of his rut. It annoyed Darcy that Dr Eleteta had suggested similar 'physical therapy'. For all of Espy's mockery of her, the healing advice from each of them could be a chorus.

Swimming? Was it that easy?

Darcy pictured himself stretching out in the heated pool over at Milton, the warm water slicking over him, the smell of chlorine in his nose, everybody's voices echoing up into the grids and fake glass ceiling way above him. He'd tried it. One, two, and turn for air on the third stroke like he'd been taught as a kid back in Australia. And there she was. Sarah beside him, swimming with him, he was slowing down to let her feel like she was winning, he was slowing down to be with her. He lost the rhythm, she was gone.

It was hard to imagine surfacing from whatever he had become. He was the dead girl's father. And that was that. The truth of it belonged in the whispers of neighbors and acquaintances and even those he didn't know – but who seemed to know of him – the discrete nod of a head towards him from another conversation far away, the quietness or nervousness from certain people as he entered a room. 'That's the father... those poor girls... Crowleaf Pond.' Words like that, phrases, thoughts.

Thule was a small place alright. Six thousand people pushed up against each other in a hill-town matchbox. Most of them watching each other for want of any other interests beyond their favorite and not-so-favorite television shows, assuming their satellite dishes were winning the endless battle with the mountains, the weather, the world as it was... cable had arrived at last, the big entertainment hallelujah, connected at last to the net. Darcy had tried to plug in, to chat online where no one knew who he was. He lost interest quickly. Left his cursor blinking; women not knowing what had happened. Asshole!

Out on the streets time had mitigated the lepotic energy, but he was still aware of it, and oversensitive to it, sure. What would you expect? That the deaths had happened at Christmas time just gave the whole thing a bad and persistent chime all the harder to escape. People just had to look at him. He couldn't breath. He couldn't keep swimming through it. He was drowning in voices. One, two and turn...



'Fuck you man!'

The soft drink can hit him square in the back and fell lightly into a thorn-shaped powdering of snow on the car-park bitumen.

The can was empty but his lumber jacket was so thick even a full one would have bounced off harmlessly. The wind turned and tumbled the can for a moment. It clattered and skidded as if of its own volition, then lay still at his feet: '7-Up'.

Darcy's hands were weighed down with groceries; five plastic bags worth of shopping from the supermarket: CCs, Coca Cola, micro-wave pizzas, chocolate, even

a bit of fruit to kid himself he was eating healthy. He was reliving his 20s, except there was no partying going on.

The car park bustled with Christmas frenzy – a little good will, a lot of snarl and stress. He hadn't bought a gift for anyone. No cards either. Grumpsville, Espy would say to him later. Population: 1. C'mon man, you're turning into Scrooge.

In the distance he could see a mother hitting her child; a businessman slipping on the icy pavement. Tinsel ran thickly across the front of the DVD store. A guy padded out in a Santa suit was working the entry to the mall with a bell; he seemed pissed off with his task, some leaflets in his hand. A group of kids were behind him singing a ragged 'Silent Night'. 'Ho, ho, ho,' he barked and clanged.

He already knew who had lobbed the can before he turned and began saying, 'Fuck you man' in reply. His only hesitation was to look around and make sure there weren't any families in earshot. But Espy wasn't so crass or indiscrete as to let that happen. Indeed he was the very picture of aristocratic refinement in most people's company. That just didn't happen to be the kind of company he shared with Darcy.

Sure enough, there he was, grinning from ear to ear like some sleazy Cheshire Cat. With a few bottles of wine in what could only be described as a very poofy, rainbow-patterned carry-bag, and a loaf of warm bread from the bakery tucked jauntily beneath his arm.

'Ho, ho... Dr Living-*stoned*, I presume.'

'No, no, noooo, my man,' Espy replied single-mindedly. 'Fuck you man!'

Darcy forced a weak smile and raised the plastic bags in his hands up in a surrender motion. They'd first played this repetitive game of insults over a joint, singing along to 'Racing in the Street' and 'Tonight's the Night' and other faves, taking turns at playing Downer D.J. at the house years ago.

He and Espy had kept laughing like hyenas over the ‘fuck you’ repartee, which became their abusive signal to take turns playing a new song.

Zel called it ‘A guy thing. You can just say ‘please’ to me when it’s my turn.’

Being stoned helped in ‘the boys’ amusement. They rolled another joint and turned up the volume, let themselves get nice and messy. Sarah had gone for a sleep-over at Izzy’s. He and Zel were having fun, cutting loose, childless for a night. Zel put on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds singing ‘Rye Whisky’ to spur the mood along.

‘Coming to see me tonight, contego?’

‘Yeah sure,’ he said, but he knew he sounded unenthused. Enervated was a more precise word. People always thought he was cold shouldering them. It wasn’t always like that. He found himself watching the breeze at their ankles, dusting and throwing low phantoms of snow along the length of the car park; he was sinking back into himself. A shot of cold air caught inside the cuffs of his jeans. What a day.

‘*Upsik.*’

It was an Inuit word and it jarred him to attention. He was used to Espy dropping into Portuguese from time to time, but his friend rarely used whatever vague fragments he had of his mother’s Mohawk and Inuit tongues. Darcy could feel Espy’s dark eyes pressing in upon him, excavating him further back to the surface.

‘Christmas Eve man... Unless you going to see *the* Pastor Edward *on tour in Thule* for Chrissakes – and I do mean for Christ’s sake – then I’m your dawg!’

Espy patted his chest with a thump for emphasis, looked up to the sky, let out a half-hearted wolf howl. ‘Be nice to see the stars some time, eh? Think it might snow again tonight though; it’s getting sharp out here. Cold out if you leave it out, you know what I’m saying?’ His breath plumed out in a fine mist as he exclaimed the last few words and clapped his gloved hands together for emphasis. ‘Hey, I’ve got a new song I’m working on –’

Darcy put his shopping bags down in a way that cut Espy's conversation off completely. Opened up the boot and started to load the shopping in. 'Midnight right?' he asked without looking up. He was aware he was being rude but he didn't know how to stop himself and change his rhythm.

Espy raised the thumb of his free hand by his hip, shimmied his gut forward in lewd affirmation. He was being comical, over-entertaining.

Darcy could see he wasn't giving his friend a lot of room to do much more than act like himself, rather than just be himself. He slammed the boot shut again. Felt bad for making Espy work so hard to get a decent hello out of him. Darcy still struggled with being sociable, even after all this time – outside of work he could be pretty bad at it. He seemed to come in at right angles to any extended conversation. Most people avoided the effort involved. Espy could usually warm him up, but Darcy knew he wasn't easy.

He looked straight into Espy's face. No idea why. People might call it an inscrutable face. But it was oddly expressive too. Doleful and stoic, then childishly pleased and open. Iodine skin, thick womanly lips: it was hard to discern the Portuguese blood from the aboriginal influences, the male from the female for that matter.

Espy looked straight back at him: 'So?'

It was a stupid standoff to be having with your best friend. Darcy's ears picked up the choristers at the mall entrance launching into 'Good King Wenceslas'. He glanced over at them giving the song a belting. Bad Santa had disappeared, probably for a cigarette break. Joy to the world at last. The kids looked ecstatic, glowing as they sang.

He returned to the conversation, noticed a badge with a home-made, love-heart collage of Nelly Furtado and Justin Timberlake pinned to the lapel of Espy's rather expensive looking woollen jacket. Barely a few cents to rub together and the guy was a chronic clothes horse. He tapped the badge as if testing it for quality control. 'As

long as you don't shake those hips in front of me again like that,' he said, 'I'll be there.'

'Contego,' Espy said, putting his bag down and the bread inside it, before he reached up and placed a firm hand on his shoulder, 'you know I got the rhythm in me, so what can I do?'

He gestured for Darcy to lean in closer as if he had a secret to impart.

Then Espy whispered into his ear with gravelly intensity, '*Fodo-o human.*'

The two men stood in the car park laughing like two teenage boys, a laughter that fell to the earth and blew away across the open ground with light particles and puffs of snow.

'Yeah, yeah, fuck you too.'

Santa was back ringing his bell like a second-rate fire alarm. The choir's efforts had intensified even more, breaking the notion of a melody altogether, sacrifice to their pure enthusiasm. It was beautiful.

*'...In his master's steps he trod
Where the snow lay dinted
Heat was in the very sod
Which the Saint had printed...'*

'Good King Wenceslas' came to a stirring end on the word 'blessing' and the choir applauded itself while people rushed by. He felt a curious and corny stab of Christmas spirit that made him suddenly feel like killing himself.

'Upsik!' Espy said again, this time triumphantly, and he kicked the 7-Up can so hard it almost hit a passing car. He put his hands over his eyes, monkey no-see, monkey no-do.

Darcy looked at his friend and at the can as it skidded to a halt. ‘You really gotta start behaving yourself or you’ll get us both in trouble.’



Laughter was Darcy’s get out of jail free card. He didn’t get to do it nearly enough. There were times when he felt he had forgotten how to.

He wore a smile like an awful grimace at work, moving his face mechanically to the dirty jokes of the other house painters: mostly young Irishmen half his age who came and went without a care in the world, and never seemed to do much more than drink and fuck and not sleep enough. It was a holiday job for them, money in their back-pockets for Guinness and girls and travel; great craic, how that phrase irked him.

It was when Darcy really laughed that he knew he was more alive than half dead, however much he might feel he was closer to the latter. As he drove off he called out to Espy through the half open window of the car, ‘See ya tonight, pilgrim.’ He arched his fingers at him as if he was John Wayne and he had Espy in his cowboy gun-sights.

Espy reached into his bag and held his bread up in a victory gesture. Unable to resist himself he quickly stuck the bread stick between his legs like a huge erection. Then he cracked up; Darcy laughed again too. What a dude... Espy stood out like dog’s balls round here. Someone should do a documentary on him some day. Small-town eccentrics, bohemian refugees: that had to be a theme worth chasing up for a TV series?

Thule had pushed itself as an arts and crafty place for ages, which is how he and Zel had ended up moving there along with a bunch of other unlikely candidates. It was all a bit quaint, but Milton, a college town, was nearby, and the slacker influences had spilled over into Thule, bringing some student looseness and a great pizza delivery

service, not to mention some half-decent radio some times. For the boondocks there was almost a liberal tone to the region, if you ignored the rednecks who worked at the pet food factory and the depressed Westside of Thule, and the religious invasion over the last few years that had weirded everyone out.

The House of Light and its followers – slam dunk good citizens, regular smile machines, please and thank you very much, but the old locals didn't like them coming in and neither did Darcy and the other arty folk who had arrived a good decade before. The god-botherers were just the next bunch of immigrants to hit Thule. But 'the Light-outs' (as they were disparagingly known) had divided the town into believers and non-believers, and this had affected the easy mood of the place as if it were now hiding something – as if they had fouled the serenity of the town and claimed its quiet atmosphere as their holy own.

Ever the simplifier, Espy summed it up without any help from St Augustine or all the other spiritual philosophers he seemed to have in his mental rolodex of quotes and sayings: 'They're a bit creepy, man.'

He and Espy preferred to indulge themselves in shamanistic notions about the artist and what the artist could tune into. The Big Maybe they liked to call it. Zel would get impatient with them when their conversations headed down this road. 'What a load of baloney. You guys over-load everything with 'symbolism'. Not everything comes with such a heavy freight, boys. Some things are exactly what they appear to be,' Zel said, brushing her hand across some invisible plane before her as if every word she had said was beyond reproach.

It was a jeweler's perspective, the truth in what you see. But after Sarah died Zel's views had given way, fractured. She looked towards him and Espy for answers, for something to hang on to, an afterlife. Whatever Darcy told her, though, was disappointing, even irritating. He should never have shared what was happening, the visions that would come and go.

Dad.

He heard her.

Then he saw her walking up their driveway in summer in just jeans and a T-shirt, bare foot, free and easy as a bird.

Where have you been?

Sarah smiled at him and did not answer.

She walked right by him and on into the house, past Zel whose back was turned in the kitchen, then down the hall towards her old bedroom.

Darcy was already chasing her. He called her name out loud as he followed her in to the house. Zel turned to his shadow as he moved by her and down the hallway.

Sarah's room was empty; they'd packed up all her things. No one was there.

What...? Zel was behind him. Trying to ask a question and too frightened to say it out loud. Not sure what the question even was, only that it led to heartbreak, asking with her eyes in spite of herself. Darcy heard her body say the words.

Nothing, he said out loud. It's okay.

He tried to bury these strange experiences, to shut them out back then... It was like a double exposure across his brain, his eyes; stains, and echoes; maybe he was just sick, sick in the head. He couldn't explain this to Zel, reason it out, talk about it. Apart from anything else it was painful. Maybe that was all it was: pain taking shape.

At least Espy understood how hard it was to transmit such things to other people when you couldn't even transmit them to yourself. For a long time his friend had been contending with intermittent dreams of his own: about his barely remembered mother and flying with her in silence. These dreams were always the same, always silent and wintery, but they never seemed to get to where they were going... Espy'd wake knowing she would return again to take him even further next time. Needless to say

Espy did not fucking want to go on those trips! *Nao estou com pressa*, he'd say to Darcy, I'm in no hurry!

Darcy was caught between a similar reluctance and a need to follow Sarah deeper into wherever she was, or seemed to be. But of course she was dead. The visitations, the glimpses: grief fizzing little sparks of fantasy into his mind. That's all. Forget all that John Edward 'crossing over' shit. His heart pumped shadows into his brain instead of blood. And he tried to let it flow right back out again.

Her saw her anyway in the haze of his mind. At age 10, in another winter time, in the backyard with Izzy, the pair of them playing with torches in the early evening chill. Fireflies. A thin moth-like snowfall suspended around them. Not a vision but a memory, nostalgia defining the borders between what had been and where he was now.

Is Sarah okay, Zel had asked him outright, relinquishing her skepticism. The look on her face as she waited for him to say something. He should have said yes, yes. But Darcy had no answers for her because he had not expected the question. Zel shed tears afterwards, as if he was cruel and holding something back from her, when he was holding back nothing.

Nothing. The old anger surged in him. She wanted things he didn't have. Always on her timeframe and her terms.

How often did he have to say it? Nothing, nothing!

He remembered then being with Espy, slinging back beers and whiskies at Mary's Bar & Trill only a few months ago. Espy'd had another one of his bird dreams, which he shared in his usual half-detailed, half withheld way. From there they'd gotten onto the subject of the unconscious and Jung, again, and thereby Darcy's therapy sessions, which he figured Espy was maneuvering him towards from the very start of their conversation. Espy knew how to set things up in a conversation the same way a guy playing chess thinks five or six moves ahead. Oh well, even intimacy needs its strategies to evolve sometimes.

‘Two years of it man, that is too long for this... stuff!’

‘Fourteen months,’ Darcy corrected him.

‘You know what I’m saying.’ Espy switched voltage, tried to lighten the mood, aware of the cut entering into Darcy’s tone. ‘I don’t wanna sound like Freddie Mercury here,’ he said, raising his eyes heavenward, ‘but you got to break free. Dr Ursula, man, she has you by the dick, c’mon, admit it!’

‘Maybe,’ he said. He raised his eyebrows, took another sip of beer. Espy’s crassness landed harsh in his ears. There was no humour to his mood tonight. So what if he wanted to fuck her. ‘You’re the guy who thinks your mother’s ghost is a bird in your dreams. It’s Dr Eletea or a séance with the vet for you, I reckon.’

This time it was Darcy’s humour that came out acid, but his friend seemed to miss the intensity of it. ‘Perdao,’ Espy said, mock offended, as if he were playing along with something more mutual in their communication. Then he got serious once more. He was worried Darcy was obsessing over things that were only adding to his depression every time he went into therapy. ‘Is it really helping you? I mean, really?’

‘Look – I know what you’re on about – again,’ he said wearily, before trotting out a list of medical phrases: ‘The inefficacy of excessive counseling, latrogenesis, pathological grief... It’s not like I don’t check these things out, or think about them. I get it.’

‘What?’ Espy’s face strained at the words, comically baffled. ‘Genesis *whatever* contego... Why don’t you just split? Take a trip away from Thule. Get outta here, get a fresh perspective. Even a bit of sunshine, for a while, uh? Thule, Milton, these mountain towns will bring you down if you let them trap you here, man. Believe me. “Forget it all. The dream life is here.” Leave that shit for the tourist brochures, man. These places can eat you alive. They’re just big enough to keep you small.’

Espy slapped his chest for emphasis, a favorite gesture when he was feeling passionate. The Portuguese flavour in Espy's voice made it sound like Darcy should go on the run, as if he was in a B-grade art-house European thriller where the protagonist can't quite understand why he is being targeted. It almost made him smile, but the way Espy acted and spoke never entirely disguised the directness of what he was actually going on about.

Darcy tried to shake off the advice by agreeing with him. Slugged his whisky chaser down affirmatively and jolted the glass onto the bar so loud it almost broke. Subject closed, you win.

Espy knew him too well to let their conversation slide away as easily as that. He pushed on. 'Contego,' he said softly, and it was the softness that gave his voice a sudden power, 'you think your daughter would want you like this? You're not remembering her the way she would like you to my friend.'

'And what *way* would that be?' he responded, flat as a knife. He wanted to misunderstand what was being said now, to attack his friend for daring to speak at all.

Espy held his tongue for a moment, shifted position on his stool. 'She still sounds like a quack to me, contego.'

Maybe Dr Eletea was 'a bit experimental' he had admitted back to him a little dryly. They'd both laughed at his choice of words, but the laughter faded faster than either of them liked. Too loud; then too quiet. They laughed again at that.

Darcy looked into the mirror over the bar and saw them both sitting there, facing forwards, a foul, dissipating aura of rage still emanating off his shoulders while Espy leant from his stool and took his whisky tumbler delicately to his mouth. Maybe the friendship had reached its use-by date. Like all friendships do.



There was way too much edge to Darcy's behaviour – even after a year or so of therapy. He was too willing to make extreme decisions and blow someone off; close them out soon as look at them. Fact is, he'd already *tried* to do that to Espy a few times and his friend had just ignored it. In this Darcy recognized a form of bravery. He wondered if their situations were reversed if he would have the same strength. And love.

Espy was probably right. It was a good idea to get out of Thule for a while. He was coming round to it without anyone needing to push him. But the thought of leaving town actually frightened him. Besides, where would he go?

Darcy had no one he cared to re-connect with, no Paris or Mali stored up in his daydreams. Half the planet was messed up anyway: terrorism out of the blue every time you had forgotten it was there, nasty little wars popping up all over the place, some virus that was making them drop like flies across Europe, and whether the dollar dropped or rose on the markets it always bought less somehow.... People were seeking to escape from the world, not wander around in it – and Thule, ironically enough, was exactly the kind of place they were trying to get to while all this shit kept raining down.

The truth was he didn't like being too far from Sarah – even if he didn't visit the cemetery much. No, he didn't worry over the grave like Zel did; no, he didn't bring flowers or get down on his knees and wash the marble clean every month. But it wasn't like he never went or didn't care, even if his reluctance to visit shitted his ex in ways she no longer bothered to express. A look was usually enough from Zel to get the message anyway. It came in quick shadows over her face, a gloomy spite he was well attuned to.

Why'd she always have to control everything, even the way he grieved? He wouldn't look over her shoulder so heavily to see what was in the bottom of her glass if she didn't judge him so darkly and silently all the time too. Tit for tat, was that all it was, the animosity he oozed back at her? A passive-aggressive see-saw?

Maybe if they'd had more children... but Sarah was all they did have. Zel wanted more kids, he didn't. Not after the post-natal depression she'd been through; he just couldn't battle through that misery again, it had nearly crushed him – along with her. More kids? He couldn't believe it. Darcy was glad to let the years slip by after. Things were on the up and up; he wanted to focus on his painting, break through to something big. Later on Zel had muttered about them trying to adopt maybe, till that idea had faded as well; life rolled on and they were happy enough. Sarah bloomed.

Darcy thought about where she lay. About the consolations of the afternoon sunlight in the autumn, when he'd last summoned up the strength to go and sit on the hill with her. About the sparrows that thrived in high bones of the nearby trees. About the words *Not lost but gone before* engraved on her headstone. Zel had wanted that. He was surprised she could be so sentimental, so primitively Catholic. It was the beginning of a longing in her without any easy answers. Maybe it had been there all along, Zel's spiritual side? Not relinquished but waiting, faith-as-denial, brewed in doubt, then ready to drink from heavily, the way any addict turns back to what they crave and deny, drugs, booze, sex, God...

He saw himself brushing away some dirt on Sarah's headstone. Remembered the feeling of the quartz at his fingertips, how dry and sharp and cool it was. How much he had studied the bitter light the stone gave off. How he pressed his fingers into it to try and stay in touch with his daughter and let her know he was there, loving her as much as he ever did. Sorrowing not just for her but for the brother or sister he had denied her, denied them all.

As if to nail it home he could see Izzy's grave not far away, plainer and sadder, nothing special about it at all. *Flowers*. The word seemed to flow through his fingertips from the quartz and break open in his chest, harsh granular petals; he'd

have to bring flowers for both of them next time, beautiful fresh flowers, yes he would. He put his palm to his heart and held it there like someone wounded. *Flowers.*



As usual Darcy's thoughts ranged rabidly through this and more, a terrain of ifs and yets and buts and maybes. It was the landscape of regret and he was the explorer lost inside it. He breathed a long slow breath, in – and – out. The wind picked up momentarily and spun fine-grained crawlies along the sidewalk and the road, all the way off into the distance, stirring like something in his guts.

A group of teenagers seemed to form out of one of these and move over a pedestrian crossing at the traffic lights where his car sat and idled, grunting exhaust fumes into a light, sleety rain. His wipers hit a beat and woke him fully into the present.

One of the pedestrians was a strawberry blonde, long wavy hair, very pretty. She and her friends moved like people in a dream of life. Like creatures from a nature documentary when the movement is slowed down and admired. She held a cell phone in one hand, was laughing and texting someone. In these mountains she may as well have been sending a message taped to a pigeon's leg, but kids were kids and to them it was fun. A boy put his arm around her hip for moment, familiar yet nervous. Darcy looked on at them all, especially her, and wanted to be young and walk with them, walk *like* them, but the lights changed and someone tooted irritably from behind. He slipped into gear.

'God, I'd give anything to be like them' he said under his breath as the same old scenery began flashing by.

Izzy and Sarah would have been teenagers by now. He smiled at the thought as he drove on through town, imagining them on the streets. Sometimes he thought he did

see them among groups of people. As if there were two Thules in existence: the one he was trapped in and another populated by ghosts no less real to themselves. More than once he had stopped himself reaching out or calling to some young girl or woman who had reminded him of Sarah, or who Sarah might be in the years since he had lost her.

In this other Thule, if Sarah was there, he'd be worrying about boys and sex and even the pill by now and most of all how Sarah's heart might get broken by the wrong boy. His ex-wife would have explained all the practicalities, of course. He'd have receded from the gritty details involved, moved forward to try and add something wise and tender that was way too vague after she already knew the story from her mother anyway. So he imagined the shy clumsiness of a father-daughter relationship at its adolescent crest. The reaching feelings, the sweet awkwardness he could never know.

'Sarah'. Her name fell from his lips like a small goodnight kiss. He wished he could feel her arm around his neck, smell her soapy skin, taste her quiet, sleepy talk close to his ear and hear her say 'dad' again. He wanted to relive his life with his daughter again and do it all better.

He pictured himself climbing into bed with her after she had called out for him during a nightmare when she was little, laying there as she put a small arm and hand across his chest and fell immediately back to sleep, him waking an hour later cursing her tiny bed and his aching back. Zel had whispered to not be such a 'softie', 'just give her a pat and she'll be fine', but she'd turn around and do the same thing with her on another restless night. The truth was they liked being near her, the depths of it in the darkness when the world was so quiet. He remembered how it had started to rain that night, the sound of it coming in gusts, once, twice, then a third time falling and breaking heavily on the roof as he returned to Zel and his daughter slept on.

In her final year Darcy began to see the young woman emerging in Sarah. She was no longer a child completely, and he was a little sad for that. Her taste in clothes, her taste in music, her way of speaking, it was all starting to come from somewhere else. She was leaving the orbit of their influence, taking her own form. He was aware of

how often he annoyed her – don't be stupid, dad – and he was dreading the teenage onslaught to come.

The wipers squeaked and pulled on his mind. As Darcy drove along he saw the streetlights that hung sparsely all the way down Dubus Avenue, little yellow drops suspended in the mist and flurry. A large blow-up Santa gusted against the front awning of an electrical store. Some mangy Christmas trees lay outside a closed corner shop with a hand scrawled sign on cardboard: 'FREE! TAKE! HAPPY XMAS!'

Electric reindeer, lit and nodding, grazed in a front yard; a rainbow of globes pulsed in a stream around another verandah; a Bethlehem scene on someone's roof; Sylvester the Cat in a Santa suit clutching Tweetie Bird in his paw; trees covered in fairy lights... people had tried to create a feeling for the season. Hungry Joe's was brightest and most festive of all and packed to the gills, a large glowing star above it. Three cut-out cardboard wise men stood outside, holding burgers out for all. Sarah's 7th birthday there, just after it opened, a horrible choice, but it was her wish and it made her happy.

Darcy realized he was driving in silence and tuned the radio in to the local college station beaming from Milton. They were 'Rocking the Free World', or so their slogan proclaimed, jingle bells mingling with an atomic explosion.

A mock science bulletin was tracked in. Two student 'experts' began discussing renewed interest in a proposal that involved sowing burnt sulphur into the atmosphere over Antarctica and Greenland, trailing hoses from B52s to create clouds of this dust, what were called 'mini-reflectors' that would supposedly ease the sun's rays. Huge masses of ice had been breaking off and drifting further and further, cooling the ocean currents that swept increasingly cold weather over places like Thule while people elsewhere sweltered and burnt beneath the Greenhouse affect and the ocean itself crept higher onto the temperate coasts. Was there any 'validity' in this scheme, these mini-reflectors? The word 'valid' popped back and forth between the student scientists with droog-like enthusiasm. As they mulled it over the problem got bigger, the solution more futile and ridiculous. They proposed a Stealth bomber instead, with wedding confetti as its payload. It was a snigger fest.

The whole world was off-kilter... maybe it was 'the end of days' like the religious nuts were always proclaiming (they had to get lucky sooner or later), but as an apocalypse goes there was nothing grand about it. It was all one long slow stagger, each and every drama serving only to break the planet up into smaller pieces, to make people feel more isolated and *want* to be more isolated: nations, regions, valleys, towns, families, one another. That was the real breakdown, all the while communications' technology supposedly got better and faster, unifying us. What a joke. Everyone's on their fucking own. The loneliness has just got louder, hotter, lighter, colder....

The students on the radio were still laughing while he riffed himself off into another zone. Some music started to play. 'If you're hurt, why don't you tell someone.' Darcy sang and mumbled along. It was a song he'd heard before. 'Don't go hiding in the shade.' Silverchair... He wondered if the DJs would be surprised to know they had a Sydney boy tuning in to the station? He knew the song inside out from when it was a hit back home years ago. The lyrics were about abuse, but listening to the thunder of the words, he saw himself inside of them. His ill-temper and when he had shouted at Sarah, the blank zones of rage he's passed through and out of again, so close to doing something awful he was horrified with the thoughts that surged within him. But he didn't, he didn't. The pain he felt now, the self-afflicted punishment that he hunched under, the guilt. It was all there in the song. It made him ache to think you could be close to someone, and still be far away from them too. *Don't go hiding...* He knew he had to make an effort to drag himself into the light for his daughter's sake when she was alive; for Zel's sake too, or their sake as husband and wife, his sake really. Had he got there enough times for them to really know him? He worried he had lived like a shadow on his own life. A double life, but of course it was not a life doubled, it was him dying on top of the life he should have been living.

On drives like this, feeling this way, it helped him to pretend Sarah was with him. That they were singing along together as they used to, hoping the DJ would play another good one. That's what he told himself, that it could almost be the old days when the days were good. Though he knew it wasn't always just pretending. That he

could reach across the seat and hold a hand no one else could see. Feel something near.



Zelda Travers rang the cash register with a slap. It *kerchinged* shut. The frigging thing was as old and tight as the manager. She wanted a pay rise badly, for the increase in her rent on the apartment, for the unseen injustice of simply being there one too many days a week. But that wasn't going to happen this Christmas. Nor the next one she feared.

How a stylish woman in her late thirties who had once run her own (admittedly solo) jewelry design company got low-down enough to be a counter attendant at a truck stop, let alone one way out on the edge of town like this, was not a story anybody liked to hear. Not the men she spent time with anyway. Not unless it led them into her bed and by then she knew she was just blowing air into space. My daughter died. I left my husband. I drank like hell and abandoned who I was. C'mon, fuck me, hurry-up and – fuck – me – now.

A few of the men might be sympathetic at first, but it was a story, or more precisely an attitude from her, that glazed their eyes and repelled them sooner or later. Spoiled the sex completely sometimes, even ended it before it got going.

For her it was hard to know whether not having the sex was so much worse than having it? Either way she hated that sitting-on-the-edge-of-the-bed feeling, her cigarette burning in her hand, something unsuccessful about everything, right there and then. As if her whole life had been building towards such moments: the man in the bed bored or angry at her, or confused and wanting to get away; the neutral, pastel look of the hotel room and its crude scent of carpet cleaner; that perpetual, ugly yellow flower in a tiny ugly porcelain vase she ached to destroy. And something else

too that slopped out of the switched-off TV screen, unseen and unwanted around them; the catching of herself naked in a wall mirror, *like some tired slut* she had thought to herself on more than one occasion, and in the same room before as well, at the same old VACANCY motel.

How did I get here?

She knew. She knew.

It was all by choice.

Zel regarded herself in such moments with a horror that made her feel as if she could choke, all that hot and horny chat on the internet gathering like so much dust in her throat. *Loverslane* dot com: It was always the same. Sleazy guys who would travel miles and miles for casual sex. It blew her out how far they would come, how much desire was out there, filling the atmosphere like static. How much she had let herself become a part of it till she was lost in a blizzard, complete white out.

A guy had come into the truck stop earlier, quite handsome, making moves on her. But his fly was half undone. What a jerk. She enjoyed letting him know. He was buzz-cut certain of himself, your typical jughead stockbroker type. Acting as if she might be grateful for attention from a stranger like him passing through. As if she were easy meat for a pinstripe warrior. Hey buddy, she said, pointing between his legs and looking away discreetly. He'd blushed, paid up and turned tail. Off to do more wailing for Wall Street, she figured contemptuously.

Zel rang the register as another customer came and went without presence of any kind. Had something happened? She stood there waiting among the chocolate bars and chip packets and fluorescent lights and cigarettes and batteries and magazines.

I'm disappearing again.



She wondered if she was fated to drift north across the border and get stuck here? The whole thing had been her plan, her dream – the virtuous country life, the new start.

Her mother, a New Jersey girl to the core, had a far more uppity streak. Had liked F. Scott Fitzgerald for his elegant, glittery sadness; the bleak horniness of Robert Johnson and the blues; nursed romantic notions of travel and adventure and places she never got to see outside of women's magazines and picture books. Men were drawn to her and just as strongly pushed away. She wore a beauty spot like the young Elizabeth Taylor, often bragged about the darkness of her looks. Passed some of that beauty and an equally haughty attitude onto her only daughter, as if their look was something men *should* be intimidated by. As well as the name Zelda. Kids her age liked to make fun of it at school: hey you getting the Zel train uptown? Zilch, Zzz, Sleepy...

Zel was the name that most often stuck with friends, though Darcy liked to call her by her full name when they were first going out together. She liked to hear it from him too. His Aussie accent had been so sexy when she heard him speaking. It ran right down her spine. It was funny to hear your own name in a potential lover's mouth – and revel in them tasting the sound of you. Where had that sound gone over the years?

She found herself dredging up an image of her father. She had been young when her parents divorced and he left for God knows where. He was nothing more than an outline in the lounge room doorway to her, suit pants on, bright red businessman braces. By the time she was old enough to ask about him in any serious way her mother had erased him from their lives. He was long gone and never going to get any closer if she could have a say in it, and you bet she did.

Zel dreaded the idea that she was living her mother's life over now; that there was something in her emotional DNA that had mapped out a similar course for her.

Wanted, not loved; pursued and never giving. When she psychoanalyzed herself she thought it may have been why she had used heroin in her teens, to fill up some hole in her heart. It was like seeing some other person when she looked back on those years. The ritual of shooting up and throwing up, the warm dreamy floating nothing-can-hurt-me feeling, it would have been easy to go back to it, how immune it made her feel. Alcohol was so heavy sometimes. It surprised her she had become so absorbed in it. Maybe she needed therapy after all: 'the de-novelization of the self', as she'd heard Darcy call it when he first started having his sessions. Was it possible to rewrite yourself like that? She'd always resisted it. She didn't believe in stories that went backwards and turned out happier or better or even clearer. When it came to the crunch you were on your own, you fought your own way out. She'd done it before, she'd do it again.

She wondered what novel-of-the-self Sarah might have inherited from her if she had lived? Style things like the beauty spot? Probably not, Zel smiled weakly. It was older woman's affectation, although she saw how that English singer who was stoned all the time went for the same slutty '50s look, so who knows, all things come back into fashion eventually. Robert Johnson? Nah, she'd still be too young to appreciate the blues; even at age sixteen, how old she'd be this Christmas, his songs would sound too barren and parched for her ears, like no fun at all.

Zel was beginning to think about her daughter as if she were still alive, when she might be old enough to be both a daughter and a girlfriend of sorts. She remembered how Sarah and Darcy used to love listening to the radio after the college station had got its booster transmitter, how sometimes they'd go for a spin around Thule after he picked her up from school, singing 'Hells Bells' and 'Heart of Glass' and stuff like that from the 'Hits and Missing It' show before they came home full of beans and jokes they'd let her in on.

It upset her to think Sarah had not seen enough of her own lifetime to find those deep songs you love and know like your own bones. That as a mother and daughter they wouldn't share in this deep music and deep talk, would never work through the sad side of things as well as the joys. Was it sick to want to know the melancholy of her daughter's future as much as the happiness?

After Sarah's death Zel found herself indulging in her old Joni Mitchell records again, *Hejira* especially. Maybe the darkening, colder weather around Thule each year had taken her to *Hejira* more than the other recordings too. Getting morose, sucking back more and more vodkas earlier of an afternoon as time went on. It could hardly escape attention that one of the cover images featured Mitchell skating on ice, a black shawl flying off her shoulders like crow wings. Oddly enough she found this image comforting rather than disconcerting, as if a part of herself and her daughter had been lodged in the music for later consolation.

Darcy had eventually barked at her that he was sick of her playing it, that she drank too much, that he hated 'Joni Fucking Mitchell'.

It was one of their last arguments, when they had managed to build up enough energy and resentment to have one. Thank God, an argument. *Something*.

You're just a fucking alcoholic.

By then she didn't really care what he said. That was what she told herself anyway. Even if the words dug into her like a shovel.

It was as if Darcy had no feelings, or those that he did have went down into some secretive vat he called his soul. He never expressed much, except the desire to quietly get along until he finally got nasty. 'Mr Forget About It All'. The hate pained her, shamed her, bound them in the worst of ways too.

When does 'too much' make you an alcoholic? Couldn't he understand what she was going through? Couldn't he let something inside of him fall out too? Maybe that was the problem with his painting since then, or the lack of it? Who was he to point the finger? All that unfinished work of his, face-to-the-wall in the studio, who was he...

It wasn't just Darcy though. So many people had been unable to talk to her afterwards; had been unable to say a word in acknowledgement of Sarah's death. Mrs Thompson over the road, a whole six months later, struggling across to knock on the

door and weep with her: I wanted to say something, I wanted to say I was sorry, I just didn't know how to.

Zel had set her down with a cup of tea. Was glad Mrs Thompson had finally tried and succeeded. On another day she might have hated her, but it was the right day, the right time. They even held hands across the kitchen table. Call me Joan please, she'd said, wiping her eye with a spotted hankie, sniffing. What a strange and foreign country grief proved itself to be: marked by the kindness of strangers and the silence of those closest to you.

She looked at the clock again impatiently. It was nearly time to go home. Out of this too-bright place. Maybe she'd go to Mary's Bar for a few drinks. Eat out again before Espy's show got going at the Trill. They had a fire there. Lower light. Men who didn't care what she held in her glass.



hi luv yr profile.

tx.

u sound sexy.

i am. Like yr prof too.

mmm. u like ynger guyz?

Sure. 28. Perfect fr a cugar like me.

Im 22 really/ dont lookit.

OK.

u mind?to young

no. better.

we shold meet, have sum horny fun. U'd like my cock.

fr sure I would. Bt NOT at my place.

how bout hotl.

where

i know somware

when Do u want...

It was the same place as always, a different room, but the rooms were all the same so maybe it was the same room. He let her in when she knocked. The curtains were drawn, only a bathroom light was on, it was dark. She could tell he was barely 18, if that. They started to kiss and grab at each other right away. She heard him call her a hot sexy bitch under his breath and she knew he wanted her and that it turned her on to hear such things but there was something wrong and it wasn't just his youth that was making her feel queasy. The way he grabbed her, undressed her. The aggression, there was something unsettling about it. He almost ripped the buttons of her shirt pulling it off her; she had to slow him down. It was not a shared lust now, and he was going faster than her and he did not seem to care. He was naked quickly and his body was white as fish and so fresh and muscular it startled her, aroused her again too in spite of whatever alarm bells were ringing at the back of her mind. He pushed her roughly to the bed although she was still in her underwear and began to rip at her panties, his body tense in the half light, his circumcised cock erect. All of a sudden

he started cumming all over her, spurting everywhere. In too much of a hurry, honey, she said, trying to alleviate any embarrassment although she already knew that he didn't care. As soon as she spoke he leant over her and slapped her. There was cum all over her belly, soaking the lower lining of her bra. Zel was so stunned she didn't move. He was pulling on his briefs and jeans and hoody before she could get a word out, the sting of the slap till burning away from her face. What the fuck did you do that for, she said, but she lacked the confidence of her age with this kid and kept the temperature of her comment low, less complaining than surprised. Her passivity revolted her. He leant over, one foot on the bed tying up the laces of his runners. She put her hand on her stomach, felt how cold and clammy the cum was on her. He pulled his hoody over his head, cloaking his face in darkness. 'Haw haw,' he said, or something that sounded like a nasty pretend laugh. Then he walked out, leaving the door wide open for whoever might pass to glance in and see her there, looking used up and finished with. She'd misunderstood what was happening. He'd had his way. This was it. Session over.



Darcy pulled into the drive of their old home. He'd let it go. Not to rack-and-ruin. But he had to admit he couldn't – quite – cope – with it anymore. Just plain couldn't be bothered either.

So it had this air, he thought, as he looked at it for the first time in a while, for the first time in ages really, of something disused, which was weird because he was always there. But the garden was a little overgrown and the house was in need of a paint job, and there was that broken piece of guttering he hadn't got round to fixing for six months or more, which had bled a long brown line of rusty rainwater down by the front side window like someone had taken a giant piss on the house. Here and there you could see rubbish that had blown in, notably a plastic bag that had attached itself to a bare rose bush, flapping and creasing in the breeze.

‘Very homey,’ he said to himself, unable to muster the energy for ‘a man and his castle’, though the snarl was there in the back of his mind.

He was supposed to be fixing the place up. Zel had got him to agree to put it on the market. She couldn’t bear to walk inside the door these days. They both needed the cash. But Darcy still felt an attachment to it, the hum of an old life he couldn’t quite let go of. Over time it was less and less that way, but he stayed on, and the longer he stayed the less he did to look after, let alone improve things. Money got tighter. Galleries interstate had all but given up on him when he’d tried to off-load some old and very ordinary landscapes onto them. The only real painting he managed these days was the house painting work for Louis. And so he laboured on almost anyone’s home but his own. The yellow on his fingernails shone bright with his failings. Louis would always call him with a job and say the same old joke till he didn’t think he could stand it anymore: ‘This one will be your greatest masterpiece, yet.’ Yeah.

Zel had reached her own limit with him. ‘I just want to sell the thing before it falls down!’ When the spring came and the weather softened they’d agreed it was time, once and for all, to put the house on the market and be rid of it.

Potentially it was a nice enough place despite the need for a patch-up. Three bedroom, big and solid, but cold and bland looking from the outside, unwelcoming, he had to admit it, as if the walls were soaking up the frost and holding the chill inside. A light glowed from the lounge-room exactly as he had left it in the early morning when he woke. The word ‘arctic’ popped into his mouth.

He noticed how the mist was setting in. Was lucky to be here rather than out on the road. It would snow again heavy tonight for sure.

He opened the car door.

‘Darcy!’

‘Huh?’

He looked up as he stepped from the car and slammed the door shut, the square-ness of the sound reverberating and sealing the world around him in a flat, square prism of otherness. He felt as if he could not hear for a second and blinked. Touched his head vaguely. His hair was getting long. He hadn't shaved in almost a week; a light, scrabbly beard was beginning to show. He enjoyed it that some people found his look a little intimidating, a bit psycho even, especially when he wore his mirror shades. Yeah, that's right, stay away.

His neighbour Suda had raised her window as if it was a warm evening and she needed cool relief. She leant out from the side of her house, into his driveway, and smiled at him.

'How you doin'?!'

Suda Kelly. Half Lebanese, bold as brass. He wondered what had ever happened to her Islamic modesty, if her scarf-bound grandmother, let alone her jailbird husband, ever noticed what an incorrigible flirt she was?

The temperature was around zero and sinking, and there she stood in jeans and a halter-top, letting it all hang out for him, making moist eyes in as good a fuck-me come on any woman could give. And Suda was very good at that indeed.

'Fine,' he smiled back.

He liked her. She was hard edged, but funny in a way that entertained him. They'd always had the hots for each other. He told her once how she reminded him of a Ted Hughes poem, some lines about a woman *filthy with desire*. When he had said this he thought she had liked it at first, even though she responded, sourly, that he really knew how to charm a girl with 'such sweet talk'. Darcy realized then how careless he'd gotten with women. And though he didn't like anyone to see this carelessness in him, the truth was he needed a type of woman who didn't mind or simply didn't care.

‘It’s nippy eh?’ Suda said, shivering her shoulders in flirtatious little circles. ‘Feel like popping over later for a drink? Got the place to myself, Saturday night, the Eve of the Lord’s birthday and all...’

She sighed like she’d been deserted. He felt like he was watching her on a small stage as she leant out from the window. Performing was a natural state for her anyway. That sexy Roman nose always gave her profile a bit of drama too. Big nose, hot fuck, it was one of those basic equations he had always subscribed to if the girl was quirkily pretty enough to make the algebra work. Suda’s math was basic but it added up. Zel had always called her ‘obvious’. Who cares? Sometimes a guy just didn’t want the subtleties or complications, whichever it was. What was ‘obvious’, Darcy thought, was the way that word staked a no-go zone around Suda. Maybe Zel had sensed something?

‘Yeah,’ he said to Suda, then ‘sure’ too slowly, like he was hesitating even though he wasn’t.

She raised her eyebrows, annoyed at the intimation of doubt in his voice. Said, ‘See you soon then...’ Shut the window with a scrape as he was saying ‘Sure’ back to her. He felt half rejected by this, which was, of course, her intention. He knew better though, that it was just a game, a power thing. No complications? There were always fucking complications.

As Suda turned he could make out the contours of her hips, a Middle Eastern Marilyn Monroe in the fogged pane of the window. She stayed there for a second, probably on purpose, the interior light surrounding her hourglass curves religiously. Then she moved on into her home, the motion of her body tugging at him, hurrying him on.

He was never sure what was happening between Suda and her husband - and she didn’t invite speculation. After they had first separated she had asked him over one afternoon to help her move some furniture around. They fucked without much more than a word, almost on the spot. Until the end, when Suda had said, ‘*Mamnuun.*’ And with a reptilian additional smile, ‘That means ‘thank you’, Darcy’.

What they were doing now was as big a secret as it had ever been; a secret from themselves as much as each other. He did not wish to pretend it was anything else other than what it was: a ‘fuck-buddy’ arrangement, those were Suda’s own words, so she seemed of a similar mind to him. He could not bear a hint of talk about their daughters. Whenever Suda broached the slightest mention of Izzy or Sarah, he changed the subject or squashed it. There was nothing to say; no point in talking; nothing they could change.

He was always edgy about meeting Suda at her place. She was off and on again with her husband like a tap. But she would often manipulate circumstances to unfold at her house anyway. He knew she got off on it. ‘The thrill of the kill baby,’ she liked to say. In an hour or so they’d be at it again, over there as per usual now the invitation had been cast. Maybe he wanted to get caught too? He didn’t know exactly why he was so careless with her when it could all be done so much more carefully. The worst of it was sometimes hearing her little girl cry out while they were having sex. Soraya was only a year old, and born into what? It was too real for him; something he preferred to pretend was not there. He hated her for having had a kid again, her savage replacing one lost child with another. Was that the way out of the darkness?

For the moment he stayed in the driveway with Suda’s presence dissolving away from him. Letting it all drift apart.

The mist continued to move and swirl slowly. He could sense the neighborhood relaxing around him as Christmas Eve settled in: the emanating TVs and radios, the frying crackle and smell of someone cooking bacon next door at the student house, an incoherent music thudding through its walls, a few late-in-the-day cars moving down the street, wet and rubbery and shooshing homewards, while a couple of passing kids swore on the sidewalk, their laughter vicious and pack-like and scary in such fresh high voices, the word ‘cunt’ punching out, something metallic, a pipe maybe, being dropped by one of them, clanging over the low-wave far-away feelings of a woman trying not to cry, the dry unhappiness of a man thinking there was ‘not enough’ money to cover things, children shaking a gift hidden beneath a bed and saying ‘don’t tell’, the trees above thick with moisture and ice, the wind rustling through the dense weight of their leaves and another constant murmuring as if he could make out even

more voices, the under-life in the minds and hearts of his neighbors permeating him with so many mixed emotions and thoughts he felt as if he might faint into the sonar pulsing and silvery, breathy humming of it all. He tipped his head back. It was just the wind in the trees, swishing. He went inside then, wild telegrams and cold glassy air echoing in the back of his mind.



Zel could not resist driving by where they used to live. It had been months since she had last succumbed to this desire, but the impulse was easy to give in to and hard to resist. Not much more than a turn of the wheel and five minutes off her usual course. Her indicator ticked a luminous, painfully slow warning she did not heed. Once it stopped she had already made the turn.

It was too much to go right by the house so she parked down near the T-intersection to her old street. She had favoured this spot before, by a clump of trees that shaded her presence. Like some pervert. She shook her head at herself, not quite amused. She could still get a good view of her former home from there. Unsurprisingly, it made her feel lonely, and having done it far too many times before, she regretted – as she had regretted so much in the past – this relapse into compulsive behaviour patterns.

Zel looked up along the street as the night closed in and felt an ebbing sensation as the streetlights flicked on one by one, foot stones on a river to her past. If Darcy would just get out and move on, if they could just sell up, maybe she could let it go too, and stop driving by like this. Goddamn him! The place was almost an addiction for her when she felt the need, as bad as booze but different. All addictions were different, or particular... weren't they?

She'd read how every man – and woman – had their weak point: sex, alcohol, heroin, money, power. 'As smoke before a fire, As dust on a mirror, All is clouded by desire.'

The book of Buddhist aphorisms Espy gave her last Christmas had got that right, baby. She had sold herself out ages ago to the dust, the clouds. It was hard to believe she might be coming back from where she'd let herself run to. She hoped sitting here wasn't a sign of back-sliding badly again. For she was not unaware of how her addictions were an anesthetic to her pain; and worse still, that she had gone to her pain at times precisely because these anesthetics were an oblivion, yes, but an ecstasy too. And some part of her liked this, wanted it, wanted more again. She was damaged goods, alright. The way the guy had said it to her at the hotel, *damaged goods*. God it had hurt. Then that thing with the kid a few weeks later. She'd had to arrest her slide before it got even worse. She'd had to do a lot of things.

The Peugeot was in the driveway. The house was all lit up. Darcy was home. It had a dreary feel. Maybe it was just her; maybe it was the evening. It didn't used to be so miserable looking. She flicked the wipers periodically to clear the windscreen. It was sleeting lightly – snow coming again tonight. The radio was on, low, indistinct. A tune drifted like mist around her. It made her feel the cold. She turned it off completely, rubbed her legs for warmth. As Zel looked up her old street the road shone black and inviting. She felt herself walking along it beneath those streetlights and going inside the house... There she was, sitting at the kitchen counter, with Darcy coming in the back door. Four years ago. Dinner was on. The kitchen was warm, perfectly warm, it was beautiful.

'Spaghetti again... Sorry babe, hectic day at the office,' she trilled, very '50s housewife.

Darcy ran with the joke. 'It's that boss of yours,' he said, 'driving you too hard when you need to be here in the kitchen fulfilling your womanly duties.'

'Yeah, right – like ordering take-away instead?'

She'd gone straight into hard-boiled mode. It was the New Jersey tough girl in her. Darcy liked this quality. He couldn't stand the excess of American manners, 'all that false buoyancy,' as he put it, as if all Americans were graduates from some Anthony Robbins self-affirmation seminar.

Zel had only left the garage fifteen minutes or so before him. He would have heard the door slam while he was tramping around upstairs, jars of paint clinking, a late afternoon burst of inspiration upon him after bringing Sarah home. He would have heard her messing about, still tidying tools and cleaning up her work bench – the work you do when you aren't doing any work, and she'd had hours of it. Tomorrow was another day. Her jewelry 'factory', Darcy's painting studio, they were a tight little creative unit out there. She'd just sold a series of silver pendants based on twigs she had found when she'd gone out walking with him, delicate yet harsh looking. 'Tiny Bones': that was what she had called the range. They'd been snapped up. She should have priced them higher.

'How's Sarah's present coming along?'

Zel was making her a pendant in the shape of a star, small, broken looking, as if to catch the glowing edges of the real thing. She was wondering whether to stucco the back of it as a finishing touch, or leave it smooth on both sides? At first she'd left it tarnished and darkened, but she'd changed her mind and put it to the buffing wheel and shined it up today, so much prettier for a young girl.

Sarah had been reading *The Little Prince*. Zel thought the star that the Prince might have come from would be the perfect birthday gift for her. Would her daughter make the connection? Should she point it out? Sarah was already acting like a teenager, as if every step into her world was an act of invasion. Maybe it was better to let her make her own associations. She hoped the star didn't look childish.

'It's going okay – it's good...' she responded slowly.

'Sounds it,' Darcy offered, smiling, trying to sound ironic but upbeat.

Zel felt her work was getting simpler, and would get simpler still. She had never liked the ornate approach to jewelry design. She'd gone in an even rawer direction a few years back, deeply affected by the work of the Navajo silversmiths she'd always admired. The outcomes were too heavy for her, too masculine. Danish jewelers from

the '50s had begun to interest her again the last few seasons, their clean surfaces and lines. Maybe she could combine the finished and the raw to get at something that was less male and less sterile? It was a mix she was still trying to get right. She had begun thinking of a whole range of smaller and subtler things to make, of how beautiful, even symmetrical a seemingly unbalanced work can be: a star, a leaf, a twig, a feather, even a woman's body if you could escape the clichéd eroticism. She didn't want to end up sitting behind a trestle table selling rings and earrings off a batik tablecloth to bikies and hippies. The stuff of nightmares!

She had sat at her clean bench today and tilted the star, studying its shine, balancing it between her index finger and the wood. A flaming edge reminded her of a ballet dancer's leg, an *arabesque penchée*. The poise, yes, the way the weight of the object flowed through it like a life force. It was almost as if it were finished before she had realized it, an ideal discovery on a day when she hadn't done much at all. How nice to complete it by simply deciding not to do a thing more; that feeling of something almost finishing itself.

Darcy piped up again. 'I bet she will love it.' He picked at some black and white oil paint on his arm. Looked up at her and said, 'I still can't get a decent sky happening. It's driving me nuts.'

'Glass of wine?'

He glanced at the kitchen clock. 'Half past four. Radical.' Then: 'Sure why not.'

She snorted, as if his reluctance and acceptance were funny. Darcy had already started opening the wine bottle. It was taking him ages. He always made a hash of it.

'Here give it to me. I should have got a twist cap knowing your form.'

'Yeah, yeah...' he said, ignoring her and continuing with his struggle. 'Jesus, I didn't think they made wine bottles with corks anymore? Where's Sarah gone?'

She cast her eyes west. Darcy knew the answer before he even finished asking the question. Over at Izzy's again – or out and about with her somewhere, up to no good.

The two of them finally sat down at the kitchen bench with their wine glasses filled. The stereo was on. Nick Drake, *Pink Moon*, her choice. It quieted them, turned their minds inward. Darcy reached over and touched Zel's free hand. The star was still closed in her other hand from when she was studying it only a moment before he entered.

She placed both arms on the bench and leant forward on her elbows, leant into him as if it were to be a kiss. Darcy followed the motions of her body and leaned into her as well, reciprocating. Then Zel tilted her head downward till her forehead almost touched his. She opened her hand, and as his eyes followed hers she showed him what she had done. 'At the Chime of the City Clock' played on behind them like the lights of a faraway city left glowing in their minds. It was as if their life were painted across a beautiful and temporary piece of celluloid, a film running slowly over the windscreen and stopping entirely for just a moment in front of her.

Twinkle, twinkle little star.

Under her breath she recited the nursery...

'O mum!'

A mother and son were walking up the street, right past her parked car. The kid was wearing a heavy winter parka, like some tiny Michelin man moon-walking home through space. She didn't know them.

Zel was still staring through the windscreen at what she realized was a streetlight as they passed and disappeared. Too late in the day to call it a day dream. She turned the ignition and started the engine. A touch of snow had begun to fall. Then more came in a burst, like a pillow had been slashed open. As it fell she sat there, the engine idling, the screen slowly blotting, snow like falling paper vaulting her into darkness.

... What you are.



Darcy was freshly showered and almost ready to leave. His skin felt warm from the hot water. He was wearing jeans, a long-sleeve thermal top from yesterday that seemed fresh enough once he shook it out a few times, and a fleece-lined flannelette shirt he was about to button up before throwing his coat on and clearing out. There was a knock at the door. He used his fingers like a comb, ran them through his damp hair, slicking it back, feeling some moisture trickle down his neck as he pulled his hand away and wiped it on his shirt.

Suda. She was not the kind of girl who liked to wait. Truth was he needed it as much as her. But it seemed strange she would come over so soon. She liked being in control and summoning him, even if it was in the guise of a friendly invitation. It was where she felt most comfortable in their arrangement, when they had arrangements. Maybe that was him too though? The type of woman he was drawn to? The controlling type... is that what made him feel comfortable?

‘Hang on!’ he called familiarly from the hallway as it banged again.

As he got closer the knocks sounded heavier and lower like someone kicking the door. It shook. Someone was kicking it. A male voice swore outside. Not Suda.

He lunged at the door in anger, pulled the door open. His top teeth bit at his lower lip, ready to snap at whoever was out there. Before he could say a word he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

‘You.’

It was strange to hear. Not a name, more a thing: *You*.

Something about the deadness of the word alerted him more than the gun itself. He felt his Adam's apple stick in his throat. Everything in him went tight.

The gun made a thick clicking sound as it was cocked in the same moment all these bodily registrations were running through him, warning him to freeze.

He didn't move an inch. Didn't say anything.

'In ss-side.'

Darcy backed into the house. 'Listen...'

The barrel lashed up and forward. He fell to the ground. The abrupt force of the blow surprised him. Hard. Black. Metal to the side of his head.

Blood trickled from the edge of his left ear. He touched it, looked at the bright redness on his fingertips. Crawled back and got up on an elbow, held his arm out in a peace-making gesture. It looked pathetic. But he didn't quite believe he was in this situation and his disbelief, along with a delay in simply processing what was happening, kept him strangely calm – if no less frightened.

'P--Planning on f-fucking my w-wife tonight, D-Darcy?'

Pete Kelly looked old above him. Old and tired. He was lean as a rake, but strong, arms like the branches on a gum tree, gnarly with prison-time muscle that hadn't left him in all his years on the outside.

His stutter sounded more menacing than usual, jerking his voice towards something unhinged and high pitched. Pete's Vaseline-tight, greying hair gave his head a light bulbish appearance, eyes popping in a drawn, oddly handsome face. One of those could be 40-could-be-60 faces that some women loved. A Keith Richards face, Suda

had called it, beaming with aggressive pride in her man. Darcy knew the face well. The weird blaze in it that always made Pete look hungry and ready to burst at once.

Keith Richards, fuck me dead.

A jail tattoo, two blue pin pricks about the size of emphatic ballpoint pen marks, stood out on the back of what was now Pete's gun hand, the right. He took in Pete's wedding ring too, an eyeful of guilt. Here was the punishment he had fantasized about, the awful bullshit about death and fate that he'd raked over with Dr Eletea, the something he had wished upon himself.

'Pete...' The way Darcy said his name sounded sad and resigned.

But the man above him wasn't listening to sad resigned tones. He reached down and grabbed Darcy by the hair. The gun was much closer to his eyes now. It was hypnotic, the thing he watched more than anything else. He felt its snaky power over him as it moved and swayed.

Pete started to make sounds as if he were speaking and moaning at once, before his voice broke out again. 'Sh-she's nnnnot yours!'

'There's nothing between me and Suda, nothi --'

Pete put the gun to Darcy's lips and pushed the barrel into his mouth hard before he could say anything more. Darcy chipped a tooth on it and his head bucked back but Pete held him tight. The barrel tasted airy and cold and metallic. For a moment he had a vision of a street where the gun lay, of snow falling, a pulsing sense of loneliness that made his head roar. He began shaking, suddenly very cold. Pete pushed the gun deeper into his mouth till Darcy gagged.

He lashed Darcy's head up and back with the barrel still hinged in his mouth, pulling him by the hair all the while.

As he began to fall backwards Pete began to pull the trigger: 'Maggot,' he barked.

For a split second Darcy saw the street again: a dead man's soul rising from a body, children in thick curtaining snow, black spores streaming from their mouths like coal smoke from chimneys as they puffed and ran laughing on and on and away.



The pool cue slammed down hard. One of the two goons playing had whipped it across the table after potting his black and losing the game. The sound of it made everyone turn around for a second then look away. Zel hated that thing of young guys needing to be noticed. They were as bad as women - worse even. She was too old for them anyway, though they had not always been too young for her. Being called a 'cougar' didn't make her feel so hot anymore. She'd let that stuff go. The young guy thing, it was a mistake to think she could control it and please herself and pretend she was a queen.

She stretched out again like a cat anyway and forgot them, all of them, rooms, faces, wants, happy to be here and find a warm place. Her boots were still damp from the slush outside. The fire burned at her soles. It caressed her legs then her face as a fresh log began to catch. Till she felt the heat flushing her skin and she was forced to move back a foot or so, her face still glowing. The leather of her boots scenting the air vaguely.

For a few seconds a feeling of nausea came over her. She wiped beads of sweat from her forehead, took another sip of vodka and tonic. It had a nice bitter taste and warmed her throat and belly, settling the un-well feelings that passed through her.

She had an inexplicable urge to call Darcy and stared at her cell phone thinking about him. It had been a while since they'd talked. Maybe he was tuning into her. Sometimes she felt like his presence dogged her, but this time of year it was always

different. She wondered whether to text him ‘☺ Xmas’, or something like it, but that kind of message was beyond them to share. Christmas, Sarah’s birthday in May, they were the worst dates for the both of them. The school holidays starting and noticing all the kids around; even just an ad for some teen pop star; almost anything could open you up, gut you. She wrote ‘Hope yr ok’ instead, felt her eyes glass over with emotion. All of sudden she was sending the message. There, done. He could take it any way he wanted. She loved him and hated him all at once.

The bar was getting busier. Terry wasn’t here yet, but most everyone else that didn’t have a life – and even some that did - would be, sooner or later. A few poker machines rolled in the corner, a sound like creatures full of teeth and marbles and bells and coins. Someone sounded almost happy about it. She heard the words, ‘Damn! Damn!’

Then a heavy clunk before ‘The Monster Mash’ began playing through the jukebox. Someone dressed as Santa Claus sat at the bar alone, half out of his costume and well on the way to getting sozzled. She recognised him from when she was at the supermarket a few days ago. A piece of tinsel hung over his shoulder like a stray bit of spider’s web. She didn’t like the way he hadn’t bothered to get changed. What was that about?

The two young goons racked up another game of pool and laughed even more loudly for everyone’s benefit. ‘Dude, you’re monging it tonight!!’ *Shuuut up*. Four more of their friends arrived, noisy and nervous, but less aggro and needy of attention than their mates. Young, dumb and full of cum. If ever there was a line that suited, it was that.

Everyone was slightly unsettled in the room, in need of a second or third drink to figure out how to relax. It was knock off time and people were still finding their social ground. A country song about never being pretty enough to get the man of your dreams entered and hovered over the sparse rowdiness of the bar.

She knew she looked good, especially for her age. That she could get most men to want her. She’d always been the type guys eyeballed; the type to get a hungry look, if

not quite a loving one. But she was getting to an age where a close inspection would show the lines on her face, a smoker's dried out profile. She was trying to give the cigs up, cutting back then firing them up again worse than ever. Espy was having better luck than her with giving them away. In her mind the cigarettes seemed to go with a deeper hardness she was trying to relinquish in herself. She dressed too much and too often like she used to dress five years ago. It could make her look tortured, she knew that. It was how some people might see her too, and when she was unhappy they were dead right. She hated the way this unhappiness could invade her so completely; that the glow of youth no longer shone strong enough to hide whatever pains or troubles she felt inside. Sexy and tortured: some guys liked that equation. They actually wanted her at her worst. It turned them on to notice a hunger in her for who she used to be. She knew this, she used it the same way she was used for it.

Tonight she was wearing close fitting blue jeans with a patch of a small red devil on her backside. Cuban-heeled boots, a long sleeve, tight 'vintage' AC/DC T-shirt that showed off her tits, a new bra to push them up just so. Yeah, she thought, giving her self a little mental boost, I still look good. Her coat hung over the back of her chair, a big heavy thing that looked like she'd gone out and murdered and skinned a large, rare white animal, a polar bear or a snow leopard maybe. It was pretty over-the-top but it kept her warm on bitter nights like these and its size contrasted and accentuated the slight firmness of her body beneath. *I'm okay.*

There was a lot of tinsel around the bar, a few plastic Santa Claus faces pasted to the walls, creepy looking gremlins she assumed were his dwarf helpers standing either end. Glittery stars and plastic snow flakes covered in gold and silver were everywhere. 'Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer' came on next. It felt more like a joke than anything genuinely 'Xmasy'. She wondered who was programming the jukebox as it jumped from schmaltz and kitsch to sob and dance and back again. Zel noticed two girls sitting quietly in another corner, both in mini skirts and cloggy shoes and heavy make-up that indicated they were under-age. She thought about herself at their age, about her mother, about Sarah again... the world was always spiraling the loss back at her.

There were a few more guys at the bar now, older and uglier than the gang at the pool table. One of them sang along grotesquely for a few lines to 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer', laughing along with his red-faced drinking buddies. They looked like the type who would work out at the pet food factory with Pete Kelly. They should have been put in the cans instead of the meat. She started laughing to herself and hoped no one could see her sniggering at them. At least it put a smile back on her face.

Supermarket Santa took another slug of beer before letting his head drop downwards. Zel wanted Terry to walk in soon. She didn't feel like stray attention tonight, least of all from this motley crew. One of the old guys was already giving her the look. He must have been kidding himself. Lord, save me if I ever get that low. He called out to the young girls with some half-assed joke they didn't get. They smiled for him anyway and huddled back to their own conversation. Zel glanced towards the door for Terry's familiar face, looked at her watch again and was surprised to realize her impatience. A couple came in that she vaguely knew. She turned her head away. *This town is shrinking*. But when they gave her a wide berth it made her feel empty and alone, depressed, as if in fact she'd wanted them to say hello in spite of herself.

She didn't think of Terry as her type. Sometimes when they fucked it felt more like he was digging a ditch than making love. He was all grunt, no grace. She had to coach him in his pacing, slow him down, speed him up, c'mon Terry, c'mon. It could be exasperating, but he'd got better at it, oh yes. He certainly had strength in his favour, a truck-driving-man's strength that compensated for his less than refined technique. Those meaty hands of his could really get a hold of her hips when they wanted to.

The love-making, and it was love-making in its own way, not just fucking, wasn't the only reason she'd started seeing him more regularly than a lot of the other guys she'd dated or out-right screwed or just flirted with endlessly and fruitlessly online. It was because he actually listened to her stories; or *the* story when she finally got it all out in one piece to him.

Watching Darcy's 'progress' hadn't boosted her confidence in therapy. N.A. had weaned her off that type of cure long ago; fine for some maybe, but a good looking female like her in a rehab meeting, well she was just a vulnerable, pretty girl that guys

came on to and took advantage of. They'd stalk her home. They'd call her. Sometimes they'd even get what they wanted. In the end she hadn't faced her true feelings back then with anything more than the bottom of a glass. And the deeper need for a man who cared to hear her out. Darcy had. And Terry did. It made her happy and she didn't drink so much. It was that easy, really. Love me.

Terry didn't say much about it all – and even when her mood changed and went dark, he didn't say much of anything then either. Terry kept some stillness about him that made it easy for her to feel he wasn't there – and when she remembered he was there, or she wanted him to be there, it was like he came back into being again out of somewhere just beyond her gaze. It kinda spooked her to think he was a lot like Darcy when it came down to this aspect of his behaviour. But this was not a comparison she liked to dwell on, least of all for getting aroused. And so she had called him around knock-off time from the truck stop and at a moment's noticed he had agreed to meet her here.

She realized that she didn't know Terry that well. That she hadn't tried hard to get to know him either. It was a door she was still holding shut. But the truth was she liked the way he held her afterwards. She had gotten truly sick of her online toy boys and lonely orgasms, of those depressing hotel fucks when they came along for real. Much to her chagrin, she had discovered after all this time that once again she needed a man she liked to keep her warm. That what mattered to her was not energy, but kindness.



As the gun clicked over and the trigger dropped back into place, Pete laughed but his laughter made no outward sound. It was more a jawing of his face, a nervous tic, his tongue exposed like a dog drinking water.

Nothing had happened. The chamber was empty. Darcy had fallen to the floor where his heart was racing fit to burst in his chest, his mouth jarred by the force of the barrel and Pete jerking the trigger.

His jaw hurt.

Pete began a low, jittery prayer above him. ‘Our F-Father who art in heaven, h-hallowed be thy name...’

It was barely audible but Darcy caught it clear as day. He almost felt like laughing. He rose into a crouch slowly, one hand still on the floor, fingers stretched, as Pete’s utterances continued in the way of a chant.

Darcy coughed; a spasm he could not suppress – he spat then to try and rid himself of the metallic taste of the gun.

Pete’s voice was marginally louder now as Darcy continued to lift himself upwards, his body beginning to tremble with delayed adrenaline.

‘Our F-father who art in h-heaven, h-h-hallowed...’

He was almost standing but he froze again when Pete leaned in beside him with the gun, waving it about in an odd and uncoordinated way.

Pete looked through Darcy as if he wasn’t even there. ‘Y-you’ he said vaguely then he laughed again, a laugh with a sound to it, unpleasant, papery, like when someone knows something ugly about you.

The laugh shredded itself away. ‘Soraya...’ Pete said nothing else. The two men drew breath together.



Terry touched her on the shoulder. Let his eyes run down her neck and shoulders, tracing the line of her body all the way along to her legs, right to the tips of her feet. He couldn't believe his luck; he'd never been with a babe this good looking before. She just rolled out like the lines of a great car, like a fast hot Toyota Supra, and he'd always wanted one of those and a woman like this to go with it.

Zel looked back at him and smiled. He hadn't seen her look at him like that before and it shot a deep trace of hope through him that he didn't know existed, did not want to admit was alive in him. O shit. He felt his chest go off he was at a street racing dig and had missed the flagger's signal.

Then her face darkened as if this same spark of feeling was shooting out into nuthin'. Or maybe she just needed a good night's sleep. Maybe that was basic fact of the matter, that black vibe in and around her eyes....

Man oh man, how he hated this negativity in her.

Don't she ever lighten up? Don't some days come easy?

The world was not nearly so complicated for him. You lived it, you let it go, you waked up and it started again. He hadn't had such a blessed life either, but he didn't need anyone to wise him up about getting on with things and rolling with the punches.

She'd never asked him much about his life. Don't I count for something? Except for how he hurt his hand – she was cool about that, he had to admit. It was something he was shy about with women, but Zel asked him straight, and he told her, showed her the scars up close. It was an intimate moment, something nice. He wanted more of that traction with her. Not so many alligators on the road, all that black shit peeling off her and bumping his ride.

Terry knew about her drowned kid, the whole town knew. Front page stuff, Christmas day. That was something big to try and get over, sure. Can ya ever get over something like that? He doubted it. Even if she'd only gone through the whole thing with him the once, it was the other bits and pieces he'd string together, just sense, whenever she'd let them out of the bag or hint at them, in a word, even just a look on her face. Some people, the way they smile, it can just about make you cry.

He tried to stay quiet mostly and just listen. Whatever it was she needed, he worried he didn't have it in him – and that all too soon Zel would find out and ditch him. That meanness in her for all the hurt she was carrying. Yeah, leaving him peeled off like blown tire on the blacktop. Black shit on the road. Was that all he'd amount to when it was done?

And yet there were things brewing in him that he wanted to get out. He couldn't figure it. He really wanted to help her. Then sometimes he just wanted to let Zel know that she was his now – and to stop all this negative bullshit. Not so much the pain she was in, he could *try* and live with it if she could try too – just all the defensive stuff that went with it and made him feel like trash. But that kinda 'we're-in-love and you're-mine' talk... ahhh, he'd never be that full on, would he? He didn't even know a hundred percent if that was what he really felt. Maybe she *was* just too heavy for him? Maybe he'd be the one to let her go? Wouldn't that be a turn-up for the books after all her queenly come-heres and go-ways? Him hammering it outta there? Sayonara, baby. He laughed to himself at the idea of being the tough guy. Oh yeah, right, the Clint Eastwood of Love is here.

Zel reached up and touched his hand with hers. The gesture shook him out of his thoughts. She felt where he had lost half his middle finger on his right hand. An accident trying to rope off a badly loaded set of 44-gallon drums – on someone else's flat-bed truck, ain't that frigging luck for ya?

Terry was careful to hide the injury; the way he held his hand back and down as he walked through a crowded room was subtle. It was a side of him she liked, something gentle and secretive that didn't go with what you might assume from looking at him.

It didn't matter to her that the finger was maimed. Maybe it made her feel like she wasn't the only damaged one, who knows? She didn't think too hard about the symbolism behind it. Her head was always in a dark swim as it was.

Zel lifted her glass to him and said, "Another thanks."

Terry took the glass from her and said 'Okay.' Tried to make it sound like he was being smooth, but it was awkward for him. He was never much good at catching a moment and he'd just been hit by two in a row from Zel as if a heavyweight were laying him waste. The way she touched him – so soft! He liked it, dammit, he *loved* it. His hand felt momentarily electrified. That was the problem, he was punching above his weight with her and he knew it, he always had.

If she just didn't have this way of making him feel he was at her beck and call, of bashing him around with her sadness. It was something Zel needed to do, yeah, but she could be real sweet, real sudden, all in the same turn. It put his own moods all over the place. He was really trying to go the rounds and last the distance. She was the type that could break a man. Yeah, maybe it was him who was thinking of quitting the relationship and he just needed time to know it. O man, he was spinning his wheels on this one!

'Vodka and tonic, not too much ice. And a beer.' Terry leant forward and waited. The barmaid knew what he and Zel drank; she was organizing their glasses before he spoke a word. He wondered what else she had noticed about them? Terry could see Zel reflected in the mirror between the rows of bottles. He watched her sitting there. She didn't look over towards him. Just kept staring at the fire. He wanted her to look his way but she did not and he regarded it as a sign of something bad.

Terry glanced then at Joe D, who was still half-in and half-out of his Santa outfit, getting totally fucked up at the lonely end of the bar. Whoa, looked like his marriage was finally done. What a time of year to go down. Empty shot glass and half a beer at his hand, peanuts spilt at his wrist like sleeping tablets. It kinda cheered him up to see it; at least he wasn't *that* bottomed out.

He called over to him. 'Better go home Joe.' As if it might be helpful.

Joe looked up – in the wrong direction. Snarled 'Fuck off' through a bubbly mouth at someone who wasn't there.

Terry laughed. 'Happy Christmas to you too, Santa.' Poor bastard, what could you do?

He collected the drinks, wondered how many Zel had sunk before he got there? It was pretty hypocritical, but he didn't like to see a woman getting drunk. Plus Zel could get the blues big time once she'd downed a few. Women and booze, it got sloppy and it depressed him no end. His mum had been a drinker and he always promised her when he was a kid that he would never grow up and be a drinker like her. She was always tryna make him dish out promises like that. Look at me, don't be like me, yeah, mum, alright, okay.

He walked back towards Zel. She kept staring into the fireplace like it was better than TV. 'Have a good day?' he asked, falling bearishly into the lounge beside her. Furniture was often too small for him, but he liked these big lounges and chairs at Mary's. They were built.

She shrugged her shoulders and screwed her face up as if her day was unimportant, so he didn't bother asking for more. She hated her work, no surprise there. It was a shit job. Although he was glad he'd met her at the truck stop anyway, only half-filling his tanks so he could come back more often to strike up a conversation and finally ask her out. He fancied he's been pretty clever about that, even if it had been a pain in the ass on the long hauls, making up the minutes.

People might say his work driving trucks day and night on cold mountain roads was pretty shit too. He loved it mostly. Cruising along, riding high. He wanted Zel to come with him on a run sometime, but it was too soon. It'd be like asking her to marry him or something, her coming into his space like that. The tractor cabin was more private to him than his own home, his own bedroom even. Cleaner too, he laughed to himself. It had the full tuck and roll job inside, serious comfort. He was the

owner-operator, why not? But the buck-a-mile thing was grinding on him, and he was feeling the years catching up. He was getting tired. He just didn't know how to change things.

There was a long silence between them. The fire snapped. Silence again.

'I saw your ex parked up on McLennan Pass,' he said.

He could have held the information back but he was curious to get a response. Any response if this was how she was going to be. I don't wanna haul this load uphill all night. C'mon babe, don't give me the silent treatment.

Zel moved a little. 'He stops to look over the pond,' she said, resentful and whispery-like. She could make a shopping list sound like a slap on the face. He wondered why he'd opened his mouth; if he'd been so smart to jump at the chance of meeting up with her. God, it's Christmas, *c'mon*, do me a favour here.

She leant down to the table and picked up her drink. Pulled the straw out, flicked it to the ground like a finished cigarette. The ice clattered against the lip of the glass as she took a deep swig. Zel drained almost half of it in a long, lazy slurp. 'Got any plans for tonight?' She ran her tongue over her lip after she spoke, seemed suddenly happier. The jukebox was playing 'The Bitch Is Back'. Yeah, that's what I gotta watch out for, he thought a little angrily, as snatches of the lyric caught him at a gallop.

'Nah,' he said, cheery as, like nothing bad was going on. 'I was hoping we might have some Chinese, or pizza here. Whatever you want Zel. I'm easy.' It was an agreeable enough statement. He didn't even know why he had to make it. He thought they had a date? She'd asked him here, what'd she mean 'any plans'? He'd assumed they'd roll on to her friend Espy's show at midnight. But Zel said nothing, just nodded. There was something about the way she looked at him. It made him feel desperate to have her again. He felt the heat of the flames on his knuckles. We're too close to the fire again. Damn. He hated this habit of hers. Always sitting too close to it. She's like a damned cat burning her own skin.



Tiny cracks of emotion: ‘You had y-your own ffamily.’

Pete raised the gun, aimed and pressed the trigger at him, double-starting his heart into wild motion again.

It was empty. Now Darcy knew for sure. Relief sweat its way through him, but the empty gun still scared him. He felt blown apart and brought back to life, hovering between what had happened and where he was. A droplet of water slithered down his neck from off his wet hair. His shirt collar dampened, a chill descending through his body. The hall clock chimed a quarter past seven. Three little chimes.

‘What?’ Darcy said, then he breathed out a weak ‘No, you got it wrong’.

Pete turned his head away. The tension and intimacy between them evaporated as if they were no longer speaking. Pete moved towards the door as if someone had called him.

‘What are you saying...’ Darcy’s voice wasn’t loud enough to be heard, or so it seemed. He was in free-fall with his own thoughts and his words turned theatrical and hollow the louder they became.

Another ‘Our Father’ began running over Pete’s lips again as he paused on the doorstep and looked out at the street, a snowy flutter littering the air. His stutter began breaking the prayer up into other phrases and words and sounds that Darcy could make no sense of. Then Pete just walked off, leaving his utterances trailing behind him.

Darcy's mind hit a short circuit. He did nothing; said nothing; felt immobilized before he pulled himself into motion again and staggered to the doorway, wiping the drool off his chin with his shirtsleeve.

At the front porch he stood and watched, stunned, as Pete opened the door to his pick-up truck. He reached in and grabbed something off the seat. Darcy knew it was an old cassette case that he used to wipe surface ice away from his windshield. Pete began scraping manically at the rime that had formed on the glass, still talking away to himself, maybe even singing now, a melody. Darcy realized it was coming from the car radio. 'Moon River'. Mad song.

Darcy watched him for a moment as if nothing had happened, as if this were some other evening long ago. Under his own breath again, angrier now, he spoke, though no one was listening but him: 'It's a lie.'

Pete climbed in, tried to start his vehicle. It struggled for a moment and kicked over. Darcy heard the roaring scrape of the ignition as it was twisted a second time into the already sparking engine. The cabin light was on and he could see Pete clearly, hear some country music distorting as he revved the pick-up to be sure the engine was warm. He drove off way too fast, his rear end fish tailing on the snow whitening the road.

Darcy touched his ear. A trickle of blood ran down easily. His hair was still damp and he felt a cold line of moisture at his collar. He shook, from cold or shock, or both. Turned. Grabbed his coat from the stand, patted his pocket automatically to make sure he had his keys. Shut the door behind him and stepped out onto the icy grass, making his way unsteadily over to Suda's as the frozen blades broke and crunched beneath his boots like fine glass.

His mouth and throat hurt, his tooth felt weird, his ear bled.

'It's not true. It's a lie...'

Darcy Travers' Christmas Eve had only just begun.



He pounded at her door like he would break it down.

Suda opened it in sex bomb mode: short skirt, high heels, too much make up as per usual, emphatically *bad* enough to fuck. The smile on her face was wiped when she saw the state Darcy was in. He charged through, brushing by her roughly.

‘We gotta talk. Pete’s just been to see me.’

‘What? He’s supposed to be working tonight.’

Darcy kept moving inside as she spoke.

‘He’s s’posed to be at work. Holiday rates they’re paying him...’

The words faded. She seemed more concerned with Pete’s loss of wages – and her share of them – than what Darcy had said, or was about to say.

‘Fuck his rates.’

‘You’re bleeding... God... Sit down. I’ll get something to clean you up.’ Suda gestured to the lounge, dashed off to the bathroom. Darcy’s voice pursued her down the hall, calling out, ‘We – need – to – talk.’

His mouth hurt.

‘Have you got any pain killers?’ he called to her again, rubbing his jaw.

Suda returned, all urgent attentive nurse. She twisted the disinfectant bottle open; the lid rolled off on to the floor. She dipped a cotton bud straight into it and patted it onto Darcy's ear.

'Jesus!' He jerked his head away. It stung like hell. 'Water it down.'

'Sorry, sorry...'. She was off again and back with a bowl of warm water, a towel, the Nurofen she'd forgot. She rattled a few tablets out, 'Here take these.'

He threw few into his aching mouth. Gulped awkwardly. 'My throat's so sore I can barely swallow,' he croaked.

'Give me a second I only just boiled the kettle.'

'Don't...'. Darcy couldn't have cared less, but she was gone again. He could hear her in the kitchen. She came back with hot, milky, sweet tea. He sipped it; was glad for it. He grimaced as Suda began dabbing at the grazed and bruised side of his face and wiped the blood away with a warm hand towel. His ear stung again with the disinfectant, but not so intensely this time. It felt like he had some weird stalactite growing where his tooth used to be. 'My mouth,' he said again distractedly. The shock of what he'd been through was leaving him; he was starting to actually feel the work-over Pete had dished out. 'He stuck a .45 in my mouth... I think I chipped a tooth.'

Suda didn't even blink at this information. He opened up his mouth and touched it tenderly but he couldn't feel much other than the sharp edges of the damaged tooth. She reckoned a chipped one shouldn't bother him too much unless a nerve was exposed, and if it was he would have known it by now. 'Kids get them all the time, people walk round with a chipped tooth for years! It's not so bad,' she cooed, cleaning him up some more as if he had slipped over and fallen outside.

'Not so bad?' Darcy looked at the floor as he spoke, beginning to seethe. 'What have you said to Pete about us?'

‘Nothing... nothing...’

He grabbed her by the wrist. The smell of disinfectant from the bottle flared up into his nostrils, mixing with her heavy perfume: *Trouble* by Boucheron. She’d asked him to buy some for her - another cliché to stack against her now.

‘Nothing?’ He breathed the word outwards contemptuously.

Suda looked at Darcy and away and back at him again as if she were being insulted and he was being too weird for words. ‘What are you saying Darcy?’ Suda was acting, faking it. He could tell it from a mile away. She was like some villainess off *The Young and The Restless*. He wondered why he’d ever fucked her, felt a burst of repulsion open up and star its way through him.

‘Am I?’ He wasn’t really asking Suda so much as himself, but the question fell out just the same.

She looked away and back at him again, a bit more sincere this time. Suda had so many lies cooking on her stove you never knew for sure what she was serving up and why. She looked him in the eye like it might mean something, appeared to be tearing up and getting emotional as she spoke. ‘Maybe’

‘That’s bullshit!’ Darcy said. ‘It’s bullshit and you know it.’ But he wasn’t sure now. He was beginning to panic.

Suda came back at him before he had a chance to compose himself. ‘You wanna know? You really want to know?’ Her attitude was mocking. ‘Well the answer, Darcy, is *I don’t know*. Shit happens.’

‘Shit happens?’ Darcy’s tone was odious.

‘Yeah... – Darcy.’ She sang his name out again as if it were full of sugar to make sure it sounded like crap.

He wanted to hit her.

‘I’m not her father,’ he said, then he repeated under his breath. Suda had never given a hint of anything like it with Soraya. He would have noticed something, felt something, some clue if there were any truth to it. His thoughts lunged away and towards another question.

‘Why’d you tell Pete that now?’

He wiped his mouth with the back of his palm.

Suda shrugged her shoulders.

Darcy had let go of her wrist, but he felt like seizing it again and shaking the truth out of her. Instead he took another sip of the tea just to help himself speak. The gesture made him feel weak in front of her.

‘All this time passes, Suda – and you say something now?’

She paused. ‘I was just tryna make him jealous.’

Easy as that she said it.

Her reasoning was so fucking banal, the way she spoke so indifferent, he pretty much believed her on the spot. As much as it was hard to believe that something so important, so devastating, could be thrown out like that – motivated by the most trivial vanity, by sheer emotional vandalism – yeah, he could believe Suda alright. She was dumb as a shark.

‘You’re a stupid bitch.’

She tossed her head back and flicked her hair like that was some kind of compliment. Darcy had the distinctly annoying feeling she even got a buzz out of two men fighting for her, and that this was how she was receiving everything that had happened.

‘I’m not lying though.’

‘Bull – shit.’

She shrugged her shoulders and leant in close to him, her breath at his neck, her fingers curled around the inside of his leg.

He had to have her. He took her right there on the floor.



Inside his pick-up truck Pete was hitting the steering wheel to a slow and melancholy beat, singing a few out-of-kilter phrases to ‘The Little Drummer Boy’:
‘Pah rum pah pump pum!’

He sat high in his seat, moving the wheel like a kid handling a radio-controlled toy. For a moment it looked he might have a head-on as he over-steered on a corner, but as oncoming vehicles swerved and skidded, horns blaring, the pick-up righted itself and charged onwards, the traffic scattering behind him.

Pete turned sharply off the street he had just entered, straight into a driveway that opened out onto a large open courtyard and make-shift parking lot. He slammed on the brakes. The pick-up slid on the ice then stopped. A spray of surface snow spat off the studded wheels. Pete’s head and body shook. Heat misted off the car. He looked out the windscreen, saw the Holy Spirit rising from the bonnet and leading him onwards.

He began rocking his body back and forth to this vision. Trying to quiet the way his mouth had sprung open like a fountain at Darcy’s, as if he had no control over what

came splashing down his tongue. He felt suddenly relieved, stopped his rocking. His mouth stopped moving too. Pete opened the door and hopped from the cabin. Looked skyward and shook his head a few times.

Young men were sprinkled about with iridescent purple batons, directing cars into parking bays. One of them took a step back from Pete. He'd been trying to direct him to a rather different spot to where the vehicle had stopped so violently. Pete nodded to him vigorously, made the sign of the cross and moved towards the chapel, a failed convention center that was now very active home to the local chapter of 'The House of Light'.

He listened to the crunch of ice and the squeak of leather from his work boots, listened to the wind and something else above him. His legs felt cold. 'Bad circulation', he thought, then the phrase 'bad circles, bad circles' as if the wind were listening to him and trying to get inside of him with new thoughts that were not his own. He rubbed the tops of his legs upwards and downwards with his hands to warm them. Get out of my blood. Get. Out.

The wind cut into him.

He reached into his pocket for his Gideon's, for whatever might unite his soul. But the print turned to night shadow in the parking lot lights; and he was who he was: a King Solomon divided by his own children. Isabel. Soraya. His fingers touched the damp pages, thin as cigarette paper... lines, names, numbers... the wind blew the pages through his head like a badly made nest coming to pieces in a tree. Nothing was put together as it was in the Book, and the Book was in the wind, and he was a... he was a... he was...

One of the parking lot lights seemed to short out, then flicker into life again – like something angry. The Cross, the criminal who spoke to Him, could he be the criminal who was redeemed? It was something like that in the Bible; the page was in his mouth; he remembered in the nest in his mind. Snow wet the New Testament before him. No answer. He closed the Book.

A young couple in front of him was talking about ‘God’s way’ and ‘Intelligent Design’ and things he had been trying to understand from the sermons he had heard on previous visits. The conversation anchored his mind in the outside world around him, gave it an order. He held on to the calm of these people speaking. Kept them tight and close as he stepped up behind them, eavesdropping.

‘It’s a miracle, that’s what we are,’ he heard the girl say.

It was Isabel, all grown up. He went to hold her.

‘Thousands of years – and every step in man’s becoming has been God’s will, God’s will that allows us to be here, right now, and walk up those steps and sing for Him. Ian it just makes me want to cry thinking about it all.’

The boy looked over at her and put his arm around his beloved, almost brushing Pete’s unseen hand away with the gesture. The girl reached out and caught a snowflake as her boyfriend embraced her.

‘Aren’t they beautiful? It’s as if He wants to touch us.’

Pete had already withdrawn his own hands, bowed his head, looking away from what these young lovers shared. It wasn’t Izzy. He was just imagining it, imagining he was seeing her.

He wondered about what the girl had said – about God falling in each flake of snow? If it was part of another Revelation he was yet to know? He had not slept for two days and his mind was wandering everywhere but into sleep. There was a land of peace inside his skull that he could not find. Isabel, where are you? Soraya have I lost you too? He was awake in a land of no-sleep. He was lonely.

When Pete looked up the couple were at the steps with many others, late-comers rushing for the service that had already begun inside. The brightness emanating through the large glass doors glowed right through the snowflake girl he had mistaken for Izzy and the boy called Ian who loved her so much. This light pierced them and

made them Good; Good to their souls. He admired their hair, how clean and groomed they were, like people from an advertisement. The doors parted, the light expanded towards him. Come in.

A flashback: to his time in jail. Just before his 28th birthday. Fighting it every step of the way, petrified and trying to hide it. They'd sent him to Kingston, way too heavy a place for a little punk like him. It was must be a mistake. The guards were jiving him from the start. He'd tried to tough it out. A beating in the limbo room and a few days in the hole were enough. He was frightened, alright, enough... Initiation time, they laughed. He'd lie on the concrete in the darkness of that initiation looking at a sliver of light beneath the metal door, remembering his childhood bedroom and all its sounds, the violent arguments outside whenever his father came home drunk. He'd see it all in replay; hear it like an old soundtrack in the back of his mind, fierce music.

Stuff came into his head that would not stop. It ran on light, underneath the door into the protection of his darkness. 'Solitary'. How he had wished and wished for God to help him, to be left alone when he was young, and to help his mother be free and safe too. How he had wished. To be free from his father and his fists and his shouting, from the nights when dad would come home drunk and late, the headlights in the window moving like low and evil moons, the crunch of his work boots on the driveway gravel, the light going on in the lounge-room. The TV switched on, canned laughter; the conversation that would turn to shouts and then cries as if his mother was being pummeled through the floor. He would punch her to hell, his father shouted, and punch her to hell he did....

Light would carry it all under Pete's bedroom door, light full up, eventually, with his mother's murder and her final screams that night; light, flashing blue and siren singing, not for the first time but eventually the last.

Light, finally, that was peaceful in a bare sterile room that he would learn to call home alongside other stunned boys from stunned worlds. But that light of peace was a lie there too, a fluorescent lie, and soon enough the cruelties began between them, the bashings and the whispered threats under torches and blankets and fists, the night they

all stood around and pissed on him and laughed, the need to be silent about it or face worse later, we'll get you Pete, we'll fuck you up, you shut your mouth or your dead.

He had lost the light, Pete thought. *The devil has got inside the light and poisoned it.* How did the devil get inside the light? He scrambled away from the light at the foot of the door in solitary confinement as if it were a diseased presence, a chemical horror leaking through and impossible to stop.

He fell apart in jail. He lost patches of time, pieces of himself. They gave him bug juice to smooth his thoughts, calm him down. He found his mind again, woke up in the future. Okay? You're back with us again. He lifted weights, bench presses in their thousands. He'd lay flat on his Cadillac in his cell and stared up from that hard lousy thin little bed at the ceiling for hours. Suda. Suda. Suda... He counted the days; he murdered his number. He came out through the in door. He came out free.

The neon intensified as he reached the top of the steps. Here he was finding the right Light, the True Light at last. Heaven must be like this. The True Light so bright and righteous; the good, clean people entering: it was Heaven, the first step up to Heaven for all of them. But he faltered for a second at the doors as he looked down at his work clothes. Was he clean enough? He noticed some of Darcy's blood on his sleeve and smudged it away. Or maybe it was animal blood, spill from the pet food factory, he was not sure. The crowd swept him forward, oblivious to his taint, blood of the calf to pay for his sin. Our Father, our Father... Could he find his daughter and know her again? Izzy was gone and sweet little Soraya needed him.

He passed through the doors into the House of Light reception area, a large lobby busy with merchandise – CDs, books, Bibles, seat covers, place mats, key rings, calendars, jewelry, coffee mugs, all of a man's needs blessed with divine symbols and images. A world of God jangling with renewed promise. This was the way, this way, this way... people were stomping snow off their boots, shaking out their coats and handing them over. Everyone smelt of ice and air.

Moving quickly now, pushing further, deeper, through another door into a cavernous hall where television cameras were enlarging the celebrants onto giant video screens

so that everyone could see them. The congregation was singing, many with their eyes closed, a blind and loving sea. People raised a single arm aloft toward heaven with an open palm that might allow a beam of True Light to pass through it, swaying to the music, ready to receive a message from God, who was close, and so ready to touch them. Sometimes a camera would pan across the audience, zooming in on people in the throes of ecstasy. Mouths open, like lovers pierced in love making.

Pete began nodding his head to the music, mouthing the words as he moved to a vacant seat. The sound of so many lips engaged in praise wrapped him in a holy swarm of noise: ‘The mountain ranges will crumble into sea, the sky will meet to ground we walk upon, but He will hear my voice, and He will come and walk with me!’

The band was exceptionally loud in the auditorium, with four guitarists and six lead singers and a choir of twenty-four and a drummer who sat behind a wall of Perspex that shook with the force of his playing. He had never seen anything like it; neither had most of the people in the room. The band were charging through the song like horses bolting down that falling mountain side and some of those on the stage were also becoming ecstatic, reaching up for God’s Light to pierce them too.

Pete closed his eyes and sang and raised his right hand high. His palm burned. The words to the song danced across the video screens but most of the people here knew it by heart from the recordings they had bought during the year. Above them all on the stage was yet another projection, a line from Daniel 8: 26. ‘Night comes first, then morning. But the revelation made to thee is a true one; seal it up, till those last days when it must have effect.’

He had opened his eyes. He had opened his eyes. He read the words and felt a warm rush upon him. Seal it up to thee, yes he would do that.

All of a sudden the famed Pastor Edward was bounding on to the stage. Everyone was whistling and cheering and clapping. No one had witnessed such a big production here before. Pastor Edward had dedicated himself to touring his communities across the country on holy days, and Thule was especially blessed by this Christmas Eve

visit. It was like having a rock star come and play to a country town. The effect was magnetic. Even waverers who were only curious about the House of Light had come to see what the fuss was all about. The air was thick with belief and the tremor of conversion. People all over the country would ‘witness’ it on the morrow when the Thule service was edited and cut and simulcast on television and radio across the nation. The humility and sanctity of this small town’s love syndicated for the world to witness. Amen.

Pastor Edward just laughed, put his hand out modestly and gestured for calm, even sending himself up with the gesture. What a guy. ‘Please,’ he said, ‘Please.’ Signaling for everyone to sit – and then to listen. A let’s be real feeling. The standing crowd fell like a tide back into their seats.

Pete said ‘M-Moses’ out loud and the people beside him gave him a funny look, but their focus – like his – was on the stage.

‘How are you all tonight?’ Pastor Edward asked, hearing everyone cheer and applaud and stamp their feet in return. ‘It sounds to me... It sounds to me,’ he repeated emphatically, ‘like we are all feeling His presence here with us!’

Everyone went wild, people called out in affirmation. Amen! Many were already pulling out their notebooks and pens so that they might document Pastor Edward’s talk for their own personal study and contemplation and discussion during the week at cell meetings. The pastor’s voice was slightly hoarse from sermonizing so much, as if there were two voices in him, the voice of the man and some other voice – like a shadow – that was trying to shed itself of the physical voice. Pete tried to listen to this shadow for he was sure it was the presence of Jesus, there surrounding the tongue of Pastor Edward, sending secret messages to those who might listen closely. So that the blessed might then hear Him speak as if it was a radio from Heaven, right there housed in the throat of Pastor Edward, trying to send out a deeper message, full of truer things than his words could express.

Pastor Edward was speaking from Proverbs 18:1. ‘A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgement.’ He hit the Bible gently but

surely and smiled, shook his head, looked out at everyone as if they knew exactly what he was talking about.

Pete listened close, his expression tightening: The isolated ones who seek their own desire. As if receiving his message at last he said the word 'locust' aloud and touched his own face with prayerful hands that slid to his Adam's apple.

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be his name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done. On earth as it is heaven. He moved his mouth without saying the prayer but the words were shaped in his mouth and he ate them up as a man starved for food might eat from his own spirit to endure.



Outside the snow kept falling.

Light, turning, floating, buds of floating light snow.

They seemed barely capable of making it to earth.

Some moved upwards again, rising not falling.

So soft... soft... God?

The air itself was a declaration of aliveness. The wind was kind and gentle.

It did not seem a night for cruel things or bad luck or bad times.

Children moved through the street, running without sound.

One, two, three... five in all.

They floated like spirits on the fresh white earth, as if they had no legs.

They floated like snow.

One held a can in his hand, half full of Woodstock bourbon and cola.

Another held a cell phone, raised it in the air for a moment, laughing.

Another called, 'Let me see. Let me see...'



'And when was this?' The cop sounded busy, indifferent to Darcy's news.

'About an hour and a half ago.' Darcy knew this detail was going to be hard to explain.

'90 minutes?' Pause. 'Why'd it take so long to call us?'

'I wanted to speak to his wife first. She lives next door.'

'And?'

The cop's lone word hung on the line. Darcy didn't know what to say.

'That shouldn't take an hour and a half, Mr Travers. Not if this is as serious as you say. You don't seem clear on whether this is a police matter, sir.'

‘She - his wife - wanted me to wait before I reported it. She said she could speak with him. That – look, it’s a police *matter* – I just don’t –’

‘Any reason why this ah –’ The cop had interrupted him, only to stop speaking again. Darcy could hear him checking his notes. ‘... why this Mr Kelly might want to attack you on Christmas Eve?’

The cop’s tone was distracted, even sarcastic. Darcy made out a commotion in the background. Heard another cop half-shouting, ‘Got a ‘240’ on Dubus Avenue’, the clacking of a keyboard, the same background voice again, ‘That’s three tonight. Two hospitalized, one okay, what...’

The keyboard tapping ceased, the sound became muffled. The cop he’d been speaking to had put his hand over the line but Darcy could still make out parts of him speaking, ‘Keep... got a domestic here... weap...’

‘Domestic?’ Darcy said down the line. He couldn’t help himself. ‘It’s not –’.

The phone buzzed.

As Darcy spoke the cop moved his hand away and his voice boomed down the line. ‘...ORRY SIR we’re very busy tonight. Can you give us a description of Mr Kelly. We’ll keep a lookout for him. You’ll need to come down to the station and make a full statement. There’s no one free to come to your house this evening, sir. We’re flat to the boards here.’

‘Right,’ said Darcy. He then described Pete, painted him into the officer’s pen, inky and scratchy and disturbed and sad, which is how he would have drawn him if he could be bothered.

The cop wrote: ‘Peter Kelly, M/W/40-45, six four, slim build, short gray hair, JC’s dogfood factory uniform, grey with red insignia, carrying a gun, ex-con, mentally ill, approach with caution’ on a sheet of pale blue paper, then tacked it to the duty board. What a hassle. He’d fill out the proper forms later. They had plenty on their plate.

Some holiday. They were going to need back-up from Milton, maybe even from Boyd in the valley too if they could get here in time. Silent night, holy night, my ass... The whole place was going to hell in a hand-cart tonight.



“Esposito and The Black Wings”

Midnight Mass

at

Mary’s Bar & Trill

Xmas Eve

Zel studied the poster image. Damned if Espy didn’t look like some trans-sexual rock ‘n’ roll superstar in that Cleopatra wig of his and all that kabuki stage make-up. And they even got the name of his band right. He had gotten so annoyed when they put ‘The Black Things’ last Christmas. *This town will ruin me yet!* he shouted. Ooosh, what a tantrum. ‘Where’s the Zen go-with-the-flow, buddy?’ she’d laughed.

It’d be great to see him play again. She knew his last tour had gone well. That he was building up an okay following on the club circuit after all this time chipping away. Maybe this coming year he’d have his big break through? Be the star he’d always wanted to be?

‘I’m too old for that, Zel,’ he’d said when he came back off the road a few months ago. ‘My boat sailed a long while ago. This is as good as it gets. I’m okay with that.’

‘Espy, things are happening. You’re touring all over the place...’

He smiled at her as if she were being naïve but very sweet. ‘Maybe.’

She knew he didn't mean it. It was unusual for him to be down like that. Espy was usually her prop and not vice versa. She didn't want to offer him platitudes, but she searched for something to say. "We Ride Like Birds" still moves me every time you play it. It sends me off into another world.' It was a great song. Honestly.

He began to rave on at her about why Leonard Cohen had stopped making music and became a monk for years. Truly great art was about humbling yourself, dissolving. What do we leave behind? What's really remembered, Zel? Just the smallest piece of us, a feeling, a moment maybe, hardly anything at all... Maybe a sliver of everything we've ever been and done.

'Espy, you don't have to be *eternal*.' She punched his shoulder playfully. 'As long as you love what you do.' It was odd advice to be coming out of her mouth.

He smiled at her. 'Yes, yes.' Then he placed his hand on hers –warmth, heat, feeling... a telegraphing energy to his touch.

For a moment Zel thought he was going to cry. How old was he now? 40? It was hard to tell. He never liked to say. He was like a woman about his age. She wanted him to have a decent lover, but he was secretive about the men in his life and there never seemed to be anyone around. Not for years now. Not since the weird thing with Leonard who owned the local boutique.

'O you see what you are doing to me Zel?' Espy said, wiping at a tear forming in his eye. 'I feel like I'm on Oprah. I mean really, how camp!'

He'd been off touring again since that conversation, playing clubs further north and west. Espy always worked hard. She hadn't seen him since he got back. If she and Terry hung around at the Mary's Bar & Trill for the show tonight, Darcy would surely turn up as well. Espy was the only friend who'd been able to cope with him – since the accident. Everyone else had been through one too many emotional stabbings out of the blue. She didn't know how Espy could stand it.

But then Espy was probably her last old friend too. His kindness amazed her and she wished he was around more often. Though being away on tour was probably what helped Espy to endure her darkness – and Darcy’s too – the way they were now, what they’d become as human beings... not that she felt sure of what she had become at all.

She looked at Espy.

He was a good secret keeper and not one to play the go-between for Zel or Darcy. Sometimes she thought he was too good at walking that line.

‘You should play poker,’ she said to him here at the bar one night when she grilled him about Darcy – and got no reward.

He smiled. ‘I’d rather be the ace of spades than the jack of hearts.’ They both smiled at how corny his line was.

‘I think you’ve got a song there,’ she said.

‘I hope not,’ he replied. Espy laughed. He had a tendency to over-enjoy his own humour, an oddly endearing trait.

‘So he’s okay?’ She couldn’t resist asking him a second time. Espy shook his head, a yes-no action that came out in the foggily affirmative. He wouldn’t betray Darcy by being her spy. He wouldn’t let her panic either. Or lie. It was the best she would get out of Espy, this kind-hearted discreteness which hinted that even if everything wasn’t okay, it would be – sooner or later.

As for running into Darcy, tonight of all nights, well Thule was too small to escape anyone for long. It shouldn’t put her off going to the show and Espy would be unhappy if it did. Seeing Darcy wasn’t that rare an event, but the truth was it could still hurt her, especially this time of year. It was a question of living her life versus changing wherever she went in case there was an encounter she wasn’t up for. After a while she had gotten tougher about it. What else could she do, but be like that or leave town? And she wasn’t leaving Sarah, no way.

Visiting Sarah's grave on her own could be a lonely business. Espy would accompany her whenever he was around, bring flowers, help her clean the grave. They'd talk a lot while they were up there. Talk too as if Sarah were with them, still there listening. Somehow he made her feel closer.

She'd hardly said a word to Terry for ten minutes. He leaned forward while she sat there staring at the poster, eyes open but not on what was in front of her. It took her a moment to register him in front of her.

'Hey, be good to see Espy play tonight.'

Zel finally looked at Terry and left her thoughts behind her. It was a funny to hear him speak about Espy so enthusiastically. Avant-garde cabaret wasn't exactly his sound. Nor the crowd Espy'd pull: kids from the enviro-science college in Milton, all the local freaks and alternative types, a few hippies and deep woods trippers from out of the mountains. She just loved the crowd when it gathered. Out come the freaks baby, as Espy had said with pride on one occasion.

Terry was more of Jim B and Lynrd Skynrd man, all 'Freebird' and big trucks and down the line tastes. He was the one who'd bought her the AC/DC shirt, a surprisingly good choice, but she doubted it was a retro fashion thing. He probably still bought their new recordings as well. Black Ice. God knows what else he had.

Whatever Terry liked musically, it wasn't as if Thule was bursting with entertainment options. The god-botherers were the only other ones stirring up a party tonight. Espy had obviously made this evening his own personal war against them. Poster for poster; shop window for shop window. Pastor Edward had practically taken over the town, and was promotionally omnipresent, but Espy had made sure he too was well noticed, and absolutely the other choice in town.

As for Darcy, maybe it was time to let him see she had a boyfriend at last. If that was what Terry was. Wasn't he?



Suda tried Pete on his cell phone but there was no answer. She shook the phone like something might fall out.

Darcy was back at his house, probably calling the cops right now. She just knew it. He could barely get his pants back on quick enough to get away from her. Scared Pete might come bursting through the door playing shoot-em-up cowboy! What a coward. He was all over her – for what – ten minutes max? Then out the door again. Loverman. The guy always popped his stick way too fast.

Pete had gone too far this time and nothing she'd done had softened things with Darcy, including screwing him. She tapped her rose purple fingernails on the coffee table for a second and thought of Darcy's face in front of her as he moaned. Wondered to herself what the attraction was; thought how much she resented him and yet how bad she had been wanting him lately. After all this time was she starting to fall for him?

Pete had become unbearable. He was cracking up again. It frightened her to admit it. The religious stuff was even worse; but inside all that talk she could still see the old Pete smiling and it made her ache for who he was. She shouldn't have said what she did to him. She was trying to mess everything up on purpose. She didn't know what she wanted. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Suda stood. She had to get Darcy back on side. If he called the cops, that was it. Pete couldn't afford to be picked up, not with his record. He was a shoo-in for jail – and serious time at that if they booked him for assault with a weapon. And for what? Losing his mind? Losing his daughter?

She and Darcy circling each other like cats in the driveway that Christmas morning. Darcy hadn't forgotten it. No way. Fifteen minutes is all it takes for your whole life to fall to pieces. Fifteen fucking minutes. The world slaughters you more for your little mistakes than those big ones, ain't that the truth? Next thing you know, you're a news bulletin on the radio; something people listen to over a cup of tea while they shake their heads and thank God it's not them.

She had to find Pete - she had to stop Darcy calling the cops if that's what he was still thinking 'bout. He'd left her lying on the floor like she was trash after they'd screwed. She'd stayed there too to make sure he recognized it. A little guilt went a long way with Darcy.

Suda tried phoning Pete again but there was still no answer, just a redirected signal to his message bank. Hearing his plain old stuttery voice made her feel sad and suddenly frightened... but if the message bank was working that must mean his phone was happening too. It gave Suda a bit of heart. She told him to call her, to just come home, that it was all a mistake, she was sorry, she shouldn't have said what she did... she didn't know what else to say and her message sputtered into silence and then out of time.

She looked in on Soraya, fast asleep, her milky smell permeating the room with comfort. She'd sleep till morning, what a gem. Suda closed the door softly and grabbed a parka off the back of coat stand, zipped it up tight. Pulled a beanie off the side table and jammed it on her head, marched out the front door. Darcy Travers was gonna do what she asked - she was gonna get that motherfucker by the balls.



The knock startled him. For a second he thought it was Pete back again. The cop was still speaking on the phone as Darcy walked over to the window and pulled the curtain open a fraction to see who it was.

Suda. Shit.

Darcy got out the last few details about Pete's clothes and his grass green pick-up truck, tried to not sound like he was whispering as he spoke. Suda knocked again. Darcy hung up quickly. Went to the door and let her in.

'What are you doing?'

He glanced at the phone, a real stupid thing to do.

Suda looked venomous as she caught his eyes on the rebound. He was always a shithouse liar. 'You don't understand...'

'You prick. I knew it. You fuck me and you *still* run here to the phone and report him?!'

He looked away. What did she expect?

'You're the one who put the wheels in motion Suda.'

He said her last name sweet and sour, the same way she had said his only an hour ago. He didn't need any of this, least of all on Christmas Eve. He wished he could shut the door on the whole world. More than anything he wished he could get Suda off his back. He should have stopped screwing her ages ago. It was gonna destroy him. Maybe it already had.

'And you didn't do anything, huh?' she said. 'How about you think back 30 minutes ago if you can't remember when we first got it on?'

Darcy stayed quiet.

'You listen to me,' Suda said. There was something scary in her voice, a quality well used to intimidation. Darcy didn't like the sound of it at all. 'We can make things

right. We can fix it. But this shit in the past with Pete, the law never forgets. If the cops pick him up it's for sure he will do time again. And he – just – can't – do – that – time – Darcy. He *can't* do it. He hasn't got the kick for it anymore. He'd rather die than go in again, I know it!

Darcy looked strained, began to shrug his shoulders as if he was trying to squeeze his way through a passage that was too small for him. What did she want? What did she expect?

Suda pushed him back hard in the chest. 'The two of us have gotta to find him before the cops do. Coz you've already phoned them, haven't you?' Her head reared up like a horse shaking off its rider, her chin jutting forward in a challenge.

Darcy still didn't know what to say. He stumbled over his words. 'No... Yeah. Suda... I can't go out there looking for Pete. Not when he's waving a gun around. I'm the last guy he wants to see. He's the last guy *I* want to see. You're not making sense.'

'If he was going to do shoot you Darcy it would have happened tonight. Believe me.'

'Yeah, right, that's very encouraging.'

She was out of her head. Darcy looked at her and wondered what possessed her to think he'd even listen to her demands. 'I'm not doing it. Why don't you get out there and find him? All this is your doing. He's your husband!'

'Because I don't have a damned car, that's why. And even if I did, what do I do, drag Soraya all over town on a freezing night like this?' Suda started to laugh and cry all at once. 'I can't get him on the phone and I don't wanna leave the house either in case he comes back.' She laid on the tears a little heavier now for Darcy's benefit, tried to appeal to his good side. 'It's Christmas Eve; Pete might think to do that. I got a feeling he will now I've left him a message. I just need you to go out there for me – to make sure he comes home. To get to him before he gets into even more trouble.'

Darcy couldn't believe his ears. She was for real alright.

'Get Espy to help you. Pete always did like him' Suda added narkily. Then quietly, as if they had just shared a moment of humour, 'He ain't gonna hurt you Darcy. And he sure ain't gonna hurt Espy. So you're double safe if you take him with you, I know it.'

'You're not the one who got a taste of the gun he was carrying.' He stretched his mouth reflexively.

'Well you taste this,' Suda said with sudden aggression again, jabbing him with her index finger. He could feel the edge of her purple nail dig into his chest. It almost cut him through his shirt and thermals. 'If my husband is picked up by the cops *any time* you can bet Zel will find out all about this little thing me and you have had. I'll make sure she knows about every time we fucked, you jerk!' Her voice cracked with feeling and not a little malice. 'Every time, right back to the first time.'

The first time. He looked at Suda, looked away from her into the grains of the white lounge room wall as if he might see something there to help him. He saw a child's foot prints running across it, a grazing of wind across its surface too, blowing snow like drifting talc. A crowd cawed in the white distance of it; only he heard it. He was back there when it happened, running after them, looking for them, following their foot prints in the snow. 'I'm lost,' he heard himself say, but the voice was in his head. He saw the wall again as it was, white, plain, there, and he turned to Suda, still standing and waiting for him to give her an answer. She had a real nasty expression on her face.



'Contego, what you bring me into this for? I don't believe you some days.'

Espy sounded incredulous down the line, but he wasn't stopping. 'What's in your mind, why you do this now for Suda? Tell Zel you fucked everybody, man. You don't have to die for this stuff. You think she was some angel for you, uh? Desculpe.'

Darcy didn't like what Espy was insinuating. Had Zel two-timed him? It threw him sideways even as he answered, 'I can't tell her. I just can't.'

It was all mixed up in his head, just too much to go into. Espy didn't know the half of it. They say a secret is something you tell to another. Well he played it a lot tighter than that. Soraya's father?... Suda hadn't let him off the hook, but he believed it less and less. It was a percentage chance, but when he conjured her into his mind, Darcy saw Pete's features, Pete's eyes. Suda was playing him, playing them. But why?

He was beginning to think that Suda was trying to bring her own house down on purpose – and his with it, whatever was left of it – to somehow corner him into a relationship with her; that it was just a big, messy game to get what she wanted. He'd have to move like a cat on a fence to avoid that happening. Not get her angry; ride it out and stay calm, not displease her.

'I'm performing tonight, man,' Espy said, oblivious to the rakings of Darcy's mind. 'I'm already dressed to play. I got all excited and got ready too early. But I'm not changing now. Not to play bounty hunter with you.'

Darcy pictured Espy in his favorite outfit. The clean and shining, snub-nosed black Italian boots he favored (a gift from Zel), the black pants and black smock with silver braided crows flowing down the arms, the long black wig, the thick white make-up: till he emerged in full glory like some weird transvestite bird on stage.

'I bet you look great Espy, perfect for riding shotgun with me in the Peugeot. Always love your company, you know that.'

Espy coughed positively. Darcy knew the sound. He was in with a chance.

‘Yeah, ‘perfect’ contego. Looking for a psycho who wants to kill you for fucking his wife! You need to cut that thing off! What is it with you? It’s time you get a real girlfriend. Someone you can see out in public, man. You so down you gotta be fucking a woman you don’t love *all the time?*’

‘No.’ Darcy was offended. It wasn’t worth an argument. ‘Look, Suda said she’d called Pete to make sure he understood we wanted to help him. All we have to do is find him and get him home to her – and that’s it. I’ll be the one that – ’

‘That’s it?! You’re dreaming, man. That’s not ‘it’. You just said she *not* get through to him. You know what the mountains are like! He might not hear her voice till tomorrow! I don’t want my life left on the line with Message Bank. Press five, delete, Esposito in the trash bin forever. And I *got* to perform tonight man, at midnight on the dot at Mary’s, no screwing round. It’s a big deal for me, the hometown show, Pastor Edward tryna hog my stage light. I want to make this one special. Blow those god-botherers off stage and right outta town.’ Darcy heard a little wheezy snigger.

‘C’mon. Just till you have to be there. A few hours. I could really use your company... Suda said Pete likes you; you know that. I guarantee that you will be at the bar to sing on time.’ Darcy stopped himself. “Okay, I’m sorry. I don’t even know why I am asking you. I shouldn’t have put all this on you, I...’

‘Pete likes me.’ He heard Espy groaning. ‘O man, if I could count the number of heterosexual men... Okay! Contego. Okay. But this is some madness. I’m too famous for this shit!’ he joked. ‘As long as my make-up and my clothes are not ruined, I do it. But I have got stay immaculate for the show. He strangles you in the slush then I will not help you. I stay E-Mac-U-Late. Okay? If he tries and kill you it better be at the dry cleaners, man, because that’s your only chance of me jumping in to save you.’

‘Yeah, okay’ Darcy agreed with a smile of relief in his voice. ‘You’ll be pretty as a picture when you get to the bar, I promise.’



Terry felt like it was going to be a long night. Stay and see Espy. That weird fag Zel liked hanging out with, and his weird, depressing fag music. The way he'd tried to act excited about him, talk about ridiculous. Give me Metallica or give me death! he should have said. He wanted music that made him pump the accelerator, not hit the brakes (or turn on the windscreen wipers). Boo hoo hoo.

'Hey isn't Espy a Mexican or something.'

Zel rolled her eyes. 'No, he's part Portugese, park Mohawk, part Inuit. Why?'

He'd had it in for everyone from Mexico ever since their drivers started coming up and working on the cheap. Falling for one of their wives hadn't sweetened things in his mind either. All of this was best kept roped down, even if it was old news. It never paid to advertise unfinished business.

'Guess I'm part interested,' he said.

She curled up a smile at him. 'Very clever.'

O well he had got round that corner in style. He found himself tryna work out a way to seem more interested in Espy and say so. But nothing was coming. He was just inviting himself along after dinner really, coz for all he knew she'd pretty much say 'see ya' out of the blue and he'd be wondering what had happened to their Christmas Eve together. Maybe not – maybe she wouldn't be as bad as that – but he just had a sick feeling that way. He was always on the edge, always looking for ways to take a step back from falling off or being pushed. He was pissing himself off now. What a circle jerk. You're starting to think and talk like a girl, Terry. Do you need her to hold a sign saying 'Attendre le feu vert'?

He looked over at Zel. Half in anger, as if to declare his independence, he pulled a small M&Ms sweets canister from his pocket, shook it in his hand. It made a chalky cheap rattling sound.

‘What are they?’

‘Two little pick me ups,’ he said, smiling at her. ‘And they’re not made of chocolate. Want one?’

Terry would pop pills to keep him awake when he was doing long road trips interstate and over the border, hot runs that could really take it out of ya if you weren’t well-rested before hand. He’d come see her a few times straight off the back of those trips, pie-eyed, weird and riffy with energy.

He remembered those times well, the way his skin tingled at her touch, as if a small electric field was buzzing around him. How hard it was to get an erection but how long it lasted once he did. How much better and easier it all seemed with a few drinks under his belt as well. It was almost like a one-night stand when it was like that; hot and well out-of-it and real down and dirty.

He knew he got pushy about sex when he was like that – a bit of a problem when he was so floppy and shrunken. He’d look down sometimes and wonder if it was even his own body. Will himself to get it up, and not always succeed. It could drive him crazy when that happened. He was gonna have to give the pills away if things were going to work out between him and Zel.

‘I hardly use them any more,’ he’d said to her when she told him she didn’t like it. But he was a liar. He used them more than he should. When it came to trucking and drugs, he was old school. Even so, he was long overdue to clean up his act. It was too risky, much as he’d rather a guy full of amphetamines heading *his* way than someone nodding off at the wheel with 60 tonnes behind him.

Zel looked at the canister, then somewhere past Terry’s shoulder. Terry sensed her aversion to his offer, knew why. He’d set her up to think that way. There was a flame

of contempt growing in the corner of her mouth. Terry quelled it, pleased with his little ruse. It wasn't often he felt like he was running the show, one up on her. The old devil in him.

'They're not "co-pilots",' he said quickly, like he wasn't stupid. 'I'm giving the pep pills away, I told you that. This is just a holiday treat. Something special I got on the way back through Milton.'



Darcy pulled up out front of the low-rise apartment block. The car engine rumbled against the cold, the air con made his face feel hot so he turned the vents away. He pulled out his cell phone, tapped in the number. It was working, waddy know, no need to freeze my balls ringing his buzzer out there.

'Esposito Horta, you're prize is waiting - come on down!'

Darcy wound the window open an inch to cool his face. Watched the delicate tumbles of the snowflakes, the way they scattered and turned like tiny white leaves in the wind. It was if the whole world was alive with spirits and the snowflakes were parting signs of their presences on the move.

He looked to see if Suda had messaged him, nada. Tried calling her, but the signal was already lost again. He wondered if she had got through to Pete, wondered where things were at? Felt the quietness of the car's interior around him, felt himself back in a conversation with Sarah, a non-conversation really, her sulking, him saying 'c'mon darling', trying to coax her out of it. He hated those tiffs with her. She was so like Zel when it got like that, her air of aloof disapproval. There she was, sitting in the backseat, looking at him in the rear-vision mirror.

‘Are we friends again?’ he asked. ‘Sweetheart...’

The heavy glass door of the building slammed open and shut. He looked up. Espy was exactly as Darcy imagined he would be, all black and silvery and heavily made up, with a large black guitar case in his hand. He tooted the horn of the car but Espy had spotted him before he had even left the building.

‘Hey,’ Darcy said as Espy opened the rear door and placed his guitar on the back seat. There was a red stencil of a naked woman on the lid of the guitar case, pornographically lush and detailed. The stuff gay guys could get away with.

‘Boa noite.’

‘Boa noite to you too.’

Espy slammed the back door shut again. Opened up the passenger side and jumped in.

‘Para onde?’

Darcy’s Portuguese was rusty. Espy had tried to teach him the odd phrase over the years in the hope of generating a conversation or at least a few jokes between them, but he was, as Espy liked to say in his own sometimes vaguely stilted English, ‘a very crap student.’

He sat there next to Espy, looking baffled. He was also looking at Espy in his make-up, the way it accentuated the shape of his face and made it luminous. For a second it was as if he were with Espy’s ghost rather than Espy himself. Darcy looked at him and at the falling snow and felt a cold draught at his legs.

‘Where to contego? Para onde? Where to man?’

Espy was irritable. Maybe Darcy had misread their earlier conversation over the phone.

‘Oh right,’ Darcy said as he came alive to both languages. ‘Sorry. The House of Light.’ He looked at Espy again, could not resist saying something about his appearance. ‘Well, looks I’m out for a spin with The Joker.’

‘Very droll, contego, very droll... Just be a good man and drive.’



Pete needed to leave as the service was reaching its climax. People were moving around freely in the huge hall and his departure did not cause a stir. The music was hurting him, too intense, too loud for his ears. There was no room for God in his mind. Pastor Edward, make room for God, he asked low on his lips, please make a quiet room for God and please make room for your servant too. But Pastor Edward could not hear the man in row ‘K’ moving his lips, stuttering, saying incomprehensible things. As Pete left, he rushed out past the Information Desk, felt the neon of the reception area as a form of beautiful burning even brighter than when he had entered. When he got to the main doors his body tipped forward, as if he had been hurt in some way by this auditorium light. The doors parted and the night opened up to him, the mist and snow and semi-darkness enshrouding him. He let out a little hum that might also have been a cry of pain or joy, who could tell? He felt himself on fire and he tumbled and rolled in the fresh snow of the courtyard to cool himself, the Holy Ghost singeing his hair and ears with the white white heat he had passed through.



Zel’s legs felt like jelly. She laughed a little as a surge ran over her head and arms. Breathed deeply in; deeply out; could almost taste the air as she did so. It had been quite a while since she’d been on chemicals and it was a surprise to recognize

the old symptoms of a rush. The varying heights and lows of the pleasure, the ‘too much’ that overwhelmed her, the surfacing back into a more controlled state of ecstasy.

‘Ecstasy.’

The word sang its own meaning. She’d only dropped a quarter of the ‘E’ and was glad for that. Terry was built like a bull and had the constitution to take things on a scale most people would quake at. But even he was looking a little fried, idiot-grinning at her, at everyone in the room, his body wavering to the music like a rubber band. It was as if he was too loose for his own physique. There was something obscene about how relaxed he was, a man in his mid forties enjoying the beats as they thumped through the PA system and the lights overhead twisted and sprayed rainbows and searchlight beams across the dance floor.

Big men should never get this funky, Zel thought to herself, and she laughed again, putting her hand to her mouth, giggling like a schoolgirl. He was too old and too big to be like this, but he *was* like this and so was she. She felt she would burst with the hilarity of it all. Hoped people couldn’t tell they were on drugs.

‘Enjoying it?’

Zel moved her hand away from her mouth. Her head moved in what she felt was an orbiting circle, all the way back and then forward.

‘Oh I’m fucked,’ she said.

‘You look great.’

Terry touched her hip, kept dancing in front of her. Smiling into her face like a planet. Zel pushed him back an inch or so. It was a playful gesture and he laughed with her.

They were having a good time. It surprised her how easy it was to enjoy herself with him.

He grabbed her by the hand, led her out onto the floor. Zel half resisted then followed his lead. She started moving about, raising her arms like wings, clicking her fingers,

not worrying if people saw her, if she might be too old to dance like this, to be this free to these young sounds. It felt so good to let herself go.



A couple had noticed Pete leave.

The boy mentioned how, 'He seemed disturbed and he was pretty dirty looking'.

Darcy was irritated by the comment, by the use of the word 'dirty'. He wondered why it bothered him. It wasn't like Pete Kelly's hygiene meant anything to him.

He imagined Pete at the pet food factory when the cow livers came in all warm and stinking from the abattoir. Tipping out two-ton vats of the stuff and sorting through them by hand to find the gall bladders and remove them. 'They m-make the dog food bit-bitter,' Pete had explained to him ages ago like it was something that might fascinate anyone. Pete'd stink of the stuff long after the job was done. Jobs like that and others. They all seemed to stink really. No wonder he'd flipped.

At the use of the word 'dirty' the girl had said 'Ian,' touching her boyfriend's shoulder and looking at Darcy intently. Christians: always looking at you like they had the x-ray franchise on your inner life. Sure enough... 'It felt to me as if he was looking for the Holy Spirit and could not receive it.'

The boy nodded along unconvincingly, then said 'Sally, we can't know those kinda things.' She tipped her head. Oh vanity and sacrilege. She was pretty though. Darcy had the feeling the boy had joined the God Squad because of her. 'I know Ian,' she whispered to him, though Darcy couldn't tell if this was out of real reverence or just a lover's hiss, 'sometimes though you can feel some people need Jesus more than others.'

‘What is this, the Grammy Awards?’ Darcy said. Then none too gratefully, ‘Thanks.’ They were like a young Donny and Marie Osmond, too perfect and contented by half, and he wanted to get away before they smiled at him again. They stood there offended, if not mystified by his comment.

He trudged back from The House of Light auditorium unsure of what to do next. People were everywhere, the service had ended. The sense of community was palpable and a little claustrophobic. Wasn’t Thule small enough as it was? He didn’t need or want this type of group embrace.

The snow was still coming down, sparse and confetti-like. It had been this way since the twilight had closed in, since Pete had visited him at first darkness. Part of Darcy longed for a blizzard, for a change, for it to stop, anything but this endless floating as if their lives were encased in a snow dome.

His car was beneath a street lamp, covered in a white and downy scattering. Espy sat in the passenger seat of Darcy’s old Peugeot like a thrown-away doll, disturbing those who happened to look and notice his presence, glowing there, like something submerged beneath the icy layer that had already formed on the windscreen.

Darcy opened the car door and jumped in. Espy reeled back from the blast of cold air.

‘He was here but he’s gone now. Ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago – just missed him. This young couple told me. They said they thought he was in search of the Holy Spirit.’

Espy smiled slyly. His face looked like candle wax in the shadows. ‘So this Holy Spirit guy, he’s been banging Suda too? She must have some sexy mojo going on, man.’

Now it was Darcy’s turn to be quiet.

Espy gave him a quizzical look. ‘So what we do now? Look for a guy with a tongue of fire floating over his head?’

‘We drive around I guess – see if we can spot his pick-up truck. There can’t be that many places for him to go unless he leaves town altogether.’

Espy nodded. Went to say something else then stopped.

Darcy looked across at him, wondered if they were becoming strangers to each other after all? It does all drift apart sooner or later: families, friendships, who you think you are. There’s no telling what might happen. Your world is not guaranteed. He knew that better than most. He cranked the car into life. The engine was still warm and easy to ignite. The wipers squeaked and moved the fresh snowfall, piling it towards the bottom of the windscreen and onto the bonnet where the heat would eventually melt it away.



‘The radio working?’ Espy asked pointing his chin towards it.

‘Ho, ho, ho,’ Darcy said, trying to pick up on the lost thread of humour earlier for the sake of a little camaraderie. ‘Happy Christmas.’

Darcy turned the radio on. ‘Sweet Child O’Mine’ came blaring through. Espy looked at him with mock distaste and brushed his hand away from the dial as Darcy steered the vehicle out into the street. Espy started fishing around for something else.

‘Hey, that’s a good song,’ Darcy protested.

Espy nodded blankly and continued searching the dial while Darcy moved the car along, scanning for Pete's pick-up as if it might be waiting for them as soon as they left the parking lot. It spooked him to think he might be the hunted and not the hunter.

Glitches of a horse race leapt out, 'Sweet Child O' Mine' again, then nothing but haze and static, back and forth through the inner atmosphere of the car till Espy said, 'Better to just switch it off and listen to the snow fall.'

He turned the dial again anyway, caught the DJ back announcing Guns 'N' Roses and giving a makeshift weather report – 'More snow ahead. A cold one getting colder...'

–

'What, he sticks his head out the window to tell us this?' Espy said.

The student DJ went on '...but for those of you not in luuuurv with another White Christmas, brrrr, here's something from the early '70s to remind you of the summer sun. It's the Old Man himself, Mr Neil Young, and the title track from *On the Beach*.'

'Keep it on,' Darcy said.

'O man, you think I need you to tell me *that*. I do have taste. The DJ though, o my God,' Espy rolled his eyes.

A distinct guitar sound moved in and Espy stopped speaking, signature Neil Young electric, a big leaning strum like a giant walking. Some hand drums vibrated into the mix right below it. Darcy and Espy abandoned their conversation and let themselves fall into the music. Young's voice came in, cracking with authority, a lament.

'The world is turning, I hope it don't turn away...'

Their vehicle moved slickly through the icy streets, the car humming and warm inside. A vague shimmer of engine heat drifted across the bonnet, accentuating the cold of the night outside. There was something alive about the Peugeot as it pushed its way through the night. It made Darcy suddenly exhilarated to be behind the wheel.

Espy turned the volume up even more as they slid forward. They were rocking, now. It was easy to forget where they were and what was really going on in their lives.

'All my pictures are falling from the wall where I placed them yesterday...'

The aquamarine blues of the duco shone against the white flecks of snow and grubby blacks and browns of the buildings, the candies of the neon signs. Above them sagging power lines across the main street were strung with Christmas lights that imitated stars, mimicking an evening sky they could not see and had not seen for days.

'The world is turning, I hope it don't turn away...'

There were still plenty of people about despite the temperature – despite the fact it was usually a quiet town, let alone one that was mostly gathering itself inside and at home to prepare for the next day. People had come into Thule from Milton and as far away as Boyd in the valley to hear 'the' Pastor Edward do his song-and-dance routine for God.

Those who lingered had bolstered the numbers on the street to give off the impression of a night life. Anyone else who was 'out', if that was a word to use in relation to your social life round these parts, would eventually be on their way to the Mary's Bar & Trill, which was flashing its dubious whereabouts from the other end of Winton Street. Darcy recognised plenty of student types from Milton who'd soon be at the show, a few greasers who were looking for fun, a gang of pretty girls. To be young again, he yearned for it, he always yearned for it. It was a sickness in him.

Despite the decorations and gestures to mark the season, it did not really feel like Christmas to Darcy and no one seemed joyous. Ah, maybe that was just him. His eyes. He killed everything with his eyes. Killed it, buried it like the snow that slowly covered the earth and people's homes tonight. It lay like a sheet over everything.

He looked on at the street, knowing he had become far detached from it all. These locals and strangers seemed like confused protestors to him, people who had forgotten

what they had ever come here for. Wandering around, looking for something to fill their evening with, waiting for something to happen. Wanting to live.

A guitar broke off like splinters into the cabin air. Then the music began to shimmer, liquefying Darcy's vision. Maybe everything out there was part of that other Thule he had imagined? Maybe these people were ghosts who had come over from the other side, wishing they could stay? Or had they come through some invitation, some magnetism the people of the town had brought upon themselves? The car lurked forward, but the scenery pulled backwards for a moment. Darcy felt it – a nauseating surge of contradictory momentums. Forwards, backwards.

Espy began to sing along to the music, his voice accompanying and counter-pointing that of Neil Young's. His friend's voice quavered along, similar, but almost womanly by comparison. The wipers swished and scratched at the window as snow padded and splattered down and was smeared away again.

Darcy's head cleared from whatever had spun over him as he cruised down Winton Street. A few restaurants and fast food joints and shops invited people in from the cold. Glancing down side-streets and lanes there was nothing and no one. Everything was actually thinning out, not getting busier as it had seemed. This was the town's last gasp of life before closing most of its doors.

Espy began scating and moaning along to the striding guitar. It made Darcy think of something Middle Eastern and grieving. He noticed a family ducking out of a restaurant and straight into their parked vehicle. Saw the wife smile at her husband as they guided their children into the station wagon. Darcy passed by them slowly, pretending to look for Pete but studying them intensely. Espy sighed like someone had hit him, let his voice spiral up into a moan. It was a life Darcy had known.

The music shuddered, the volume distorting the radio speakers for a moment. Large snow flakes fell in collective slow motion like a flock of white birds released. Darcy looked at Espy for a second and was tempted to say something, but anything he might say seemed superfluous. He let his words go.

Outside the people and the snow looked as if they were being scattered by the breath of the song, as if everyone and everything was moving in some strange dance, an entire world pulled into this music and breathed back out again. Espy's cries and hums, the sounds inside the car and the wind outside, the meandering life of the street in all its loneliness, binding and releasing, binding and releasing...

The rupturing beat of hand drums made it appear as if the music and the world were vibrating as one now, and Darcy felt as if the scene was beginning to slide and slip at the sides of his eyes again, parallax errors, tunnels of light, before moving itself back into something he could call a normal perspective. Parallax errors, tunnels, holes...

He listened to Espy's voice as the song seemed to ebb in intensity, then grow in power once more. A light went out at the take-away on the corner. Someone stood still in the sudden shadows. Darcy felt as if it was himself standing there, a silhouette looking to step back into a body. All of us are dying, all of us are turning into ghosts. He felt sad, sad as sad can be.

Another shudder, as if the music itself were groaning now, a piano he hadn't noticed that must have been there for a while. Espy eased his voice along with it with all. They'd left the main drag of Thule. A surge of desertion came into the car.

'Get out of town, think I'll get out of town...'

Darcy swang the Peugeot around and circled the block, then down the main street again but no sign of Pete. He looked back for the family who had piled into their old Volvo station wagon, watched their car pull out behind him, their lights flaring into his rear view mirror and igniting the interior as they grew closer. They seemed to be going too fast for the icy road; he wanted them off his tail. And yet he knew he had returned for them. That it was really them he was looking for. This family, these strangers...

'Cause the world is turning is turning. I don't wanna see it turn away...'

The guitar took off again and ascended. Their car was aflame inside from the headlights behind; the rear vision mirror shone like a violent star. For the first time Darcy was wishing the music wasn't so loud. He slowed down as they departed the main part of town again, letting the family vehicle overtake him. He caught a glimpse of a boy's face in the side window of the station wagon as it passed, a hand raised and held against the glass like a fixed farewell pressing against the pane. He nodded at the boy but did not know if the boy had seen him, and yet it meant so much to Darcy to be seen even if he did not know why.

Darcy looked forward again and saw mostly darkness as the overtaking family took a sharp right and disappeared while their own car ran beneath the last vestiges of the town lights. They continued heading out among the trees and Spartan housing towards the dull and then dead fringes of West Side, going where, he did not know. He did not know.

He felt a disturbing magic at work, trees bursting in slow shots of wind that contradicted the gentle fall of the snow drifting before him. Headlights outlining the road and the overhanging branches but also denying all trace of anything beyond. The ice beneath the wheels made him feel as if he was flying the vehicle not driving it. Everything in strange ecstasy, melting before his eyes, into streaming colours that ran from the globes of the last decorated trees at first and then on into an oily and rushing darkness as the night took hold, a oneness that was all consuming – looking into the snow and the night, falling into it, as it too seemed to fall into him, falling, falling...

He lost track of the road.

Hit a steep, long windrow of packed ice, hard and way too fast. The car skidded along, low hanging branches from nearby trees pummeling the roof and doors, till the Peugeot came to a halt almost completely on one side. Nothing then, no engine, no voices, only snow. A guitar note draining away, then a DJ's voice chirping out into the night, 'O but its cold out there tonight. Had to get an axe just to chop a hole in the air so I could go take a piss just five minutes ago...How good is that song?'



The rush had passed, thank God.

Zel felt much better for it, was just riding a nice sweet wave to the shore at last. Terry was more gone than her, but it didn't seem to be bothering him much.

'You look great.'

'So you said.' She liked hearing it from him anyway. He'd become lavish in his compliments, more fearless. The beer tasted superb. Every goddamn bubble.

'You remind me of, of – a –' Terry laughed, and said, '– a Toyota Supra.'

'What?!'

'It's a car. A really great car.'

'Stick with 'you look great' buddy!'

She pushed him hard. The both laughed, dizzy with amusement. Hands on each others shoulders for support now, they began to kiss, soft at first and then more intensely. Zel felt like she was passing through room after room of surprises.

Drugs. Was that all she needed with him to let go?

Terry was just plain stoked. I'm getting more E's for the New Year, oh yeah.

Over his shoulder Zel could see a young couple moving towards them at the bar. The girl was hard and pretty looking, a stud in her nose that caught the light. The boy has his hoodie on despite the heat of the room. There was something about their movements that caught the edge of her mind. The girl kept going straight ahead and ordered at the bar right beside her. But the boy just stopped and stood in front of her,

and she could see a smile on the bottom half of his face but not his eyes in the darkness.

She knew it was him.

The boy in the hotel room who had hit her. He kept standing there, smiling. Saying nothing. Zel froze. Terry turned. He knew something wasn't right. And when he saw the kid, half his size, he stood over him like a beast, marked his territory with a shadow. 'Looking for something?' he said but the music was loud and no one could have heard a word. It didn't matter. The boy shook his head and smiled and his girlfriend joined him as if in a ballet and they turned away, beers in hand, like jackals moving out to find other food. Terry was surprised to feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

'Who was that?'

'I don't know,' Zel said, but her arteries still had the chills running through them. She took Terry's arm and pulled her to him. She was glad to feel him close to her.



The car was so badly tilted over on its right that Darcy was almost in Espy's lap. He started to straighten himself and heard Espy groan.

'You okay?' he asked

'Yes,' Espy said in the darkness.

Darcy forced his door open but it slammed shut again with gravity. He braced himself and unclipped his seat belt. Pulled his legs out and managed to stand against the

dashboard and the other car seat without trampling on Espy. Opened his own door again and held it as he scrambled out and fell into the snow.

Darcy kept the door open while Espy clambered out as well. They stood there together in the night, a little confused. The headlights of the Peugeot beamed out on a skew. The radio was still on. They both realized it was playing Elton John's 'Your Song'.

'How romantic,' said Espy, 'you want to propose to me now?'

They both burst out laughing, a nervous release.

'What do we do?' Darcy said.

Espy looked at Darcy as if he'd gone stupid. 'Get the car back on all four wheels on the road is what we do, man. That, or *walk* back into town.'

'I gotta climb back in. Hold the door.'

Darcy hung down into the car and moved the automatic transmission from drive into neutral. He could feel Espy holding the driver's side door as well as one of his legs as if he were 'Catch of the Day'. He also heard Espy say, 'Some kind of driver you are' as Darcy flicked off the radio – that DJ's company was getting annoying.

'I lost the road,' he said as he pulled himself out. 'The snow hypnotized me.'

'Yes, I noticed.'

The two men got beside the Peugeot and pushed hard. The car bounced back onto wheels, kicking up a drift of ice into their faces. Lucky for them the windrow was packed hard and the wheels did not dig in. They stood behind the vehicle and pushed with all their might and the car rolled forward and with a bump it was back on the road. Darcy ran beside it as the car slowed to a stop and jumped in. He put it into 'Park'; put the handbrake on out of habit. Turned the transmission over. A foul noise

at first. He stopped, tried again, and smooth as a cat she purred as if nothing had ever happened.

Darcy climbed out, left the engine running, surveyed the damage as best he could in the darkness. Some scratches on his side; the front left bumper bar looked a little dinged in – but nothing serious he could see.

Espy was already opening up the back passenger door.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting my hair brush,’ he said huffily. ‘Could you turn on the interior light please, I’ve got a show tonight. And I do hate so to disappoint.’



Once Espy had re-groomed himself, the Peugeot took them back into town. Darcy drove with a fragile concentration; the way a man does after an accident. They stopped right in front of Frank’s Ristorante. Terrible food, great coffee; though they never advertised their menu in this manner it was common knowledge, even to those who worked there.

Darcy hit the gutter with a bump. Snow had covered up the edges of the curb. That was his excuse anyway. Espy let his body shake forward with more force than necessary.

He and Espy walked inside, placed their orders. Their drinks came quickly. They’d made a joke of things, but they were still a little shaken.

Espy fidgeted for a moment with his spoon. Placed the strainer over his cup; poured the tea. The fennel seeds gathered in the old copper-looking gauze. Darcy thought of panning for gold.

The two of them sat in the café on stools facing the window, looking out onto the street. His flat white and Espy's fennel tea steamed upwards into the glass.

'Fennel tea?' he said, screwing up his face.

Espy nodded. 'Try it.'

Darcy held his hand up to say no thanks.

The light in the café was subdued, yellows and blues splashing out onto the powdered sidewalk. The snow drifted and tumbled down.

It made him feel melancholic: the slowness of it, the way it fell so continually and gently, as if time itself had been slowed down. He could see through it into the frosty window of a closed milk-bar just across the road, yet another make-shift Bethlehem scene with clumsy cut out figures of donkeys and wise men, straw bales, a manger and a single gold star lit with a yellow reading lamp wrapped in foil. They must have a kid, he thought. It was a child's work, a child and an adult helping.

'So you want to tell me why are you doing this?' Espy asked once more. 'It doesn't make sense, contego. I don't get it.'

'What do you mean?' He feigned ignorance.

Espy set the seeds in the strainer down away from his cup. Asked his question again with an upturned hand – the why of it all? 'It doesn't make sense: looking for Pete like this.'

Darcy said nothing. He could hear the sound of balls clacking on a pool table in the rear of the café, looked back to see the disembodied torsos of some kids below the brim of a wide, low light.

'Talk to me contego.'

‘I don’t know...’

‘Yes you do. You’re always saying you don’t know. But it’s all going on in there, man.’

‘Then you say it for me, Espy.’

‘Nao respondem.’ Espy laughed dryly; clicked his tongue.

He changed tack, asked Darcy if he’d been doing any painting lately?

‘House painting?’ he asked wryly.

‘Real painting, man. You shouldn’t let it go. You’re too good.’

Darcy sat still for a moment then began to speak. ‘Maybe... I just can’t hack it anymore. Just the idea of trying to tune into myself – I keep coming up with negatives. Who needs it?’

Espy was garrulous at first. ‘C’mon, you’re a painter, I’m a singer. We make paintings and songs, that’s what we do. It’s what we *are*. Don’t tell me your work is too dark. Anyway, what’s dark? Rothko? Even pain can have a light in it, man...’

‘I dunno... I don’t know who I am. I can’t concentrate the energy like I used to.’

‘Of course you know who you are.’ Espy smacked his hand gently on the counter. ‘You are too hard on yourself. And if the work bothers you but is good, isn’t it better to let it go? Not keep it? You nurse it up in that work attic like... like I don’t know what. Some fucking Dorian Gray trip you are on?’

Darcy ploughed over Espy’s words. ‘Yeah, that’s right, I’m fucked up and I don’t need to go back into the process of it all anymore.’

‘And now? You don’t paint, you don’t talk to people – you may as well be living in a coffin you keep this up. C’mon man, you’re hiding from everyone, you’re hiding from yourself.’

The air around them was charged. Espy turned to him and apologized. 'I'm sorry contego. I go too far – big mouth strikes again, eh? Who am I when I get off stage?' he gestured, turning back to the window and out through it at the falling snow. 'Some has-been old club singer kidding himself...'

This time it was Darcy who sized Espy up. 'Espy – Jesus, man. You're a lot more than that.' Darcy put both his hands on the counter. 'Well the Sad Fucks Club has convened.'

What a pair they must look in the window to passers-by. Darcy wondered if Espy was so casual about going out in other towns dressed and made up the way he was tonight. Maybe Espy just wanted to stick it to the old home-town that little bit more by parading around like this on Christmas Eve.

A few other people sat in the café, stirring their drinks, talking low, laughing low. There was a quiet, almost solemn vibe and most everyone seemed consumed by their own business. People who had noticed Espy quickly returned to their conversation or their cups. Make-up or no make-up he was a local boy and everyone knew who he was. Nobody was bothering anybody but themselves here. That was Frank's to a T. It made Darcy think of Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*. The sad, isolated stillness of the lives Hopper had caught. Darcy still had a painter's mind. Espy was right. It hadn't left him. But the energy to commit to it, do something with that eye?

A crawly picked up in the wind and half hurled itself against the window with a grainy splat. Some fine speckles of snow and grit stuck to the glass.

'Somebody up there loves us,' Espy said wryly after he had jumped back, briefly startled by the explosion on the glass.

'I'm not insured,' Darcy said. It was meant to be a joke about the lashing wind and snow, but his timing was off and it landed like a line from another conversation taking place somewhere else.

The heat of the coffee machine not far behind warmed their backs and the glass in front of them. The odd rivulet of melting snow fell down in a long snaking journey

they could follow with their eyes if they cared to. The pane rattled consistently at the base with low, less violent gusts of wind.

Espy let Darcy's joke pass, if he ever caught it all. He returned to where the conversation had started, speaking quietly as if not to break something they'd only delicately established. 'You don't need to do this tonight. Maybe Zel won't like what Suda tell her, but it's ancient history – ' Espy paused. 'She has a boyfriend, you know this, yes?'

'Zel?' Darcy flinched at this information. Felt it in his stomach. He was glad Espy turned away to give him a moment to recover.

Now it was Espy who stared across the street at the milk-bar Bethlehem scene. His face was the colour of the snow that fell and lay over the road between them and the birth of Jesus. Darcy watched him go to rub his eyes, then stop himself when he realized he had his make-up on. Espy squinted. Saw his reflection in the glass, made a polishing gesture towards the face in the window: 'Oh so much better.' He blew a kiss to himself.

Darcy could see that Espy was also sizing him up in the window reflections. His own face looked knocked around from the encounter with Pete. The graze across his cheek, an obvious bruise, yeah he looked like a guy who'd been in a fight... cleaned up, but still fucked up.

Espy sang a few words under his breath for a moment. It cracked with sweetness. *Think I'll get out of town....* He smiled. It was his idea of a joke between them.

'C'mon, Zel won't hate you for whatever has happened,' he said. 'You both know what your real issue is. All that other stuff is bullshit, my friend, pain and bullshit. Your issue is each other, you got to work out how not to be together and be *friends*.'

Espy pushed the last word out just as the coffee machine hissed with steam. Now Darcy was the one to look away, to the wall. As if the brickwork, a picture of Naples and a chalkboard menu in Italian could offer up the answer to life's deepest and most complex questions.

‘It’s not anybody’s fault.’

Espy was reaching out to him. Darcy didn’t say anything.

‘So?’

‘Jesus man what are you, the C.I.A.?’ Darcy put his hand to his forehead like he had a headache. ‘Okay. Fuck... Sorry.’

Espy didn’t know the *half* of the mess he was in. Darcy was not sure of what that mess was himself; if that mess was even for real? He’d kept pushing the idea of whose father he might be away and it kept returning to him. He could not believe it; he did not believe it. It was a lie. But it wasn’t the only reason he was out here.

‘I guess... I guess I feel I owe Pete,’ he said. The words did not come from any thought process. Instead they sprang directly from some place within Darcy that he could not name. As if he were hardly speaking them at all, as if he were listening to someone he used to be. ‘Izzy and Sarah, what happened. I dunno. I can’t let him slide away. I can’t throw him to the dogs.’

‘Even though you were the one who called the police? Ave Maria.’ Espy shook his head.

‘I just didn’t think things through properly.’

‘So now you want to save him? This guy who wants to kill you?’

Darcy laughed awkwardly. ‘I don’t know about ‘save him’. I don’t know if he wants to kill me either. I don’t think he does. He got his pound of flesh outta me earlier. I just owe him Espy, I do. I know that seems crazy, but I owe him.’



‘Oh Jesus it’s you.’

‘S-Suda?’

‘Yes! Pete I’ve been trying to call you for hours.’

A silence ensued. Suda could hear the wind rushing through the pick-up, hear the vibrations, hear some music straining out of the car stereo.

‘Pete... Pete?’

‘S-Suda?’

‘Are you okay baby?’

She felt as if she were inside the vehicle with him. The velocity of it raced through her ears, washed around her head as she listened intently. An awful feeling of emptiness came over her, a feeling for Pete’s aloneness as he drove along.

‘Please Pete, answer me baby. Say something.’

‘I’m h-here. I’m - here.’

She heard him crank the gears down, heard him say, ‘It’s snowing.’ Heard ‘Moon River’ begin to play, realised he was listening to that stupid Andy Williams tape of his, then the noise began to evaporate until all that was left was a gentle silence on the line and the sound of Pete’s breathing, catchy and uneasy, as if he had been crying.

‘Pete. Pete, sweetie, are you okay?’

She listened. Waited. He had stopped the truck somewhere. She could hear his breathing, his movement, or maybe it was the wind again.

‘Pete I’m here at home baby. Just come home. I love you. There’s nothing going on between me ‘n’ Darcy. Nothing. We just talk sometimes. I shouldn’t have said that

stuff. I was angry with you for hitting me, baby. It's not true. Not a word of it. You're her father, you always have been...'

She started to cry. She heard him cry too.

'I sent Darcy and Espy out to look for you. Everyone's worried about you. I'm here Pete. Just come home please...'

"That'd b-be nice,' he said vacantly, as if he were not quite connecting with her again.

Suda had to stop a flood of tears gushing through her. The last year or so she'd felt him turning back into a child, a strange child to whom she played strange mother.

'Oh it would make me so happy to see you Pete. We can talk about everything. I'm so sorry. I was stupid – you know the dumb things I say when I'm angry. We both do dumb things – '

'Can I- w-wa walk?'

'Walk?'

'Y-yyeah. I want to – walk. It's s-ssnowing.'

'Where are you?'

'H-Hopkkkirk Street. The car is h-hurting me Suda. I d-don't like it anymore.'

'Hurting you?' Suda was searching for what to say. He was scaring her. He didn't seem to be responding to what she had said about Izzy. It was as if he had unplugged. She knew this vacancy in him and how heavily it could descend.

'You can just park the car, baby. Walk if that's how you feel. It's not far. Fifteen minutes, that's all, and you'll be home. Home with me. It's a hop, skip and a jump. Are you warm enough? It's very cold.'

‘It’s snowing. I see it – se- see it coming down.’

Pete’s voice seemed even further away from her. She touched the back of her neck, leant into the receiver. ‘Just come home Pete.’ Suda began to sob again, but she muffled her tears so that Pete could not hear them. Don’t let him hear anymore of my tears.

‘Just come home.’

The connection died. There was no one there any more.

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He wished he could talk to his girls; feel them near him. Kiss Soraya goodnight and fly to Heaven to be with Isabel. To brush his lost daughter’s hair again, and feel his hand again upon her shoulder. To see Isabel hold Soraya. It was an imaginary happiness. A dream born in the blood.

Pete sat in the cabin, thinking about Jesus might save him. About the way he walked across water and how he died for everyone’s sins. How he had died a criminal’s death, in the place of the skull. The weight of the greatest story ever told pressed in upon him. He was a criminal on a cross; he knew the skull. Pete was suddenly very tired, as if his own skull were pressing sleep into him. His head tipped forward. There was a darkness and it took him.

His headlights were still on even though the pick-up had stopped. They shone out till they exhausted themselves in the middle distance. A carload of teenagers passing in the opposite direction saw a man asleep at the wheel as they caught him in the snapshot of their lights. They blew their horn long and hard.

It was these headlights and the horn that woke Pete again into a bright clamoring. The emanation dissolved as he looked up and could see clear down Hopkirk Street to the corner of Dubus, before the snow and mist and darkness ate it up. It was as if his world were no more than an island.

To his right, between the trees, the park was deserted. The ground was white, God's sleeping frosty breath. He felt he must enter into this breathing white world. Took off his jacket. Bent down and began taking off his boots and then his socks. Hummed. Little fragments of a tune, though he did not know what the tune was.

Twinkle twinkle little star... It was in the back of his head like a memory that wasn't whole, like the flakes of falling snow. All he understood was that the music took him back to Izzy when she was young and he would sing it to her and how tiny her hands were in his, how in winters like these she put those tiny hands in his to have them warmed. Time to go to sleep my love. *How I wonder...* Later he'd sung the same song to Soraya. It made him tremble. He saw that he needed to get back to his baby daughter.

He opened the door. The wind hit him and threw snow against his clothes with a splat. His feet touched the ground and for a moment they burnt. He gasped for a second. Then the pain was gone and he began to walk.

His cell phone rang, but it lay on the dashboard, vibrating beneath the window like a castaway stone in a pond. Its ripples went silent.



Espy put his hand on his. 'What you so afraid to talk about?'

Darcy was uneasy with this sign of affection. Espy moved his hand away, patting Darcy's shoulder before withdrawing altogether. 'You can say anything to me Darcy. I won't condemn you. I have lived a lot of lives too, you know. Por favor.'

It was even harder to speak now. Darcy felt the emotion rising; then it was as if a fist were being released from around his neck. As if he was breathing for the first time in

ages. His mind slid into his memories. He wasn't sure if he was speaking at all. Espy seemed to absorb it nonetheless.

Darcy saw the girls at the morgue, Sarah and Izzy, each on a table of their own, as if they were levitating. The refrigerated hum of the room, the blue tinted light, the numbered metal lockers nearby, the white sheets peeled back to show their faces. Pete stoic but hunched, Suda with one hand to her mouth. The way Zel moved the sheet back and reached to touch Sarah's shoulder blade, thin and fine as a quill.

The washing and the dressing of the bodies in preparation for the undertaker's arrival in a few hours, the fresh clothes they had brought. Sarah's favourite jeans and shoes, the top she had wanted for Christmas that Zel had not found the time to buy until now. The sound of their shoes on the linoleum floor, small fragments of communication, 'thank you', 'there', a nod, a weak smile, as the two couples went about their business.

He zipping Sarah's pink windcheater up to her chest. Zel re-positioning the silver star and chain she had made neatly around Sarah's neck before finally placing Sarah's lucky penny into her jean pocket.

Darcy had dropped the penny only a moment before. It had rolled and shivered to a stop on the floor. Pete had bent down and picked it up, and with a smile placed it neatly and softly into the palm of Darcy's hand. They had looked into each other's eyes for a second. Darcy had given the coin then to Zel, who was waiting to receive it.

They all carried on. The long beginnings of a funeral march, step by step.

Snow and grit lashed at the window once more. Darcy and Espy looked up out into the street. Shadows stretched and wavered as a light began to roll and flicker and brighten.

Something was burning.



‘Please God,’ Suda said as she put her beanie and parka and boots on.

Praying on her feet, reciting a Koranic verse she remembered from her childhood, too agitated and ashamed to hold her hands together, but willing to try if she thought it would really make a difference: ‘Verily we are God's, and to Him shall we return.’

Faith and faithlessness mingled inside her like oil on water. Who might hear her? Who could she turn to? Her mother's image hung over her like a dark bird, an admonishing silence.

She scribbled Pete a note in black texta on a sheet of paper, the wet plastic smell of the texta repulsing her as she wrote, as if she were struggling with something toxic that was already overpowering her.

Big block letters so he couldn't miss it:

‘WAIT FOR ME HERE SWEETIE IF YOU GET BACK HERE FIRST! THOUGHT I'D TRY MEETING YOU ON DUBUS AVENUE. I LOVE YOU. STAY HERE. WAIT FOR ME!’

She signed it with her name and drew a misshapen heart below. Laid the note on the dining room table, held it down with a framed photo of the two of them on a holiday when they were young. She was four months pregnant with Izzy and she was in love with Pete all over again after his time in jail. She still loved him now in her own way. It was a terrible thing to feel, to remember, to see the man in the photo and sense him like some creature hiding in a shell tonight.

She opened the door of Soraya's room a fraction. Smelt that milky smell. Went to her and knelt down and listened to her breath. The deep, placid sleep of an angel. Suda kissed her very softly on the forehead. Watched her sucking absently on her dummy

as she turned on her side. She went out of the room on cat's feet. Soraya would be fine.

She took her cell phone from the side table near the door. Tried calling Pete again, but the signal was out. Same thing when she tried texting Darcy. Then she popped the dead phone in her pocket, hoped it might come alive as she walked, headed out the door, careful to leave it unlocked.

Suda had the awful sense that everything was going wrong and moving faster than she could keep up with. That she was caught in a blizzard of things that no longer gave her any sense of where to go, what to do. She wanted to run but she was frightened this action would unleash the blizzard of her fears with an even greater intensity. That the worst would come even faster towards her as she moved. But oh how she wanted to run. And soon, of course, out there in the cold white street, she could not stop herself and run she did.



‘What’s happening?’

Darcy and Espy were on the sidewalk. Flames raged from the local mall. The town fire-truck was already on the scene, smoke billowing beneath the water hoses and falling snow. A crowd had formed, if you could call twelve or so people a crowd.

An old woman in an orange tracksuit staggered across the road supporting an even drunker guy with red pants and a red hat and black boots. ‘It’s Drunk Santa,’ she called. ‘He saw it all.’

‘Fugging kids,’ he said, waving his hands around at anyone who might listen.

A cop came after them, grabbed Drunk Santa by the white tail of his red coat. 'Back this way mister. We haven't finished getting your *statement* yet.' The old lady went with him as if there were Siamese twins.

Espy raised an eyebrow, looked over at the Peugeot.

Darcy checked his watch. It was close to 11 o'clock. He knew Espy could not stay with him much longer and there wasn't much point anyway.

They piled into the Peugeot again, detouring around the block and the fire. 'Quite a blaze,' Espy observed, face to the window. 'No Boxing Day Sales this year.'

Darcy felt their repartee was failing again. One minute it had been fine; then it seemed as if they were just acting their old selves, trying to climb back into old ways. He wished they could settle on their intimacy, but it was elusive and kept slipping away.

'Some kind of wild juju going down in Thule tonight,' Espy said.

'Some kinda something,' he agreed.

The car park of the Mary's Bar & Trill was full. Espy directed him to a loading bay beside the band's P.A. truck. 'Come in.'

Darcy shook his head. 'I better keep looking.'

'For all you know he could be in here. You did say he liked me.'

Doubtful – but what did he know for sure? It'd fit, the two of them looking everywhere but the most obvious place in town, Pete at the bar slinging back whiskies and saying his Our Fathers and Hail Marys when they walked in. A few high fives, a last round of drinks, then home. God rest ye merry gentlemen. Wouldn't that be nice?

He didn't see Pete's pick-up, a mother of a thing and easy to spot, out on the street or here in the car park. But that didn't mean much. He shifted in his seat, weighing things up. What else was there to do, but go round town in circles? What difference would one drink make to the whole stupid evening?

‘Come on,’ Espy said. ‘Nao ha pressa. I buy you a drink, and you can be on your way like that,’ he snapped his fingers. ‘It’ll warm you up better than coffee, contego.’

Espy led him in via the service door. A bouncer nodded to them both. The band room was deserted, apart from a pile of equipment and the female keyboardist for The Black Wings, who these days liked to call herself ‘Julianne Jewels’. Her head was shaven, a provocation against her formerly good if somewhat masculine looks. She wore an orange jumpsuit; Darcy thought of the old lady with Santa back at the fire. Julianne said ‘Hello Mr Horta,’ in an amused way, nodded to Darcy like he was barely there, went back to fiddling with her leads.

Seeing Julianne Jewels made Darcy realize how important it was for Espy and the rest of the group to imagine they were stars. Their lives were in Thule, Milton and Boyd, spread out over a hundred miles of nowhere, but they were trying to dream themselves free of the whole damned place. Darcy felt envious, chastised himself for his own fearful, unchanging nature. He was in a limbo of his own making.

Espy took a peek through the curtains. ‘Zel’s out there with her new man.’

Darcy’s body took a hit of nerves. He went to the curtain and looked. Zel was by the bar, laughing with a bear of a guy. He hadn’t expected him to look like that. Thought she’d lock on to a buffed-up lawyer, or someone slicker, and slimier with money; or that they might lock on to her. Perhaps it had been a spiteful fantasy of his to think of her love life heading that way. She looked happy and it made him feel oddly happy for her, even as it saddened him too, made his heart bleed.

‘What’s he like?’ Darcy turned and asked, cocking his thumb back towards the room, acting casual. He heard his own voice, it sounded weak. Julianne Jewels kept tooling away at her keyboard, making off-key organ sounds. He wanted her to go away but she simply ignored them both and stayed where she was. She had the switched-off energy of someone used to sharing unnecessary intimate space with others and opting to occupy her own field entirely. There was nonetheless a light element of sarcasm to her fiddling, as if she was punctuating their conversation with the odd, sour note to annoy Darcy if not Espy as well.

Espy appeared to think about his question for a second. 'He's friendly. Not exactly comfortable with gay men. Terrible taste in music! Decent enough. He likes Zel, I see that. He's a good friend for her to have. I think you might even like him,' he added.

Darcy nodded his head. There was a hint of jealousy showing, fear, mixed emotions - he couldn't help it.

Espy poured them both a vodka and lime. 'Gelo?'

Darcy looked at the ice. 'No, I've had enough of that outside.'

He took the drink. 'Maybe I'll go say hi. I probably won't come back through here. I still gotta find Pete. I'm really sorry I can't stay for the show... Look Espy - thanks - for tonight, for everything...'

'For nothing?' Espy said.

Darcy nodded, smiled.

Espy put his hand on Darcy's arm and stopped him from straining to say more. 'Nao foi nada. You and Zel have a nice hello. You've seen me sing a hundred times. No problem. And look at me, here, as guaranteed, too beautiful, eh?' He picked his brush up with a flourish and dragged it through his hair

They laughed but the laughter was so light it felt as if it could disappear before it started. Darcy sensed their friendship in all its fragility. It was what he had been sensing all night, mistaking it for something finite rather than flowing. Nothing was certain; nothing was lost.

'Tell Zel to come back after the show. I love to see her. And you be careful, huh?'

'Sure,' Darcy said, moving to the stage door.

He felt for a second as if Espy had not let him go, that they were still 'best friends' after all. As he went to close the door, warm with this intuition, he caught the darkness in Espy's gaze and a final call from his friend in Portuguese: 'Ate logo, contego. Ate breve.'



Zel turned around. Saw him coming out the side stage door. Darcy.

Terry followed her eyes. Shit. The ex is here. He could tell from the look on Zel's face and the family photo he'd seen tucked away on a bookshelf at her unit. First that creepy kid and now the husband: some date this was turning out to be. Being full of pills on an icy road was easier work than this. He knocked the back of his hand against hers twice, raised his beer to hers with a clink and moved away to give them space. The way he and Zel moved so neatly and instinctively together surprised him, made him happy. Maybe they had a wavelength going on after all.

Darcy saw Terry walking away, presumed he was going for piss. Hoped he would have time to talk with Zel alone and then get moving. Make it short and sweet.

She leaned back on to the bar and watched him approach. In her pale blue, straight leg jeans she reminded him of a horse: coltish, proud, a little unstable but valuable, something fast and worth having. He guessed it was the cowgirl look to her stance, the way she held her Corona. Yeah, it made him think of horses and it made him think of when they first connected. Just like this, pretty much, in a bar like this, ages ago, with the same thoughts in his head. Lucinda Williams' 'Passionate Kisses' on the afternoon jukebox: their first dance hidden in the rhythms of just standing there talking.

'Hi.'

He was nervous, but as opening lines go it was all he had.

'Hey.' Zel felt surprisingly relaxed; the 'E' was still running its kinetic warm grains through her, but its dominance had faded. She had wished she was straight when she

spied Darcy, but this was okay. She felt in control, the rush had passed. The bar at her back felt good, reassuringly firm as she stood propped against it. ‘How you doing?’

‘Good, good,’ Darcy lied. Then, gesturing, ‘Got yourself a boyfriend?’

‘Yeah,’ she repeated, licking the beer from her lips, trying to let Darcy into her situation somehow. Not wanting to seem resistant to him – or like she was throwing the new boyfriend in his face either. She wondered when she’d got so tender towards Darcy? Thought about the ‘E’ she’d had and the night with Terry and something shifting in her, about what was artificial and what was genuine in this realm she called her feelings.

‘We’ve been seeing each other for a few months.’ Zel took a swig of her Corona, tasted the lime on lip of the bottle as the beer passed by it. She tried not to let Darcy see her watching him as she pulled the bottle away and took a quick estimate of his emotions. He was always such a bundle of shadows to catch on the move. Zel thought he still looked handsome, but run down and pretty wild with his hair and a bit of a beard too. Not shaving, not caring. She kinda liked it; understood it anyway. In the half light she saw after a while that he had hurt his face, thought better of asking about it. She was still busy trying to explain Terry to herself as much as him.

‘He drives trucks for the cannery. Met him at the truck stop where I work, would you believe?’

She knew Terry didn’t seem her type, but she didn’t want to appear like she was apologizing for him either. A lot of women would say Terry was handsome, in a mountain man kinda way. Why should she be embarrassed? It was all too weird, she felt like she was stumbling out a resume for him.

The music boomed over them as they kept leaning in to communicate with each other. It forced them into an oddly proximate intimacy. Zel moved back slightly after each time she spoke, as if her words might hurt Darcy if she stayed too close to him.

‘Terry.’ Darcy belatedly took the name in. ‘I’m really happy for you Zelda. That’s great. Great.’ He feared it was coming out more hollow than he intended.

‘Thanks.’ She felt the full sound of her own name. It hit her in the heart. God, when had he last used her full name?

She half-turned, put her beer on the bar. Darcy caught her profile, her hair swinging across her cheek, remembered how mad he’d been for the very sight of her when they met.

‘You seeing anyone?’ she asked, turning back to him, drawing her hair clear of her face. Those stone green of her eyes upon him. Sarah’s eyes.

‘Nah.’ Darcy was embarrassed. He felt like some aging roué as he tried to explain himself. ‘Seen a few people, but you know what it’s like in Thule.’ There was another lull. ‘No one special,’ he added. He shrugged his shoulders like he didn’t care, like being solo suited him.

She nodded. It frightened him she might know about Suda.

Everything was minimal, but gentle between them – despite the awkwardness, despite the volume of the dance music too. Darcy looked back across Zel’s shoulders. Saw Terry coming out of the toilets and ambling across the dance floor. Terry moved his right hand to his side but Darcy was surprised to see he was missing a middle finger. It was not something he had time to dwell on. He wanted to get away but he knew in a second that he had no hope of making an escape.

Terry came up to them, feeling like an outsider, big time. What am I gonna do here? His size made him loom over them, like some spare wheel was how he felt. He was one of those guys who could be too big even for himself some times. Well shit, here I am.

Zel put her arm around Terry’s waist, which totally surprised him. ‘Terry, this is my ex. Darcy,’ she gestured, ‘this is Terry.’

The two men went to shake hands. Darcy felt he like was being gripped by a vice. He was immediately aware of the missing finger, of acting as if nothing was wrong. Terry knew it threw people. In a way it was the test of a real man, especially if they had noticed it before he had shaken hands with them and they went ahead and shook

it anyway. Sometimes he liked the way it made people feel uncomfortable. He gave it a rub with his thumb afterwards, searching for his own thoughts, as if it were a thermometer of the encounter.

Darcy recovered without a flicker. He got a good vibe off Terry. Terry got the same feeling as he stood there. Maybe it would all be okay.

‘Well,’ said Darcy, as they all shuffled about and the music thumped along. ‘I gotta be on my way.’ He pointed to the Exit in case they hadn’t heard properly.

‘What?’ Zel acted surprised but she was relieved. ‘Aren’t you staying for the show?’ She took another swig of her beer, got paranoid Darcy might think she was hitting the piss again.

But he didn’t think that at all, not at all. She’s happy. I guess I must be happy for her. He smiled at her, right into her eyes. Tried to shoot some joy her way without a word.

‘Nah. I got something on. Espy said for you to come backstage and say hi afterwards. He’s keen to see you.’

Darcy rushed the last few words. Lifted his hand in goodbye and started to turn. Zel raised her hand back at him, leant forward and gave him a clumsy pat on the arm. Terry nodded, polite. Zel took Terry’s hand and held it. They were really together tonight. Wow.

As Darcy moved back out into the street and the night, it was as if a more humane and noisy darkness were behind him, back inside the club, and that some other universe was waiting for him out here, shifting and yet to find a shape in all its blackness and whiteness and silence.



Pete moved across the park like a sleep walker. He had a feeling he might sink and drown, and that only by putting his faith in Jesus could he stay upon the surface. He looked down into the snow and saw fish moving, gold and silver and blue, as if in a sea of milk.

The trees blew in the wind, shooshed and roared. He glanced back to the road; saw the interior light of his utility, the door left wide open. Turned around and faced forward. Stepped once and stepped again and then again with care. It did not take long to cross the white waters and reach Dubus Avenue. The fish faded from his eyes.

A police car ripped by, blue lights jittering, though Pete heard no sound at all, as if he had entered a silent film. It was traveling towards town and the amber flicker of a large fire pushing smoke upwards against the falling snow. Pete could see the shine of it reflected in the low sky, the way it beat like a sacred heart amid the clouds.

To his left was the walk home, not that far, *not that far*. And so he began his steady pacing again. Looking back for a moment at his footsteps – and then at a vision of himself walking towards himself across those recent steps, then above at the intermittent trees lined with fairy lights. Feeling the snow as it cold-kissed his face, as his old self and his new self merged.

A figure moved out from the cover of the trees. 'Izzy.' The apparition smiled and moved towards him. She held a cell phone in their hand, with an image he could not make out, and this was offered up to him as a vision. The hand holding the phone was gloved, and Pete thought again of Izzy's slender hand as he bent to see what he was being shown.

It was then a sharpened screwdriver struck him, tearing across his jaw. The angel cursed as she went at him again, this time landing the edge into the side of his neck, catching and tangling it on his jacket. Pete knocked her arm away and the screwdriver flew to the ground. Figures flapped around him, shadow shapes shouting.

One had a piece of wood, a frozen tree branch. He felt it as soon as he saw it. The blow sent him sprawling to the ground. Pete stumbled half way back to his feet.

Grabbed at the wood as it lay now on the ground, swinging it wildly back, hitting one of the figures across the legs with a dull bone crack.

He lost his own footing and was on the ground again. Tasted blood. Felt kicks upon kicks upon punches. Someone picked up the wood again and began to work on him, grunting as they chopped it down over his back. He heard laughter. Laughter. Reached for the gun in his waist belt and went to rise, but a sharp pain went through his shoulder blade and a spasm took the movement away.

He heard the angel's voice shouting 'Keep going!' as he crawled now, falling forward onto his face, shivering and warm as both heat and cold rinsed through him. The gun lay on the ground, unnoticed. The snow was thick in the air, falling like the heavy pages of a giant book that had been torn to pieces around them.

Pete tried to use an arm to raise himself, but the limb dangled and flopped. Instead of raising himself up he quivered and rolled around onto his back like a cockroach. He managed to lurch to one side and lift his head, half sitting, half-rocking as he continued to struggle for his feet.

Figures were in a scattered circle around him. As he looked up at them he saw his angel's face – 'Izzy,' he said – but her smile fell like a final page of snow across his eyes and he felt the tip of a boot again, forcing his head backwards in a single motion that snapped his neck and would take him at last into a white and endless sea.



Darcy checked his cell phone, no reception. He drove through town one more time, then started heading towards home. Maybe Pete had gone back to Suda's, maybe he was safe and warm with his wife while he was the sucker still out here chasing shadows in the cold.

It was on Winton Street that he saw Pete's pick-up truck, the driver's door wide open, headlights drinking in the night. He stopped his car, left the engine on. Leapt out.

There was no one to be seen. The park was covered in white sheets and icy drifts, undulations like small suspended waves, the wet rustle of the trees enhancing the oceanic and muffled weight of everything around him. The snow was starting to come down heavier now and the world seemed to be caught behind an ever thickening veil.

Darcy thought he heard shouts in the distance, but the sounds were fuzzy and hard to discern. He thought about walking into that park and its shadows towards the noise, the black whiteness or white blackness of it. It was not a thought that gave him pleasure.

He leant into the pick-up, began to pull the keys out of the ignition, jumped up bolt straight and ready for a fight when he thought he heard a cracking sound and a thud behind him. It was just the bough of a tree above, the weight of some gathered snow as it slid to the ground.

Darcy pushed the door shut, locked it. Wondered what had made Pete leave the pick-up? What was going on in his mind, how it worked... if his mind worked at all?

He looked around, leapt back into his own car gratefully. Slammed the door shut, locked it. He was more frightened than he cared to admit. Now what to do? He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. He'd hoped to deal with Pete at the House of Light, with people around, with Espy to back him up. Not alone, not out here.

Darcy touched the side of his face. His tooth was okay but his jaw ached again. The Nurofen was wearing off, or maybe the cold was bothering it. Darcy raked through his glove-box for a first aid kit; nothing but a few band aids, maps, rego'.

He got out the car, opened Pete's pick-up again, pulled at the glove-box. Half the contents fell out on the floor: chocolate wrappers, pens, work gloves, a coffee-stained well-thumbed Gideon's, a half skinned tennis ball, a crushed pirate mask. And, wonder of wonders, an old Panadeine Fort prescription of Suda's. Out of date. He popped the foil anyway, shoved it in his mouth, scooped up some clean snow. It melted and washed the bitter taste of the tablet away. He thought he heard the sounds

of people shouting again. But it died on the wind, or was swallowed by it, a part of the general sighing and shuddering of the trees, the silencing snow.

Locking his car, Darcy took a breath and set off into the park in the direction of the sounds. They ebbed and flowed across the way as he walked, but he became certain a group of people were ahead. He did not know why, but he began to run towards whatever was happening.

As he emerged from the trees onto Dubus Avenue the snow made him feel as if he was peering through a thick curtain onto a stage, as if audience to something he was not a part of. Up ahead he could see a group of people gathered round Pete, who was half on his feet and trying to rise. One of them swung a lump of wood and the charge of it to Pete's shoulder and arm was visibly crunching as it knocked him sprawling face forward into the snow.

They were all over him like birds feeding on a carcass, but Darcy noticed one of them standing back. He realized they had a cell phone held high. The figure filming the scene passed the cell phone to someone else, and as Pete tried to stand again they calmly placed a bone-cracking kick below his jaw.

Darcy was almost on top of them now. He could hear them laughing and cursing; it was as if he'd stumbled on an orgy. They were so caught up in the kill they hadn't noticed him approaching, had not heard his steps on the snow, if such a thing could be heard tonight. As one of them turned around Darcy landed a punch with all his might square in the face of what he was stunned to see was a teenage boy of about 15 years of age. The physical lightness of the boy, the force of Darcy's punch, flattened him and his face was instantly covered in blood. He was out cold.

The others turned and fled as soon as they saw this, back into the park. Darcy felt slow and cumbersome, but he caught the arm of the one who had kicked at Pete's head and swung them violently to the ground. It sounded like he might have snapped their arm as he did this, but Darcy had no regrets about the force he was using, knew he was doing it on purpose. Again he was to be horribly surprised. As they hit the ground and screamed, the thin, high peak of their voice and the slipping off a hood revealed a teenage girl before him, crying and cursing and staring back into his eyes.



The girl reached over to her injured arm and shouted at Darcy that he was *a cunt* and that she'd *fix him* forever. She tried scrambling to her feet but Darcy pushed her straight back on her arse. He looked up and saw vehicles coming down both sides of Dubus Avenue, then at her face, sweet and poxy like a cheap candy bar. Her eyes were black as berries. She called him a cunt again, *ya cunt*, and kicked hard at his shin and got him good and tried to stand as he reacted to the pain.

Darcy landed a punch square into the centre of her face and she fell back grunting and blubbering as her nose shed blood over her lips. For a second he wanted to continue hitting her until he had exterminated her, but his rage had abated with a single blow.

The vehicle heading into town pulled over first as Darcy scrambled over to Pete. He knelt beside him, leant down. Pete's lips were moving. He was alive. Darcy felt Pete's fingers binding with his in the snow. He was saying something.

Darcy said 'Pete...'

Pete's lips kept moving. No sound at all.

He heard a breath strain in Pete's mouth as if it had come raking through every one of his body to get out. 'Isabel.'

Darcy then felt presences near him, was stunned to look up and see Dr Ursula Eletea. She looked just as surprised to see him. A man in a suit was beside her, their car behind them, doors open, engine idling.

The scene was lit brightly now. More headlights from an oncoming police car, one, then two, very quickly, with spot lights flooding from their roofs. Darcy could see a blood-tipped screwdriver lying in the snow not far from where Pete lay. Pete's gun on

the ground too, another few feet away, half covered in snow, the same one that had been in his mouth only a few hours earlier. His vision came back to him, and he knew Pete was a dead man, though he saw no spirit rising now.

Cops were rushing around them, asking questions, dragging the two kids to their vehicles. The first one he'd punched was still out to it; the girl was screaming 'that cunt hit us! He attacked us! All of us!' They gave her a handkerchief for her bloody nose as she grizzled and snarled. Her voice was like something scraping across a blackboard till one of the cops told her to shut her mouth and started reading her rights.



Suda felt something inside her plummet as the scene took shape through the falling snow. Figures silhouetted and puppet-like in the light; cops at work amid white sharp spots and rotating flickers of blue; Darcy standing with a tall, poised woman and another man in a suit while someone was on their knees over a body, giving CPR.

It was Pete. Suda knew it straight away, even without being able to see him. She could make out his clothes, a hand raised upward like he was holding a cup, oh my God, his feet – they're bare.

As she got closer and came around them all she could see Pete more clearly, snow icing his face. The kneeling man looked up at Darcy; it was all over. Darcy looked at Suda, unable to say anything as she approached, carrying the story to her in a glance.

She began to hyperventilate. There was a sensation of something hard in her chest, her legs falling away. Suda was on her knees beside Pete. Her hands fluttered over his body like a butterfly unable to land. Till she touched his bare feet. 'His feet. Oh his feet, his feet...'

She buried her face into Pete's chest, pulling at his shirt, then putting her cheek beside his face, his blood drawing into her hair as if it were a frayed bandage. Suda kissed him, begged him to wake up, to come back, then she lay across him and dug her fingers into the snowy ground.

Darcy, Dr Eletea, her husband, the police... they all looked on. Darcy remembered Zel's cries for Sarah, the way it had been three years ago.

The cop who had been giving Pete mouth-to-mouth bent down again gently and pulled Suda to her feet, her clothes, her hair, sticky and wet. Another cop grabbed Darcy's arm and led him away. A process was now in play. What *exactly* had happened, what he was doing there, did he know who the victim was, how were they connected, how many attackers were there, could he give any descriptions?

Suda was taken to a parked patrol car. A policewoman sat with her, but they did not seem to be speaking. Darcy looked over the interrogating officer's shoulder, dealing with his questions automatically. As Darcy answered these questions another police car pulled up with three teenagers. All three were piled in the back and handcuffed, crying but for one, who was dull faced, glaring out from his hoody like an angry priest within some occult darkness. Of the other two, one looked not much older than thirteen now that his hoody was pulled back; the other was the fat boy of the gang, maybe sixteen, a blubberer.

A young officer got out of the patrol car while his partner leaned over and looked back at the gang smiling. With one hand on the door he stood and called to the officer questioning Darcy. 'Got 'em all on the other side of the park... the fat one was limping so bad he couldn't wait to come to mama and weep.'

Darcy learnt from the police conversations and the questions he was being asked that the gang had been operating for months. As the two cops conferred he eavesdropped. The two crying boys, 'Fatso' and 'the Baby', had told the arresting officers went out 'happy slapping', bashing people for fun. 'Chantel' would film it on her cell phone then they would all go back to her house and watch it and get drunk, till she and the older boy, 'the douche bag in the hoody', would get excited and have sex in front of them. No one knew yet where any of the parents were. "Westside trash.'

They'd travel to other towns like Milton for fun then piss off. Tonight they'd just gone on a bigger spree than usual, and on their home turf. Overconfidence, the holiday season... who knew what drove them on? 'Musta thought they were invincible. Or just too fucked up to care.'

'We got the film on their camera,' said the cooler interviewing cop. 'There's a witness to the fire too. Not very solid, a drunk dressed up as Santa. A few cars trashed, house windows smashed...' He was running down a list. Someone else had been bashed in Milton much earlier in the night. The kids had filmed it, gone home, watched it, got drunker, and gone out hunting for more thrills. 'Sick,' said one of the cops. They were all talking. Incidents and laughter spilled across the snow like war vets reminiscing after a big fight.

An older cop emerged out of nowhere, zipping his fingers across his lips as he spoke. 'Just do your job – everyone!'

The older cop looked over at him, knew who Darcy was straightaway. 'What's the deceased's name,' he called to the officer who had seemed in charge up till now. 'Peter Kelly, Captain.' He nodded, said nothing, but the Captain knew who Pete Kelly was too. He'd been in charge the day they lost Sarah and Izzy. A day you don't forget.

The Captain gestured to Darcy and pulled him aside.

'You phoned a report in earlier.'

'Yes.'

He asked Darcy what had happened. Captain Raymond Selt. Darcy remembered him too. The calm about him, the steel... He told him a simple version of the truth: that Pete was his neighbour; that he'd been having a breakdown; that his wife was worried and had asked him to find him. That despite a run-in with Pete this was why he was out here, crazy at all seemed. The old policeman took a few notes; seemed underwhelmed by Darcy's version of events.

‘There’s a few gaps in there I might need to know about, but it won’t matter to this investigation for now Mr Travers. Go home,’ he said. ‘If we need you we’ll be in touch.’

‘What?’

‘Go home. We don’t need you. And if we do, we’ll call.’ Then as an afterthought that came on like a warning: ‘You’re not planning holidays are you?’

‘No. Maybe. If I go anywhere my wife will know exactly where I am.’

‘Mrs Zelda Travers.’

‘Yeah,’ Darcy said. A little uneasy with the cop’s good memory for names – ‘She works at the Crossroads...’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen here there filling up. Okay.’

Darcy was dismissed. The old man was helping him out. Darcy didn’t quite know how to accept it. The Captain just turned his back and set to work among his officers.



Dr Eletea and her husband walked over to Darcy while he stood for a moment and watched the police cordon off the scene. Tape flittering, snow burying the traces of it all minute by minute, Pete’s body still laying there like something spilled from a garbage pail. A photographer was busily trying to get it all recorded, while somebody else with gloves followed her around with plastic envelopes, a bag and a blue bin, picking up the screwdriver, the gun, various samples of bloody ice, the medieval piece of wood.

‘Can we give you a lift home?’ Dr Eletea asked.

Darcy was trembling a little. 'No, no – my car is just across the park.'

Dr Eletea looked at him skeptically. 'We were going to Mary's Bar,' she gestured up the road. 'Are you sure you are able to drive? Maybe you should let us take you home? We don't mind at all. We'd be glad to –'

'Home?' That wasn't where he wanted to be. Not after all this. He needed to feel the heat of a few human beings around him. He wanted a drink too, a whisky, badly.

'Mary's Bar?' It had a gravity that was pulling him back.

Dr Eletea's husband studied him, his eyes like fine instruments calibrating his state of being. 'This is Jim,' she said, as if she'd forgotten her manners at a dinner party. Jim shook his hand. Darcy wondered if he was a psychologist too? The soft evaluating intensity he exuded threw him a little; he felt under the microscope again.

'I think I need a drink. I don't want to go home. I couldn't stand it.'

'Sure, sure, okay,' Dr Eletea said. She looked at her husband, as if to ask his thoughts? If he signaled anything back to her it was so subtle as to be invisible to Darcy.

'Can we leave now,' she turned and asked the Captain who had already dismissed Darcy. They must have taken Dr Eletea and her husband's statements while Darcy was giving his. The captain checked in with his senior officer by raising nothing more than a finger at the couple and getting a nod in return. Then he said 'Sure' like it was nothing at all. What he lacked in warmth he made up for in efficiency.

Dr Eletea took Darcy by the arm as Jim walked quietly beside them, pressed his key-ring remote, and with a squirt of light and sound, unlocked their new SS-V sedan. Its interior was aloof with the scent of fresh leather and money. The car pulsed into luminous being and pulled away as if they were unplugging from all that had happened. The scene disappeared behind them in the snow. It was over.



The ecstasy had tapered off and Zel was feeling extremely mellow, enjoying her drinks, enjoying Terry's company too. The room was almost full and she felt the zing of association with Espy's talent. He was her friend. No one here knew him like she did. So when he said 'this one is for my sister' she was shot through with pleasure. Espy had no sister but for her.

'We Ride Like Birds,' he said, a little off mike to the band.

There was a moment of dissonance between the instruments before the band coalesced into the song. Zel registered the tribal rhythms beneath the slick atmospherics of the musicianship. It was the primitivism of it that had always appealed to her...

*'We ride like birds,
our heads our feathers
our face is blood
our thoughts are weather...'*

There was almost something shamanistic to it. And the band seemed to attack the song as if they understood its importance to Espy. The ghost of his mother, the indigenous blood in his veins, something in the ground they now stood on. The song moved on and Espy chanted as much as sung it...

*'Our dreams are mothers
Our tracks are smoke
We whisper children
We smell their hope...'*

Darcy stood to one side at the back of the room. He could see Zel and Terry in the crowd, the way he was parked like a Mac truck in the middle of everybody. How Zel stood in front of Terry, the way her new boyfriend held her before him.

The stage lights wrapped everybody into the mood of the song, made it feel as if they were inside some kind of smoky, crimson star. Espy's voice, touching each word, a parade of images from a dream...

'We know this somewhere

We know this flight

We sleep in maps

And eat the night...'

Jim had already bought a whisky each for Darcy and himself. Dr Eletea – 'Ursula please, Darcy, call me Ursula' – had ordered lemon, lime and soda. Darcy shook his head at her while Jim was at the bar getting another round. 'I'm amazed you don't need a drink too.'

She looked at him, brushed her jacket open, reached down and touched her belly. 'Can't you tell Darcy? I'm almost four months pregnant.' She smiled at him as if he were an old friend. 'You're actually the first person I've told. How about that?'



Darcy made good his escape while the crowd were calling for an encore. If he stayed any longer Zel and Terry were bound to see him and he could not bear another stumbling conversation, especially after everything that had happened.

He'd downed his second whisky in quick time before remembering the Panadeine Forte he'd dropped back at Pete's pick-up truck. Darcy was glad for the affect. It was like moving through warm liquid. His tooth gave off a grainy sharpness whenever he moved his tongue to it, but the pain of his jaw had been numbed away again. His mouth moved with rubbery pleasure. He licked his lips, slugged down half a bottle of water as he was leaving, throwing the rest away into a bin, too much hassle to carry in the cold.

Ursula Eletea and her husband Jim had wanted him to wait, insisting they would drive him to his car, but Darcy had said he needed the walk – to sober up, to clear his head. All true in its limited way. Clear his head. He imagined his mind as a dark well you could fall into and never touch bottom. The more you threw into it the emptier and darker and more bottomless it became. Drop a memory down there you won't hear it make a sound, go ahead. He felt suddenly sleepy. His steps were a little slow.

Outside the freezing air awoke him from his fuzz. The snow had eased back into a more delicate fall again. He was maybe twenty minute's walk from his car, a good enough stroll to straighten him out. Thule was dead quiet. The Mary's crowd for Espy's show would soon file out, while the hard core partyers would stay on for another hour or so till they shut the bar completely. Then it was home for everyone. What time was it, he wondered? One-ish, closer to two? He checked his watch but the glass was cracked, the hands still back near midnight when it all happened.

As he walked along the main street he looked at the Christmas window displays, the toys, a baby Jesus in a crib stuffed with straw, a Star of Bethlehem glowing, a reindeer feasting on chocolates, the Three Wise Men, coloured lights and plastic mistletoe. It was as if the day had passed before it had even begun.

He was alone, Pete was dead. Suda, Zel, Espy... Everything was shifting. Was it true that he was Soraya's father? His mind reeled at the possibility but he just could not – would not? – believe it. He'd done his maths and he was sure it wasn't possible. His

felt a flare of anger again towards Suda but more than anything he felt sorry for her. Sorry for her lies and her losses. With each step he became more sure that he was once again a man alone in the world.

Darcy cut a diagonal across the street, past the smouldering mall that was being watched over by two bored firemen trying to keep warm inside their truck. A flask of coffee and two cups sat on the dash, steaming their window. Darcy nodded to them like they should be proud. As if they needed anything affirming from him. He turned into an even quieter street that would lead him all the way back to King James Park and his car.

To his left he heard a voice: 'Hey!'

Darcy turned his head to the shadows. Out stepped the pretty strawberry blonde he had seen crossing the road on his way home at the start of the night.

'Mr Travers.'

Darcy looked at her confused.

'Mr Travers? It's me. Charlotte. Charlotte MacLeod. I was friends with your daughter. And Izzy. We were in the girls' soccer team together, the under 13s. Remember?'

With each piece of information Darcy wrestled with his memories, till they fell together like an old jigsaw snapping into place. Charlotte MacLeod. She was a bit older than the girls. The under 13s... It broke his heart to think back to their games, to a bright green field and a ball being kicked around.

So what would Charlotte be now? Sixteen? And already a beautiful young woman. Looking at her for too long made him feel illicit. Her hair was red not blonde.

It stabbed Darcy to think again of Sarah being the same age, of all her possibilities, of the fact that she should be here, right now. That it should be her – not him – walking home with Charlotte MacLeod, two fine young women talking about boys and music

and whatever else young women liked to talk about at one o'clock in the morning when their secrets flowed like the wind in their hair.

'Charlotte.' Darcy said her name like a hieroglyph that takes on its meaning slowly and with great importance. 'Hi... Nice to see you.'

'Nice to see you too, Mr Travers.'

Mr Travers. He never got used to that as the kids got older. 'Just call me Darcy, Charlotte.'

She'd fallen in beside him as he kept walking. Skipping every half a dozen steps or moving ahead slightly and walking backwards as she spoke to him, before returning to his side. Her grace was noticeable, the woman blossoming out of the adolescent, an energy that oscillated across her face and gestures as if she hadn't quite decided on entering adulthood yet, as if she were just there standing at the door weighing up the possibilities.

'Where've you been?' she asked all brightness.

'Oh just to see Esposito and The Black Wings at Mary's. You?'

'Cool! I love his record! That song about the night and how he watches the stars glow and how it's 'like a darkness twice adored'.'

'Yeah, I know that one.' Darcy remembered Espy writing it. How he'd expanded it out of an improvisation while he'd been strumming to 'My Sweet Lord' to Sarah when she was young, the way it became something new, a long time ago.

'How about you? Where've you been?'

Charlotte laughed and took a deep breath as she spoke. 'Oh just with friends at a party. And at Frank's. Played some pool out the back.'

Darcy could smell something sweet on her breath as she spoke. Southern Comfort. She seemed a little too close to him as they walked, as if not quite in balance, a closeness that made him awkward and happy at once.

She danced a step out and back again, kicked up some powder. Laughed a bit for no reason. She was tipsy. Before he could think much about that, Charlotte asked Darcy how he'd been. It was the kind of question that always had a way of lingering over him. The unstated part of the question being, How have you been *since Sarah died?*

'Okay,' he said.

The way he spoke the word made him sound like The Sad Old Man of the Mountains. How funny. One word and its resonance could still convey an ache as if he were bleeding.

'O cool.' Charlotte smiled, putting her hand to the back of his arm. It made him feel as if he were infirm and he froze at the gesture even though it was intended as caring.

'I still think about Izzy and Sarah sometimes,' she said, releasing her hand, letting her gaze fall to the ground.

Darcy stole a glance at her. There was something reverent about her manner. Her long red hair spilled out from her beanie and over her shoulders, her face took on an even paler hue. The streaming perfection of her figure, her red gloves, she really was quite something.

He looked away.

Darcy felt an edge of silence grow then between them. Knew she was worrying she'd gone too far. 'I still think about Sarah and Izzy – too,' he said in agreement. 'All the time.'

He wondered if Sarah were with him now? Watching him and Charlotte walk. He was an old man at 42, he thought, an old man wishing he were young and without much history, walking a girl home in the excited winter newness of a first date. All his dreams before him, all things ahead and undiscovered... Yes, he wanted to begin his life again. Instead he felt as if his life were closing down and he was simply hungry for his past, to live as much past as he could because so little future was left.

'What do you think about when you think of them?'

He hadn't expected a question like that. A part of him felt angry at her for asking something so insensitive. But he wanted to talk, to let things out.

'What? I... oh I guess I think about lots of things.' His voice cracked a little. Darcy checked himself. Charlotte waited. It was suddenly too personal, too deep, he couldn't speak. He mumbled something about being a better father. Then he whispered, 'You don't get a second chance.' It wasn't what he meant to say.

'Sarah always said you were the bestest. We all thought you were the coolest dad around.'

Tears came into Darcy's eyes but he could not let himself cry again. 'Thanks.'

The main streets of town faded behind them. Till they began walking through a residential area. Some dogs barked from behind their fences.

'Where are you going?' Darcy asked, trying to change the subject and take some pressure off the emotions in him.

'Just up here' Charlotte gestured vaguely. But he had the feeling she was going wherever he went. Why had she chosen him to walk with?

Darcy smelt the heavy scent of wood smoke in the air, pouring out from people's chimneys. He imagined the warmth inside, the sleeping families, the anticipation among the children for Christmas.

The two of them heard a baby cry as they passed by a house. It was a sweet sound, like someone just being born. He and Charlotte smiled at each other. A TV sent a small prism of light through a curtain. Cars hummed sparsely along the main road a few blocks away. People leaving Mary's Bar at last.

'Are you still at school?'

'Yeah,' Charlotte said, like of course! 'I want to go to university and be a biologist when I finish. I've been studying snow skinks for my major project this term.'

‘Snow skinks?’ Darcy wanted to sound interested but the conversation seemed ready to take a more banal path than he could be bothered with. The mind of David Attenborough in the body of Uma Thurman, he thought to himself. She was a little too much this Christmas Eve.

‘Yeah, when its cold they dig themselves down into rocks to stay warm and hibernate for winter - or, if they can, they gather in a group to keep each other warm, in what they call a hibernaculum. It’s kinda cute when you think about it.’

‘I guess so.’

‘Anyway I won’t bore you with that.’ She fluttered her eye lashes and said ‘a little bit special interest, I know!’ He looked at her again and saw that she was bit kooky.

Darcy felt his cynicism melting as she walked beside him, at the same time he felt his age and its weight. Stones had gathered around his heart, one bad event after another rolling in. Charlotte McLeod was so fair and young. A little snow skink. Moving around in the cracks of my life tonight, he thought, getting yourself warm, making me feel warm too.

‘I’m heading this way,’ she said suddenly at an intersection, pointing up the street to the blackness. She stood there all nervous. For a moment he shuddered when he felt that they might embrace, but he quickly realized this was a mis-reading as she lunged towards his face and kissed him on the cheek and said ‘you take care Mr Travers’ and, in a rush, ‘Merry Christmas.’

Before he could take that in, Charlotte MacLeod turned on her heels and marched off. He watched her receding along the street, the snow floating around her like wedding confetti, until she was gone into the darkness and he remembered that he was once more alone.



Pete's pick-up truck was gone. The Peugeot was covered in snow. It seemed as if years had passed since Darcy left it and walked across the park.

He pushed as much snow off the windscreen as he could with his gloved hands, brushed away the residues, hoped the engine would start without much trouble. Got in, and turned her over. First go. What an old warrior she was. He was glad something was going his way.

Darcy cranked the air con and the demister. Sat there a while as two holes emerged on the windscreen out of which he might see. The air con and the demister were working hard, and he revved the engine, waiting a while longer before he turned the wipers on. They stuck for a moment, then bumped and moved squeakily, pushing at the lines of melting ice as snow dribbled down.

He began rolling through the deep silence of the streets. It pleased him, this solitary feeling, this time of the night. It always had. He thought he heard a voice beside him for a moment, but maybe it was just wish.

Sarah?

They were coming home from a volleyball game. She and Izzy couldn't stop chattering. They'd 'slaughtered' the team from Boyd, they were reliving the game, the points they'd scored, the cheeky things they said and did, that 'unfair' foul on Izzy that had seemed pretty fair to Darcy... He felt like he was listening to birds. The beautiful conspiracies of youth, the soft way they touched the world.

They disappeared again as he pulled into the home street and saw that Suda's lights were on. He wondered if she were already home? It was not something he could deal with, her grief, if she wanted him to deal with it at all. Perhaps she was angry with him, he did not know. He felt his exhaustion hit him like an avalanche, the pains in his body. Placed his tongue on to his tooth and massaged it.

He clicked his headlights off as he got into the driveway, shut the engine off, let the car roll to a stop. Returning like a thief. Instead of going into the house he moved

quietly down the drive way, past the window Suda had stood earlier, straight out back out to the shed. Once inside he switched on a light and pulled down a trap door that led upstairs to his studio, the skylights letting the night pour down while light swelled up from below.

In the semi-darkness Darcy could still make out a half a dozen paintings, face to the wall. Even if the night had been pure blackness he still would have known exactly where they were. He switched on the studio light, a bare bulb 100 watts. Its crudeness white washed everything. Darcy had rarely worked nights up here, preferring the softness of the morning, preferring daylight in all its forms and where it led him.

He began pulling the paintings from the wall one by one, strange expressionist works whose narrative outlines were barely discernable: a man being devoured by a black bird; conifers covered in pearly ice, hunched over like men and women beckoning; a landscape of chilly severity; the figure of a man upside down, wreathed in ice and snow; another landscape of almost blinding white with two dark, calligraphic brush strokes moving across it; a view through what could be a very old mirror or a frosted window or a block of ice.

As he picked up each one he carefully let them drop through the trap door to the shed floor below. When they were all down he grabbed some turpentine and some matches and climbed down, shutting the trap door behind him. Leaving the turps bottle and matches beside the paintings he made his way out into the yard, all the way down the back where a wood pile lay sheltered by a make-shift awning. Much of the wood was frozen together but he managed to kick away a few decent pieces, and gather up some kindling and drier wood caught behind it. He made a small nest, went back inside the house and fished an old half smoked cigarette out of an ashtray. Then he returned to the shed. Took some newspaper from a shelf, crunched it roughly into balls and went out again, shoving the newspaper under the wood. 'Worst fire I ever fucking built.' He fetched the paintings now, with great care, and took them out into the falling snow and placed them over the wood and newspaper. Then he poured the turpentine on it all once everything was stacked and ready. Darcy lit up the cigarette butt and when it was burning well with a red ash he flicked it on to the soaked canvases. Within seconds it went up with a roar as he jumped back and watched it burn. It was a quick fire, ten, maybe fifteen minutes of pure turpentine rage. As it calmed down the old

Buckminster Fuller quote that ‘fire is the sun unwinding itself from the wood’ sprang into his mind. He thought of this in relation to himself for some reason he could not fully articulate but sensed nonetheless. Then he pushed the remnants closer to the center of the dying flames while the snowflakes fell into them and soon enough it had subsided into steaming ash.



Zel sat quietly chatting with Espy while Thule’s own little rock ‘n’ roll scene did its moth-like dance around the star of the evening.

Despite all her big feelings she hadn’t said anything significant to Espy. He was sweaty from the performance, his make-up had run, his clothes glued to him by moisture, and yet he was somehow serene, liberated by his exhaustion.

‘I wish we had more time to talk.’ She didn’t even know if she was making sense, if her urgency to communicate with Espy had a substance to it she could articulate.

She felt a presence beside her. Sarah, a memory: her daughter at age ten with a Black Wings t-shirt, ever-so-proud after Espy had smuggled her backstage to see the show. Beaming, excited beyond belief by not only her first rock ‘n’ roll show, but one in which her ‘uncle’ was the center. Zel and Sarah had sat here, in this spot, six years ago.

Zel saw Espy watching her closely, his rosary bead eyes upon her. She felt as if he could see Sarah too, that he was sharing in the memory.

‘Nao ha pressa,’ Espy said back to her. There’s no hurry. ‘We’ve got all the time in the world to talk, Zel.’

She put her hand on his knee. Espy put his hand on hers as it rested on his leg.

Terry sat quietly in the background, twice mistaken for the roadie, clutching a cold beer, talking to Julianne Jewels about who knows what. They began shaking their heads up and down, clinking beers, making air guitar motions. Zel could never quite believe she was a lesbian. She wondered what Terry made of her.

‘Maybe see you on Boxing Day?’ she returned to Espy.

He looked at her. ‘Sure, I’d like that. Just me and you for lunch?’

Zel nodded, said ‘That’d be great.’ She stood on impulse. Oh God they were being so banal and yet beneath it you would think the world was turning. ‘I gotta get going,’ she said, tipping her head towards Terry like he was somehow pressuring her to go.

‘I know,’ said Espy. His tone was no need to offer me excuses.

Terry stood the moment he noticed Zel standing too. Waved goodbye to Julianne Jewels and then Espy, as did Zel, but people were already moving in to fill their places in the conversation. Terry put his arm around Zel as they walked out the door. ‘Great show,’ he said. She laughed.

They were at Terry’s place in what felt like a matter of minutes, undressing and beginning to make love. The grubby kitchen smells wafting in over their kisses in the lounge-room as they stripped one another down to skin.

‘I love you,’ Terry said in the middle of it all, their bodies locking together.

His work clothes greased the floor of the bedroom with a discernible scent of petrol and hamburgers, or so Zel imagined. What a grub. Some Romeo she’d landed herself.

He told her he loved her again as they continued on, unsure if she had heard him. She said nothing either time, but arched herself agreeably to his movements and caresses, and in a moment of stillness bent and kissed his hand. Kissed the shorn off finger that he so carefully kept to himself.

Did she love him too?

Terry's romantic proclamations were the roll-on affect of the Ecstasy. As soon as he had cum he wondered if he should have got so carried away? She hadn't said anything back to him and they now lay in a gentle, exhausted silence. He meant it, but he wasn't sure how *much* he meant it. She must have heard him?



Back inside the house was exactly as Darcy had left it at the start of the evening. The central heating had kept it warm, in a suffocating way that never pleased him. He went to the bathroom, washed his face and hands and arms clean. Walked back down the hall, opened a door into Sarah's old room.

It was empty now. The posters and toys and signs of her life were all gone. There was nothing left but her old single bed, which he sat on delicately. They'd gotten rid of everything that wasn't necessary, had tried to avoid letting the room turn into a shrine.

Darcy stood and went to a cupboard, reached up and pulled down a small box. As he opened it on his knees, he lifted out a zip-lock plastic bag that contained a shirt of hers. He took it out carefully as if it might tear at his touch and clutched it to his face and said he was sorry, I'm so sorry, and he told her how much he loved her, I love you, and how much he wanted her back, seeking out what little scent of her was left after all this time, o my baby, Sarah.

A book lay inside the box still. Darcy leant down and picked it up. *The Little Prince*. He flicked the pages. A green feather slid out and floated to the carpet. He'd known it was there. He picked the feather up and examined it, turned it carefully in the light, admired its intensity, the way the colour had endured. Then he placed it back between the pages and closed the book, and carefully put everything away.



In the morning Darcy rose and showered. The hottest shower he could stand. He packed a suitcase with things he might need. Went into Sarah's room and took her box out of the cupboard again. Put it beside his suitcase in the hall.

Then to the kitchen where he made himself a cup of coffee, popping a few more Nurofen again just to be safe even though his mouth was no longer bothering him.

Darcy walked out the back door to see what the weather was like, stood alone in his yard with a few birds flitting and jumping. They were sparrows, chests palpitating with breath, whistling as if they were in a panic to live, exploding with air.

The ground was white, the sky was white too. The snow had stopped falling. His fire from last night lay pitifully before him, a heap of damp ash half buried in the snow.

He moved towards Suda's house, leant over the fence and glanced upwards to see smoke pouring out of a chimney. She was home.

The woodpile was low on her back verandah. On impulse Darcy went to his own woodpile and began kicking pieces free, using a tomahawk to split the less daunting pieces of hardwood and throwing it quickly into a Hessian bag. When it was about half full he lugged it down the driveway and around to the front door of Suda's.

He went back to the shed, up into the studio. Found his best brushes and oils still packed away in a crate, a roll of canvas, some stretchers, a staple gun, the better of the two portable easels he liked to use. These went straight into the boot of the Peugeot.

Then he began loading up the back seat of the car with his suitcase and a smaller backpack, a plastic container of things pulled from his desk in the house, some framed photos off the walls, a couple of coats pulled from the clothes rack and thrown in on top of it all. It wasn't much of a packing job. But there was nothing else he wanted. It

would do. He placed the box of Sarah's things beside him on the passenger seat, said, 'It looks like we're going this time sweetheart.'

Darcy walked back inside, put the kettle on. Used hot water from the kettle to melt the ice on his windscreen, then tossed the kettle into the front yard, where it landed with a jab in the snow. He climbed in, turned the car over a few times before the engine kicked in. As he began to move Darcy was startled by a hand hitting the window with a repeated thud.

Suda.

He hit the brakes. Let the window down. Her hand slipped away as it fell open. With her other arm she held Soraya on her hip, meek as lamb, eyes boring into him.

Suda was still puffing from having run out the door to catch him. He was embarrassed at leaving without a word, but was there anything to say?

She placed her hand back on the windowsill and leant down to speak with him. 'What are you doing?'

He said nothing.

She stood straight again and looked down at him. 'The cops asked about you. I said Pete had been acting crazy. That you were tryna help.' Emotion quickened her voice as if the explanation was all she had in her.

'Suda, I'm sorry.'

He looked up at her. Her face was puffy. 'It's okay.' She spoke softly. Then she just stood there for a while as the engine idled. Soraya wriggled for warmth in her mother's arms. Darcy gave her a weak smile.

'Look I know I am not her father.'

'Soraya?' Suda let out a pained laugh. 'Izzy, Darcy. It's Izzy who is yours.'

The world span around him slow and steady and sure: a pale, washed out kaleidoscope moving and reshaping itself. Suda and he had got it on twice all those years ago. Not even an affair, just a stupid moment he regretted instantly, and regretted the second time even more. They'd put a lid on it, but something had simmered or they wouldn't be where they were now. Darcy tried to think back to those first grabbing times. He'd buried the memory of it having ever happened. Compartmentalized it away.

There was no game playing in Suda's face now. No game left to play. She waited.

Izzy's smile surfaced behind Darcy's eyes as if reincarnated, the same as ever in his memory and yet an altered being. The way she walked. Her tugging at his arm one of the first times he took the girls out with him landscape painting. Her eyes. Looking for something in him, unconsciously connected? The way Sarah and Izzy's voices mingled like birds. Like sisters. He felt some core intuition run from his belly to his throat. A tear ran down his cheek as he saw them together in his mind's eye, the girls' backs to him, walking away. O God come back.

He found it difficult to look at Suda as he spoke. 'Okay...' Darcy bit his lip. Shook his head. 'What am I supposed to say to that?' The intent of the question sounded more savage than he intended. He had fallen through the floor of the world.

'Nothing Darcy. I –'

Darcy held his hand up in a stopping motion. 'I can't take this.' All the old claustrophobia of past events set themselves upon him again. There was something about Suda and Soraya's presences that began to make him panic for some space to think, to breath. 'I'm leaving here now,' he gestured wildly. 'I should have got out ages ago.'

Suda looked stunned. 'What will I say to the police?'

'Zel will know where I am. I wont be going that far – whatever,' his eagerness to get away rising in his voice.

Suda nodded, still absorbing what he was saying. 'Well goodbye then, I guess.' No sarcasm, no edge. She spoke a little absently, started to raise her palm in farewell.

It occurred to him that she was valiumed out. She didn't seem quite with it. Stoned maybe. Something. He reached out the car window and caught her by the wrist. How different the gesture was from last night's anger. 'You take care,' he said.

'Yeah.'

He let her arm go. Then he lifted his own hand up in goodbye and began to pull out of the driveway and onto the road. Darcy pressed the window shut with an electric clunk. He began deep breathing to calm himself and try somehow to reconcile himself what he'd just been told.

As he moved on up the street he looked in his rear view mirror. He could still see Suda standing there in her lime green tracksuit waiting for something, he didn't know what, something good he hoped for her sake. Soraya had her head turned away, back towards their house. Suda turned with her and began to move inside. 'O God,' he said as they moved together and out of sight. Then he turned a corner, and was gone.

2. rapture

He could see her through the glass handing someone their change. She must have seen him too as he pulled in and started to fill up.

The customer, a woman, came out the electronic doors, said 'Happy Christmas' to him as she passed. There were two children in her car, a Labrador pup, a pile of presents. Everyone looked excited as they drove on out of the service station towards their morning celebrations.

Darcy put the hose back onto the pump. He could feel Zel's eyes on him. He was aware of acting for her as he moved – of how he walked across the bitumen, the breeze cutting into him – through the doors and up to where she stood.

'Hey,' Zel called out with a smile like she was genuinely happy to see him. 'Happy Christmas.'

'Happy Christmas to you too,' he said. 'I wasn't a hundred per cent sure if you'd be here.'

'Yeah, well,' she shrugged, 'I need the money. It's only a half-day shift, just for the morning. It's okay. I'm going to a Christmas lunch thing with Terry later.'

Darcy looked around. There were a pile of papers by the counter, yesterday's news... He wondered how much he wanted to tell her, what to say. He'd spent nearly an hour at the cemetery with Sarah and Izzy. Placed some scraggly witch-hazel wildflowers he'd torn sprouting from the undergrowth, sunlight yellow rags against the snow. He'd sat there and said his goodbyes, placed what were more like petals than flowers on their white graves. Till it got so cold he had to go. Though he still wasn't quite sure where.

Zel spoke first. 'Did you see the fire last night?'

'Yeah, kids they reckon,' he said blankly.

‘A gang of them,’ Zel added.

Darcy registered the radio then at a low volume in the background. ‘Young Americans’ was playing: ‘Gee my life a funny thing, am I still too young?’ It made him think again of when he and Zel used to date. She was so pretty. It was as if their lives were floating up on another level back when they first met, a level somewhere there above him now as then. Love. Was it just an idea of who you could be?

Zel kept talking. ‘Apparently two people got killed.’ She shook her head. ‘Some Christmas. What makes kids act like that?’

What makes anyone do anything? Darcy shrugged his shoulders at the mystery.

It was quiet again between them. His inability to speak was making them feel uncomfortable. Darcy shifted on his feet before quietly blurting out, ‘Pete Kelly was one of the people that got killed last night.’

Zel looked genuinely shocked. She put her hand on the cash register for want of somewhere to rest it and said, ‘Suda must be a mess.’

Her sympathy was a way to hide more confused thoughts. Everything she felt was mulched together with what they had once shared as parents and the terrible events since that time, the resentments and evasions that had stopped them from ever being real friends. They’d never had much in common. Sarah and Izzy, they were the bond, the link. Living next door to each other was only an illusion of closeness. She’d been glad to get away from Suda and Pete in the end. Her having Soraya just upset her even more.

‘Maybe I should go see her?’ Zel could not imagine she would be the first person Suda would want to hear from. She’d call anyway. The phrase ‘sisters in a darkness’ flitted across the top of her mind. She looked out at the sparrows on the tarmac pecking and jumping, oblivious.

The thought of what might come out of such commiserations made Darcy nervous. But would Suda say anything? He doubted it. And what could he do if she did? He

looked through the window outside. Snow covered the landscape. Sparrows jumping. Was it possible to begin again, to start clean? Could he ever leave this world behind?

He did not answer Zel's question about whether she should visit Suda? He simply flicked his eyes to the car and said, 'I'm leaving town now.'

'You're what?!'

'I'm leaving – for a while anyway. I... I...' He didn't quite know what to say. He was just going and he didn't know where. He'd finished with Thule. 'Heading south.'

Darcy fished the keys to the house out of his pocket. 'I figured you could take care of the sale. There might be some stuff you want. You can give the rest away to charity or chuck it.'

Zel felt a surge of relief in her chest. She needed that money bad and Darcy had been dragging the chain. She'd started to think about forcing him out, but she didn't have it in her to sick the lawyers on to him. It had never been that bad between them, she didn't want it to get that bad either.

'You've got my account details,' Darcy said now that it was all rolling out. 'Just put in half of whatever's left when it's sold. Whatever you think is fair. I trust you.'

So it was all going to be left up to her again. Typical. What the hell. At least it would be done. Enough for a down payment on a place for her – an apartment, maybe even a place out in the hills like she'd hoped for. Even have some money in the bank depending on how she managed it. She could stop working in this dump, buy herself time to get her jewelry business rolling again...

'Right.' Zel was still working it out in her head. It was as if she suddenly had a future again. She wasn't used to cards falling her way. It had been a long time since real opportunities had spread themselves out before her.

'So where are you headed? For how long? What –'

Darcy shrugged his shoulders. 'New York, I'm thinking. I'll email you. Send you a few postcards,' he laughed. He was inventing his own story as he spoke but it

sounded promising enough. ‘Anyway you have my cell phone if anyone really needs me.’

She looked at him. Sensed there was something more to those words. Darcy knew he needed to say more. ‘I was the one who found Pete, I saw some of what happened.’

‘You can’t just go then.’

‘The cops said they didn’t need me. I’ll come back if they do.’ He started to get testy. Does it fucking matter to you? He let his anger go. It was the poison in him. It came out of nowhere and he felt a flush of shame for it.

Zel sensed it and let it pass too. Couldn’t they just talk?

Darcy noticed her hand. Zel’s wedding band was no longer there and that hurt him, he had to admit it; he remembered the Navajo bracelet, though. It had been a gift from her mother when she turned 21, a heavy thing big enough for a man, probably meant for a warrior once upon a time. Zel had intended to pass it on to Sarah when she turned 21. He saw the sun carved into it, the rays, the way it always rested so dramatically on her wrist.

He wondered what she had done with the wedding ring. Thought about when he slipped it on to her finger at the church. Her wedding dress and the way it disguised the fact she was already pregnant with Sarah. Everybody applauding as they kissed. Life goes by in a moment. Life is a ghost when you remember it. And what am I, he thought...

Zel saw him looking at her hand.

Saw how far away he was. She knew the look of daydreams and lost dreams in his face. God, even after all this time he’s still like a solitary boy away with the fairies. She let all her concerns about him go; they were his business. It was his life.

Zel pulled off the bracelet, took Darcy’s hand and slipped it over his wrist.

‘What’s this?’ he said, confused.

‘A gift.’

‘But...’

‘Just keep it.’ Zel let her hand slide into Darcy’s for a moment, their fingers interlocked. Then she pushed his hand back across the counter and released her grip.

Darcy looked at the bracelet. It pleased him, the substance of it. He turned his wrist, watching it fall down his arm, watching the silver catch the light. ‘Thanks. I wish I had something to give you... I didn’t think... I *forgot* it was Christmas.’

‘It’s okay Darcy.’ It’s how you are.

‘I’m glad we’re still friends.’ Darcy had never thought such words would come, but there they were, bursting out of him. He started to cry.

‘Me too.’ Zel leaned over the counter. Took both his hands in hers, pulled him very near her, face to face. ‘I’m really glad.’ Tears took hold in her eyes.

‘Yeah.’ Darcy laughed and wiped his own tears away.

Zel was doing the same thing, her hand at her cheek. ‘Do you still talk to her Darcy?’

‘Sometimes. In my head I do.’

‘Me too. But not like you – you know what I mean.’

‘Yeah,’ he said awkwardly. ‘It’s changing. She’s... not here... as much anymore.’

‘Maybe she’s feeling free to go? Maybe she’s happyforus.’ The last few words collapsed together but Darcy heard them in the blur of emotion.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Everything’s changing. Has changed.’

A truck pulled in with a loud, hot hiss of its pneumatic brakes. A man began to step down. They both looked at him through the glass as he lifted the pump off the hook.

‘I should be going,’ Darcy said.

Zel nodded, leant over the counter one last time, pulled him to her clumsily for another hug, one arm around his neck, a little off balance. She kissed his cheek. Whispered in his ear, 'I'll miss you. I love you.'

'I'll miss you too,' Darcy said, looking down shyly as he moved back from her kiss. 'Good luck with Terry. He seems a like a nice guy.'

'Ah we're just friends,' she said and she meant it. 'He's a good guy.'

Darcy was glad to hear that, hoped she wouldn't rush things. He still had all these feelings for her mixed up inside of him. It surprised him how strongly they streamed through his chest. Gathering up his courage, saying what was once so easy and now so hard he said, 'I love you too.'

Zel delivered him a smile at one corner of her mouth. 'Hey the feeling's mutual buddy. Always has been, always will be.'

Darcy half laughed at the way she said it. So did she. They looked into each other's eyes and then he turned and walked out, rushing across the bitumen, feeling the adrenaline and emotion rise like a sea within and before him. The truckie was still filling up his tank when Darcy got to the car. He looked up, shouted 'Merry Christmas.' Darcy said 'Merry Christmas' back to him with a croak of emotion, turned and waved to Zel one last time. She waved back to him through the glass. He opened up the Peugeot, climbed in and started the engine.



He took the loop road, along Niland Drive all the way up to McLennan Pass, looked out across Thule on a soft Christmas morning, soft as sleep itself. Chimneys

were piping out smoke from fires, a few cars ferried gifts and early rising visitors from home to home. Snow blanketed the entire town.

Darcy paused the car again further along at the siding, looking down at the iced-over pond he had looked down on so many times before. Frost covered the ground in a cold glitter. He did not stay long, simply lifted his fingers in farewell and turned the car around, something stirring in his chest as he moved, faster and faster, to the town limits and beyond.

He thought he heard the word 'goodbye' echo beside him, then something like the flutter of bird's wings, a rapid flickering sound that might have been the wind. He thought about meeting up with Zel and Sarah as she was finishing pre-school on a rainy day, when the rain had stopped, her frog umbrella raised high and happy above her. The way she held her mother's hand, the beauty of them as they walked down the street towards him.

Izzy stepped forward in his memories. Prodigal, now. Though he was more like the prodigal father really. Returning in a dream for forgiveness. Mr Travers? He heard her voice, its catchy wit. The way she couched respect in something cheeky. Her and Sarah, so close.

The road rose and fell, revealing and hiding the landscape, a few sheep mewing in the snowed upon paddocks, trees in all shapes and sizes as if the inhabitants of Thule had gathered to wave him on his way. As the car rushed on Darcy saw a stretch ahead clouded in mist. He went into then out of it, the cloud hollowing and closing again across the road as he shot through it. He clicked on his headlights, checked they were at low beam. A motor cyclist in dark leathers and dark helmet passed Darcy going the opposite way, raising his fingers from the handlebars in acknowledgement as they almost merged and went their mutual ways.

His car got colder. The air con did little to ease it. Darcy wondered if it was broken and tapped the controls, then the vents to no great affect. There was heat coming out, he could feel it on his hands when he moved them close.

Darcy thought about a summer holiday with Zel and Sarah. Half asleep on the sand, a book he was too drowsy to read. Zel's shadow as she came back from swimming in the ocean, drops of water from her body as she knelt over then lay beside him. Her kiss on his shoulder. 'Can you watch her,' she whispered. He raised himself on his elbows to check on Sarah, squinted against the sandy light. She was only four year's old then, and he looked at her as she played with a spade and bucket. Watched her leave them behind as if the spade and bucket had never existed, to walk off and begin collecting shells along the tide line. Her funny gait, the way her hands filled with shells, till she could carry no more and began to return to them, shells dropping from her hands in a trail behind her.

'Daddy' He heard her voice calling to him.

Darcy said 'Yes?' as if that might bring her back to him.

The road dipped once more and then up over another hill and down again. There was more morning fog and he drove into a sea of it. Darcy slowed right down. Kept hard to his side of the road. Leant forward in concentration. The bracelet moved on his wrist as he shimmied the wheel back and forth, feeling for the road.

He found himself looking through the windscreen, not at the road or the fog, but at a memory of the day he lost Sarah. And now Isabel. Except it was not so much a memory as a vision, outside of all possible remembering. He could not remember these things. He was not there. Not there to see the girls coming down the hill in the snow, past the clutch of trees he'd painted only a few days before. Not there to see the startled crows, ferrying themselves slowly skyward. Not there to hear the sweet sound of Izzy and Sarah talking, let alone hear their thoughts too, so deep and beautiful and innocent like water from a fresh stream you could cup in your hands and drink.

Darcy wanted to say stop, come back. But the girls could not hear him. 'Stop,' he said anyway. 'Come back.'

He felt his whole body leaning further forward, right over the wheel and into the windscreen itself. As if he might somehow dive through the glass and into this past

world and change those events, change everything that had happened. But this he could not do.

It had happened; was not happening.

The scene engulfed him nonetheless. He could hear what sounded like a song, but it was a chorus of things, the girls voices, Zel and Suda and Pete and Espy and his own voice too, things they said and things they had done, flowing into a wind that trembled among the icy trees flashing past as he drove by. And yet amid this shimmering of leaves and wind and voices and snow and water he could still hear Sarah and Izzy's voices most plainly of all, the closeness of it.

I love you.

He felt himself penetrating the windscreen, saw his journey in an instant, the limbo of what could have been and what had been. Darcy fell forward and deeper into what seemed like water and was more like glass, into what felt like the sky and was merely air. Deeper and further as dark shivers ran through him all the while a whiteness claimed and surrounded him.

He saw shapes forming in this wild light and white coldness, saw his daughter ahead of him and called her name. But this was all a waking dream, a world of dreams within dreams, and he was now in a room far, far away, and he was painting this story all over again. This moment and others, image by image, till it was no longer a story that was just about pain and loss, it was a story about love and forgiveness and what had never been left behind or destroyed or drowned or lost completely. And as he did this he reached for Sarah and Izzy too, he reached for Zel, he reached at last for them all, remembered and vivid and alive in his heart, the snow bursting like small brilliant stars scattered and alight on his soul, a white fire on his fingertips.

3. birds

Sarah stopped as if to listen, looked down at her skates as they hung from her bare hands.

At the damp marks from the snow flakes as they touched the red leather and dissolved.

She thought of flowers and galaxies, watched them darken and spread and lose their form. Felt something touch her hand; hesitated a moment before moving again.

Her father had said something.

It came to her now in the wind and flew away, into low rolling cloud and flecks of snow that turned and turned in the misty air.

She looked at her friend's skates, at how they were almost the same colour as hers, but cheaper and more worn.

Izzy swung them from her gloved fingers as they clattered into the hollow-sounding world around them.

She span around and smiled at Sarah; walked backwards for a few steps.

Felt the coolness of the ground beneath her boots, the snow bunching at her heels. Turned face forward again and started to move quickly, grunting a little with each step.

Sarah absorbed these movements. Felt the same ice beneath her boots, the same breath.

Till she joined Izzy in these quickening steps and a rhythm grew, the cold air licking at them both as they began chanting like Indians on the warpath, running now to the vowel sounds thudding into their chests.

Till their cries subsided and they slowed their pace and started to talk again, imagining the day as if they were inside a gigantic glass jar, behind which painted glass sky someone might be watching: Jesus or an alien, or someone magical and strange who wanted to speak with them.

Spooook-aaay, Izzy said, bending her knees and waving her hands as if she were feeling out the pale vibrations of the landscape and sending them back again.

Then she arched herself backwards and screamed at the sky.

As her voice shot through the trees a slur of crows raised themselves in a damp, startled rush, the ricochet motion of their wings sloshing backwards into the girls ears.

A bad feeling ran through the girls – but it was as fast as their single gasp inwards and by the time they breathed out the badness was gone.

Izzy shrugged her shoulders at the commotion she had raised.

Sarah looked ahead, stone green eyes on a floating world.

The two girls were often mistaken for sisters and the phrase ‘thick as thieves’ came easily to people’s lips.

Sarah was taller than Izzy, but stockier and clumsier, or so she felt. It made her shyer than her friend, this sense that she was somehow not as much of ‘a natural’.

Izzy had the gift of the gab that was for sure, though not everyone liked the sharpness or brightness of her tongue.

It made Sarah see how people – how adults especially – could resent someone who

was friendly and excited, as if this was a mask that needed removing.

It also made Sarah sad for Izzy, even ashamed of her sometimes as if there was something wrong with her friend. But these were thoughts from another time and not really on her mind as they trudged in the snow today. Crunching through thin crusts of ice into the mash below, leaving a trail to follow in case they got 'lost'.

Sarah started toting up her Christmas presents from that morning out loud: the new red skates in her hand; a red mountain bike ready for the thaw; a cherry coloured i-Pod; and lots of clothes, but not that black top with the bright red-cross she had asked for.

The one in the window of Leonard's Boutique that looked so cool.

Maybe her parents were holding this one last present back as a surprise?

Izzy scoffed and rolled her eyes. Give it up, Sar!

Then she spat into a pile of snow, stopping to watch the saliva crystallize and sink through a gobby web of ice.

Gross.

Izzy was all bones and scrappy looking, with long, thick black hair she thought made her special. People who didn't like her said she was 'nothing but trouble', 'a wild thing', 'a little bitch'...

She'd been caught in town once or twice for shop-lifting and Sarah's mother had said she should 'spend less time with her perhaps', but there was something about Izzy that made Sarah stick by her all the more.

In a way it was even more special to be friends with her now.

To fight the unfair world they'd jabbed each other's fingers with a pin and touched

them together: a blood oath behind Izzy's shed last spring.

A whole year had turned and the two were as close as ever.

They were at the top of the hill now and could see the pond below.

It was frozen over and heavy looking, with patches of snow on it like dampened salt spilt across a supper table.

Sarah thought of breakfast that morning: her mother a little hung-over, her father trying hard not to be annoyed; the smell of percolating coffee brightening their mood as always. A Happy Christmas, it was a happy Christmas, it really was.

She shouldn't have gone on about her presents.

C'mon.

Izzy was skipping ahead of her, egging Sarah on.

The two girls puffed their way forwards across Niland Drive, treading carefully to avoid slipping on patches of ice that shone splinter-black and mirror dead before them.

Free of the road again, Izzy plunged up to her thighs in a windrow of snow, scrambling to get out as her friend laughed and hurried over to help her.

Izzy wiped herself down and moved on. The snow squeaked beneath her boots.

Sarah stood by the windrow for a few seconds longer, looking back at the way they had come. The road ran off behind them like a dark stream into a cloud.

Tyre marks from early morning traffic had created the rippling impression it was flowing uphill against the force of gravity, the fresh fallen snow afloat upon its drifting surface.

A car droned away in the distance, tail lights fading into ragged bits of morning mist as it crested the rise of McLennan Pass and disappeared.

Sarah shivered as a cold gust of wind caught her full in the face, pouring down her neck like water – as if a wave had come to her in the car’s departing wake.

There was still a space in her chest from when she had been frightened earlier, a bird-headed skull of a space into which the wave poured itself and stayed.

She felt kinda inside out at that moment; and not able to understand herself at all.

Back on the other side of the hill was the town they had just come from.

Thule: ‘Some say it rhymes with fool, some say it truly.’

Smoke was pouring out of chimneys she could not see, drifting sooty and low across the tip of the hill.

Sarah imagined the town all misty and post-cardy and thought she heard a dog barking and someone chopping wood, but it was extra quiet everywhere on account of the snow killing all the sounds she might have heard.

She thought again about the jar over the world and the eye of whoever might be there, watching them. Why they made it so quiet when it snowed?

Then the thought went away, winged and light into the landscape, quiet as a faraway bird.

Sarah became conscious of the cold once more and flexed her fingers to warm them.

Wished she had worn gloves.

Instead she had to pull the cuffs of her jumper over her knuckles and palms as she

swapped the skates back and forth and started walking again.

How she longed to put her hands in her pockets – but by now they were almost at the pond and it didn't matter anymore.

Izzy kept moving ahead of her as they descended, leaving the hood of her parka down, her hair getting wet as feathers of snow continued to fall upon them.

Sarah knew Izzy was doing this on purpose, so that when she got home she could talk her father into drying it with a towel and brushing it for her.

They would sit and talk in front of the television while he made rough work of it and watched an old episode of *Degrassi High* and pretended it was on for Izzy; while her mother cooked and listened to rock 'n' roll songs in the kitchen: '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction', 'Beast of Burden', 'Fool to Cry' ... she was a total Stones' freak!

Sarah's family was different. Sometimes she wished they were more like other kids' families. Not so arty and 'weird'; always heating silver over a flame and trowelling away at a canvas. Although they liked lots of music too; they weren't *that* different. It was hard to explain. Sarah just wanted normal things, normal thoughts too. She touched her dark woollen beanie like it might solve the problems in her brain. It was damp but it felt nice.

She knew Izzy's parents weren't so happy, that she was lucky to have what she had in her own home; but sometimes Sarah wondered about her own mum and dad too. How quiet they could be with each other; if they loved each other deep down?

She had asked once if she were adopted?

No my love, you're all ours. Eyes, ears, nose – even your father's funny feet. Her mother had squeezed her toes to confirm it as they lay at opposite ends of the couch, listening to Bon Iver and watching the dust motes float through slats of Venetian afternoon sunlight: "Running home, running home, running home..."

Oh come *on* Sarah, you are *such* a slow coach.

Izzy had her hands on her hips: all mock exasperation. She turned and started bolting forward as if she were running away and might never come back.

Sarah smiled; tried to imagine being as skinny and fast as Izzy. Moving between the particles of snow with such twisty speed the flakes would never touch them.

She jogged after her friend until they were almost side-by-side, the snow thickening their steps to a trudge once more. Their breathing growing deeper; their faces glowing with the cold: the cold space shining through them, vast and clear as a cold church bell.

A clump of conifer trees stood in a gathering as the girls passed by. Sarah recognised them from her father's paintings, wondered when he'd been out here last?

My dad says glass is a liquid, you know.

She had spoken the thought, not quite meaning to say it. Sometimes her mind slipped into her mouth before she knew it.

Ah, bull.

The girls burst into laughter. It didn't matter whether it was true or not.

Izzy scooped up a handful of snow and hurled it into some bushes. The leaves shook as if lashed by a whip of powder, petrifying back into a frozen, heavy stillness despite the breeze lifting around them and drumming at the girls' ears in a rush.

Sarah liked being with her father on his 'expeditions' out here – when he'd let her join him; sometimes they'd take Izzy with them too and bring a picnic lunch for three, walk for ages without knowing where they were going, or what they were looking for.

It was nice to be like that with him; talking without talking, that's how it felt.

When he stopped to work he'd give them some brushes and a sketchpad to do with as they pleased, but they'd usually tire of that and just go for a wander on their own – 'Not too far'.

They knew to be careful.

They were somewhere they were not supposed to go.

Another crow called, louder and closer, shaking out the dampness in its wings and scaring the girls again, though neither of them said so.

To brazen it out Izzy started singing 'Good King Wenceslas' like her mouth had a flat tyre. Hey check the sun out, she said, breaking off her moronic version of the song and calling back to Sarah as she pointed upwards.

There was a part of the sky that glowed like shiny cotton wool.

It was as if they were walking through another land, a magic place.

It's pretty, Sarah said, but the words sounded silly and she felt embarrassed when they came out: dumb.

She'd written about this problem in her journals. About not being able to express the way she felt – or of saying the wrong thing altogether when she tried.

Her uncle had told her she'd work it out when had the right tools to express herself: that it might come in the form of a paint brush or a pen or a guitar – or, God help us, an Excel spreadsheet, baby, but being an accountant would have to be pretty boring, wouldn't it?

He'd usually say that kind of thing after he'd snuck off to get stoned in the middle of their music lessons. Half the time he'd be quoting song lyrics and you couldn't tell where his own wisdoms began and someone else's ended.

Oh Sarah, Sarah, her uncle would sigh-and-sing when he was having boyfriend troubles, I can keep my cool at poker but I'm a foooooool where love's at stake!

He was just gagging to show her some Joni Mitchell songs so they could surprise her mother. But you gotta learn to walk before you can run, eh princess? Maybe we'll try 'Woodstock' soon though, uh? He hummed a phrase or two, plucked the notes off the guitar slowly for her eyes to study. She heard him breath outwards as if he were laughing to himself.

As if on cue a snowflake touched Sarah's lips.

She tasted ice and blood.

Felt how dry and cracked her lips were as she ran her tongue along the edges of her mouth. Turned her lips inwards; wiped them clean with the back of her hand, a streak of red appearing across her knuckles.

She touched her lips again with the back of her hand, kept it there a moment.

More crows called.

It sounded like they were letting go of all the strangeness in the air they had swallowed.

Sarah felt relieved this time to hear them, as if these very same sounds had somehow been caught in her mouth too.

She figured the crows must have a roost further, deeper into the woods.

Wondered what they were feeding on?

Tracks like thumbprints trailed off into nowhere.

Izzy hooked her thumb at the trail. Weasel, she said.

Her dad used to go hunting and had taught her how to skin a rabbit. Izzy knew her way around knives real good; bragged she could live out here for days on her own.

But then Izzy always exaggerated about the things she could do.

Sarah studied the tracks. Glanced back at the trail that she and her friend had made.

The more she looked and listened the more alive the emptiness became.

She pulled her hand from her drying lips, wiped her knuckles clean on the back of her jeans.

They were finally at the edge of the pond.

For luck Sarah unzipped her jacket slightly and reached inside, touching the pendant at her throat.

Her mother had made it for her last birthday, a jagged piece of flattened silver, its edges smoothed like a broken star.

When she let go Sarah felt the coolness of the metal press against her skin.

She could still remember the smell of her mother's breath from when she first put the pendant around her neck: the previous night's round of vodkas, her crusty morning cigarette, the faint after-taste of lime marmalade and toast when she kissed and hugged her so tight she had to wriggle free. Mum, enough already!

Mum, she whispered to herself.

The word turned into a mist before her face and floated apart as if it were never there.

Izzy was already sitting down on a small ridge of snow, ripping her shoes off and

putting on her skates.

Sarah started to do the same. She wondered for a second if it would always be like this? And felt a pang of envy for her friend and the easy way she had of doing things.

Izzy put her hand on Sarah's shoulder and smiled as she stood.

Sarah's mixed-up thoughts went away.

The sky seemed to move closer to them for a moment, white inside white, a slow white turning. The breeze ebbed and everything stopped.

Among the trees Sarah could hear a vague crack as a branch surrendered to the weight of the previous night's snow.

She thought she heard a surprised scrambling too, a deer maybe, startled by the fall.

Sarah had her boots off and was putting on her skates while Izzy tottered forward and was away with a kick onto the ice.

As she criss-crossed over the pond's surface the dusty cut of the blades inscribed themselves into the morning air, lassoing their way upwards into higher spaces.

In or out, don't mess about, Izzy called as she swerved to a halt, spraying up powder.

Yeah, yeah... chillax, Sarah drawled.

Her fingers were cold and she was having trouble working the skates onto her feet.

Finally she pulled the Velcro straps tight and stood, brushing the snow off her backside before moving awkwardly over the ridge.

Once she touched the surface of the pond Sarah started towards Izzy like a big engine rolling down its tracks.

People had noticed her at the rink over in Milton, told her she was like a real professional. It felt incredible to be doing it out in the open like this.

Izzy took off again, knowing how fast Sarah was.

Her long hair sailed out in dark ringlets, octopus arms.

Sarah pulled away her beanie, unleashing a black fin of her own.

Her legs pounded the ice as she gained ground on Izzy and began to encircle her in a wide fast arc.

Her beanie hung in her hand, soggy and half glittering in the frosty floating light.

The girls' breathing seemed to fill their entire heads with sound and space. And as they called out to each other it seemed only the sky could hear them clearly.

Sarah thought how she wanted to be thirteen forever! And redoubled her efforts as Izzy made a sneaky move and suddenly cut away from her again and they twisted in and out of each other in a sloppy set of figure '8's.

They were moving further out onto the pond.

Sarah's beanie fell from her hand.

She did not know she had let it go.

No such thing as safe ice, her father had warned her when it had started to freeze over completely.

But all Sarah wondered about now was the fishies below and how they could live down there before it thawed again? Did they get cold? Did they escape through the underground stream that fed the pond and flowed on to other places?

She'd seen ducks once, caught at the edge of the pond when the winter began arriving heavier and earlier to Thule only a few years back – and she had helped her father dig them out of the ice and mush.

He had not been able to tell her why they had waited to be frozen in rather than just fly away? Some were already dead before they could help them.

Her father took them by the neck and threw them dead into the snow.

Sarah had seen this anger in her father before; felt the edge of it on a few occasions when he blew his top and shouted at her. It was worse when he went silent. As if he was throwing the whole world into a dungeon below him.

Sarah watched as her father stood straight, and calmed himself.

He put his hand to her back in reassurance – and they set to work digging again, quiet but close this time – the scrawny, depressed quacking intensifying the urgency of their efforts.

The birds they could free were weak, and as they flapped off woozily Sarah feared for where they might go. Their flight as heavy as her mother's movements to the bedroom a month before, bumping the walls of hallway with her shoulder as she moved.

Go back to bed, her father had told her that night. It's okay, Mum's just had a bit too much to drink...

Green and black feathers lay scatted over the ground, twisting into the mush beneath their boots as Sarah and her father worked to free the last of the ducks.

For luck she picked a feather up and put it in her pocket when he wasn't looking. It was better than jewellery, almost shining.

She remembered those ducks and the feather she had saved and everything else all at once as she began to see her friend slowing down ahead of her.

Izzy was turning the edges of her skates to stop and buckling her knees, her arms spread out behind her as she bent her elbows and tried to fall backwards onto her hands.

In spite of the memories and what she was starting to feel now, Sarah began to laugh at Izzy and how funny she looked.

Sarah!

It wasn't quite a scream.

Instead it was soft and heavy the way Izzy said it – soft and loud at once.

Then her friend just disappeared.

Sarah heard the thin, splashing crack as if her own stomach were being cut open.

Could feel her heart a-rushing; tried to call out her friend's name without a word escaping her mouth.

Then she saw Izzy's head and arms bob up and water roll off her.

Her wet hair made her head look small and her eyes were big and scared like a doll's.

Izzy grabbed wildly at the nearby ice but there was nothing to hold on to and she slid backwards as if in slow motion.

Now Sarah could see how thin it was around them, the watery greyness of the ice at her feet.

Her heart beat even faster as she took a step forwards, then tried to lie down and crawl

towards Izzy.

The pressure of her chest made it feel as if the pond were swelling like a terrible bruise beneath her.

She started praying to Jesus for help but her friend's shrieks and splashing made it hard to think straight and Sarah was so frightened she barely knew what she was doing at all.

Izzy broke through another piece of ice as she scrambled to get out and disappeared once more.

By now Sarah was at the hole.

It was as if a large window had been smashed but you weren't able to see through it.

The water was disturbed, dark looking, sluggish with dark motion.

Looking into it, Sarah felt a cold fist pushing into her as if her insides were being similarly stirred.

O God, please...

Please.

For a moment she could not do anything.

Then she screamed.

Screamed her friend's name so loud the sky itself nearly cracked and, as if God had heard her, a head appeared again, then two arms swinging and splashing through the icy sludge.

Sarah reached for Izzy's right hand; could see Izzy shaking her head and blinking as if

bees were attacking her face.

My eyes, Izzy shrieked, and something else too, but her words were garbled and strange.

Izzy grabbed at Sarah's hand, caught it in a single sweeping gesture.

Sarah could feel herself slipping forward as they connected, heard a cracking at her chest as she tried to anchor her fingers into the resisting ice behind her.

She found herself yelling, No, Izzy... but as the words came her face was plunged into what felt like a million cold pins and she gasped and swallowed as a coldness burnt her face and throat and blinded her, seizing her body whole.

Now she was in the water too – under the water.

Izzy's body twisted with hers as Sarah righted herself and fought for the surface.

In her panic she lashed out at Izzy – but as she came up for air she grabbed for her friend again; grunting as she wrenched her upwards, gasping as if something immense were crushing and piercing her at once.

The cold. The cold...

At last they broke the surface, spluttering and coughing together, snot and water streaking Sarah's mouth; a half-formed shout for help scraping out of her chest, her eyes opening, chilled terrifying into a moment of blindness – then sight again.

She heard her friend choke her name outwards: 'Sa – rah'.

Felt Izzy hug her like she was going to sleep – all the while the water churned around them and she brawled for their lives like a wild thing.

What are you doing?! Sarah cried.

But her teeth rattled and her tongue and mouth felt anaesthetized and the words made no sense to her ears as she cried them out.

Sarah saw that it was all slowing down, even as she reached for the ice and more of it broke away beneath her hand and Izzy began to slide from her grip.

It was too late.

Her breathing had been fast and full of stuttering terror, but it seemed only a moment between that and another feeling, like she was watching it all, calm as could be.

Sarah pulled Izzy to her once more and wondered at this world for a moment, saw it tilting. Thought she could see the sun coming out yellow from behind the white drifting sky that had seemed so close and peaceful only moments ago. Saw it shining through a haze that crackled once more into her eyes.

She realized then that she and Izzy were below the water again, that she was only imagining what had already occurred above.

It had happened; was not happening.

They were sinking in each other's arms and there was a shivery darkness embracing them from below, and Sarah was not so frightened now, and she felt the darkness of this water as one would feel a heavy blanket in a dream, as if your head and body were in two worlds and she would wake again to that which was solid and real, pulling her away from the things that terrified her, and she told Izzy this with all her mind's electricity, and Izzy said she was afraid, and Sarah said that it was okay, we're alright, and as she did this it felt as if the voices of her life were growing around her in a song, as if they were just outside her bedroom window like calling birds, and she began singing back to them and helping Izzy to sing through her too, and she held Izzy even closer to her with the love of a sister's heart, and the water was cold, and blacker now, like the dim deep falling weight of sleep itself, and Sarah felt as if they were becoming ghosts in this blackness (*blacker now*), departing their bodies and

floating down through the night into another kind of morning where everything would be alright, and she hoped then that they might come back across this sleep made of water to tell everyone it was okay and not to be sad (*like calling birds*), don't be afraid, they were only dreaming and soon they would wake, it was alright, they were headed towards the morning, running home, running home, and it was silver and dark at once, the same as always, the same as always (*solid and real*), Sarah could feel it breaking across her dreaming eyelids, dad, mum, o please, the cold, it's alright, oh sweetheart, the first moment of dawn through her bedroom curtains when she heard the birds (*sleep itself*), they were calling back to her, it's okay, almost there, footsteps, almost there, voices, water, another day, the same as always, silver and dark, silver and always, silver and dark and silver (*another kind of morning*), and they sang and they called and they sang....

FIN.



A Story Inside of Me

Exegesis

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'His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'

- James Joyce, 'The Dead', *Dubliners* (1914)

I close my eyes to watch a story inside of me.

That's how I feel as I write my first novel – although I do not really close my eyes so much as let them fade from the world and turn back inside of me in order to see what is going on. Or at least I *try* and see what is going on. Since what is happening may not always be so readily available or clear to me.

Sometimes when I'm lucky it seems to rise up like something dwelling in my chest and pour out of my mouth like a ghost. I type away and tell then what I see: this story happening inside of me, this story coming out of me... this 'ghost story'.

I call it a ghost story because I am thinking that all fiction must be some form of haunting of the self, where you invoke these ghosts into life, most especially into your *own* inner life, then out onto the page – and into the world at large if you are lucky enough to be published. These people you call 'characters' that had never been there before, or were at best sleeping forms floating through your blood and your head.

It's hard to articulate the energies behind this act of conscious dreaming, a literary journey that requires various levels of control and dissolution. All creative works necessitate this duality, of course. But the rational aspects of 'control' or consciousness are more usually analyzed over the elusive and even spiritual act of imaginative dissolution, if only because the latter *is* so abstract and beyond words. Not to mention the dangers of slipping into a magical view of creativity that ultimately adds an air of vanity to your project: much like those tiresome speeches at the Grammy Awards where every B-grade pop star under the sun seems to have been

in direct dialogue with the Divine, thanking that Master of Modern Song, God, for the what they have achieved.

In his essay 'The Implied Author' the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk looks at this 'divine' or unconsciously organic process in another way, discussing the aversions and circuitous paths that led him to write one book instead of finishing the manuscript he was originally working on. In doing so Pamuk weaves an incidental argument in favour of the procrastinating and easily distracted writer:

'I can explain this by taking the "implied reader", a principle put forward by the great literary critics and theorist Wolfgang Iser, and twisting it to my own ends. Iser created a brilliant reader-oriented literary theory. He says that a novel's meaning resides neither in the text nor in the context in which it is read but somewhere between the two. He argues that a novel's meaning emerges only when it is read, and so when he speaks of the implied reader, he is assigning him an indispensable role.

When I was dreaming up scenes, sentences, and details of another book instead of continuing the novel I was already writing, this theory came to mind, and what it suggested to me by way of corollary was this: For every unwritten but dreamed and planned novel (including, in other words, my own unfinished work) there must be an implied author. So I would be able to finish the book only when I'd again become it's implied author.'¹

This concept also 'implies' something intrinsically healthy about the author-text relationship, along with the notion a text is writing the writer as much as the other way around. To complete a book a writer must be fulfilled, literally. There's a moral element to this too which suggests literary works are at heart a self-interrogation of some kind, and that writing a great book correlates with becoming a better or, at least, temporarily more complete human being. A less value-laden version of this theory, if you could call it a theory, would be that the purpose of great writing is profoundly evolutionary for the author involved. And if this singular spiritual project is successful

¹ Pamuk, Orhan, 2007, 'The Implied Author', *Other Colors: Essays and a Story*, Translated by Maureen Freely, Borzoi Book, USA, pp 9-10.

(however momentarily) then perhaps there is a larger value as well, a shared empathy and 'becoming' inherent in one person writing, and another person reading, a fine novel. The writer, reader and text becoming one: each dissolving into the other.

In writing *There's No Telling* I became interested in the dilemmas this posed as an existential theme associated with the creative act, and as a stylistic challenge to the writing itself. The latter ambition posed special problems for me as I was developing what was more truly a novella, something I hoped could work on a poetic level, taking advantage of the compressed space of the novella in what seemed to me an almost atomic way, unfolding its energy and forms out of the language as much as the story.

I was, however, forced to creep around the term 'novella'. To deny it like a case of the flu' best fought off and overcome for everyone's sake. The word alone was anathema publishers who apparently placed it in some ghetto with short stories and poetry and 'things that didn't sell'. I found this aversion odd given the number of over-long and boring books I'd withered away from ever completing as a reader. To dislike a slim and compressed work seemed illogical to me, as if value for the modern reader were now presumably measured as a dollar per kilo arrangement: the heavier the better, the more bang for your buck. Even people who buy meat from a butcher knew this wasn't true, so why would readers and publishers assume it as our new golden rule? Weren't we in the Twittering age of shrinking attention spans? Should that not mean shorter works were more effective and more appealing to the tenor of this age?

But even coming up with a definition of what a novella was a problem for me: the best general definition seemed to be that a novella was longer than a short story yet shorter than a novel; that it floated anywhere above 15,000 words and somewhere below 60,000. It did not escape my sense of irony that in writing an exegesis of some 10,000 words I would be spending almost as much word space explaining my book and its influences as writing it.

In the end I stopped using the term 'novella' to all but a few trusted friends and covert poetry fans who read such things under cover of darkness. This antagonism to the idea

of a novella was debilitating as I sought to stretch the work beyond its natural seams and original conception. Inevitably I have returned to my original ‘novella’ impulses in completing *There’s No Telling*, doing my best to burn away the padding and the fat, the steroidal boosting of character and plot I had developed in order to make the book a novel. It’s been painful to lose sight of my original intention, to be pushed away from it and then to fight my way back. I’m *not* sure I’ve made it back yet. That’s the truth. Or that my original intention was ever gracefully realized enough to warrant the faith I wanted in it.

Not that the terminology – novel or novella, prose work or poetry – ever truly mattered to me. I simply wanted to write a slim book that radiated as much as possible in the language and images as much as the story and characters. My heart was never in something ‘big’; the vision was always smaller, and more intense. Or so I hoped.

The more I thought about it as I worked the more important the musicality of the writing became: the rhythm and sound of the words needed to take on a hypnotic quality to draw people into the feeling of another world. Just as importantly this musicality should completely draw me in too. In this ‘fiction writing’ process what unfolds is something I’d describe as the illusion of believing, or a feeling of actuality, as if one has been or is going through what one is only imagining – a necessary seduction, or trick of the mind, that has as much to do with writing as reading.

There is something of this seductive quality in Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow*, beginning with what is for me one of the finest opening passages for a novel of recent times:

“The silence of snow, thought the man sitting just behind the bus driver. If this were the beginning of a poem, he would have called the thing he felt inside him the silence of snow.”²

Note the boldness of the repetition in the use of the phrase ‘the silence of snow’, and with it this element of musicality essential to the rhythmic power of the writing. Then the initial anonymity of the central figure, and the feeling we are both watching him,

² Pamuk, Orhan, 2004, *Snow*, Faber and Faber, UK, p.3.

yet intimate with his interior life. There is also the obvious suggestion of a journey, and of a permeable, perhaps too permeable, connection between this figure and the outside world. The emphasis on the word 'silence' adds to the ineffable tone, and a sense of sadness with it. All of which may seem an over zealous reading of a relatively simple passage if Pamuk did not unfold these themes and linguistic qualities in the novel as a whole, as if the entire book could have sprung from these two opening sentences like a defining seed or, more precisely, a defining crystal.

We learn that the man with 'the silence of snow' inside of him is called Ka, a failed poet and would-be journalist on his way to a Turkish border town called Kars. Having spent the previous 10 years in Germany as a political refugee, Ka has only recently returned to his own country. He has lived a creatively bereft life in Germany, writing nothing and feeling the shame of an immigrant's life at the bottom of the social heap: 'It had been a long time since he had enjoyed the fleeting pleasure of empathising with someone weaker than himself.'³

Ka has been commissioned by a newspaper to report on a municipal election in Kars and to investigate a mysterious 'epidemic' of suicides among local young Islamic women. But Ka is really taking the journey west to seek out a beautiful former university friend called Ipek, whom he hopes to make his wife. As he trudges through Kars pursuing the details of the election and the more troubling events that motivated so many young women to kill themselves, a snowstorm cuts the town off completely. Questions of politics, faith and identity dog him and all those he speaks to. Eventually these tensions overflow in a local coup that takes on the shrill dimensions of farce while Pamuk sustains a sense of matter-of-fact brutality and evil behind it. At one point, Ka observes how the 'pale yellow street lamps cast such a deathly yellow glow over the city that he felt himself in some strange, sad dream, and, for some reason, he felt guilty. Still, he was mightily thankful for this silent and forgotten country now filling him with poems.'⁴

Out of others' suffering, and all these sad or awful events, Ka is finding himself creatively reborn – and even joyful. A long time writer's block, and with it a feeling

³ Pamuk, Orhan, 2004, *Snow*, Faber and Faber, UK, p.46.

⁴ Pamuk, Orhan, 2004, *Snow*, Faber and Faber, UK, p.112

of worthlessness exacerbated by his time in exile in Germany, is being dispersed by his time in Kars and his slowly reciprocated passion for Ipek. As readers we yearn to see Ka's poems, which are hinted at or explained to us but *never* fully revealed. It only becomes clear by the end of the book that the narrator who is telling us Ka's story is drawing from Ka's diaries and his own investigations in order to track Ka's movements and hopefully find these lost poems, the material "soul" of the events.

It would be hard to find a more perfectly titled book than *Snow* in light of all this. To help structure the novel Orhan Pamuk toys with the six-sided physical properties of snowflakes as an organizing principle, and the phenomenon of twelve-sided snowflakes that occurs when two snowflakes twin together and develop as one. Ka himself uses this snow geometry in his notebooks to map when and where he wrote his poems in Kars, and with that 'map' what these poems (and therefore the the novel) mean about his 'divided soul' as both an educated Europhile and a Turk, his relationships to Enlightenment thinking and Islamic culture, his exiled spirit and his love for Ipek:

'One by one, he recalled the facts about snowflakes he had read in the library that afternoon. He had gone there to prepare himself, just in case another poem came to him on the subject of snow. But now his head was empty of poetry. Although his poems had come to him individually, he now saw that they all fitted together as neatly as the childish, six-pointed snowflake in the encyclopedia. At this moment he had the first intimation that his poems were all part of a grand design.

'What are you doing over there darling?' asked Ipek.

'I'm looking at the snow, darling.'

It seemed to him that Ipek somehow knew he could see more than just beauty in the geometry of the snowflakes, but that could not be so.⁵

This symbolism takes ultimate structural expression in the finished form of the novel itself with the story of the narrator overlapping that of Ka's own journey:

⁵ Pamuk, Orhan, 2004, *Snow*, Faber and Faber, UK, p.269

‘That morning as I walked the streets of Kars, talking to the same people Ka had talked to, sitting in the same tea-houses, many times I almost felt I was Ka. Early in my wanderings, while I was sitting in the Lucky Brothers Tea-House, where Ka had written ‘All Humanity and Stars’, I, too, dreamed about my place in the universe, just as my beloved friend had dreamed.’⁶

With its meticulously formed sentences, floating atmospheres and endlessly swirling storylines and characterizations, as well as the snow itself that falls so constantly throughout the story, the metaphoric energy could eventually take on a heavy-handed quality. Yet Pamuk never runs out of ways to make you feel, taste, see and "hear" its quiet power, thriving on the lyrical possibilities and permutations at every level. Form and style mesh with surprising, almost obsessive intensity.

Despite the European postmodernist tag Orhan Pamuk gets there is also something Eastern and traditional about his approach. His prose style echoes the elaborateness of Turkish miniatures, the circling, riffing ascensions of Sufi mysticism (pages-long paragraphs of long, running sentences that erupt like long seizures or visions within the more formally graceful writing) and the traditional role of the storyteller as a conjurer. As corny as the metaphor sounds, reading this book also feels as if you are looking at a world in a snow-dome (or a television set), with all the melancholy distance that might imply. A tendency to lapse into fatalistic voyeurism is therefore never far away in spite the magical properties of the story and its atmosphere. Perhaps in a way this mix of magic and pessimism is another reflection of Ka’s divided life as well: the poet bent on capturing something mystical and romantic; the reporter exposing the misery and corruption and entrapment the people of Kars are condemned too?

As I stood in a bookshop and read the first few lines of the novel I was still unaware of how well formed they were in relation to the rest of *Snow* – but I knew I wanted this book badly. There was a dreamy magnetism to the words that immediately attracted me. As I went deeper into the reading experience I realised I wanted to be inside this story, as we always feel when great literature affects us – because we know

⁶ Pamuk, Orhan, 2004, *Snow*, Faber and Faber, UK, p.420

it or, more strangely, feel it knows us. That the author of *Snow* plays a literary shadow game – as a nameless narrator attempts to retrieve the details of a turning point in his friend's life – adds to this curious feeling of remembering rather than reading, of melting into the process of the story. Like the narrator our own identity blurs or merges with that of Ka as he wanders the wintry streets of Kars. Indeed we mostly forget there is a narrator until Pamuk reminds us periodically by addressing us directly in the manner of a 19th century novelist. By the book's end we move closer to the narrator's pursuit of what happened to Ka, shaken out of our dreamy empathy with Ka's experiences as he fades once more into a life of exile in Germany and away from us. As *Snow* concludes our associations with the narrator echo his process of having trawled Ka's notebooks for clues to this mysterious and tragic sequence of events, to the man who has also disappeared from us.

Though I had *not* planned my work this way, I belatedly came to see that *There's No Telling* had unfolded in some way out of Pamuk's *Snow* and its floating mood. That as a reader I had been enchanted and influenced in ways I had not perceived. I too had been drawn to visit my own town of Kars, 'the silence of snow' within me. I'd gone looking for some type of poem within me and with it a reason for living. This goes beyond any post modern textual analysis into something I do willingly embrace as mystical, despite my earlier snarl at Grammy Awards God-given artistry. It seemed to me the writing of the work was indeed a spiritual struggle of some kind. And that if it was anything less than that the project was bereft, hollow.

But a book can also destroy a writer, or at least possess him or her in the most negative of ways. A well-known example of this in recent times is the Australian rock n roll singer Nick Cave's first novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*.

Cave's unreliable narrator is called Euchrid Eucrow, a deluded mute whom we first meet sinking down into a swampy quagmire. Above him, Euchrid observes how:

'Three greasy black crows wheel, beak to heel, cutting a circle into the bruised and troubled sky, making fast, dark rings through the thicksome bloats of smoke.'⁷

⁷ Cave, Nick, 1989, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, Black Spring Press, UK, p.3.

The words ring like the portentous tolling of a bell. Euchrow then begins to tell the story leading up to his predicament in a series of flashbacks that are written in an over-heated Southern Gothic prose style that recalls the works of William Faulkner for its density of language and streams of consciousness, and the freak-fascinated and religious interests of Flannery O'Connor, as well as her bleak sense of humour.

In this convergence of influences Cave found a more immediate contemporary in Cormac McCarthy, whose exaggerated Biblical voice, and novel *Child of God*, are an obvious influence. Compare these two passages for voice, alliteration, rhythm – the first from McCarthy, the second from Cave:

‘They came like a caravan of carnival folk up through the swales of broomstraw and across the hill in the morning sun, the trucks rocking and pitching in their ruts and the musicians on chairs in the truck teetering and tuning their instruments, the fat man grinning and gesturing to the others in a car behind and bending to give note to the fiddler who turned a fiddlepeg and listened with a wrinkled face. They passed under flowering appletrees and passed a long crib chinked with orange mud and came in sight of an aged clapboard house that stood in blue shade under a mountain. Beyond it stood a barn.’⁸

‘In the talcum light of dusk, as the fleeting sun retrieved its bright spears and the fine black hem of night veiled its brow, Ezra and Euchrid made their way across the marshland. Each wore across his shoulder a simple pine-board halter from which ran about fifteen feet of thick rope hitched to either side of a giant pallet of corrugated tin. Freightened upon the pallet’s considerable circular expanse was a vast and ghostly carcass, enshrouded in muddy cloth and trussed in coloured electrical cord. Both figures strained against the lumbering deadweight that they hauled behind them, their bodies angles forward, a knotted walking-prop clenched in each fist, their faces strangely void of grimace, of effort. Each solemnly bore his burden as if some shred of dignity was to be retrieved in the trappings of ceremony – hence the grim grey hoods, the sombre masks. Hence the crying, straining muscle beneath.’⁹

⁸ McCarthy, Cormac, 1989, *Child of God*, Picador, UK, p.3.

⁹ Cave, Nick, 1989, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, Black Spring Press, UK, p. 153.

Re-released in 2009 as a Penguin Popular Classic, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* was re-edited by some 10 to 12% in order to prune back its excesses: the direct product of it being a young man's overly derivative work (Cave wrote the novel in his mid 20s), and more particularly that of a lyrically-focused songwriter adversely affected by his own performative voice (an overbearing storytelling presence and obsessive *sound* that can only partly be justified stylistically as a reflection of the main character's demented consciousness). Cave's addiction to heroin and amphetamines during the time he wrote the book only adds to this hyper-ventilating verbal energy and the page-after-page sense that this is a writer who does not know when to stop, or when to create space rather than intensity.

To get into character for writing the novel Cave frequented local flea markets in Berlin, collecting everything from samples of human hair to religious iconography and pornography, creating a lair around him in his bedroom that echoed the lair Euchrid Eucrow inhabits in the novel. This mirroring, a form of authorial 'method acting' if you like, intensified and fed off Cave's drug habits, and the increasingly spiraling consciousness of both the writer and his narrator. Cave would later admit it was unclear who was writing who: Euchrid Eucrow sinking to his death, up to his neck in a swampy bog; or Nick Cave, addicted to drugs and highly isolated in a Berlin, obsessing over a work he could not seem to finish?

Orhan Pamuk might well have sympathized with this predicament and recommended aversion therapy for Cave in the form of another album of songs, or another writing project altogether. In fact Cave *did* seek these alternatives out, with stellar results for his music and his lyrics on *Your Funeral...My Trial*, and less successfully in a series of violent short plays he co-wrote with Lydia Lunch under the mutual influence of Antonin Artaud and trashy American pulp literature.

But *And the Ass saw the Angel* called him back again and again. And was finally completed for better or worse, releasing Cave from the destructive bondage of the project. Once Cave had finished it he left the city of Berlin and began taking his first steps towards a drug-free life. It would be almost two decades before he would commit himself to writing screenplays and a second novel, *The Death of Bunny Munro* (2009). By then he was a very different human being and the control in his

personal life would be reflected in the focus and discipline his later literary works manifested.

Art in Cave's situation has the potential to become a cipher for self-annihilation, if not suicide. The songs of Nick Drake, or Ian Curtis from Joy Division; the last paintings of Mark Rothko and Vincent van Gogh; the poetry of Hart Crane: there are numerous examples of this in the history of creative endeavour, of becoming and dissolution expressed in the most violent or desperate terms. It is as if an inclination towards the divine is bound up with a suicidal twin, a Narcissus factor that drowns the dreamer in his own reflections. At this point it is no longer clear where the writing has been therapeutic or 'creative', and how much it leads to self-destruction. There's a Lethian stream here that leads to the ultimate question of whether life itself is worth living? Without wanting to sound too melodramatic about it, art then becomes a matter of celebrating life or accepting (or is that embracing?) death. The Romantics appeared to see these two options as one and the same thing.

David Foster Wallace cautions against those equations, and easy links between a writer's life and the work they produce. Forster Wallace makes his thoughts most explicit in a brilliant *New York Times* essay review of Edwin Williamson's biography, *Borges; A Life*:

"There's an unhappy paradox about literary biographies. The majority of readers who will be interested in a writer's bio, especially one as long and exhaustive as Edwin Williamson's "Borges: A Life," will be admirers of the writer's work. They will therefore usually be idealizers of that writer and perpetrators (consciously or not) of the intentional fallacy. Part of the appeal of the writer's work for these fans will be the distinctive stamp of that writer's personality, predilections, style, particular tics and obsessions -- the sense that these stories were written by this author and could have been done by no other. And yet it often seems that the person we encounter in the literary biography could not possibly have written the works we admire. And the more intimate and thorough the bio, the stronger this feeling usually is...

The big problem with "Borges: A Life" is that Williamson is an atrocious reader of Borges's work; his interpretations amount to a simplistic, dishonest kind of psychological criticism. You can see why this problem might be intrinsic to the

genre. A biographer wants his story to be not only interesting but literarily valuable. In order to ensure this, the bio has to make the writer's personal life and psychic travails seem vital to his work. The idea is that we can't correctly interpret a piece of verbal art unless we know the personal and/or psychological circumstances surrounding its creation. That this is simply assumed as an axiom by many biographers is one problem; another is that the approach works a lot better on some writers than on others. It works well on Kafka -- Borges's only modern equal as an allegorist, with whom he's often compared -- because Kafka's fictions are expressionist, projective, and personal; they make artistic sense only as manifestations of Kafka's psyche. But Borges's stories are very different. They are designed primarily as metaphysical arguments; they are dense, self-enclosed, with their own deviant logics. Above all, they are meant to be impersonal, to transcend individual consciousness -- "to be incorporated," as Borges puts it, "like the fables of Theseus or Ahasuerus, into the general memory of the species and even transcend the fame of their creator or the extinction of the language in which they were written." One reason for this is that Borges is a mystic, or at least a sort of radical Neoplatonist -- human thought, behavior and history are all the product of one big Mind, or are elements of an immense cabalistic Book that includes its own decoding. Biography-wise, then, we have a strange situation in which Borges's individual personality and circumstances matter only insofar as they lead him to create artworks in which such personal facts are held to be unreal.'¹⁰

Reading David Foster Wallace's words my thoughts jumped back to Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and its influence over me as both a reader and then a writer. It was as if I had been born out of reading one book into writing another -- and though those experiences were separated by years I retrospectively saw the bridge that was there between them. I also saw that in writing a complete or 'true' fiction, so to speak, I was attempting some form of imagined autobiography whose details had nothing to do with me, and yet whose themes were profoundly connected to some inner life I was struggling with.

At their point of origin, all books are conversations an author is having with him or herself. As W.H. Auden once put it, 'How do I know what I think till I see what I

¹⁰ Wallace Forster, David, 07.11.04, 'Borges on the Couch', *The New York Times*, USA.

say.’ The novel is a way of thinking and being puzzled out on the page and clarified (or carefully disguised at the case may be). Though many writers have a highly schematic process from the get-go I have never really known what any work, short or long is, till I have written it and began to recognize what was impelling me in the first place.

Autobiographical connections to a work of fiction are fraught, nonetheless. Certainly it is too easy to reduce everything in *The Age of Oprah* to these tormented existential and confessional terms. Most writers with half a brain resist the easy captioning of their work in therapeutic terms.

Many readers are meanwhile cynical about first novels when they emerge as little more than disguised autobiographies where all a writer has done is change a few people’s names and places, and sometimes barely that. There’s a feeling such a small step is somehow dishonest, or a failing of the author’s imagination –that it is in some way cheating the reader of a story the author is *supposed* to create, rather than replicate or out-right ‘steal’ from reality, which another moral concern behind this: some sense of the author as a thief, rather than a ‘true’ writer.

Despite serious ethical issues about the way you might use and expose real-life people in a so-called work of fiction, I nonetheless have major doubts about an aesthetic position that argues in favour of the more purely imagined over a drawn-from-life approach, or indeed any attempt to put a line in the sand between them ... If I am honest, all I really care about is how well written it is; and where the writer and the book take me when I read it. The experience of reading itself, the dream in the head that it conjures up, over and above the experiential backdrop or creative process behind it, much as those things are also of interest to anybody’s appreciation of a literary work.

What are you going to do if the step into the imagination is as dubiously ‘small’ or ‘slight’ as some might have it, and yet is magnificent on its own terms? Go back and tell Jack Kerouac that *On the Road* was just a rip-off from his own life; say to the poet Robert Lowell that *Life Studies* should be less autobiographical; let W.G. Sebald know that *Rings of Saturn* sounds too close to memoir and not enough like fiction?

It would hardly be a winning point to say these works have no need to justify themselves against any charge of being intimately dependent on their authors' lives. Though in Sebald's case that dependence may well be another construct, an illusion he toys with to take us through yet another room in his labyrinthine mind:

“In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work. And in fact my hope was realized, up to a point; for I have seldom felt so carefree as I did then, walking for hours in the day through the thinly populated countryside, which stretches inland from the coast. I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star. At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralyzing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into a hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility. It was then that I began in my thoughts to write these pages. I can remember precisely how, upon being admitted to that room on that eighth floor, I became overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot. Indeed, all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window.”¹¹

Sebald tightens the associations to memoir by then showing us a photograph of that window. The first of many photos, paintings and sampled imagery that he uses. His now famous use of imagery to support the text, often very banal imagery at that, adds to the 'reality' of the narrator's reflections and confessions in all of Sebald's books, as if we are opening someone diary or journal and discovering their collected ticket stubs and snapshots along with what they have written. The final outcome is something of a hybrid literary form that purposely confuses the novel and the memoir, as well as the travel narrative and the essay. It is hard to know how to finally categorize Sebald at

¹¹ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, pp 3-4, New Directions Books, New York 1999

all. It's interesting nonetheless that Sebald usually chooses a narrator who seems to be him, and who has suffered a breakdown or crisis of some kind that has preceded the book and which the book then proceeds from in an invariable tone of elegiac aftermath. Perhaps this is why Sebald's 'novels' all feel like one long involved, continuing story by the same person. Which of course is what they are in my opinion, a kind of long dreaming essay. Yes, yes, that word 'dreaming' again.

In my case I don't have to worry too much about such immediate connections and criticisms being made. Maybe I'm simply too old to write the kind of veiled first-time-up autobiographical novel that gets slammed for these 'real' reasons. Sometimes I think there are ten lives inside of me that have already been and gone *anyway*. And if I did want to write the book of my first life or my second life or my third life, well, it's as much a fiction to me now as anything else.

This is the deceptive ground of the narrator, and what the poet Arthur Rimbaud once framed in his own way by saying 'I is an other'. If that is true of a poet or a novelist, then it's just as true to say that memoir too is a fiction, the use of first person always caught up in the shaping of a character and a voice, a position. Exaggerated, cheated on, distorted, lied through, venerated, damned. Whatever 'character' the author needs to make the story work and perhaps also create a mythology as well for themselves. Even the 'I' is a mask.

So why not use this core material as one wishes to, why worry about larger leaps from life into the imagined?

As Proust observed in *Swanns Way*,

'Whether it be that the faith which creates has ceased to exist in me, or that reality will take shape in the memory alone, the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers.'¹²

¹² Proust, Marcel, 2002, 'Swann's Way', *In Search of Lost Time*, Trans. Scott Moncrieff, C.K., Dover Thrift Editions, p169.

Remembering and making transform experiences, even in the effort of perfect or mere replication (of which there is no such thing). And yet in discussing all this, the irony is that I seem to be trying to create ‘another reality’ in my work that is *like* a memory – but which I have never actually experienced.

This is why it has been vital for me to feel my way into the story, to live it – even if I have not lived it.

And yet I am still not sure, all the while I freely quote Proust with a flourish (thank God for Google) and look over the umpteenth draft of my manuscript and write these journal notes for what will be my Exegesis. The work grows and shrinks as I write this Exegesis, getting stronger and weaker as I cast a magnifying glass over both it and my inspirations. I am unfinished. I want to give up. I might give up right here. How far I feel, suddenly, from what I thought was a closing moment of ecstasy barely a fortnight ago when I had, at last, ‘completed’ it.

Writers talk of this often in interviews. The wonderful but false illusion of completion; the aggressive, even violent setting-in of the critical faculties and its associated destructive energies: of great joy and deep depression within an arc of 48 hours, as if one is looking at two very different manuscripts when in fact what one has is two very different sets of eyes. Perhaps that’s why I’m calling my book *There’s No Telling*. Perhaps the title itself was some form of subconscious warning to my self about the endeavor ahead?

I’m aware in this essay of how often I equate dreaming with watching. This dreaming or watching did not always flow as freely or magically as I would have liked. I had to dig in to myself to find this vision, or keep it ‘running’. It bothered me sometimes how important it was to see it happening, as if I might be polluted in some way by cinema and be crafting a script disguised as a novel. Eventually I let this concern pass me by, since all that really mattered was the integrity of my relationship to the thing being felt and made. I was not writing *for* the movies, I was trying to be in a world.

Having made a career as a journalist, critic and non-fiction writer this sense of an authentic illusion was strange indeed to me. Almost bi-polar! There’s always this fuss

or nervousness about someone moving from non-fiction into fiction, of course. It can be a bit like those handovers of spies that used to take place on a bridge between East and West Berlin. Maybe there should even be a secret handshake when a fiction writer or poet heads the other way and writes an essay or a memoir?

It's ironic to me that some of the most interesting new fiction happening now is being fueled by the feedback of non-fiction or 'reality' into fiction writing. People like W.G. Sebald, or more importantly for me as influences, books like Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* and many of the works of the Chilean author Roberto Bolano (notably *The Savage Detectives* and *Last Evening on Earth*) who couldn't seem to care less about whether something is made up, autobiographical or bastard mix of the two.

So can I come from writing about the real world and write about an imagined world too? And do words like real and imagined have a line separating them?

Thule is not a real place – that much should be obvious.

As time has passed I have come to see that my chosen 'genre' for *There's No Telling* is not so much crime fiction or the thriller or the romance or even the supernatural tale as I originally thought, all of which influenced me in some tangential way. It is in fact a fairy story. An adult fairy story about coping with loss and death.

In his autobiography, *Istanbul – Memories of a City*, the Turkish author Orhan Pamuk deals with this sense of self and how it is reformed in literature as if memory were in fact rather close to a fairy tale:

"At times when I accept as my own stories I've heard about my city and myself, I'm tempted to say, 'Once upon a time I used to paint. I hear I was born in Istanbul, and I understand that I was a somewhat curious child. Then, when I was 22, I seem to have begun writing novels without knowing why'. I'd have liked to write my entire story this way -- as if my life were something that happened to someone else, as if it were a dream in which I felt my voice fading and my will succumbing to an enchantment. Beautiful though it is, I find the language of the epic unconvincing, for I cannot accept that they myths

we tell about our first lives prepare us for brighter, more authentic lives when we awake. Because – for people like me, at least -- that second life is none other than the book in your hand."

Which is perhaps why I find it easier to say that I see my book as a something like a bud of snow or a single star: icy and white and emanating and cold in a night-time place. *That's how I see my book.*

In the music documentary *Fall in Light* there's a great line from the tragically drowned singer Jeff Buckley's mother where she explains, by way of dealing with her grief, how, 'I have a picture in my mind that was actually a metaphysical image. That the body of my son was not the speck of dust they pulled out of the Wolf River but the body of his work.'¹³

On hearing it I wondered if a work of art might console both the artist and those close to him in a more conscious way; if in fact art was designed for precisely this deeply personal purpose in our lives; if this was, quite literally, the communion that was sought within a work?

It makes me think about how my book got born.

The way it was delivered to me from the real world. Sitting in a café in Glebe, reading the paper and seeing a tiny news article about two 12-year-old girls who had drowned in an ice pond in Holland. Being inexplicably moved by that tiny story, perhaps because my partner was pregnant with our first child and the first intimations of fatherhood were already upon me.

Going home and handwriting – in a mood of total compulsion – a short story about the drowning from the perspective of one of the girls. Putting it away in a shoe box and forgetting about it till a few years later when I was trying to write a very different book and the story came back to me as I lay in bed at midnight and stared at the ceiling.

¹³ Kent, Don, 1999, *Fall in Light*, France.

Those girls drowning.

The icy water.

The lightly falling snow.

And the question of what would happen next? To their parents – and who their parents were? And how Christmas might feel if you had a lost dead child to try and put to rest in your soul?

And if there were some rage about this loss that had not been reconciled?

And where such feelings and people might go in the course of one evening?

And with all those thoughts in mind I abandoned a non-fiction book I was working on and let this new one take possession of me.

I have never had a book experience like that, a feeling of being taken over by a story. And what makes me happy is no matter how long I left it for and no matter how hard it got, the book always asserted itself in me, pushed me on. I mostly feel the book is better than me – that it's coming from another place I can't put my finger on and always will come from that place.

Sometimes it's as if I am the ghost. And my book is the reality I am *trying* to stay inside.

Every time I see a white page I imagine a field of snow and me walking, word by word to this place that hovers in my mind.

You see what's happening here then don't you? I'm looking back over my book again as I write this essay, and I'm wanting to leave here and dissolve. I'm closing my eyes and dreaming I am somewhere else, falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling.

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â€œBecause there is no telling whether these children would have survived had we gone down the path you are suggesting.â€™ â€œOf course, there is no telling how far the current climate of cigar taxation and smoking-bans will go.â€™ â€œStill, there is no telling whether as president he would be so unequivocal.â€™ â€œIt is free to visit - though there is no telling for how long.â€™ â€œAlso, there is no telling whether or not you will be caught one day.â€™ â€œShould the elections be held freely, there is no telling what the outcome will be.â€™ Word of the Day. Translations in context of "There's no telling" in English-German from Reverso Context: There's no telling what effect it might have.Â These examples may contain rude words based on your search. These examples may contain colloquial words based on your search. Translation of "There's no telling" in German. wir wissen nicht. man kann nicht sagen. There's no telling definition at Dictionary.com, a free online dictionary with pronunciation, synonyms and translation. Look it up now!Â This idiom uses telling in the sense of â€œreckoning,â€ a usage dating from the late 1300s. Content related to there's no telling. Are There Any English Words That Have No Vowels? It's a question that just about every English learner has asked: "Are there any English words that have no vowels?" The answer to this depends what you mean by "vowel!" and "word." READ MORE.