

THE HUMAN RACE

by

A.P. Atkinson

The characters, places and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental, not intended by the author, and very clearly the result of crippling mental illness

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Introduction – Please read around

If you were to somehow fire a rubber ball into a sealed, frictionless, and perfectly spherical container that maintained a vacuum in a perfectly weightless environment, then the ball would bounce away in there for a very long time. It would ricochet from side to side, endlessly thumping away on the walls in a mad effort to escape.

That's a lot like how it felt to have a story like this in my head.

The idea came to me a long time ago, but it got shuffled off to the side or ignored, since there are many, many other rubber balls bouncing around inside the dark and gloomy confines of my skull.

I was working as an English teacher and renting motorcycles on the side in a third world country, all the while wondering just exactly what it was that brought me here, and why the hell I wasn't doing something else, anything else, literally anything in the world other than this.

Of course the most obvious, and probably most accurate, answer was motorcycles. I had ridden them across the continent several years earlier, as frankly not that many countries were sympathetic to my cause—that being, to live and work, and ride motorcycles freely, without too many problems.

Most of SE Asia restricts motorcycles very heavily, and, while I should disapprove of anything that encroaches on personal freedoms, I do have to agree with that general policy in that particular part of the world. The driving standards are so utterly appalling that giving them larger machines is signing a blanket death warrant for entire swathes of the population. It does make it difficult; the quality of their driving does destroy a lot of the enjoyment of riding, travelling, and occasionally remaining alive.

This all got me dreaming about motorcycles, my first true passion—you know, after beer, coffee, curry, cheese, poor business decisions, women, and writing lists in the wrong order.

With a short break from full-time teaching, thanks to the summer season, I found myself with a little free time and a headful of rubber balls. All this came together, and I decided it was time to vent this story, to bring it out from a vaguely intelligible idea to a moderately intelligible work of fiction.

I had had several books published before: a travel story, a proper science-fiction, and a sci-fi comedy about a waiter and a man who delivers towels. I thought it was time to write something more mainstream, something a bit more accessible to a wider audience. That wasn't going to be difficult after creating a true story of two grown men arguing, a tale of a sex-industry android, and a book set in the mind of a sentient brick holding open a toilet door somewhere in Turkey.

I spent some time staring at a wall and sipping coffee while everyone around me thought, quite reasonably, that I had finally snapped, and that at least it would soon all be over—probably for the best all round. Sadly for everyone, my battle with mental illness was only just beginning.

I initially came up with an interesting alternative structure by which to best relate the story, as just writing a straightforward narrative from beginning to end would be way too easy—where would be the fun in that? My idea was that each chapter should exist as a self-contained story, following the unique journeys of a specific set of characters. The chapters would all take place over approximately the same time frame, so each is able to build on the previous ones, occasionally overlapping, adding unknown details, gradually filling in an overall complete picture.

The characters themselves would be as varied as the situations they find themselves in, each bringing their own motivations, reservations, aspirations, personal demons, and occasional eccentricities. As varied as they are though, they'd each

share one defining characteristic—a longing to find hope, in a world that has all too little to spare.

In realising this aspect of the story, I really didn't have to dig that deep into my own experience. Desperation is becoming commonplace, and writing characters who will willingly abandon their better judgement proved easier than I had initially imagined. I modelled some of them on people I'd met, some on aspects of myself, and others simply wrote themselves.

I was determined that the story should remain believable, and that the characters and their situations stay grounded in the same reality we all share. At its core, it's a human drama—there are no heroes, and there are no villains, just people like you and I, trying to make it in a world where the odds are stacked heavily against us.

The drama occurs when these relatable and ordinary people are put (willingly or otherwise) into situations that threaten their sense of normality, their decency, their morality, possibly even their very lives.

I believe in people—hope in the future hasn't been beaten out of me just yet, although the world does keep on trying. Ultimately, this story is about that. It's about the strength of the human spirit, and its capacity to overcome adversity in a positive way. This story is about our ability to achieve the impossible, in a world where the impossible is the right thing.

It's about people—the one thing there really is left to believe in.

The Human Race

**Buy a used motorcycle from a stranger for only £500.
You must then ride it 500 miles before midnight.**

Karen held up the paper note. She blinked as she read it, shaking her head and making a slightly annoyed, partly incredulous expression of irritated disbelief.

It made no sense. It was stupid, and she was beginning to wish she'd never got involved in any of this. "I don't have £500," she said, handing the slip to the man beside her.

He took it and smiled sarcastically, shaking his head in amusement and frowning at it.

"That's a tough one," he said. "I'm glad I didn't end up with one like that."

She turned to stare at him and looked him over dubiously. It was time to admit that she was out of her depth—totally out of her depth, and was starting to sink. He was what she considered a real biker; he was wearing greasy black jeans, a battered leather jacket, and wore solid-looking boots that appeared to have traces of blood on the end. He had messy black hair that clung to the back of his neck like freshly cooked, and horribly burned, spaghetti. His facial hair, while not really a beard, was dense and wiry enough to trap unwary insects. But it was the smell that really struck her: it was like oil, but somehow more so. She had a not entirely welcome mental image of him sleeping naked in the engine bay of a large car while it was running.

"I thought you were my partner?" she said sternly as she glared at him, like a mother telling off a naughty child. This was a habit she'd picked up because a mother was exactly what she was. Her children, of course, looked nothing at all like this monstrosity before her, and she was glad of that much. She glowered at him as if

this was all somehow his fault. Old habits died hard with her, and she was a slave to them, a creature of routine.

The first time she'd dared to wander too far beyond her comfort zone, she'd landed herself here—a dingy church hall surrounded by motorcycling monsters where she really, really didn't feel like she belonged.

He shook his head and told her, “No. I got her...” He pointed to the corner where a couple of bikers were talking.

They were, somehow, even more appalling than this other one, and she gave a groan as the last lingering shreds of her belief in humanity were torn rudely from her. She shook her head and tutted loudly in disapproval. Through pinched up lips, she demanded of nobody in particular, “Well, who did I get then?”

“Are you Karen?” a voice asked her a little awkwardly.

She turned to find what she presumed was her partner standing behind her. He seemed refreshingly normal, despite being the sort of person who would ride a motorcycle. He didn't smell like he lived outside, and slightly to the rear, of someone else's home, and it didn't appear that he was the sort of person who might feast on dead rats. She smiled slightly, somewhat in relief, but not entirely convinced that this was all going to work in the way she wanted, expected and demanded that it should.

“Yes, and you are?” she said.

He held out his hand to shake hers in the traditional manner of a formal greeting. She looked down at her palm for a moment in confusion, and seemed to back very slightly away. It seemed that neither of them were quite sure what to make of all this. She was perfectly convinced that she was the cleanest person in the room, and she was planning to stay that way.

He laughed a little, shaking his head as he looked away. It was condescending, insulting, and clearly showed a lack of respect.

Perhaps he wasn't in his right mind, she wondered? Perhaps motorcycles and mental illness were more closely related than she had feared.

"I'm Malcolm," he said, after it had become quite painfully obvious that she wasn't going to touch his hand.

She rolled her eyes and regretted not only this sorry episode of her life, but all the many sorry episodes that had led up to it. "I'm assuming we're partners then?" she asked him accusingly.

Malcolm looked at her for a moment, his expression giving away nothing of what might be going on in his thoughts. He said very dryly, "No, I'm madly in love with you, and simply had to come over to introduce myself."

She was taken aback. "What?" she shrieked in a sudden burst of emotion—somewhere between outrage and just plain old normal rage, and her face erupted into an expression somewhere between embarrassed confusion and confused embarrassment.

"Of course we're partners," he told her with an apathetic sigh. "Can I see what our challenge is?"

"I suppose..." she grumbled, grudgingly holding out the little slip of paper. It had clearly been printed by a standard home printer. The paper had a relatively expensive looking watermark, but was otherwise nothing special. None of this was particularly special, come to that. With so much at stake, she had expected so much more importance to have been attached to things. Finding that everything looked so crushingly benign felt like a horrible disappointment all round.

He took the paper and flashed his eyes over it, reading and re-reading the challenge. He was an older man; probably around fifty, she would have guessed. His face had deep grooves around the corners of his mouth, a fan of fine lines that radiated around his eyes, and he had greying hair that had long since started to recede.

That fact seemed to have largely escaped him, as he had allowed it to grow down the length of his back where it had managed to reach far enough down to look slightly ridiculous. She could picture him with his hair down playing 'Freebird' or 'All Right Now' as part of a poorly-conceived tribute band that performed in crowded little bars in boring little towns on evenings where too many people tried to drink themselves into oblivion, to forget the fact that they didn't have the imagination to leave. In all likelihood, he did not enjoy discussions about where to place furniture.

"We have to buy a motorcycle?" he said with a sigh, somewhat stating the obvious. "A second-hand motorcycle from a complete bloody stranger?"

She was gratified to find that at least he could read. She leant forward and said softly, "But how will they know?"

"They're watching us, aren't they?" he said similarly softly, and with some hint of sarcasm. "It said so in the rules. They know everything we're doing and if we cheat, we'll be disqualified. I don't want to be disqualified. I want to win this."

"I want to win too," she grumbled as she looked around the room at the other, quite hopeless, competitors.

The others didn't appear to be any great challenge in that respect, but the competition was worded so oddly, she wasn't exactly sure how to win; or how to lose, come to that. "So how do we go about buying a bike?"

"Motorcycle!" He held up a finger and waved it admonishingly. "A bike is something you power with your legs, but a motorcycle has an engine. It's an important distinction."

She grumbled, and looked at him with the contempt she reserved for the kind of person who left the toilet seat up, or worse, didn't wash their hands before leaving the bathroom. She was

rapidly coming to the conclusion that he probably was exactly that kind of person. “Who cares?”

“We have to follow the challenge to the letter if we don’t want to be disqualified,” he began, looking around the room as he spoke. He said more softly, to himself, and with a thoughtful tone, “I wonder if it’s too late to change partners?”

“Charming!” she snapped, with no degree of good humour whatsoever, good humour being something to which she was clearly not biologically predisposed.

“Oh, no offence!” he told her quickly with a haphazard and moderately apologetic smirk. “It’s just that you don’t seem to have the faintest idea what you’re doing; and also, that big biker guy spoke to you earlier and he said that you seemed like a vicious, humourless old bitch.”

He looked to her, blinking while a sort of haphazard smile was fixed on his lips. It must have been quite clear that she was not entirely happy. In his head, the explanation had probably seemed far better, and nobody had turned red or begun vibrating with rage.

“No offence,” he shrugged once more.

“I beg your pardon!” she spat the words at him accusingly, her eyes bulging, and her chest rising in furious readiness to pour spite upon anything within spite-pouring range.

He muttered almost to himself, “He seems to have a bit of a point, really.”

“I know precisely what I’m doing, young man!” the words had already left before she realised that he wasn’t particularly young at all. In fact, he seemed to be just around the same age as her. It then occurred to her that she really didn’t have any idea what she was doing. The whole effort seemed largely wasted, but that wasn’t going to stop her.

“Young man?” he said with a frown, and looked at her in surprise, the way a person might if they were to go to the opticians and were asked to strip naked and lie on the couch. “Nobody has called me that in...” he sniggered, rolling his eyes back thoughtfully. For a moment he seemed to vanish, lost to whatever place his train of thought led, before derailing completely and crashing through the safety barriers. He continued, “I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess that you don’t go out very much, at least not around actual people.” He began making a pointing gesture and narrowed his eyes into the kind of expression clever people use when they were making an educated guess.

“Can we get on with this?” she scowled, tapping her foot to the floor and crossing her arms tightly over her chest. “We’re on the clock you know, presuming you ever actually learned to tell the time.”

Malcolm looked down to his feet, somewhat confused, before snapping back with a silly smile on his lips. “Yes,” he agreed. “We should get on with it.”

He looked at his watch, a very old and worn metal thing.

“It’s 8.30 now, and we have until midnight to get back here with a new, cheap bike, and 500 fresh miles on the clock.”

“I know the rules,” she told him stiffly. She looked around the room, knowing she was in competition with the other people, but not quite knowing how, and having absolutely no idea why. She wished she had any real clue as to what was going on here—it would certainly make things easier. “So where do we start?”

The most obvious place to start, all things being equal, was in a place that had newspapers. As Malcolm had more experience with matters of buying second-hand motorcycles, and had proclaimed loudly that the internet was useless for everything except finding

celebrity nipples, he insisted that this was the proper and correct course to take.

Pointing to an advert in a free-advert paper, Malcolm said, "Here's one!"

She looked over and read it. "I don't have any money," she said loudly.

"Well, we have to buy a bike," he said with a frown, starting to find that his growing dislike of her was threatening to overwhelm his good manners, such as they were. "That's the rules. We have to buy a bike and ride it for 500 miles. We need £500."

"Well, you'll have to pay it," she told him with an expression of pure arrogance, as if it had been distilled from the considerable arrogance of a large group of BMW drivers, and she'd consumed the lot in a single hit. She crossed her arms over her ample bosom and looked away, her nose in the air, and her mind quite thoroughly closed off to the matter.

"I haven't got £500. If I had £500, do you think I'd have signed up for something like this?" His eyes prompted an immediate answer to his not unreasonable question.

She, however, disagreed as to just how reasonable it was, clearly deciding that it was not in the least bit reasonable. They were deadlocked for now, and didn't appear to be going anywhere.

"Well if you want to win, you'll have to find the money!" She turned to face him, her cold little eyes peering up into his with the self-assurance of someone who knew they were absolutely right. It was the look of his wife's divorce lawyer when she laid down her demands, and the look on his when they found out how much he actually had. "You do want to win don't you?"

He nodded that of course he did, because of course he did. "But that breaks down because of the pure logistics of the matter. The logistics being, I don't have £500. I have around £300 to my

name, and debts around five times that. I wouldn't be here doing this if I had money in the bank, now would I? I mean, you can understand that, can't you? I could draw you a diagram if you think that would help?"

She shook her head and tutted at him in loud and undeniably annoyance. "That's quite pathetic—a man of your age not having a few hundred pounds in the bank for emergencies. You should be utterly ashamed of yourself."

"So let's use your emergency money then, shall we?" he suggested with an angry frown. It was clear he didn't like her, and this was something for which she seemed to blame entirely on him.

"I'm a divorced mother of two," she said, managing to sound quite offended at the very notion that she should be in any way useful. "My money is all tied up in ensuring the future of my children."

"So you work then?" He shrugged and began to grin.

"No!" she replied angrily, furious that he didn't seem able to follow any of this properly. "I'm divorced."

"So it's his money. He's just letting you have it." Malcolm grinned more widely, enjoying causing a little offence, since he was causing it to someone for whom he had precisely no respect whatsoever. It seemed to be working perfectly.

"It's mine. I'm entitled to it," she sneered at him viciously. "I stood by that man while he ignored me; while he spent all his waking hours out of the house. I was virtually single the whole time I was married."

"So he was working, then?"

She hissed, "That's not the point. He wasn't there for me. He should have made more time to make me feel special. I had no choice but to find what I needed elsewhere. Not that any of this is any of your business!"

Malcolm just stared at her, and carried on with his expression of amusement, as he witnessed her belief system crumbling uncomfortably around her.

“I don’t think you are special,” he said after a lengthy pause. “At least not in a good way. Maybe in the way a broken fork is special.”

She was too angry to reply. She seethed with hatred, her blood boiling in her skull behind her reddened face.

“I will pay £200 towards the motorcycle,” she said very slowly and quite deliberately. “You must pay the rest. Do you understand, you horrible little man?”

Malcolm looked her up and down, checked his watch and sighed. “Half each.”

She made a snorting, grunting noise from her nose, and looked at him as though she regarded him as being moderately less pleasant than Russian food. “Do I have a choice?” she said, her voice a sneering, rasping sound like someone dragging a punctured tyre across boiling water in which someone was cooking a very angry cat.

“No! Now, can we get on with this? We’ve got a lot to get through before midnight. Five hundred miles is no easy task.”

“Just get the cheapest bike you can find! And hurry up about it.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” he huffed wearily. Was there really any point explaining? he wondered. “Really cheap bikes are going to be rotten, and probably unreliable. We need something that’s going to stand up to a solid day of riding without breaking down on us. We’ll be lucky to find something, anything, that can make it. We haven’t got time to fix anything, or even give the damn thing a service.”

“You’re making it more difficult than it is.” She snatched the paper away from him rudely.

He rolled his eyes and quietly took another one from the magazine rack.

“Here!” she pointed at an advert for a machine priced at only a few hundred pounds. “It’s not hard, you know.”

“No tax, no MOT, and it’s a 125cc.”

“My bike is a 125cc,” she said as if, just for a change, she was highly offended. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with 125cc motorcycles, Malcolm. Not that you seem to know anything about it.”

“What do you mean, you’ve only got a 125?” He grimaced at the thought of such a thing. “I thought the advert demanded you have your own motorcycle.”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “I have a Honda 125cc scooter. It’s a perfectly good motorcycle.”

“Does it run on pure evil?” He was only half-joking, but actually was beginning to wonder. “Maybe it was all you could find while your broomstick was in the shop having its bristles changed?”

“I don’t like you, Malcolm!” she told him but, frankly, this was already well-established at this point. Her eyes narrowed as if she was focusing the beams of pure hate that were waiting ready to lash out of them.

He snatched the magazine back and rolled his eyes at her, letting out a weary sigh. “Why don’t we let me choose a bike, since I seem to be the only one here with a firm grasp on reality?”

“Motorcycle,” she admonished him, wagging a finger in sarcastic rebuke. “A bike is something you power with your legs, a motorcycle has an engine.”

“A bike can also mean a promiscuous female who has an affair, while her husband goes out to try and make enough money for them to raise a family.”

She certainly looked like she really didn't like Malcolm and that made him smile to himself.

"Your bike is too damn big, and you ride it too damn fast!" Karen shouted quite offensively loudly as she half climbed and half staggered off the back of Malcolm's motorcycle.

It was a Suzuki Katana, the biggest of them, a 1000cc version in original silver. It was heavy, out of date and cumbersome, but it was reliable, quick, and still attracted a little interest wherever he went on it. To him, it was perfection given form in steel, plastic and alloy.

"We'd still be in the car-park if we took your bike," he shouted back to her through his helmet.

She made an angry expression as she tussled her mousy brown hair back into some semblance of normality after the helmet had worked its sweaty magic on it.

"There's nothing wrong with my bike," she told him again, although her words were falling on deaf ears and she must have known that - but saying them anyway, because she did, and for no other discernible reason.

Malcolm barely knew where to start, but he gave it his best go. "It's ugly, covered in fussy plastic, it's boring, under-powered, and it's a hideously tasteless orange colour. I would rather ride in the back of a hearse than on that thing."

"It's just the thing for short local rides," she told him proudly, defending it like her honour had been challenged. "It's good for shopping, and the horn is nice and loud. It's a perfect little bike!"

He took out his mobile phone to check the details and sighed, resigned that this was going to be a long day, and that by the end, he would be requiring enough beer to drown a small elephant. He looked up and down the quiet suburban street that they'd arrived

at. There was nobody around, and he couldn't see anything that looked like a motorcycle, beyond the one he'd just gotten off.

"Normally, sellers like to line them up outside, proudly displaying their wares. Even more so if a potential customer is coming to see it," he said to anyone who was listening. Nobody really was.

"There's number 21!" Karen cried out, as if she'd discovered something of great value that was hidden cleverly beyond the sight of mortal man. She pointed to a door with a slightly dulled brass number screwed to it.

Malcolm sighed and headed over to the door, grumbling under his breath all the way. "I don't see a bike though," he noted redundantly, since there was clearly no bike to see. He swung open a rusty metal gate and walked down the cracked concrete path. He knocked on the door and turned away, waiting for her to say something stupid.

"Is he in?"

There it was.

"I don't know yet, do I?" he told her, rolling his eyes. "He said he would be, and I have no reason to assume he was lying to us, as selling his motorcycle rather depends on him being here."

He checked his phone. It was now past 10.30am; time was getting on. Five hundred miles in a day was no easy feat, and was going to require a long day of riding. They hadn't even sat on a single second hand motorcycle yet, and the clock was decidedly against them.

The door cracked open and a very old man peered out suspiciously from behind the door. "Yes?" he asked, his voice fluttered nervously.

Malcolm peered back in through the crack at the shadows within, hidden inside of which was a pair of rounded white eyes. “Are you selling a motorcycle? An old KLE500?”

“A bike?” The old man frowned for a moment. “Oh yes, my son is. Come in! He’s in the garden, moaning impotently about something!”

The door finally opened. The house was filled with a smell that reminded both of them instantly of the inside of a dog basket, perhaps mixed with the staleness of an even worse dog basket that had been locked in a coffin for 18 months, and most probably with the remains of a dog still in it.

Karen began to cough. Malcolm nudged her with his elbow and gave her a withering glare. She glared right back up at him, holding her arm as if he’d injured her greatly with the gentle contact.

“I’ll just go and get him.” The man staggered away very dubiously down the length of a green-carpeted hall.

“This place stinks,” she told him, although this wasn’t news to anyone with a functioning nose.

“I know!” he told her with a completely insincere smile. Sadly, his nose was functioning just fine, but that was no sadder than the fact that his ears were also perfectly fine. “It stinks that this is the best bike I could find for the money that we were allowed to spend. If we don’t buy it, we’re stuck, because we don’t have time to find anything else and ride it 500 miles before midnight. So it also stinks that we’re stuck with this horrible situation, but what stinks most of all, is still your attitude.”

“My attitude?” She was completely taken aback, shocked even, that such words had been spoken to her. Keeping her voice to barely a whisper, she hurled back, “You are an incredibly horrible, sarcastic man!”

He nodded in agreement. "I was once told by a teacher that sarcasm was basically my super-power. In fact, Horrible Sarcastic Man would probably be my ideal name." He looked at her and sighed. "I always thought I'd probably use my powers for evil, but then I met you. To be honest, evil just doesn't seem sexy anymore."

"When this is over, I'll be happy to never have to clap eyes on you ever again, you sorry excuse for a man."

"That would be a largely ideal situation," Malcolm agreed, quite sincerely, and with a note that suggested he didn't just really mean it, but that his opinion on the matter was so rigid that his patience would be quite comfortable hanging off the end by its fingernails.

"Well let me tell you..." she jabbed him in the chest angrily, just as an old, but not as old, man came into the hall.

He froze in surprise at the sight of the two strangers who looked like they were about to rip off their jackets and start fighting right there in his hallway. They turned suddenly, assumed happy smiles, and said 'Hello' in unison. It was an unconvincing display, and he clearly remained unconvinced. He didn't appear to largely care one way or the other, though, and that was about to be demonstrated quite graphically.

"Um. Yeah. Hi. You're here about the bike?" he asked slowly, his voice a monotonous sort of drone.

"Motorcycle." Malcolm nodded with just a tiny wince. It was bad enough when a civilian did it, but the words came much harder when they were spoken by a fellow biker.

"Whatever," he said, any distinction apparently lost on him. "It's in the garden if you want to come and see it."

"Sure! Thanks." Malcolm led the way, or tried to but he got an elbow in the ribs as Karen forced her way past him.

“How long have you owned it?” she began, like someone who knew what she was doing.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Years. It’s just taking up space, so I need to get rid of the bloody thing.”

Malcolm elbowed his way passed Karen, earning himself a frightening glare in the process. They walked through the house and it continued to be quite awful, the smell being one of the more positive aspects, as it turned out. The white paint had yellowed and was stained around the top from constant clouds of tobacco smoke. The pungent sickly-sweet aroma of damp dog fur hung everywhere, but somehow seemed more strongly focused as they headed deeper in.

“It does run, right?” said Malcolm.

“Yeah, I used it up to last week,” he said. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it; I just don’t have a need for it anymore and it’s time to make some space. I’m just selling it cheap to get rid of it. £600—it’s a bargain!”

“£600!” Karen exclaimed in horrified surprise.

Malcolm gave her one of his best and strongest glares, but it wasn’t very good, and was actually weaker than a cup of tea from a motorway café.

“Problem?” The man turned and waited for her to speak. He didn’t seem at all bothered what was happening; whether he sold it or not, it was all the same to him.

The only one bothered by all this was Malcolm but, to make up for it, he was extremely bothered.

“No problem,” he said. “She’s just...” He thought about how to end that sentence for a quite a number of seconds. The seller stared at him, Karen waited, and, as all eyes bored into him, time seemed to stand still. He finally found a way to express his opinion that seemed entirely satisfactory. “... A fucking idiot.”

“Oh right.” The seller indeed seemed satisfied with that. “I was married once, as well, worst thing I ever did. We were always fighting. The cheating bitch ended up leaving me for some guy she met in the pub. I thought that was a lucky day for both of us. I always felt a bit sad for him, though.”

“There’s a lot of that around.” Malcolm grinned at her knowingly.

Karen managed to control her ever-growing fury by some sheer force of will. “We’re not actually married...”

“She’s divorced,” Malcolm explained; not that anyone cared, including him, and he realised it after saying it.

They came up to a kitchen door that opened out onto what looked like the sixties. The whole kitchen was a terrible thing to behold; the floor tiles were pitted and black with grime; the wooden window frames were peeling and rotting; and the door was only held up by its own arrogance. It was like stepping back in time, but taking all the grime that could have built up during that time with you and then dumping it in one go, straight on the floor.

“I’m divorced now, too,” he began conversationally, in a dull and irritating drawl of uncomfortable sincerity. “She got everything, of course. She got the house, the car, the kids. I got this bachelor lifestyle and the freedom to start over.”

Malcolm could think of nothing to say. Luckily for nobody, the seller just carried on talking as he opened the door and stepped into the garden. “Not that a bachelor lifestyle is much good to a man pushing 60 with angina, liver-disease, and cancer in his colon.”

“Bloody hell,” Karen grumbled without really thinking it through. “I mean, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh no...” He waved his hand dismissively, before droning on. “It’s a lucky escape, if you ask me. She poisoned the kids against me so they don’t want to know me anymore. I can’t even say I blame

them, to be honest. I'm not allowed to drink anymore, I can't even eat bacon without getting chest pains and farting big black bubbles of blood all night. All my underwear is dark-coloured now, just in case. No, I'm better off getting out now, while I've still got a little dignity left."

There was a lengthy silence, as Karen and Malcolm just stared at one another grimly, not knowing what someone could possibly say after that.

"You have a lovely home," Karen said. She closed her eyes and winced at the sheer idiocy of the words that had come out of her head.

"Thanks," he said. "It's my Dad's actually, but I'll inherit it when he dies." He paused thoughtfully. "Well... probably not, actually. I've only got about a year or so left. Luckily, though, that means I've only got one more Christmas left to endure. They're the worst, you know. Sitting there all day, missing the kids, knowing the wife is having a lovely time with a man who earns twice as much as me, and doesn't wake up every morning in a pool of his own blood, shit and vomit. I haven't even left a will, you know. I've only got my Dad, and he was useless forty years ago. I can't exactly leave him to anyone."

"So this KLE?" said Malcolm, desperately trying to drag the conversation back to the point, that being to buy the bike and get out of that house as quickly as the thing was capable of taking him.

"Oh yeah!" He pointed down the garden. "Its dark purple you know—same as what's left of my colon, so the doctor says. I've taken up smoking now, so that should help things along, I reckon. If I'm lucky, it could shave off a few weeks; maybe a month if I'm really lucky."

Karen actually looked quite impressed at the state of it. It was a good-looking machine, despite the fact that it would forever look

to her like a tumorous colon suspended between two wheels. Shaking her head might have might have been an effort to get that thought out of her mind, but it would be helplessly lodged there for the time being.

“Can I try it?” suggested Malcolm.

“Sure,” he said, handing him a key. “Do me a favour and don’t steal it, though. The insurance could take six months to pay out, and I’m hoping to be out of here by then.”

“Sure.” Malcolm shuddered as he took the key. “I’m not going to steal it, just ride it round the block and back. I’ll only be 5 minutes.”

“No problem,” he told him, without even the slightest hint whether he cared one way or the other.

Malcolm made himself comfortable and began checking the thing over. Normally, when buying a bike, he’d be considering what it was going to take to make it a sound, roadworthy machine. This time, he was only concerned with whether or not it was going to make a 500-mile trip before collapsing. If so, then it would be doing rather better than its current owner. He stuck the key in and turned it. With some relief, the old-fashioned dash lit up just as it was meant to. His finger hovered over the starter button and his heart fluttered nervously. This had to work. If they were to be in with a chance, then this had to work.

“So, you’re not married?” said the seller, making awkward small-talk until Karen felt bullied into joining in. “My name’s Bernard, by the way, not that anyone was asking. Not a problem of course; if I were you, I wouldn’t have asked either. I mean, I’ve got all this time to plan a funeral, but who’s going to be there? Nobody, that’s who. Probably my Dad, I suppose, but the senile old git will probably think my Mum has died again.

“She killed herself ten years ago. She hung herself in this very kitchen, roughly in the spot you’re standing, actually.”

He lit a cigarette and offered the pack over to Karen. She politely declined, forcing herself not to run out of the house screaming.

“Something to live for, huh?” he sighed nostalgically. “I had something to live for once; probably. It’s hard to imagine now.” He took a puff on the cigarette, coughed a little, and began making a choking noise, clearing something that sounded horribly solid from the back of his throat. “Are you pregnant or just a bit fat?” he asked, swallowing hard.

She was too surprised to be angry. He had a rare talent indeed. “Just fat...” she said softly.

“Does he like it that way, your young man? I use to prefer tall, slim, pretty girls myself. I always settled for short, fat, ugly ones though, and I usually had to get them drunk before they’d even look at me. I once dated a girl who looked like Elvis, right after he died on the toilet. She dumped me though. She said she thought she could do better.”

“We’re not actually a couple...” she explained, although she couldn’t explain, not really since she didn’t really understand herself everything that was going on. By now her mind had scuttled away to hide, and she was just nodding and waiting for all this to stop so she could get back to the far more comfortable business of being angry at Malcolm. At the present moment, that seemed like a luxury.

“Just friends?” He shrugged. “Friends with benefits?”

She had no idea what he meant by that, which was best all round. “We’re not friends either really. I can’t imagine there being any benefit for anyone to be friends with a man like that.”

She looked up as the engine roared to life. A small plume of white smoke came from the rear pipe and then melted away, leaving

her purring nicely. Malcolm was grinning as he slipped on his helmet. He backed the bike out of the yard.

“Well, I’m more interested in the benefits than friends these days,” he laughed, dissolving into fits of heavy coughing that she felt he probably deserved. “Not that I’m up to it, I would think,” he spluttered, recovering some of his composure. “The heart medication means erections are pretty much out of the question. Sex got me into nothing but trouble anyway; best off out of it, I reckon. I was never very good at it anyway. My wife said she’d be better off sticking pins under her fingernails for a good time.”

“Why are we talking about sex?” she frowned accusingly, also not being terribly happy about the mention of the word, erection.

“That’s all I can do now.” He seemed actually sad for a moment, but he was such a sad person in general that it was tough to know if it was real, or she was just imagining it. “Talking about it is probably all I have left. Mind you, I keep a tab of Viagra next to the bed, just in case. It will probably be the end of me, but at least I’ll go out with a bang.” He began laughing and then hacking, spluttering, coughing and wheezing.

She wondered if death might quickly follow since all this didn’t show any sign of ending any time soon. Minutes passed.

“Are you alright?” she asked finally, after being slightly transfixed by the whole thing. “Can I get you some water or anything?” She lowered her voice to a mutter. “Cyanide tablet? A strong piece of rope?”

“I’m fine... I’m fine...” he coughed and spluttered, spluttered and coughed. “It’s just a sign that things are going exactly according to plan.”

After Malcolm arrived back from his short test-drive, he took her to one side to speak about the bike.

“Buy it! Buy it! Buy it! Buy it!” Her eyes were wide as saucers, and she grabbed him by the arm and shook him. To say she was desperate to get out of there was an understatement.

“Well, yeah. It’s actually pretty good. I was going to say we should buy it.” Malcolm pushed her away—not quite rudely but not far off.

“We need to go!” she told him in a way that sounded like she really, really meant it. She really, really meant it. “I’m losing the will to live just by talking to him, and my nose is going to be sucked inside my body in an attempt to escape.”

Malcolm smirked at her. “You have that effect on my testicles.”

She grunted, snorted, and then hissed at him. “This isn’t the time for any of your childish jokes.”

“That was quite an adult joke,” he said, happily correcting her. “And I’m not even totally sure it was a joke. You do have quite a negative effect on people. You’re like... the opposite of an aphrodisiac, if there is such a thing.”

“We don’t have time for this!” she shouted, and slapped him quite hard on the arm. “Buy that stupid bike, and let’s get out of here.”

“So we’re buying this stupid bike, and getting out of here?” he grinned at her. He turned to smile to the seller, and then back to her. “I’ve only got £500 though—he wants £600.”

“Then why did you come here, knowing we didn’t have enough money for this bike?” She was getting really angry now. Her face was flushed red, and her hands had balled into fists, fists that were hitting his arms over and over.

“I can negotiate,” he said.

“I’m not good at negotiating,” he said. “I honestly thought I was, but he was pretty firm on the price, and wasn’t going to budge. He said the money could mean the difference between a half decent coffin interior and a really good one. He’s planning to spend the money on being buried in style. Mind you, he says he’s now tempted to buy a sports-bike and ‘try his luck’ at getting things over with nice and quickly.”

“So what do we do?” she grimaced in solid frustration, stamping around on the spot, veins popping out of her forehead. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

“Well, we’ve come to an agreement,” he told her. “Now, let me explain—you’re not going to like this, but hear me out. It’s important that you hear me out before you get angry.”

“What have you done?” She shut her eyes; her mood, already one that wasn’t made out of sunshine and moonbeams, sunk alarmingly.

“Well, you see, we’re running out of time,” he began by way of an introduction to the much worse things that were to come, a way to convince her that all was perfectly fine before he got to the really good stuff. “We have to have this bike, or we’re out of the competition, you see? We can’t afford to be out of the competition, and to stay in, we need a bike, and to ride 500 miles on it. We only have time for that if we get this bike, right now. You agree with me so far, right?”

“OK...” she mumbled at him, knowing there was worse to come than everything that had happened so far put together, she just knew.

“So I got him to accept the price, and he’s willing to take £500 for this motorcycle.” Malcolm smiled as if all was right with the world.

“So what’s the problem?” she said.

“Well, he wanted £600, but he’s willing to accept my price for a small concession,” he explained, holding up his finger and thumb with a tiny gap between, just to illustrate that it really was a very small concession.

“What concession?” she asked, rapidly losing what tiny, minute, minuscule little scrap of patience she might have left.

“He wanted your phone number so he can arrange a date with you for tomorrow night!”

“What?!” she cried out, her worst fears confirmed. Her mood darkened beyond the inky blackness of the dead of night, even if she were blind and immersed in soft tar, head first and completely upside-down. She stammered, “He wants what?”

“I don’t know,” Malcolm shrugged. “He said something about going out with a bang. I think he’s just lonely and wants someone to talk to.”

“I don’t think that’s at all what he wants.” Her voice was now so loud and so highly pitched, that dogs around the neighbourhood had begun barking in pain.

“So it’s a deal then?” he smiled.

“No.” She slapped him, quite hard, and then quite harder. Then she slapped him quite harder still, which only succeeded in hurting her hand since he was wearing an armoured motorcycle jacket. “I’m not a piece of property. I’m not a bargaining chip. You go back and tell him to accept the deal or we’re walking away.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” she scowled at him. The hitting had stopped, at least, but it seemed there might be more of it to come, and worse besides.

“This is it,” he told her wearily and rolled his eyes. “If we want this bike for £500, this is the only way he’ll sell it to us. It’s either this, or we’re out of the competition.”

She seethed angrily. She wanted to turn around and walk away right there and then. She wanted to tell him that he could take the competition and shove it right up his arse: she wanted to be better than this, to be above and beyond it. But she wasn't, she couldn't, and she didn't.

"One date." She could scarcely believe the words were coming out of her own mouth. "One date, dinner, one drink, then I leave. No promises, no nothing. Just dinner in a public place and I'm going. Do you understand?"

"Excellent." He clapped his hands together excitedly and gave her a beaming smile. "And it's important to remember that this only makes you technically an escort, not a prostitute. So your pride is still almost entirely unscathed."

She spoke through gritted teeth, "Buy that bike. Buy it now before I change my mind."

"It's bought," he told her with a shrug.

She presumed he meant that he was about to go and finalise the arrangements, but he just stood there, smiling, not moving from the spot. She hissed at him, frowning in confusion, "Well, go on then."

"It's bought," Malcolm told her again. "I mean it's done. I made the arrangement, I paid the money, I gave him your number and did the paperwork. It's bought."

"You did that without consulting me?" she yelled, her voice raised once more to a piercing squeal.

Somewhere a dog barked.

He nodded. "If I'd asked you, you might have said No. This way, we're in with a fighting chance. This way, even Bernard's in with a fighting chance. It's a win-win!"

"You are a vile man," she said, regarding him scornfully.

He nodded in agreement. "I knew you'd agree in the end—this was just quicker."

"You knew?" she hissed.

"You're in this competition for the same reasons as me. You're not going to back out any more than I am. We can't back out, can we?"

She looked away, her expression one of frustrated anger, partially aimed at herself.

"No we can't."

The bike sat outside the house, the deal having been concluded satisfactorily for all involved; at least those involved who weren't Karen. She stared at the vile thing, loathing the very sight of it, hating everything about it. The bike still reminded her of a tumour but, other than that, it seemed to be a fairly reasonable looking motorcycle, as far as she understood about such things. She narrowed her eyes and scowled some more at Malcolm, hating him like the sub-human monstrosity that she thought him to be.

"OK," he told her, doing up his jacket. "We ride back to base, we drop off my Katana, and then we both jump onto the KLE and we ride; we ride as fast as we can for as long as we can, and then we ride some more.

"Deal?"

She did her jacket up, pulling a noisy zip up along the front of the black textile jacket, decorated with very responsible bright orange stripes. "Fine," she scowled through gritted teeth. Suddenly, she looked up and shrugged. "Wait, what do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?" he asked, narrowing his eyes. He was suddenly filled with the nagging feeling that something was about to go wrong, again, even though absolutely nothing so far had gone even slightly right.

“How are we getting the tumour back to the base?” she shrugged, attempting to be sarcastic, and not doing a very good job of it.

“You ride it.”

“I can’t ride it,” she said, looking over the big, fat, purple lump of a thing.

“It’s not that big, you’ll be OK,” he smiled, as if she was being ridiculous, because he was convinced that that was all there was to it. “We’re not going far, you’ll manage.”

“I mean, I can’t ride it!” she told him sternly, as if this was all his fault again. “I mean, I actually can’t. I don’t know how. It’s got gears—my little bike is automatic. I wouldn’t know where to start with that thing.”

His face froze, and he stared angrily forwards. “What do you mean, you can’t ride a motorcycle? To be eligible for this competition, you have to own a motorcycle. Are you telling me that you literally can’t even ride one?”

“My little bike has an engine—by your own definition, it is a motorcycle.” She looked quite proud of how thoroughly correct she was. It then slowly dawned on her that being correct wasn’t solving the problem.

“For god’s sake!” he yelled angrily. “Why did I have to get you? There was a whole room full of bikers, and I got lumbered with a scooter-riding moaning-machine with weird hair.”

“Motorcyclists!” she corrected him, waving her finger.

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” he began more calmly. “But how are you still alive? How has nobody murdered you in your sleep?”

“Because there are laws governing that sort of thing!” she growled at him moodily.

He nodded that she was indeed quite correct about that, and it was probably about the only reason.

The front of the motorcycle was just a little too low, which caused the wind to blast over the fairing and straight into his helmet. Malcolm wasn't a particularly tall man, despite looking as if he should be. His being quite skinny also meant that, from a distance, most people thought they were looking at him from slightly more of a distance. Still, the bike was built for someone even less particularly tall. It was, however, reasonably comfortable.

After a brief discussion which involved rather a lot of shouting, they had decided to head into Kent, having abandoning the beloved Katana in a side-street and hoping for the best, in terms of it still being there later. There were motorways up and down where they could sit at the national speed limit for as long as possible and eat up the miles. She had wanted to take the scenic route, of course, but he argued that the mileage they had to make was going to be difficult enough to achieve, even on a motorway, and a traffic jam could still push them out of the competition for good. She had numerous reasons that explained why she thought he was wrong, but none that actually proved that he was.

The KLE was an old machine. It didn't have a fuel gauge, or even a warning light. It had a switch. Once empty, you went onto reserve and started looking for a place to find some fuel, and sooner, rather than later, was usually a good idea.

Malcolm hoisted his jacket sleeve up and took a look at his watch. It was a warm day, but still the wind rushed over him catching his arm and making it difficult to sit completely still.

It was already past lunchtime and they were both hungry. Malcolm didn't eat by dislocating his bottom jaw and swallowing baby animals whole, but he considered that she very well might.

Still, something had to be done, and quite urgently, if indeed that was the case.

He had set the trip meter to zero when they left, and had only clocked up around seventy miles since. He huffed wearily, thinking about how tired he was already, blazing along from South London all the way to the coast with the sun beating down on him mercilessly. The roads were long and straight and grey, and he was already feeling bored, drained by the endless repetition.

He was in need of a break.

He saw a sign; there was a turn-off several miles up ahead. His mind filled with thoughts of coffee and a sandwich with bacon, tomato and brown sauce. A most unwelcome set of thoughts dashed across his mind of tumours and waking up with a horribly stained set of sheets, and he thought that perhaps, just this once, he'd eat something else.

His passenger was holding onto him, gripping way too tightly if the truth be told. She was dead weight, fighting the corners, and making panicked noises every time he overtook a car. There was no getting away from the facts and so, grumbling to himself that a break was inevitable, he clicked the indicator switch with his thumb. A green light began to blink on the dash.

His mind tumbled lazily through various empty thoughts which, like the road, went nowhere until finally he saw the signs. Three blue arrows loomed ahead, each 100 yards apart that counted down to the turn-off. He checked his mirror but needn't have bothered, the roads were largely empty and he had his wits about him in case something tried coming up the inside. They pulled off to the left and then climbed an oddly sharp hill all the way up to a roundabout. He carried on straight over, and the country road took them back down to a bridge built over the main road they'd just been riding on. The turnoff, according to the signs, led quite neatly

to a motorway on which they could ride for hours, clocking up the miles before nightfall.

He encountered yet another roundabout, and then another, but by then he could see a petrol station up ahead and a café just beyond it. Within a few metres, they could fill the tank and refresh themselves with a mug of coffee and some food.

The food seemed the more pointed of their needs, so he passed the petrol station and headed straight to the café. He pulled off the road onto a broken concrete parking area that was mostly filled with loose gravel mixed with dirt and tiny bits of broken glass. There were huge craters filled with water, and the café itself looked as if it had been assembled from the salvage of a sunken boat.

Her arms gripped tightly around him, and there was a small, nervous whelping noise, as the bike edged along on the broken pathway before finally coming to a stop as close as they could get to the door.

Malcolm switched off the engine and sat up, unclipping his helmet. She began rolling awkwardly from the back of his bike, which was even higher than his own. He shook his head, fluffing his hair loose, and began taking a few breaths of the fresh, warm air.

“You’re riding too fast!” she grumbled as she pulled off her helmet.

“We have a tight schedule,” he said, too tired to make a fight out of it.

She looked over the pretty terrible building and scowled as if she’d just found a flaming envelope of human faeces dropped through her letterbox. “This looks terrible. I’m not going in there!”

Malcolm sighed. “How many men have said that while looking at you, even with a few beers inside them?” Perhaps he wasn’t too tired to make just a little bit of a fight out of it.

She gave him her angriest glare, but this time, her heart just wasn't in it, "How dare you? Do you know what a vile, awful man you actually are?"

"I have a rough idea. Do you know what a vile, awful person you actually are?"

"There's nothing at all wrong with me!" She jabbed her fists into her sides and glared at him, absolutely convinced that the problem with the world was everyone else in it.

"We don't have time for me to list everything that's wrong with you!" he said wearily, as he climbed off the motorcycle and slipped the key into his pocket. "We wouldn't have time if we weren't on a tight schedule. We wouldn't have time at our age at all, I would think."

She gave a tight-lipped little scream, and then just weakly gave in to it all. It was a bad day, and it would be best for everyone involved to just get through it and never look back, she thought.

"You go in," he told her, throwing his leg back over the bike and rummaging in his pocket for the keys at the same time. "Order me a sandwich and a coffee. I'll be back in a few minutes. We'll eat as quickly as we can, and then we'll go."

"I'm not your servant!" she told him acidly. "You order your own food."

"Look..." he rubbed his temple in weary exasperation. "I'm going to ride back and fill up the fuel tank and check the range. From that, I can work out how far we can go between fuel-stops. While I'm doing that, you can order the food; that should save us 10 minutes or so, maybe a little more. Is that OK with you, seeing that you can't actually do anything else, like actually ride a motorcycle, or contribute anything to the challenge whatsoever?"

She mumbled something to herself grumpily and held out her hand.

“You want money, are you kidding me?” He grunted his bemusement at the whole terrible situation. Nothing was worth this. “Do you not understand that we have some free time while we wait for the food, and right now your stupidity is eating into the schedule?”

“Money,” she told him, twitching her hand in a grasping motion. Clearly she did not.

With a groan, he reached into his pocket and handed her a small note. He was still grumbling as he got off the bike to fill it up with petrol.

“I ordered you a bacon sandwich,” she told him as he sat down opposite.

The inside of the place was, if such things were possible, worse than the outside. None of the chairs matched, none of the tables matched the chairs or each other. The only point of similarity was that everything was dirty, chipped, damaged or broken. He grumbled, but accepted that a bacon sandwich was very likely to hit the spot, and it was unlikely it would give him chest pains or make him shit out any major organs.

The coffee had already arrived. He hung his jacket on the back of the chair and sat down heavily, letting out a weary sigh. “This is hard work; I’m too old for all this!”

The coffee tasted like it had been stirred with a filthy table-leg, but he had braced himself for that and it didn’t come as any great surprise.

“You look it,” she smirked, with a sarcastic little smile dragging up the left side of her mouth.

“You’re no spring chicken,” he sarcastically smirked back. “I’m only 52. There’s still plenty of life in me yet. I’m just not used to riding any distance, that’s all.”

“How do you think I feel?” She sipped at her tea and made a big show of wincing at it. Clearly, she wasn’t used to lowering her standards—perhaps more accustomed to grabbing and wrenching down the standards of others, he presumed.

“I should care how you feel, why?” he shrugged, shaking his head at her.

“It’s quite clear you don’t care about anyone but yourself,” she sneered; it was an ugly thing indeed.

“Do you know what it is I do?” He sat back in his chair, a little smile fluttering over his lips, as he enjoyed a strong sense of impending arrogance.

“I don’t care,” she told him, and she clearly really didn’t.

“I’m a social worker. I am literally paid to care. I go around caring at a professional level.” He enjoyed the sense of enormous superiority as it wafted over him. “And what is your contribution to society again?”

“Two children. I raised them single-handed while their father contributed nothing.” She somehow managed to look pleased with herself.

“A dog can do that though, can’t it? I mean, the male dog wanders off and the bitch raises puppies all by itself, going out to get all its own food while they’re sleeping. But you didn’t do that, did you? You had the additional benefit of a man bringing home money so that you could do what you wanted to do? I presume that was watching daytime TV while your arteries hardened.”

“Is that what you think?” she grunted, cautiously sipping at a cup of tea that tasted suspiciously like a punch in the face.

He nodded that indeed it was. It was exactly what he thought.

“Have you any idea what it’s like to be trapped inside, day after day after day with only a pair of screaming kids and a TV for company?”

“It must be almost as awful as waking up on an alarm, and then going to work every day to a job you hate, just so that you could provide for your family!” he said mockingly, his tone bearing lashings of pointed sarcasm, as it usually did.

“You know what you are?” she hissed. “You’re nothing but a disgusting misogynist!”

“No, no! I believe in equality. On my team, I have a Mum of three; she managed to work a full-time job and still raise a family. I respect women; I just don’t respect you.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but words failed her. Her eyes bulged angrily and she sat, broiling in her impotent rage.

“You know what you are?” Malcolm was past caring now, so why not just let it all out, he reasoned. “You’re sitting on the back of this bike, you’re arguing, you’re a nuisance, you’re moaning relentlessly, but what do you contribute? Nothing! You’re a big bag of ballast, you’re dead weight, and I have to carry you all day for no good reason. You’re getting a share of this competition, but you’re doing nothing whatsoever to earn it. Without you, I’d be better off. The world would be better off, even your children would probably be better off.”

Her anger seemed to give way. She hung her head, and her eyes began to mist up hazily behind a sudden blanket of tears. Her mug of tea fell with a heavy clunk to the wobbly wooden table, and she seemed to sink into her chair, dejected and broken.

Malcolm sighed, winced at himself and rubbed his temples. Perhaps that was too much, he’d gone too far and he felt horrible about it. “But what the fuck do I know? I don’t know you. You might be the best mother in the bloody world for all I know.” He suspected she wasn’t.

“I’m not...” she shrugged, all the fight finally kicked out of her. “My kids are all grown up now; the youngest is 22. They left, and I barely ever hear from them.”

“That happens, I guess,” he said, beginning to seriously regret his previous outburst. “I’ve got a son—he’s getting married next year. He hasn’t phoned me in over a month. That’s just life; don’t take it personally.”

“I had three,” she told him. “One of them died!”

Regretting his previous outburst somewhat more, Malcolm now just wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. “I’m sorry.”

“She was hit by a car on the way home from school...” She scooped up her mug of tea and sipped at it. She made no face this time, just swallowed and carried on. “No point to it at all. She was only 9, old enough to bring herself home, I thought. The police said she ran out between two parked cars. He wasn’t even speeding; it was just bad luck.”

Malcolm just sat listening, regretting his previous outburst even more with every passing second. In fact, it was possible the only thing he had ever said that he regretted more was saying I do to his ex-wife.

“A van hit her, just some guy out doing his job. Maybe it was his fault, maybe not. Witnesses said there was nothing he could have done.”

“I am sorry,” he said.

“That’s when he left,” she continued, putting down the mug for a final time, her sad, tear-filled eyes still fixed on it. “It all changed. The other kids were older—14 and 16—it ruined us as a family. Barry threw himself into his work, but I just didn’t know what to do. The boys didn’t need me anymore, as they were all grown up by then. None of us knew how to handle it. Who does know how to handle something like that?”

Malcolm drained his coffee with a noisy slurp. He looked over to the staff, hoping the food would be showing up soon. “But then, why this?” he asked. “Why are you even doing this? What do you need the money for?”

“I want to leave. I want to start over.” She wiped the tears away with her hand and sniffed. “I can’t walk down the street without seeing the lamp-post next to the road where she was killed. It was where they left all the flowers when she died. I can’t go to the paper-shop without people looking away. Some of them blame me. I blame me, if I’m honest.”

“For what?”

“I should have brought her home—she wasn’t old enough to walk back on her own. I mean, I thought she was... I had two boys, and they walked home from 7 years old on their own. Nothing ever happened to them. You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?”

He nodded back. The world did have a way of seeming to make perfect sense, and then showing you that you really know nothing after all.

“So why are you doing it?” As she spoke, a waitress appeared and dropped two bacon sandwiches on the table. She smiled politely and left, not paying them more than the very slightest attention.

“My dad’s ill. He’s got Alzheimer’s. He doesn’t know who I am most days; he doesn’t know who he is, come to that. I heard of a place in Switzerland that can help. There’s an experimental treatment, but the NHS won’t pay for it, of course. It might not cure him—it might even kill him—but it’s worth a try. He’s 73 and as fit as I am. I can’t watch him rot away for the next couple of decades and do nothing.”

“Maybe you’re not so bad, after all. There’s a heart in there somewhere.” She gave a measured and very cautious smile.

“Yeah, most people reckon I’m alright.” He squirted a large blob of ketchup into his sandwich. “You know, you could tone it down a bit. The evil... It doesn’t have to be so full-on all the time, does it?”

She shrugged, frowning back at him.

“I mean, you don’t have to argue with me all the bloody time,” he said, biting into his food, sending dripping red blobs of goo cascading out of the sides. “We’re both in this together, right?”

She huffed and looked away. “I guess we are.”

He smiled at her, and for the first time, he looked like he actually meant it. “Alright, then. We don’t have to be best friends, but we can try to make the best of this.”

“Yeah, I agree,” she said with a nod. With a sarcastic little grin, she added, “Let’s not be friends at all.”

They might not be best friends, but at least they were no longer the worst of enemies. That didn’t stop them spending the duration of their lunchtime arguing about what roads to follow. Karen wanted to head back to the M25 and ride around it until they’d hit their goal. She had whipped out her smartphone and showed him why she was entirely correct. At only 117 miles in length, he didn’t at all fancy spending the day looping around it, and was very dubious about traffic that could tie itself into knots at any given time, often without a moment of warning.

In the end, he decided it was best to take a ride down the M2 and back up the M20, then just follow along and see where the road took him. She argued, but he told her he was just going to go along with her plan, confident she wouldn’t have a clue what was actually

going on in any case, and instead be terribly smug about her victory over common sense.

The weather had cooled, the sun was peering shyly out from behind a thin layer of grey clouds, and the wind had picked up a bit. The riding was harder, and his old wrists ached from the effort. A dull, burning sensation was unpleasantly lighting up his lower back as he sat rigid in a fixed uncomfortable position, with her pressed up against him in virtually perpetual terror.

His mind wandered as he rode along, watching the speed carefully. He kept the needle, as close as possible, at 70mph. If he rode any faster, he might attract the attention of the police; any less and he'd be wasting precious time. He thought many times of how his own Katana would be so much better at this, more comfortable, delivering easy power and with a larger tank to stretch out the distance between stops.

Night fell and the temperature dropped with it. It wasn't horrendous, as winter might have been, but it was grim, and the miles ticked away at a snail's pace; each number clicking by on the odometer was earned for too high a price. He ached, he grumbled. He wriggled in the seat, always looking for a more comfortable position, but it was as futile as trying to get drunk on American beer.

Finally, they swung in for yet another break. This time, the station was on the side of a motorway. It was suspiciously modern, sophisticated and expensive. It was a bland façade of grey plastic and painted metal with expensive treats inside, lit with teasingly brilliant white light.

"Thank god!" she grumbled as she pulled off her helmet. She looked like he felt. Her eyes were dull; her face gaunt and beaten from the fatigue; the sheer exhaustion of it all was painted all over her. She rubbed her fingers vigorously: her gloves were woefully

inadequate for such a ride and the cold evening chill had nipped at her fingers.

He clicked off his helmet and flung it on the bike, resting it over the mirror. He huffed loudly, rubbing his hands over his face and just wishing all this was over. "I need a bucket-full of coffee, some sugar, a blowjob, and a smack in the face from someone not quite strong enough to knock me unconscious," he said loudly, but, really, just to himself.

"I'll stretch to a coffee, but if you take one step towards me, I might consider adding one more thing from your list, and it won't be something you like," she said, assuredly.

"I presume you mean a blowjob then, because honestly, if it was coming from you, I'd much rather have a smack. I will settle for the coffee though."

"When you're quite finished making me think I was right about you all along, do you think you could please manage to tell me how we're doing?" It occurred to her that, actually, she was quite good at blowjobs.

"We're OK!" he smirked, quite proud of himself as he tapped on the dash. "It's 9.30 and we've managed to just break 440 miles. We're on the home stretch now—we'll make it easily. We've cracked this!"

But it had been hard work. Every mile had been making him pay for it. He leant away, stretching his back and grunting in pain.

"Are you OK?" She unzipped her jacket and frowned at him with something approaching concern.

"No," he grimaced. "You?"

"No," she admitted. Her own back was aching, her arms were tired, the muscles heavy and numb. Her neck was sore and she rubbed it vigorously. "This isn't fun!"

“You know what is fun?” he asked playfully. “Coffee—warm, tasty, keep-me-awake coffee.”

She looked at her watch and nodded in happy agreement. “Aren’t you going to go fill up while I get them?”

“Nah!” he shrugged and pointed towards the fuel stop with his thumb. “It’s right there; it will only take seconds on our way out. No problem.”

They headed out from the motorway services, cardboard cups in hand, sipping at the hot, bitter coffees. Malcolm’s was black, strong and sweet; Karen’s was frothy and fussy, much like herself.

“The bike is holding up well,” he commented, nodding in approval at the little thing that had earned his respect. “They’re a great little engine—it’s been around for years! Good little machines, these things are.”

She sipped and then looked up suddenly as the thought occurred to her. “What do we do with it? Do we sell it, split the money?”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” He looked away, lost in contemplation which only showed itself on his face with a slight frown. It had never occurred to him. “I think I’d like to keep it. She’s done a great job for us today. I think I owe her a full service and a good home.”

“Maybe. I might like to keep it,” she suggested.

“I thought you had your perfect little 125cc scooter,” he huffed sarcastically.

“I’m quite serious.” She brightened up, smiled, and seemed almost human for a moment. “I’d like to learn to ride. Or I would, if there was someone that could teach me.”

“There is, you know.”

“Really?” she said excitedly, grinning like she was holding a winning lottery ticket.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “There’s a riding school in Orpington. That’s where I learned to ride. I suggest you go there. They were absolute pricks to me, but it would be nice to know that I got my revenge on them by sending them you.”

She grunted, scowled at him, and said grumpily, “That wasn’t what I had in mind.”

“I know what you had in mind,” he laughed. “Quite frankly, your only job today was keeping still and not opening your mouth, and you proved to be horrible at it. There is no way I’m going to put myself in a situation where you have to move around and ask questions. Life’s just too damn short.”

“Fuck you!” she sneered.

He dropped the cup into a bin, not quite empty, and grinned at her. “That doesn’t mean I’d be averse to buying you a drink when all this is over, maybe apologise for some of the nasty things I said earlier. Not that you didn’t deserve them—you are a force of pure evil. I’m surprised you were able to go into the church-hall without your eyebrows catching fire.”

“It’s a good job you don’t want to apologise for all the stupid things you said, as that would be a lot of drinks,” she told him evenly, still not quite getting the hang of sarcastic banter, but showing definite improvement.

“See, you ruined it all by opening your mouth again,” he grunted, popping the key into the ignition.

“It might cost all of your winnings,” she continued. “But then, we’ve got to get the winnings first.”

“No problem. 60 miles, two and a half hours left for a share of one million pounds. What could possibly go wrong?”

She dreaded to think.

“What the hell...” he grumbled.

“What?” she said as she looked over. His expression had darkened into that of someone quite concerned, quite concerned indeed. She wouldn’t have been able to say she liked it.

“The bloody key won’t turn. It’s jammed.”

There was a sudden roar as something big came to life. The unmistakable growl of a big, powerful and sporty motorcycle filled the service-centre car-park. Malcolm looked up briefly, and then saw it. He looked way more concerned than before, something approaching panic.

Karen now was worried too. She looked over to the other bike. “What?”

A man in motorcycle gear was watching them. The bike in the distance revved up suddenly and roared away through the petrol station, vanishing into the distance before the sound exploded into a cacophony of released power as the rider unleashed everything that had been churning away inside.

“So what?” Karen could see the worry on his face and was worrying right along with him. She had no idea what she was worrying about, but she was definitely worried about it.

“Phone!” he said. “Give me your phone!” All business. There was no room for messing around.

With a frown she handed it over. “What’s going on? Will you tell me what’s going on?”

He flashed on the light and looked over the ignition barrel. “Super-glue.” He sighed heavily, shook his head, and stepped away. “Bloody super-glue.”

“What?” she shrieked. “Who would glue our locks?”

“They did,” he said, pointing into the distance where the other motorcycle had roared away. “They must be involved with this challenge in some way. They must be.”

It all dawned on her at once. "They want us out of the race?
What can we do?"

He rubbed his balding head. "Honestly, I have no bloody idea."

Take photographs of yourself breaking 10 different laws on your motorcycle in public places.

Tim stared at the small slip of paper. He put it back in the red envelope. He pulled it out and read it again. He put it back in and handed it to the gentleman to his left. His expression changed, shifting rather suddenly as his face ripped open into a wide grin. "Bob?"

Bob nodded. "Tim?"

Tim nodded back. They were partners now and this was their challenge, such as it was. Tim, for one seemed totally happy with all this. Bob less so.

"I don't think this is legal..." said Bob, as his wide, bushy and unkempt eyebrows slunk down over a pair of very bright blue eyes.

"Of course it's not legal," Tim sighed at him as if he was disappointed. "We have to break 10 laws. When was the last time you remember breaking the law being strictly legal? I mean... when, right?"

Bob looked around the room. Various other motorcyclists were milling around, staring just the same as they were, in horror or confusion at their challenges.

A younger, aggressive-looking man glared at an older, slightly overweight woman as she walked away from him. "Vicious old bitch," he said to a tall man who actually didn't seem all that tall.

In the far corner, a man dressed in black, waterproof bike gear gave up. He threw the note on the floor and simply walked out, shouting about how utterly insane all of this was. Of course, in many ways, he was perfectly right.

Tim bit his lip. "It's not that insane really, I mean not really. Anyone who drinks cola is crazier than this."

Bob replied thoughtfully, "It is though. We're all doing stupid things. I mean, what's the point of any of this? It's the craziest thing I've ever done. I can't believe I actually got involved with all this."

"Well, we'll be dead in a few short decades, so when you get right down to it, what's the point of anything? I mean, if there is a point? I hope there is..." Tim broke into a yawn. Checking his watch, he continued, "8:30, and we've got to be back here by midnight tonight, all finished or else we're disqualified. Am I following this correctly? Sometimes it's hard to tell. You never know, right? Or do you?"

"Plenty of time," Bob said. "I think the best thing would be for us to go and get some breakfast, and decide what we're going to do."

"That, Mr Bob, is a wonderful idea! I could eat a horse, but I won't. Will I?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully for some reason that Bob assumed quite incorrectly was an attempt at humour.

Bob was a big man, and his breakfast was consequently a thing of no small measure. He ordered a full-English breakfast with several extra items, some of which were already included.

Tim sighed as he rattled off his order. "Don't bother with a plate, love," he said to the waitress taking their order. "Just pile it up in a bucket and save the washing up."

She smiled at the weak joke politely, but clearly her head was elsewhere; she was just coasting through the day on auto-pilot, thinking the least amount possible in order to get it nicely over and done with, the way most people got themselves through their lives. Tim tried to flash a flirtatious smile at her, but she ignored it, or missed it, or was just entirely, utterly and completely lacking any romantic interest in him whatsoever.

Bob just shrugged the whole thing off. He watched as Tim ordered some eggs on toast. Tim appeared to be the kind of man who would become very annoying very quickly. He was thin—the kind of thin you get from something that’s gone beyond careful diet and exercise. He had a mop of unruly blonde hair, and while not really a lot of it, Bob felt that he was likely to over-balance, or worse, just collapse under the weight of his own haircut. He was dressed in a white jumper that had been poorly laundered, and jeans that probably never had been. He moved with quick, precise little stabbing motions, his eyes flicked around furtively, and he seemed awkward in his own skin, what little there was of it.

Bob was not quite the opposite, but close enough for him to think that he was. He was substantial; a big, thick greying beard tumbled from his chin, his hair was balding, his cheeks were ruddy and red, and his clothes were hard to find in normal high-street shops.

“What bike have you got, Bob?” asked Tim conversationally, as he looked around at the other patrons, searching for who-knew-what. He’d insisted on sitting at the back of the table so he could see the door. He’d said he felt uncomfortable any other way.

Bob couldn’t care less where he sat, what he sat on, or what he could see while he did it. Breakfast was all about food, and that’s where the bulk of his attention was fixed, on the immense bulk of his breakfast order. “I’ve got a Harley,” he said proudly. “A 1200 Ironhead Sportster. Black. I’ve got a few extras on there too. Beautiful machine it is.”

“I hate Harleys,” Tim said simply. He then raised his eyebrows and held out his hand. “No offence, of course. To each, his own, I say. I think they should leave us all alone. We’re all better off just doing our own thing. That’s what I think. I don’t even care if you’re gay.”

Bob couldn't care less what he thought. Love his bike or hate his bike, he was just happy if you weren't trying to steal it. "What about you, Tim? What do you ride?"

"Are you gay?" Tim asked enthusiastically.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you gay?" Tim asked. "I mean, I don't think it would make a difference, but maybe we should just get it over and done with." Tim rubbed his chin, and took a deep breath. "Bob, is it OK to call you Bob, Bob?"

Bob just nodded wearily.

"Bob, I think I should tell you. I'm not gay. I'm straight. I like women." He shrugged as his mind went off in a direction that seemed to go somewhere he was having trouble following. "I've never tried being gay—it might be good. I mean, women don't tend to like me, so I might have better luck. But would it really be lucky if I was lying in bed with a man thinking, yeah that really hurt and this guy doesn't have breasts or anything?"

"I'm not gay," Bob told him, sticking a sausage into his mouth.

"I knew it!" he blurted out excitedly, breaking into a wide grin and banging his palm down heavily on the table. "I once knew a gay guy, and he didn't look anything like you."

"What did he look like?" This was why Bob preferred motorcycles to people.

Tim shrugged. "He looked gay. I dunno."

Bob noted that this was becoming a distraction from the simple pleasure of breakfast. "So what are you riding?"

"TRX 850," he blurted. "It's a Yamaha, parallel twin. Nice bike—like Italian, but totally different. It starts when you press the button. Mostly, it does, and it's red. How sweet is that?"

Bob sighed. This was all taking up too much energy. Even watching Tim was making him weary. “So, we’ve got to break 10 laws today on our bikes.”

“Speeding!” Tim said, nodding to himself. “I can do that, you take the picture.” He held his left hand up sideways, thrust it forwards, and made a zooming noise loud enough for everyone to turn around and look. He burst out laughing to himself, cackling like his sense of humour was being pulled out of his nose by an electric tickling-machine.

“You can do that,” Bob agreed quite happily.

“But you will have to get your own hands dirty,” Tim said, suddenly focused, but only for a fleeting moment. “What can you do? Can you do anything? What can you do?”

“I was thinking of maybe parking on a double yellow line?” he shrugged.

“That’s not a proper law—it’s more like... a civil infraction. We need to do things that would upset police officers. We could steal a bike; we could ride through a shopping mall; we could abduct someone on the back; we could jump over a bus.”

“We’re not doing any of those things,” Bob told him with a sigh.

“I know! We could pop through the tunnel to France... and drive on the wrong side of the road!”

“We can drive on the wrong side of the road here.”

“I don’t think it is the wrong side of the road here! But all that is boring, though! I know. Go to France, drive on the wrong side of the road... and deny the Holocaust. That would kill two birds with one stone!”

“We’re not going to France.”

“Then what do we do?”

Bob conceded that this was an excellent question. “Well, we can’t go around breaking big laws—we’ll have to find some small ones and break them carefully.”

“We’ll be the most careful criminals in London,” Tim nodded to himself. “They’ll be telling stories about this for years to come. We’re going to be legends. Careful legends.”

Bob sat back in his chair and shook his head. “I’m not sure you really understand the concept of careful.”

“I understand, I understand.” He fidgeted and turned around sharply, looking for his breakfast. “So what do we do?”

“I’ve decided that I’m going to be the organ grinder and you’re going to be the monkey,” Bob told him, his voice soft and low, and spoken slowly with a clearly deliberate tone that was unavoidable.

Tim frowned back. “I don’t care.”

“Speeding is good,” Bob said with a nod of his head. “We can go just a little over the speed-limit, nobody will get hurt. Everyone does it, every day. It’s no big deal.”

Tim nodded. “I could drive the wrong way down a one-way street?”

“I like that!” Bob agreed, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Again, we’d have to make sure nobody was about, so that there’s no danger of anyone getting hurt, of course.”

Tim cocked his head to one side curiously. “I think we’re on different pages here,” he began. “I’m more interested in completing the challenge: you seem oddly preoccupied with not hurting people.”

“You think that not hurting people is odd?” Bob frowned thoughtfully.

“It’s not my absolute number one priority, that’s all.” He jabbed his hands in the air as he spoke, to illustrate the point,

although exactly what point he was trying to illustrate, and how, was anyone's guess.

Bob sighed. "Surely we can do both at once, can't we?"

Bob huffed and puffed as he walked along the path. It wasn't much further and he would be at his goal, but the effort of walking had left him exhausted.

There was a grey concrete rail along the side of a main road. The road below was wide, spacious, and it was rare indeed that anyone kept down to the 50mph limit in any case. From the side he could easily photograph Tim as he sped along below. With a sigh, partly from the uncomfortable weight of his huge breakfast, and partially from the uncomfortable weight of many previous huge breakfasts before it, he hoisted himself up the last few steps and gasped for air. A few footsteps further and he was able to lean over the rail and see the road below. He popped his smartphone out and waited.

He had time to think, and the thought that preoccupied him the most was that he didn't very much like Tim. While he focused on why exactly that was, he saw a small, red motorcycle carving its way through traffic, weaving wildly through the widely dispersed cars. He rolled his eyes and clicked off a series of pictures as the machine roared past below him.

He huffed and pushed himself away from the rail. A few miles per hour would have been sufficient; he could only hazard a guess as to what kind of speed he had actually been doing.

They met back at the café. Bob ordered a drink and sat back with his phone, scrolling through the various pictures. He found one. There was no blurring, and it was quite clear that it showed Tim on his little red motorcycle. It was perfect, they were off and running! Still

he frowned. Tim was a lot like a child—untrustworthy, unpredictable, and completely irresponsible.

Minutes strolled lazily by. His mug of coffee came and went, and still there was no sign of him. Bob realised he should have taken Tim's phone number and, just as he was about to become slightly annoyed about things, the red bike pulled up outside, parking just behind his own.

Tim got off, grinning and smirking as he whipped off his helmet. He came in, clicking his fingers at the staff who took it with good grace. "Tea!" he cried out. "Lots of sugar. Not much milk. Lots of sugar. Actually make it coffee, black, no sugar. Lots of milk."

He sat down, still grinning.

"Where have you been?" Bob scolded him, but it was a gentle scolding as Bob was not a man known for his ferocious temper. Lucky for Tim.

"Speeding!" Tim replied.

"I photographed you about an hour ago!"

"I like speeding," Tim said. "I got a taste for it. I got up to 100 mph—did you get a picture?"

"100 mph?" Bob shook his head. "I thought we agreed that you were only going to be a little over the speed limit."

Tim looked away thoughtfully for a moment. "I don't remember agreeing to that. I wouldn't have agreed to that. I like speeding."

"You're lucky you didn't get yourself into any trouble." Bob did his best to sound intimidating. It wasn't entirely successful.

"I did," he shrugged. "The police caught me."

"What for?"

"Speeding!"

Bob groaned. "What happened?"

“I was speeding!” Tim shrugged. It was all quite simple, and he didn’t seem to be quite sure why Bob wasn’t managing to keep up with him. “Lucky for me, they decided to let me off with just a ticket.”

“Giving you a ticket isn’t letting you off.” At this point, even he wondered if he was following all this properly.

“They didn’t arrest me. They said I wasn’t worth the bother.” Tim grinned. “I know my rights, you see. They caught me at 65 in a 50 zone, but I said to them, Prove it, prove it, and they asked me what I was doing. I told them I was doing 65, but that they couldn’t prove it. So they just laughed. They both knew I’d won; I’d outsmarted them. I was better than them.

“They gave me a ticket, and I rode off. It was me laughing at them. They wanted to arrest me and take me back, but I won’t ever let them take me back. I’m never going back.”

“Take you back?” Bob was becoming quite concerned that this man’s brain was somewhere else, possibly languishing at the bottom of a bag of not quite legal white powder.

Tim suddenly darkened. “Take me back.” He looked around furtively some more and nodded. He lowered his voice and his expression was grim. “I won’t let them take me back to that place. It’s a bad place, I won’t go back.”

“Prison?” Bob hoped it was as simple as that, but somehow, his faith in his own good fortune was dead and gone, and the funeral had been poorly attended, mostly by habitual mourners.

“One coffee,” came a voice. The waitress held out a hot mug of steaming coffee, and turned it gingerly so Tim could grab the handle. “Will there be anything else?”

“Your phone number?” Tim laughed. He looked up with his languid, vacant little eyes which pointed in almost totally different directions.

Bob hadn't noticed before, but there was something about the way the light caught them that made him look exactly like a sock-puppet.

"No," she said simply.

"We're fine then, thanks." Tim nodded, turning away from her as if their business was happily concluded, and just carried on as if nothing had happened.

Bob actually smiled at this rather pitiful display. "Does that ever work?"

He sipped at the coffee, and looked puzzled. "Does what ever work?"

"With women?" he said. "Asking random women for their phone number - does it ever work?"

"Oh no," Tim said assuredly. "But I hear it's a numbers game. It will work one day, if I just keep trying. I'm getting better at it. I can usually ask 10 or 15 girls a day now. When I started, I was lucky to ask 3. That's progress."

Bob decided not to tell him that that wasn't how playing the odds was meant to work. He was tired; just watching him was hard work, listening to him was utterly exhausting. "Come on, we need to find another law to break. This time, without doing anything stupid."

"Stupid?" Tim frowned, confused.

It was only around 50 yards long—a short, easy straight road directly to a roundabout. Bob sat on his Harley and huffed a heavy sigh.

"It's a nice little one-way street. Do you think you can ride down it the wrong way without causing any damage to yourself or, more importantly, anyone else?"

Tim nodded to himself. "I think so."

Bob thought it was unlikely. "You can see the other end, right?"

Tim nodded that indeed he could. He would have also nodded if indeed he couldn't, but as luck would have it, he was nodding for all the right reasons. All this was rather against the odds.

"Right... You wait until I go down the other end. I'll pull up, I'll get my phone out, and I'll wave. When I wave, you ride down slowly. I will stop anyone coming in, and warn them that there's an idiot going the wrong way."

"What if I hit the idiot?" Tim bit his lip thoughtfully.

Bob explained in words of three syllables or less, "You are the idiot, Tim. You can't hit yourself, can you?"

"I can't hit myself," he repeated with a heartfelt nod of agreement. "I can't hit myself, I can't hit myself. OK, I get it now."

Bob shook his head sadly. He fired up his hog and flicked the throttle. The engine spluttered and lumpily rumbled away beneath him. He clicked his helmet strap into place and rode off, his big machine chugging along unevenly.

He took the long way round—the strictly legal way round—and finally stopped his engine and pulled his phone from the inside of his jacket pocket. He waved, throwing his hands up so Tim could see him quite plainly.

He waited.

Glancing around, he was relieved that there was still no traffic. A car passed directly over the roundabout, not even hinting at turning into the little one-way street.

He saw Tim rumbling along in the distance. He held up his phone camera, catching both the bike and the One Way sign, to really bring home the fact of how naughty they were being.

By the time he'd done it, it was all over. Tim and his motorcycle were almost at the end, and there was no incident to speak of. With a sigh of relief, he turned away.

As he did, there was a loud crashing noise.

“How? How? How is this possible?”

Bob helped him heft the bike up from the ground. It was heavier than it looked, and it took both of them working together to get it back up off the floor. When it was finally upright, they both stood around, gasping for air, red-faced and exhausted.

“Well... these things happen, don’t they?” Tim shrugged, catching his breath.

“How exactly do these things happen?” Bob demanded.

“We did it, didn’t we? We broke the law and got away with it. So I cheered, didn’t I?” Tim sniffed, it was all so obvious. He obviously wasn’t sure why Bob wasn’t following it properly. It seemed a lot of people didn’t follow him properly; there had to have been a lot of stupid people around, he surmised, without properly knowing what surmised meant. “I forgot to keep my hands on the bars. I mean, we’ve all done it, haven’t we? We’ve all forgot we were riding and had a little crash. One time I forgot I was sleeping and just woke up. I forgot I was eating once and nearly choked to death.”

“No,” Bob told him sternly, but by now the sternness was actually quite stern indeed. “I’ve never met anyone who crashed because they forgot they were riding. I’ve never met anyone before who I think could have crashed because they forgot they were riding.”

“A lot of people tell me how different I am. I’m actually quite proud of it.”

Bob grumbled and walked away. “Coffee, now!” he shouted.

The café was just thrilled to have them back for a third visit, a visit that Bob was determined would be their last. “I’m sorry, Tim,” he said with a heavy sigh. “I can’t carry on with you.”

“You’re giving up?” Tim fidgeted nervously in his seat. “You can’t. I need you!”

“I don’t have a choice.”

Tim started to speak but Bob held up his hand to stop him.

“I don’t want to, Tim, but I have to. You are going to kill yourself, and I can’t be a part of that. I’m very, very sorry.”

“But I can’t do this without you!” Tim whispered. He slouched down in the chair sulkily. “I need this. You don’t understand, I need this.”

“We all need this.” Bob laughed humorlessly, his voice tinged with morose bemusement. He rubbed his hand over his forehead. “Nobody would be doing something this crazy if they didn’t need to win that money.”

“This isn’t really that crazy,” Tim said, rather too heavily emphasising how crazy he didn’t seem to think this was.

“I actually meant me, spending time with you, Tim.”

“I just... I really need my share!” Tim suddenly sat up straight, leant forward and began pleading. “They split us in half, all of us, the whole group. Half and half. Half one side, half the other. I got to pick the random names out of the hat. I got to choose who I was partnered up with, and you got to choose the challenge. You were lucky—lucky to get me. I need this; I need this bad! I’ll do anything, I don’t care. I will do literally anything to get my share. That means you get your share too.

“You’re lucky, because I will do anything.”

“I can’t be responsible for you hurting yourself!” Bob sighed sadly.

“You’re not. You’re not.” He spat the words out quickly, jabbing at the desk with a downwards chopping motion. He stopped, like a child’s toy when the battery had suddenly run out.

Bob felt a momentary relief.

“I need this, Bob. I will do anything for this.”

He sighed and huffed but it was going to take more to convince him than that.

“You want to know why? You want to know why I’m doing this?” Tim narrowed his eyes and stared at him.

“No, not really,” Bob told him, meaning every word.

“Then I’ll tell you.” Tim lowered his voice. “I’m a victim, Bob. They did things to me.”

“Who?” Bob was losing his patience, but the story was mildly intriguing. He wished it wasn’t, because it was time to leave.

“I don’t know who.” He shook his head. “Not the point, not the point. Aliens maybe, but it’s not the point.” He swallowed hard and his eyes saddened as he made the trip back into memories he was trying to forget. “I wake up every few months. The room is white, I can’t move; I can see and hear, but I can’t move. It smells like alcohol; not a bar though, like a hospital. The smell is horrible; it makes me want to puke but I can’t, I can’t do anything. My head is spinning; I can feel things, just a bit; I can feel things. I can usually remember, but not always. People come in, they hurt me. There are needles, knives sometimes.”

There was a lengthy silence. After several seconds, Bob picked up a mug of coffee and took a sip. Finally he looked back up. “You need help, Tim.”

“You’ll help?” he said, grinning happily.

“That’s not the kind of help you need!” Bob told him firmly. “You need to talk to someone who can help you; someone professional at helping people who aren’t thinking right.”

“I’m thinking right. Look!” He rolled up his sleeve and there were scars—long, deep scars, and many pockmarks and needle punctures.

Bob sighed; it proved nothing, of course, except that this young man was desperate.

“I need to go,” Tim said, looking around and smirking. His face flattened again. “I need to go, to get away. I’ll complete my challenge, I’ll finish. I’ll get some money and I’ll leave. I’m going a long way from here. I’m going somewhere where, if I don’t know where I am when I wake up, it’s because I was drunk, nothing else.” His eyes misted over, he swallowed and seemed to choke momentarily on his emotions. Pointing to his head, he said “It’s here. This is where it hurts the most.”

“I can’t help you to hurt yourself,” Bob said firmly, almost certain this time that he meant it.

“You’re not.” Tim smiled awkwardly to himself. “I’m desperate because of them. They’ve driven me to it. You... you’re just helping me escape. You’re the last chance I have. There’s nothing else now. If you don’t help me, you’re sending me back to the white room. They have me scared. It’s because of them that I’ll do anything, not you.”

Bob didn’t know. “I don’t know,” he said. And he really, really didn’t.

“And what about you? You have reasons, right? Aren’t they too important to walk away from?”

Bob shook his head wearily. They were indeed.

“I can do a wheelie!” Tim insisted. “I can do it!”

“But it’s illegal...” Bob laboured the point somewhat, realised what he was saying, and groaned at himself. “I mean, it’s illegal for a reason. They’re dangerous, especially on a public road.”

“No no no no no... it’s safe, it’s safe!” Tim beckoned him to come closer before he revealed his next gem of wisdom. “I’m not very good at them. I can only get it up a little bit, but it’s still illegal. No danger.”

Bob looked at the scuffed tank, the ripped seat of his bike. The clutch lever was missing the little ball off the end of it, and was

slightly bent upwards. What was missing from Tim was probably far worse.

“Alright,” he sighed, grabbing his phone. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“Great!” Tim grinned and slapped his helmet onto his head. Pointing up the road, he said “I’ll ride around the roundabout and come back down towards you. You take pictures. I’ll do my very best!”

“If you hurt anyone, we’re finished and I’m going home.” Bob massaged his temples. “A small wheelie. Tiny! That’s all you do, right?”

“Sure, sure!” He waved his hand dismissively, pressed the button, and cranked his engine to life. “Just keep watching. I’ll try not to hurt anyone, or something.”

The red bike roared around the roundabout, narrowly missing a car that was pulling onto it, not fully expecting something to be there moving so quickly, or so erratically. He thrashed the engine into a low gear as he came along the straight. He dropped the throttle and let the bike slow itself down.

Bob raised the phone camera, sighed to himself, and wished he was still in bed, or better yet, still at breakfast.

Tim threw the bike down a gear, revved it up, and dropped the clutch, pulling the bike up and back as hard as he could. It wobbled on the back wheel, but the front left the ground, waving her nose several feet up in the air.

With a click, Bob caught the picture. He smiled to himself in relief as the little red bike went off into the distance, clattering down onto both of its wheels.

His relief vanished when he heard the whine of a siren. He turned in surprise to see a police-car chasing after Tim. Sometimes it

just wasn't your day, he mused. His mouth lolled open, and his eyes fluttered closed as he cursed himself for ever getting involved with any of this.

He didn't know what to do; there was nothing he could do to help. He was stood at the side of a road, a quiet road in the middle of a quiet town. As he turned to leave, he heard the roar of the little red bike coming straight at him, the police car following some way behind. He quickly snapped a series of pictures as the two vehicles raced past him.

Tim laughed to himself. They weren't going to catch him—it was just as simple as that. There was no choice; there was no part of reality in which catching him was a realistic possibility. He shot round a corner, dragging the bike hard into the turn. He slammed on the brakes, light on the front and stomped heavily on the rear. The bike began to slide, and he twisted hard to the left, cutting back down the opening to the one-way street he'd ridden down earlier. It had bollards at the mouth, a restriction the car would have to slow for. He didn't and he gunned it. There were 50 yards stretched out ahead of him, and he was sure he could make it before the car could even enter the street.

His heart was pounding, and there was a whooshing sound, the echo of his engine against the bollards as he whizzed past them. His thumb clicked up the headlight, just in case. He dropped a gear before laying on the power.

His parallel-twin engine delivered her all, driving the motorcycle hard forwards with a growling roar that shook through the whole bike. Houses flashed past in a blur; his eyes drilled forwards, focusing only on the way ahead. A car indicator flashed ahead of him. He saw the sickly white glow of the daytime driving lights and the orange light of a pair of indicators. Huffing in irritation,

he chanced a glance at the mirror and saw the red and blue light in the distance behind, and heard the screaming siren.

He let off the throttle, simultaneously pulling hard but carefully on the brakes. His speed melted away as the tyres chattered on the grey tarmac, struggling to grip. He pulled the bike hard to the right, stepping the front wheel up on a small verge, and up onto the pavement. He rode along, gunning the engine once again and closing the last few yards to the end of the road. As he reached it, he flicked the throttle once more. It pulled up the front just enough for the motorcycle to float off the curb and land gently back on the road. He dared another glance behind him—the police were nose to nose with the other car now. The road was too narrow for both to pass, and the driver was panicking to mount the curb and get out of their way.

He grinned to himself—more seconds had been bought. Knowing the area vaguely, he headed down the road towards a small pathway, with bollards set up to stop anything wider than a pushchair from entering. He slammed on the anchors and screeched to a halt, the back wheel locking and skidding around in a wild arc.

He gingerly put the bike nose up to the kerb and mounted the pavement as quickly as he could. He laid on the power and shot down the pedestrian alley as hard as the bike would accelerate. Wooden fences shot past him in a blur until, suddenly, he was exiting. He nudged the bike back down to the road, and headed back to the café, where he was sure Bob would be waiting with a smile on his face.

“You must really like the coffee,” the waitress joked, handing him yet another one.

“Not really...” he told her firmly. Much more firmly, in fact, than he had been with Tim, and yet nowhere near as firm as he

should have been. This was definitely all getting a bit much for a man who aspired to little more than eating too many sausages.

After a worryingly short time, the dented little red bike pulled up and a grinning idiot got off it. He stepped in through the glass door, making a little bell chime as he did so. He waved, stepped over and sat down. His mouth traced upwards into a wide smirk.

“Did they catch you?” he sighed. It was obvious they hadn’t.

“I like speeding!” he replied simply. “I really like speeding, and I’m good at it. No, they didn’t catch me, I outsmarted them!”

“I’m amazed.” Bob took a sip of the increasingly awful coffee. “Isn’t that like a dog outsmarting a quantum-physicist?”

Tim shrugged. “Dunno anything about dogs...”

Bob had nothing really to say to that. “You’ll be pleased to hear, I got the pictures.”

“That’s great, we’re up to three then!”

“Four!” Bob corrected him, raising the appropriate number of fingers. “Outrunning the police is still quite illegal in this country, and I got a picture of it.”

“It is?”

Bob was feeling a little light headed. The amount of coffee he’d swallowed, the short time he’d been swallowing it, and close proximity to Tim, was something nobody should have ever gotten used to. He was actually beginning to wonder if Tim really was the victim of a secret plot, a drug user who had accidentally snorted some washing powder, or was he just a paranoid crazy person? Did it even really matter in the end?

Certainly, there could be little doubt regarding the third one—perfectly rational people didn’t race the police through a suburban maze, and then come back grinning like they’d won £10 on a lottery

scratch-card. Perhaps people who regularly bought lottery scratch-cards did.

“This is good right?” Tim told him, asked him, or commented rhetorically—they all seemed to blend together with him into a finely pulped amorphous blob of illogic. “I mean, this one is going to be easy?”

Bob was struggling to keep up with his mannerisms, and had decided that it was easier all round to just nod occasionally, and not allow himself to get too deeply involved.

“I mean, I would never normally ride without a helmet.”

Bob held up Tim’s helmet. It was nice; it was painted a glossy metallic black, a good brand, and expensive besides. It boasted a gold sticker, meaning it was of the highest standard, and had only a few minor scratches showing on the surface. It was a worthy thing—it looked like it would protect him in a fall. Bob approved. “I guess, so long as you ride carefully for a few yards. There’s no real danger involved, I guess.”

“My helmet is special!” Tim assured him.

Bob was sure it was, and he was also sure he was about to find out why he thought so.

“You see, I needed that particular brand. I pulled out the lining—it’s removable you see... Inside there’s no lining after you take the lining out. I bought some really strong glue; really strong industrial solvent glue, strong enough to glue Boris Johnson to the side of a fucking elephant. You see? Once the elephant realises that it’s got Boris Johnson glued to the side, it panics. I mean, who wouldn’t? It’s got Boris Johnson glued to the side. Panic is a perfectly sane reaction, probably the only perfectly sane reaction if you really get right down to thinking about it. So the elephant panics, it runs along, thrashing around, running into trees and making elephant noises for all its worth.”

Bob sighed. This was a terrible time not to be having a stroke. “An elephant?” he said.

“A fucking elephant! He’s still there you know—that’s how strong it is. This glue is so strong, it can hold Boris fucking Johnson to the side of a fucking elephant.”

“And it actually says all this on the packaging?” Bob asked sarcastically.

“It’s heavily implied!” he agreed. “I think the actual words it used were, Caution, not for internal use. It’s my glue though. I’ve paid for it, so I’ll use it where I damn like. I mean, I didn’t pay for it, but that only proves my point. I’m not a slave of the glue company. We’re free men, right? Power to the people, right?”

Bob thought it best not to labour the point, or at least pointless to labour Tim’s brain. “But getting back to the point—assuming there is one, and I strongly doubt there is—why did you pour industrial solvent on the inside of your perfectly good helmet?” Bob frowned and looked at it thoughtfully. “I’m pretty sure you’re not meant to put anything more dangerous than your head inside these things. It could damage it, couldn’t it?” He looked at Tim’s head and realised that he actually hadn’t broken the rules at all—not in that respect, at least.

“Silver foil.”

Of course, what else would it have been?

“I have a layer of silver metal foil in there to protect my brain. It doesn’t just protect me from the rays: it also means the people from the white room can’t find me. I’m safe, you see? It’s like that guy in the comic book, but without all the special powers and the evil, and stuff.”

“Presumably they have your address?” Bob shook his head. A stroke would be best, but he would settle for a heart attack. “If not, perhaps they can just find a shop selling industrial solvent and wait

for you there. It should be easy—there can't be many elephants with Boris Johnson stuck to the side of them, and I'm sure they would be able to trace it back from the source."

"I've thought of that." Tim grinned maniacally. He did everything manically, and Bob was becoming fairly used to it. "I've foiled my own house. All of it. It's all covered in foil."

"Really?" Bob managed to seem sarcastically surprised—maybe even a little more than surprised. "I'm amazed."

"Don't be surprised. I'm covering all my bases. I'm making sure."

"It's not that. I just had you pegged as living in a cardboard box; maybe a hole with smelly water coming out; perhaps a burnt-out car."

Tim frowned to himself thoughtfully. "I do own several cardboard boxes."

"Well let's get this done, then, shall we?" Bob pulled out his phone and sighed wearily. What was more scary to him was the thought of what they might do after this. What terribly terrible ideas were still lurking in the head of this crazy-person? "Now listen! Helmets are essential for safe riding. They protect us even at low speeds. I can't condone this action, but I do accept that it has to be done on this occasion. Plus, I fail to see how much worse your head can get, even from a high speed collision with something more hazardous than Boris Johnson glued to the side of an elephant."

"A fucking elephant!" Tim corrected.

"I mean it, Tim." He held up the helmet to eye level. "This thing is built to protect your head; it's designed to save your life, and you won't be wearing it. Do you know what that means?"

"I'll have superior peripheral vision, better hearing, and a clearer sense of the location of other objects?" Tim said.

“Well, yes,” Bob sighed. “But I was more thinking that it means you must, must, must ride safely. No racing police-cars; no speeding; no doing anything except riding a few yards at low speed. Do we understand each other?”

Tim muttered something and nodded his head in agreement.

Bob began stepping away. He paced just a few yards, in order to make the distance that he could ride as short as possible. “This helmet will save your life in a fall. Without it, you’re vulnerable. Please, Tim, take this seriously!”

Tim grunted and started his engine.

Bob took a deep breath, held up his phone camera and prepared himself for the worst. Horrible things flicked through the darkest realms of his imagination. Vivid images of Tim, slamming his skull into the tarmac, or showing off and crashing into a bollard, raced through his mind. At one point, he imagined a light passenger aircraft plunging from the sky and landing propeller first, straight down onto his blissfully helmetless head.

He shook such things from his mind and said with a muted shout, “Go!”

The bike passed very slowly out from behind a parked car. Bob’s eyes were up and down the road; there was nothing—no other traffic, no sounds, no people. He clicked off the picture as Tim rolled towards him, knowing there was still plenty of time for this to go horribly wrong, and afraid that it still might.

Tim pulled up beside him, his face an innocent expression, his body relaxed. His speed had never exceeded walking pace. It was over—the whole thing had happened with absolutely no fuss and no disasters. Bob breathed a sigh of relief, breaking into a happy smile as he wiped off beads of sweat from his brow.

As he handed the helmet back, Tim began to laugh. “I told you!” he said, throwing his hands up in one of his wild gestures.

His finger clipped the helmet, which tumbled out of Bob's hand. He tried to catch it with his other hand, but the phone was still in it. He watched as the valuable thing rolled clumsily to the ground, landing with a sickening clattering noise. It cracked, bits shattered from the middle, and tiny shards of weakened plastic splintered out, dancing across the tarmac and coming to rest in a haphazard pile of broken parts.

In silence the pair looked at one another, their eyes fixed wide open in surprise.

"How much industrial solvent did you say you used?" Bob asked.

"Not enough, obviously." Tim rubbed his chin, before speaking a sentence that Bob was convinced had never before been muttered in the entire history of the English language. "It looks like Boris Johnson must have unstuck himself and fallen off that fucking elephant."

Bob replied with a sentence that Tim had heard many times before. "You fucking idiot!"

"More coffee?"

There was going to be more coffee. "More coffee," Bob agreed to the waitress who politely took the order, rolled her eyes, and headed off, pointing back at them and saying very rude things in Turkish.

Tim seemed unfazed by it all, and was happily bandaging his helmet back up with thick silver tape. "I'll be even safer now that I've identified the weakness," he said as though his actions were cunning in some way, rather like a small child who'd copied his friend's homework and thought he was going to be getting away with it.

“I think that is only the case if you actually fix the fault that you identify.” Bob didn’t actually want any more coffee, and he didn’t want any more Tim, either, if the truth was told.

Tim waved the tape around as if that answered everything, which in his mind, might have actually been the case.

“We’re halfway there now,” Bob said, largely for his own sake. “But what’s next? We have 5 more laws to break and I can’t even think of any.”

“I can!” Tim said with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Bob nodded solemnly. “I rather thought that might be the case.”

“I was thinking of maybe drinking beer while I’m riding along.”

Bob frowned. “Are you sober now?”

Tim nodded that indeed he was, not that it made a terribly huge difference.

“Then no, we’re not doing that. I can only just barely tolerate you as it is.”

“I don’t know what tolerate means.” Tim finished mummifying his helmet and held up the plastic, tape-wrapped abomination proudly. He smiled at a job well done, and put the helmet down gingerly under his chair, taking good care not to scratch it.

Bob snapped his fingers. “Littering!”

“Boring.”

“We’ll drop litter, and when you win your money, you can go to the cinema and watch an exciting movie to make up for it,” Bob told him gruffly.

“What if we’re driving in a place where you’re not allowed to drive?” suggested Tim with a smile.

Bob narrowed his eyes at him. “Where did you have in mind?”

“The supermarket bakery in South East London!”

Bob shook his head and grimaced at the prospect. “You drop litter, I pick it up. No harm done, whatsoever. Do you see how nice and easy this can all actually be?”

Tim tutted. “But the problem with that is that there’s no harm done whatsoever. Do you see how dull and boring this can all actually be?”

“We’re doing it, Tim. It’s nice, clean and simple. It’s everything you’re not. In fact, from a certain perspective, you could be described as simple.”

Tim nodded in weary acquiescence. “If I have to, but what if I drive in a pedestrian-only place as well, while I’m dropping litter? We could take two pictures for the price of one.”

“OK,” he agreed.

Tim looked surprised but said nothing.

“But I will choose the place—somewhere where there are few, if any, people.”

“A library anywhere in South East London?”

“Try again, Tim.”

“OK. Then how about, for instance, along the banks of a canal?” he suggested, far more helpfully.

Bob nodded and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He said, “Yes, like the banks of a canal! That’s much better.”

The banks of the canal were peaceful and quiet. Up ahead, a man walking a large, ugly dog, wandered off into the distance and there was nobody else around for them to annoy, inconvenience or accidentally kill. The water was brown and dirty, and if anything was alive in it, then it would have had to have evolved super-powers by now just to survive. The languid surface of the water moved gently with the breeze as it rustled softly through the polythene bags,

trapped in the branches of some distant trees. It was doubtful any harm could be done here, even if they really tried.

The path below was narrow—barely enough space for the pair of them to walk along—and the surface was of smashed concrete. Large stretches were gone altogether, as nature had already begun to claim back what was hers. It was dissolving into rocks and dirt, with blades of grass beginning to peer shyly out from beneath the earth.

It would have been an almost idyllic scene, if Tim hadn't been in it, and planning to shatter the peace by riding a motorcycle through it, in violation of the law, and Bob's sense of morality; a sense of morality which was, to be fair, taking a back seat to the day's proceedings.

"I'm not sure about this!" Bob voiced his perfectly reasonable concerns. He ran his eyes over the steps that led down to the path. He pointed back to them with his thumb. "What about them?"

"No problem." Tim bent down and picked up an old tin can. "I can throw litter too. It's not like we're going to be ruining the natural beauty of the place, is it?"

He tossed the old can into the water. It sunk quickly, a burst of bubbles rippling at the surface as it was dragged into the depths of who-knew-what.

"If I agree to this," Bob began haltingly. "If I agree to this, then you'll have to make a very short run. There can't be anyone around. You go in, out, and we're done and away. Understood? That's how this is going to work."

Tim nodded, grinning. "Now this is fun! Dropping litter is so pedestrian, but dropping litter while speeding through a pedestrian zone... That's hard-core, man!"

"I know you like speeding," Bob began by way of a warning. "But—"

Tim cut him off and frowned in surprise. “How do you know? Who told you that?”

Bob grumbled to himself and rolled his eyes. “Just some idiot...” he said. “This has to be safe, Tim. Do you understand?”

“Of course I understand!” Tim waved his hand dismissively and smirked to himself. “I’m not some crazy monstrosity that loves to ride around causing trouble, you know.”

“Well, yes you are, Tim,” Bob said plainly. “That is exactly what you are.”

“Maybe.” Tim shrugged. “But that’s not the point. It’s not the point, is it? The point is, we’re doing this: this is happening. It doesn’t matter if I enjoy it and become very slightly aroused, is it? I mean, that’s not the point. I don’t know why you brought the subject round to sex. What is it with you?”

“This has nothing to do with sex,” Bob huffed angrily. “As I’m sure your creation also didn’t. I’m fast becoming convinced you were conceived in a test-tube in a lab, thanks to some random accident with a chimpanzee and a bucket of snake venom.”

“Anything’s possible,” Tim acknowledged, without even a hint or suggestion that he was even slightly offended.

Tim threw his leg over his bike. He looked down the lane and was satisfied to see Bob in position with his phone pressed up against his chest in readiness, his finger on the shutter button. He pressed the button and the engine growled to life. He pressed down with his foot and heard a very positive clicking sound as the first gear engaged. This really was a very nice bike indeed. He loved it.

He revved her up and edged towards the steps. He looked down dubiously and paused just for a moment. He had assumed it would be like bouncing down from a curb, a thing he’d done countless times before. Now, perched at the top of a set of proper

steps, he could see it wasn't like that at all. There was more than one of them, for a start.

They stretched out before him. At least a dozen brick and stone stairs leading down to the narrow canal path. There was a verge along the side, a rusty painted metal railing from which all the paint had largely got up and left.

He was actually nervous; for all his bluff and bravado, this looked a lot like it wasn't actually going to be possible. He closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on the money, on the white room, on everything that hung on this one moment. Everything hung on this one moment.

He revved the engine and pulled away. The bike clunked down noisily, the whole thing shuddered as the front wheel fell down to the second step. There was an ugly scraping noise as the exhausts ground along the floor. A sensible man would have given up there and then, but a sensible man wouldn't have been in this position in the first - perhaps not the second or third - place either.

He held her upright and let whatever happened, happen. The whole bike shook violently. The stairs were uneven and every time the front wheel landed, it shook in a different direction, sending the bike weaving all over the place, while he fought the bars to keep it upright.

It was working; it was viciously unpleasant, but it was going to work. The scraping noise under the bike was accompanied suddenly by the sound of shattering plastic as the fairing along the bottom gave way to a rock, and dissolved into a hundred shards of smashed plastic. As he was beginning to feel quite triumphant, he suddenly became aware of the bottom. The stairs led to the path. It was narrow, and he would have to make a good grip on the floor, or else he was going to slide off, straight into the water, bike and all.

He winced as he vibrated, rattled, and shook his way to the bottom, pumping the brakes, squinting his eyes together, and nervously hoping for the best. At one point, and in a fraction of a second, he remembered he couldn't swim.

Could he?

Eventually he stopped and opened his eyes. He had made it. The front wheel was mere inches from the artificial bank, a sheer drop of several feet into something wet and toxic that could quite possibly melt the skin off a rock, if rocks had skin.

Did they?

He punched the air triumphantly. Bob was shaking his head in relief or anger or something—Tim didn't care. He gunned it gingerly, and the bike wobbled slightly over the uneven surface towards him while he clicked away. He whipped out an old newspaper from inside his jacket and casually tossed it aside.

Done.

Two more challenges had been achieved, his heart was pounding, he felt like a hero and all was well with the world.

"I'm actually impressed," said Bob as he approached alongside him. "Those stairs looked much harder than I thought. You did a good job there, Tim."

Tim pulled off his helmet to speak, but Bob had already wandered off to collect the discarded newspaper. He picked it up from a pile of many other discarded newspapers and carried it along to find a dustbin. Tim could only see how pointless that was, and wondered if it would make sense even to Bob.

Bob smiled and actually looked like he was happy. "Come on. Let's get out of here as quick as we can. I don't want to be caught down here with a motorcycle."

Tim looked up, and his expression mellowed, some of the elation from his previous victory melting away. He hadn't actually

thought far enough ahead to consider this part. Before him, the only way out, was yet another set of stairs, leading, quite obviously, upwards—downwards was bad enough, and he had had the help of gravity to assist him.

“Ummm...” he said pointing. “I have to go up those stairs.”

“Yeah!” Bob nodded in agreement. “Of course you do. I tell you what - I’m going to get a picture, just for the sheer hell of it.”

“But...” Tim looked quite worried, mostly because he was, and it was a refreshing change that his mood and appearance balanced out for Bob on this one rare occasion.

“What?” he asked, frowning deeply. He looked over at the stairs. They were an ominous thing indeed. “What? You can’t ride up them?”

“I can’t ride up them,” Tim agreed.

Bob looked at him angrily, really angrily. He looked like he was going to hit him, or write a strongly-worded letter to The Times, at the very least.

“Try!”

After trying, Tim sat on the verge, what little there was of it, with Bob sat next to him. He was nursing two very sore elbows, and a knee that he was fairly sure was a little bit broken. Compared to all that, the bike didn’t actually look too bad. Of course, if you didn’t compare the bike to all that, then it did actually look quite appallingly bad indeed.

The tank was battered where the railing had pounded into it with every failed attempt. The side panels were smashed on one side, and the other - at the bottom of the canal. The tail plastics were scraped, the exhaust was making horrible noises, and the headlight had a brick sticking out of the glass.

“I tried...” Tim shrugged.

“17 times!” Bob agreed. “I commend you on your doggedness, if not your skill.”

“I don’t know what doggedness is.” He shrugged, wondering in what way he was being compared to a dog, and just how well or badly he was coming off.

Bob looked at him rather sadly, “After what I just witnessed, I think it’s clear you don’t know what skill is either.”

Tim suddenly grinned wildly, which Bob had come to realise meant absolutely nothing. Nothing at all.

“I have a plan!”

“It’s been a long day,” Bob sighed. “Why do I get the feeling that we’ve not even broken the surface yet, but that we’re about to? I think it’s going to imminently collapse under us and we’re going to plunge headlong into the abyss. Am I right?”

Tim nodded enthusiastically. Then he frowned, shrugged, frowned again a little more and then finally smiled. “I don’t know what any of that means. I have a plan though, a brilliant plan.”

“Does it involve a time-machine, a condom, and seeking out your father?”

“No,” he assured him. “We dump the bike. We abandon it. We just leave it here to rot. That’s against the law. That takes us up to 8.”

“I personally have absolutely no problem with that, but I don’t think you’ve quite thought it all through yet. I can wait while the hamster running around in a wheel inside your head charges up your brain, if that would help.”

“Get your camera,” Tim instructed him, with a furtive grin tracing its way across his lips.

Bob took it out and held it up, not sure what was happening, but absolutely positive he wasn’t going to like it.

Tim limped up behind the bike, held the handle-bar, and stood her up, kicking up the side-stand. “Ready?”

Bob nodded, frowning curiously. "Ready for what?"

Tim just smirked at his brilliance. He edged round the bike, holding it up by the bars alone. "Make sure you get this," he said, almost laughing to himself. He grunted loudly as he summoned all his strength and put in a mighty effort. "You're only getting one chance!"

He hefted the machine, and it tumbled over the edge. It hit the water with a crash as the water splashed viciously around it. It vanished quickly into the depths, bubbles and waves rippling over the surface which subsided away into nothing. The bike was gone—gone as if it had never been there.

"Ta-daaa!" he shouted loudly, and with a proud expression of a job well done.

Bob's expression was somewhat different. His mouth lolled open in total surprise. Whatever he thought was going to happen, it wasn't that. He very slowly shook his head, not even noticing he was doing it. "What..." he began very slowly. "...The...fuck?"

"Eight!" Tim felt that that explanation was adequate.

It wasn't, at least not for Bob. "You threw your bike in the river..." Bob said softly, still reeling from this act of unconscionable recklessness. Somehow his mind was unable to accept that he had seen what he thought he'd seen.

Had he?

Tim grinned. "No I didn't!"

Perhaps his mind hadn't seen what he thought he'd seen at all. This actually made much better sense to Bob, in this now utterly senseless world that he had stepped unwarily into. He actually found himself looking around, wondering if the motorcycle was still there, as if it had all been a trick of some kind. Of course not, it was gone. It was at the bottom of the river.

“Canal,” Tim corrected him—evidently, a portion of Bob’s thought process had escaped through his mouth. “But I didn’t, not really. Not really really.”

“What the fuck?” he managed again, only this time he felt that it really deserved a proper answer.

Tim threw up his arms. “It’s not mine! It’s not my bike!”

“What?” Bob’s eyes widened. That was bad, but this was worse.

“I stole it. You don’t think I’m stupid enough to throw my own bike in the canal, do you?” He shrugged, a little offended. “I’ve been speeding, outrunning police-cars, and doing all manner of stupid stuff all day. I mean, you must think I’m crazy or something.”

Bob had to admit, the thought had occurred to him. He just nodded in agreement. “Then what the hell is going on?”

“I stole it! Obviously.”

“Obviously!” Bob felt like crying; he felt like just collapsing down right there and falling into the warm loving embrace of a complete nervous breakdown. “You stole a bike?” He hung his head in his hands and held on just a little longer, but not by much. “You’ve been riding around all day on a stolen bike?”

“Of course,” Tim shrugged. What else would he have been riding, when you really got right down to it? Tim briefly thought that people were weird sometimes. “My bike isn’t really up to challenges and stuff, or going in a straight line. It’s a little Suzuki 250cc. It’s really boring, and when I turn left, the tank slides off. Also the exhaust is made from baked-bean cans welded together.”

That actually made much more sense.

“Do you even know whose it is?” Bob was shaking his head, considering handing himself in to the police as an accessory to premeditated lunacy.

“It’s my brother’s,” he said, quite calmly, as if this was all perfectly fine. He must have realised how that sounded, so he added, “We don’t really get on.”

“How unreasonable of him,” Bob said, quite a bit louder than he intended.

“I know!” Tim agreed. “I always wanted to ride it, but he said that wasn’t possible on the grounds that I was a twat. So this is a win-win.”

“But you stole a man’s bike. Even worse, you stole your brother’s bike! Do you not see how utterly terrible that is?” Bob yelled at him, his patience a forgotten blur in the rear view mirror of this terrible journey.

“But I wrecked it!” He pointed to the water which was now still and quiet. To him, this explanation seemed perfectly reasonable.

“But...” Bob held up his hands. Suddenly the gears inside his head just stopped turning. There was nothing to add.

“I’m on a ban as well. I don’t have a license, so I can’t just bring my bike out. I don’t have insurance or anything, but my brother does. I just showed the police his license, no problem at all. No problem. Do you see how well it’s all worked out?”

“I actually am beginning to see how your brain works, or rather, how it doesn’t.” Bob just gave in. It had happened; there was no going back and changing any of it. “There is one silver lining, though.”

Tim didn’t know what that meant, and assumed they were discussing his helmet again. Consequently, he listened with some interest.

“We’ve done all 10. We’re finished. You rode a stolen bike, and you’re not allowed to ride. We’re finished! I have photographic evidence of you breaking 10 different laws. I even got a picture of

you tossing a stolen bike into a canal. If we do get caught by the police, we have everything we need for an insanity plea.”

Tim grinned. “You’re right,” he said happily, but tinged with slight disappointment and sadness.

Bob held up his phone. “4pm,” he said. “We finished early.”

They began to walk very slowly away, back up the first set of steps.

“Do you think we should do one more, just to be on the safe side?”

“No,” Bob told him.

“Can I ride your bike now?”

“No,” Bob told him.

“Should we go back and have another cup of coffee?”

“No,” Bob told him.

“Do you have any games on your phone?”

“No,” Bob told him.

“Can I see?”

“No,” Bob told him.

“What would happen if you dropped your phone in the canal? Could I ride your bike then?”

“Shut up Tim!”

Using none of your own financial resources, take one motorcycle all the way to Edinburgh.

Tracey laughed. Paul didn't.

She handed the slip over to her boyfriend—he'd already read it, but went over it again, just trying to get his brain around it all. "What the hell?" he grumbled, and handed it back to her, shaking his head. His brain wasn't the most useful thing about him. Quite what was useful about him at all was anybody's guess.

"I know," she laughed again.

Again, Paul didn't. "Do you know who your partner is yet?" His eyes flashed around jealously at all the other men in the room.

She shrugged and shook her head. When she spoke, her voice was like ice-cold water being poured over hot coals. "I don't know. One of these idiots, I suppose." She cocked her thumb to the other people in the room and sniffed at them. She didn't much care, and made it quite clear that this was the case, not that she ever really cared about anything, or ever kept such a thing a secret from anyone. She just hoped it would be someone interesting; someone fun, in exactly the same way that Paul wasn't.

Paul did care. He cared so much that he was stewing in his anger, and he made it painfully obvious that this was the case, not that it often wasn't the case. This had caused a certain amount of stress in their relationship. The fact that she also didn't consider it a relationship accounted for the additional stress that her attitude didn't quite manage to cover.

"I don't fucking like this," he told her, and he really didn't fucking like this, not even a little fucking bit. "We're a couple: we should be out doing this together, it's not right that they split us up. Who gives them the right to split us up? It's not right."

Paul spoke with a thick South London accent, which was slightly odd, since he actually came from a very nice cul-de-sac in Surrey.

Tracey also spoke with a South London accent, which wasn't odd at all, and she was even thicker. "Does it really matter?" she asked, because to her, nothing much really did.

Paul grumbled and made some shrugging gestures. "Someone deserves a smack. Someone's getting a smack today, I tell ya! That's just how it is."

She laughed at him, shook her head, and looked over the challenge once more. She knew enough to know that his threats were as empty as the part of his brain that governed ambition. Her brain began working over it, but not quickly, and to be fair, not particularly constructively.

"If it's a bloke..." he began threateningly. "If it's a bloke, it ain't happening. I'm telling ya, he's getting his teeth knocked out. Knocked right out. Straight away, just as soon as he looks at you." Paul had never knocked anything out of anything else in his life, and he never actually would. The closest he would ever come was some 17 years in the future when he would throw a ball at a coconut in a fairground in the South of France. It would wobble for several seconds before settling at a slightly wonky angle. As for the question of teeth, his own would all be long gone by then.

"Tracey?"

Paul turned to the source of the male voice. He sneered, he frowned, he swelled his chest, he looked ready to do some pretty hard-core staring. It all came to nothing when he saw Craig. He was large, pissed-off looking, had scruffy dark hair, a stubbled chin, and had the appearance of a man who had knocked out a lot more than the occasional futuristic coconut. Paul deflated, intimidated enough to inch away very slightly.

“That’s me,” said Tracey with a flirtatious smirk.

Paul seethed, but did it in non-threatening silence.

Craig growled and chewed on an unlit cigarette. “You’re sure?” His eyes narrowed and flicked up and down over the length of her body, flashing her a tiny smile.

“Yeah!” She was momentarily confused, which wasn’t at all out of her sphere of experience. “I’m pretty sure!”

“Sorry, just met some old bitch,” he said, pointing off somewhere in the distance. “I mean, all I know is I have to draw a name. I dip into a box of names and I get ‘Tracey’. They won’t tell me who it is, so I’m wandering around asking the women if it’s them. Some old cow with fluffy hair says to me, Do I look like a Tracey to you? Well, if I knew what a fucking Tracey looked like I wouldn’t be asking, right? So I tell her that. She gives me a load of verbal abuse. Fucking bitch,” he explained, sort of.

“This is my girl!” Paul said, not very effectively breaking the ice.

Craig looked her over. She was close to 30, not unattractive, but her face was thick with makeup and her dark hair was dyed almost white. The dark roots were growing through, and the ends were fading to a straw-like yellow. Tarnished silver jewellery hung tastelessly off of her, and she slouched as if she just didn’t care what anyone thought of her, and had learned not to the hard way.

“Good for you.” Craig took the cigarette from his mouth, and gestured towards him with it. “What do you want, a medal?”

“Just sayin’.” He looked down and kicked at the floor, his accent thicker than ever. “Thas all.”

Without asking, Craig reached over and grabbed the challenge. He shook his head, he frowned, he smiled, he frowned again. “This is bollocks!” he noted quite correctly.

“Yeah, bollocks,” she agreed with a smile.

“Well, I’d hate to keep you,” Craig told Paul, not a huge believer in patience or the finer points of the social graces. “You better get going before your tampon needs changing.”

Paul snapped up, reeling backwards and widening his eyes like a crazy person with a vicious temper who had just inhaled an automatic umbrella. He began huffing impotently and choking on frustrated offence.

“Trot on,” his own girlfriend added, waving him away and positioning herself so that the conversation could only continue between her and Craig.

Paul continued to mutter as he vanished into the swirling mass of confused people.

“Where did you find him?” Craig grunted redundantly, since it was fairly clear that it had been at a student union bar with cheap beer and poor lighting.

“He’s alright...” she drawled. “He’s just always scared that I’m going to screw everything that moves.”

“But you’re a nice girl, right?”

She smiled and shrugged encouragingly. “Not really...”

“Today could be fun then, couldn’t it?” He grinned, running his eyes up and down her body once more, a little slower this time.

“Yeah. It could be fun for both of us!”

The pair of them went to the main desk. It was just a desk, with little on or around it, nothing more on the top than a set of instructions written down. It had nobody there monitoring them, and nobody watching them. Craig glanced upwards to see the various cameras around the roof. Maybe nobody was there, but someone was indeed watching them, it seemed.

“What the hell do we do now?” he grunted, looking over the various things.

There were two boxes, and a list of laminated instructions was set between them, taped to the desk. The instruction had only told them how to split into two groups in order to choose their partners and challenges. Underneath the desk was a pile of manila envelopes.

“Look, what’s that?” Tracey bent down and scooped up the envelopes. They were A4 size and each had a hand-written note on the outside. She held up one with their challenge written on the outside. “Look!”

“OK!” Craig took it from her. It was heavy—too heavy to have papers alone inside. They looked at each other for a moment expectantly, almost reluctant to continue. He very cautiously pulled up the flap on the top. It had been stuck down, and whoever had done so had done a particularly good job at it. He peeled it back and peered inside.

“Well?” she asked excitedly.

He looked up to her again and shrugged slightly. He reached in and pulled out a small black box with a rubber strap. They stared in silence at it, glancing back to one another. Their eyes locked for a moment, then a moment longer. Both of them smiled awkwardly and looked away.

He handed the object over to her to look at, reached back into the envelope, and pulled out yet another laminated set of instructions. “Bloody hell,” he grumbled as he read them. He went round and looked behind the desk. A small but very heavy metal safe was sitting up flush against the wall at the other end of the room. He hadn’t noticed it before, but then, why would he?

“We have to leave all our money, our debit cards, our phones, any key that won’t start our bikes, and anything of value behind. We’re only allowed to take our driving licences. That’s it.”

She frowned. "That's not fair." Of course, that was really the point and they both knew it.

"We can't discuss this with anyone," he read off the sheet. "We can't go to anyone we know and borrow money, because that would then become our own financial resource. We have to make it by midnight tonight, with our bike in running condition."

"That's impossible." She hadn't really been paying attention, but was starting to. "Isn't it?"

"Pretty much," he agreed. He pointed to the small black object. "That's a GPS tracker. One of us has to wear it on our leg. They'll monitor us the whole way, presumably to make sure we don't cheat."

She looked it over dubiously.

"They're going to be following us too. We'll be observed the whole time. Any hint of cheating and we forfeit our share of the money."

"I'm not losing my share of one million pounds!" She was now paying complete attention; the last comment caught and roused her interest and, from then on, it was staying roused.

"Yeah, me neither." He looked back into the envelope, peering deeply inside. He saw something lurking at the bottom, and scooped it out.

"What is it?" she asked excitedly, hoping for the best.

He shook his head grimly. "Two vouchers for a free burger and coffee."

"Well, at least we get to eat today..."

Craig stood in the car park staring at his bike. It was a big machine—a Suzuki Bandit, 1250cc, heavy, and perhaps difficult for a small person to manoeuvre, but it made up for it with smooth power, effortless reliability, and a solidly rugged feel that inspired

confidence. It was quick even, but not fast like a modern sports-bike was. Still, if he was in the mood, it could keep up with just about anything.

What it couldn't do was get all the way to Scotland on the half tank of petrol it had in it.

"How the hell are we going to do this?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, he rolled his eyes, he made a clicking noise with his tongue and shook his head.

None of this helped.

Tracey stared at his machine, obviously quite impressed and not afraid to let him know it. "I like your bike," she cooed, nudging up a little too close to him. "Mine's a lot smaller."

"Smaller?" He was suddenly interested in a small bike for the first time he could remember. A smaller bike meant a more frugal bike, and perhaps a machine that would be able to make such a long journey on a single tank of fuel. "Show me what you've got."

After they'd established that 'showing him what she'd got' referred specifically to her motorcycle, they did actually make some progress. Her motorcycle was less impressive. It was a Suzuki GS500e, a great learner's bike, but not something built for long journeys. It was a tired old thing, not properly maintained, and was showing signs of a great deal of long-term abuse. Someone had tried to tidy it up by repainting it, but they'd just sprayed the panels purple with a rattle-can, without even removing the stickers. It was a bit of a mess, and he was not entirely impressed.

"We've got around 400 miles to cover," he told her. "Both bikes have about 150 miles on range, if we're lucky. Yours will use less fuel, but that's not the point as we don't have any money to fill up the tank."

“Or eat breakfast,” she grumbled. “Let’s take yours though, it looks bigger and faster.”

He shook his head. “Mine would make the journey easier—it’s a comfy bike, but we’ve got to cut through town. I’ll be almost out of petrol before we cross the M25.”

“So what are we going to do?” She frowned quite deeply as the actual ramifications were finally starting to dawn on her.

Craig shrugged. “We could sell your bike, and use the money to ride mine?”

“It’s not strictly mine,” she told him. “It’s Paul’s—he lets me use it.”

“We’ll have to sell something.” He rubbed his head and made some more clicking noises with his tongue, which didn’t help this time either. “What have you got? Empty your pockets.”

She did as he asked. She had a few scraps of paper, a half-eaten chocolate bar and some metal earrings.

He had even less; a pack of breath-mints, a disposable lighter and a box of cigarettes. Seeing them in his hand made him suddenly want one, and he snatched one out of the box and sparked it up. It lit up in his mouth and he felt himself relaxing. He breathed out heavily and offered her one. She shrugged and accepted, almost reluctantly, since she didn’t really smoke.

“We could take the fuel out of mine and take yours,” he suggested. “That would probably get us about 300 miles. It might get us almost there, maybe.”

“It’s almost empty. I haven’t filled it up today, yet.”

He grumbled and gave her an annoyed glare.

“Paul didn’t give me any money!” she explained, sounding quite defensive for once. “We thought we’d be going on his bike—we didn’t expect to be split up.”

This was all perfectly reasonable, and he could hardly blame her for it. He did, though, and shook his head angrily, tutting noisily as he did.

“So between us, we’ve got barely enough petrol to get out of London!” he snapped. He rolled his eyes, trying to work something out, but his brain just kept screaming back the same thing over and over again: this wasn’t impossible.

She looked at a very cheap watch on her wrist and bit her lip. “It’s nearly 9am. What are we going to do?”

This was, of course, a very good question.

Craig brought the little GS500e to life with a press of the starter button. The engine purred happily enough. He bent down and began examining it. He listened to the engine, he checked over the brakes, the chain, the bearings. “The engine sounds alright,” he commented, mostly just talking to himself. He ran his fingers along the top of the forks. The seals were weeping and weren’t going to hold up much longer. He shook his head. “Nah, this isn’t going to work. This old thing isn’t going to make it all the way there.”

“What’s wrong?” She seemed offended, as if he’d made a personal slight against her.

“The chain is at the end of its life, the sprocket teeth are hooked over, the front wheel bearing is loose, headstock has a knock, fork seals are on their way out, front brake has air in the system, tyres are on the limits, and there’s a big hole in the seat and when I push on it, dirty water comes out.

“Also it’s purple...” Although that was a fairly comprehensive list, it wasn’t exhaustive; he just felt he had to stop somewhere. “This thing would only barely make it as-is. With the two of us on it, I don’t fancy our chances.”

“You’re insulting Gisele,” she frowned angrily. Her balled fists were dug into her sides and she was ready for a fight. “Gisele is awesome!”

Craig was momentarily taken aback. “You named your bike Gisele?”

“Say sorry,” she growled at him through gritted teeth. “Apologise to Gisele!”

He sighed. They didn’t have time for this. “I’m not saying she’s not awesome. She just needs a bit of attention, and she’s not the right bike for this trip. In fact, she must be awesome for keeping on going for this long in this kind of state.”

“Close enough.” She smiled, and seemed to lose interest in the whole business of being offended. “So we get to take yours?”

It was hardly ideal, but... “Yeah,” he agreed. “We get to take mine.”

Craig’s bike was huge. It wafted along on a cushion of pure arrogance, the suspension making nothing out of the many potholes and imperfections. Tracey clung onto him, and made a point of pressing herself hard up against him, so that even through her leather jacket, he could feel her breasts on his back.

“I love this!” she shouted over the gentle growl of the potent engine. “Paul’s only got a little one!”

Craig had more or less guessed that for himself.

He twisted the throttle a little harder and made the bike lurch forwards, scrambling for grip as she poured the easy power onto the road. The bike accelerated hard, which earned him a very impressed squeal of delight from his passenger.

He made his way around the M25, taking the quickest, easiest route he could think of, the most direct way. He decided to plant the bike at the legal limit, and see how far he could stretch out what

petrol he had. She was hardly a frugal machine, and that issue was now pitched against him more pointedly than ever before.

After less than an hour, he pulled into a petrol station and came to a stop, somewhere out of the way, where he hoped the security cameras wouldn't easily spot them.

She clambered off the back, squealing in delight. Excitedly, she said,. "I like this bike." She danced around excitedly, hopping up and down on the spot.

"You're good on the back! You're not fighting me: you just go along with it nicely. I hardly knew you were there."

Her smile vanished for a moment and then returned, looking quite different. She looked at him flirtatiously and said in her best soft voice, "I'm happy to go along with whatever you need me to do, and I promise not to fight you."

He looked up, suddenly transfixed like a deer in the headlights of an approaching car. "OK..." was about all he could manage to say. He even worried for a moment that he was blushing.

She giggled and hung her helmet on the mirror, relishing the easy power she had over men. They were such simple creatures.

Craig tried to pretend that his head wasn't filled with thoughts of what she might look like naked, which it had been for the majority of the last hour. He flicked a breath-mint into his mouth, offering one to her.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she frowned, her expression one of sarcastic disapproval.

His hand pulled back instantly. "What?" He frowned, then shook his head and smiled. "You come on a bit strong, don't you?"

"Sometimes..." she admitted. "If there's something I want, I usually get it."

“I’ll bet you do.” He pushed the key into the petrol cap, plunging it down hard into the inner mechanism. He gave it a little wriggle and then twisted it hard to pop it open.

“Harder!” She laughed.

He laughed, too, and tried to ignore her.

He peered inside, and wasn’t thrilled with what he saw.

“We’re almost out. Maybe another 30-40 miles and we’re done.”

“Even with mine?” She seemed disappointed. They had drained every last drop out of Gisele, but it had barely been enough to fill a large plastic bottle they’d found in the bushes. “What are we going to do?”

“Fill up and ride off,” he told her. “What choice do we have?”

“Steal it?” She grinned excitedly. “That’s really naughty.”

“For a share of a million pounds, I don’t mind getting a little naughty,” he told her, narrowing his eyes and looking dangerously focused on his insidious purpose. Actually he intended to take the address of the petrol station and call them in the morning, apologising for his mistake, and offering to pay by card over the phone.

This was something he felt that she really didn’t need to know.

“Not here,” he told her. “What we’ll do is head back up to the next turn-off. We’ll go and find a big petrol station along the side of a road somewhere. We’ll ride past and I’ll drop you off. I’ll turn round and head back on my own.”

“Why?” She wasn’t at all happy with not being involved.

“So that when they call the police, they tell them it was a lone male rider with a purple helmet.”

“Your helmet is white.”

“Yours isn’t though.”

She grinned and nodded. “What about your number-plate?”

Craig bent down to the side of the road. He scooped up a handful of dirt and started rubbing it onto the back. Some of it stuck, enough to begin obscuring the number. “This will work,” he told her. “I’ll wipe it off when I pick you up. The police won’t be interested—they’ll take hours to even call them back.”

“You’ve done this kind of thing before, haven’t you?” she smirked.

He hadn’t—he was making all this up as he went along. He nodded and tried to look even more dangerous. “It will work; let’s just leave it at that, shall we?”

She nodded, quite happily.

He grabbed her helmet and tried to put it on his head. It was so tight that it felt like trying to mate an African bull elephant with a donkey. He wondered why that thought had wandered into his head and what the outcome might be if such a thing was actually possible. Would it make a really inferior elephant, or a really superior donkey? In the end he remembered that he didn’t care about donkeys or elephants, and just gave up on the whole thing. He gasped as he yanked the helmet off of the top of head.

“Your head is bigger than mine!” she pointed out, since his apparently superior brain capacity had left him unable to work such things out for himself.

He looked at her angrily. “Yeah, I think we’ve established that now.”

“But your helmet is white.” She looked at it in disgust. “It’s really going to stand out when the police are hunting for us.”

“The police aren’t going to be hunting for us,” he snapped at her impatiently. “We’re only talking about taking a few litres of petrol. They’re not going to bring out the search helicopters for that.”

As confident as he was trying to sound, all this was beginning to worry him now. He was having strong reservations, and his plan was beginning to feel like a bad one, especially since it involved him.

“But the white helmet,” she persisted, poking it accusingly. “I mean, it is pretty obvious.”

“It’ll be fine, trust me!” Craig grumbled to himself, as he scooped the helmet up from the mirror, handing hers back to her—to her, and her freakishly small head.

“I know!” she said suddenly. “While you’re stealing the petrol, try and get some clothes as well. If we change clothes, it’ll be like a disguise—there’s no way we’ll be recognised! Get some hair dye too—I always fancied myself a strawberry.”

“Strawberry?” he said, somewhat confused. “What?! As in tart?”

“As in blonde. Strawberry blonde—it’s a hair colour.”

Somewhere down the rapidly convolving line, a miscommunication had clearly occurred, and as usual, it was up to Craig to fix it.

“No. Absolutely not. No change of clothes! No hair dye! No elaborate ruse to fool ‘Hercules Pirate’ on the case. I’ll just get the fuel we need to get this stupid challenge finished, and I’ll be back in ten minutes to pick you up.”

“But you said...” she began.

He held up his hand to stop her. “I know what I said.”

He did indeed, and now it sounded like the jabbering of a madman. He was a mechanic, not a criminal. He was 39 years old, not some teenage street thug. He hadn’t broken a law in years; he didn’t know if he had it in him anymore. He was beginning to strongly suspect that he didn’t.

“Look, you stay here, and you won’t get into trouble if anything does go wrong.” He slammed on his helmet and sat on the bike. It revved easily to life and he rode away into the distance.

“My fucking hero,” she grunted at him as his glowing tail light vanished around the corner.

He knew the roads well—he’d ridden them often enough. The next turn-off came up quickly, and he knew he could double-back and pick her up later. The grey tarmac sped by underneath him as the wind blew breezily into his face.

He briefly entertained the notion of not bothering to go back and get her. After all, if she didn’t arrive in Scotland, she’d lose her share and it would just be divided up between the group. However, there was something about her that he liked. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that she constantly flirted with him, shoved her fairly respectable breasts into his back as hard as she could, and made plenty of overtly sexual comments as often as was possible.

He couldn’t be sure, of course, but it did seem likely that all that had made a positive impression. She was easy to be around, she looked up to him, and she was potentially sexually available. To a man like Craig, all that was hard to resist, not that a man like Craig would try very hard.

Despite all that, there was one thing that he could be sure of, and that was that the rules were fairly vague, so vague that it was hard to know exactly what was expected of them. It could easily be interpreted that, to win, they both needed to turn up in Edinburgh. And besides, she was wearing the GPS tracker.

While his head was filled with dishonourable plotting amidst visions of her lying naked in bed, the turn-off came up pretty quickly. He leaned in and followed the slip-road off the motorway. As he

turned in, the road straightened, and at the end was a fuel station. It was large, busy, and always filled with plenty of vehicles. If he was lucky, they may not even notice he hadn't paid until the evening. Of course, he knew that wasn't how things worked, but he enjoyed the idea of it.

He laid on the power and covered the distance quickly, with a soft, effortless purr of the big engine. The petrol station, a gigantic yellow mass of glowing plastic signs and gaudy offers, glared at him disapprovingly. It scowled down on him as Mrs Percival, his junior school teacher, had done when he'd accidentally set fire to the class tortoise. It was as if it knew what he was there to do. He could feel it stretching out a hand and pointing accusingly down at him while screaming, monster, monster over and over again.

He gingerly pulled in. His bike was largely standard and he was grateful for the quiet exhaust and plain, unimaginative styling. He was likely to go unnoticed. He pulled up at a quiet pump somewhere near the back. His throat was now dry, his heart was fluttering. Sweat was pouring uncomfortably into the soft foam of his helmet.

This was ridiculous. He was a grown man, and this was just a simple thing. He could do this easily, he told himself. Pass down the line and shoot off back to the main road. The cars weren't blocking his path. It would be easy; all too easy.

Why had he ever been paying for petrol like a mug all these years? There had been many times that he'd filled up, and then ridden his bike to the kiosk to look around and buy sweets. This was no different, not really. Nobody would assume the worst, not straight away. People were essentially honest, they assumed the best of one another.

The car in front, a small, grey, boring family thing filled with a small, grey, boring family potted away, a tiny wisp of white smoke chugging from the back. It was his turn. He was actually shaking as

he stepped off the bike. He was being silly now, and cursed his stupidity, as he made an effort to pull himself together and behave like a man; a real man.

As he did, a car pulled up behind him. His face fell, the blood drained out of him, his body froze and the shaking began in earnest. The car was dull metallic grey with hi-visibility stickers. On the top was a set of blue lights, and there were two uniformed men staring forwards, straight at him.

Police.

He turned away sharply, cursing his horrible, horrible luck. He couldn't just ride away now. If he did, they would follow him, and if he started to act suspiciously, the same would happen. He just stood, rooted to the spot, wondering just exactly how he was going to get out of this one.

He very calmly stopped to think, but calm was quite a long way from how he actually felt. He took a deep breath, and he tried to work out what to do. After he had set fire to the tortoise that time, he had blamed little Johnnie Bardon. He'd also tried to hide the tortoise, which was how come the teacher's desk had also caught fire. It was also the reason that little Johnnie Bardon had ended up in the hospital.

He didn't think that any of that was particularly relevant now, and wondered why he couldn't get the thought out of his mind. The half donkey-elephant thing wasn't helping either. It was just too damn big to be useful as a donkey, and what use was an elephant anyway? At least it probably wouldn't need petrol. For some reason he was now imagining it eating a flaming tortoise.

His brain was now apparently useless and he would have to rely on something else.

He very casually made a big show of opening his jacket. He reached inside, and then made a theatrical gesture of surprise. He

patted himself down, as if looking for his wallet. He smacked the side of his head playfully, as if rebuking himself for being so silly as to have left his home without any money. He got on his bike, started it up, and rode the short distance over to the shop. The police didn't seem to have noticed.

There was one thing left that he could do.

He went inside and asked to speak to the manager. The teller grumbled and, a short time after, a very, very fat woman with immensely greasy hair came out, looking quite angry. She rubbed her red and puffy eyes, and it was quite obvious she'd been asleep somewhere out the back.

By then, one of the policemen had come into the shop to pay for his fuel. A fresh wave of guilt washed over him, but he realised he hadn't actually done anything wrong, and that this was all quite utterly ridiculous. That didn't really help, as his brain wasn't quite working, so facts didn't seem to have the same impact as they usually might have - or equally might not.

He felt like the little boy in junior school who was the reason why little Johnnie Bardon didn't have any eyebrows, why the tortoise would never again go near an electrical mains socket, and why Mrs Percival's packed lunch was now toasted and sealed in a bubble of blackened plastic.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I have to ask you for a favour!" he told the manager with his best, most responsible voice. It was the one he used to the bank manager when trying to get a small business loan, the same one that hadn't worked for that, or got him a date with the attractive secretary outside.

Her anger seemed to wash away instantly, to be replaced with an apathetic sigh and an expression of weary resignation. Her arms folded across her ample bosom. "Oh yes?"

“I’ve forgotten my wallet and run out of fuel, you see,” he explained, trying his very hardest to look like a very nice, very trustworthy man.

“So you can’t pay for your fuel?” She looked angry again.

“Well, I haven’t taken any yet!”

That did improve her mood slightly. She narrowed her eyes and glared, but it was only a token gesture.

“I only have my driving license, but I can arrange to pay you by debit card when I get home. I can even leave my license if you need me to.”

She huffed and glanced back to the window of her office, where dozens of licenses already sat along the ledge, from people who hadn’t had the foresight to check if they had their wallets before filling up.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Those words terrified him. They were the words of greeting for every traffic-cop in England. That meant that, behind him, was a man that nobody ever wanted to speak to. That may have been why he became a traffic cop in the first place.

He turned and smiled but his heart clearly wasn’t in it. “Yes Officer?”

“Is that your motorcycle outside?” He pointed with his thumb to Craig’s crimson red Suzuki Bandit.

He nodded, very awkwardly. Did he know? Could he have known that he was on this highly illegal and very dangerous challenge? Had they realised that he had come to this place with the express intention of stealing petrol? Was his tax out of date? Had he dropped a piece of paper?

“Miss,” he continued, his attention passing to the store manager. “We can check his license against his home address and

check that he is who he says he is, if that would help. We can make sure his bike is legally registered, and make a note for you.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Of course, madam, it is your choice entirely,” the officer added. “I’m just offering to help.”

“Yes, if you could do that, it would be very helpful.”

Craig had never looked more surprised.

“I’ll keep your license, though,” she shrugged with a weary sigh. “You seem like a nice man, and honestly, this bloody thing happens half a dozen times a day. One more isn’t going to make a blind bit of difference, is it?” She grunted and snatched his license with a sigh. “Honestly, I tell you, this shit happens so often I don’t even bother reporting it anymore. What’s the point? Life’s too short, I always say.”

Craig heard this, and felt a fresh wave of anger and stupidity wash over him with such crashing, crushing and crippling force, that he didn’t know which was which. There was only one thing left for him to do, and it didn’t come easy. “Thank you very much, madam. And thank you, officer.”

The officer shrugged. “That is what we’re here for. Some people seem to forget that sometimes.”

Tracey was bored. Really, quite bored. Waiting had been exciting for around 10 minutes when she knew that she was an accessory to a crime. She felt alive, excited, thrilled even. After those 10 minutes had expired though, the reality of it all had started to set in, and she was faced with the fact that they really were only forgetting to pay for a few litres of petrol. It really wasn’t a big deal. In fact it was such a small deal that it was barely a story worth telling. Once she’d realised that, she’d also come to realise that she was standing in a petrol-station car-park waiting for someone to go and get petrol

from a different petrol station, for reasons so utterly stupid that they made her head ache.

Finally, the big bike wafted in and she stood up, dusted the dirt from her trousers, and waited expectantly for him to park up next to her.

He pulled off his helmet. "That was intense," he admitted, and he guessed it wasn't really a lie. "Police were there."

"Police?" She looked worried, but was grinning too. "What happened?"

There were several ways to tell this story, some more honest than others, and some that meant that whatever chances he had of getting laid that day would go flying out of the window like a blazing tortoise.

"They were in the queue."

He flipped out a cigarette and very casually flicked it into his mouth, catching it between his teeth. He narrowed his eyes and tried to look dangerous. He felt he was doing a fairly great job—he was even starting to believe it himself.

"They couldn't get down the line towards me."

He sparked up the cigarette and took a few soothing puffs, as she listened with rapt attention.

"I made my way to the shop to pay. They couldn't see my number then. Then I gunned it, put the power to the tarmac, and I got out of there as fast as I could. I could hear the siren, but they had no chance. I took it to the country lanes and just laid on the juice. I lost them in a matter of minutes!"

Some of this was even true, but only from a very biased point of view, and seen from the perspective of someone who didn't have command of all, or even most, of their mental faculties.

"Wow," she shouted, jumping up and down excitedly. "You're a hero."

He very modestly simply nodded. Sucking hard on the cigarette, he said, “We’ve got to get to Scotland, haven’t we? The adventure continues!”

After just over an hour had passed, the clock on the bike was warning them that lunchtime was fast approaching, and Craig was certainly getting hungry. Tracey must have been, too—the sheer effort of enthusiastically rubbing herself up and down his back must have been exhausting. He almost regretted telling her about the police, as it just made her worse, not that she wasn’t bad enough already; and that wasn’t to say that he didn’t like it, either.

He saw a sign for a motorway stop, and decided that it was time for a break. They weren’t making good time, but they were essentially on schedule, and were set to arrive in Edinburgh at some time between lunchtime and midnight—that was really all that mattered at this point.

He was beginning to worry about what might happen when they arrived. Somehow, they had to get back. Somehow, they had to sleep. He toyed with the idea of using the internet—he could log into his bank, transfer some funds, or call them up and explain that he’d lost his wallet and see if they could send some emergency cash to help him. He could get someone to wire him some money once he’d arrived, perhaps?

At this point though, he had more pressing urgencies to deal with, the least of which wasn’t that he needed to visit the toilet, and then fill the void that he was going to create by doing so.

The cruising speed was a dull and steady 70 mph. It was an economical pace, and that was more important than anything else. He flicked the indicator and began to pull over to leave the motorway. He leant in and slowed the bike down, a touch of the brakes, and the speed melted away to nothing.

They stepped off after parking up at the front of the motorway services.

“Lunch?” She sounded happy, but she was tired already. He watched her stretching her back out and rubbing her neck. He felt the same and grumbled to himself at the little knot of tension at the bottom of his spine, the ache growing in his shoulders.

“We’ve got vouchers for a burger and a coffee each,” he said, holding them up. “Time to eat, I reckon.”

She seemed pleased with that. They hung their helmets back on the bike’s mirrors and headed inside, their tired muscles making them grumble at every step.

She bit into a very small cheeseburger that tasted as if any resemblance it had from anything taken from a cow was purely coincidental, and not entirely intentional. She wasn’t bothered—free food was free food, and anything she might have cooked would have been immeasurably worse. She was a firm believer in deliberately ruining everything in the kitchen, and had a reputation for not even managing to get sandwiches right. This was completely deliberate, as the net result was that she never got asked to make anything, even coffee.

“So tell me about yourself, big boy?”

Her voice was seductive again, as enticing as she could make it, and she had a way of using her eyes to make her seem that much more alluring.

“Not much to tell,” he replied, and perhaps there really wasn’t. “I’m a mechanic for Suzuki, service work mostly. Been doing that about... 3 years. I did a couple of years at a mate’s garage before that. Also, I’ve been separated for 2 years.”

“Separated?” She had found something that interested her. “Why did you split up?”

He shrugged. “No reason. It just didn’t work out—we weren’t right for each other. Everyone told us that, but we didn’t believe it. I guess they were right and we were wrong.”

“So there’s nobody special right now?” She grinned knowingly, fluttering her eyes at him.

“Well, there’s Paul, I guess,” he said wryly.

“I said important.” She gave a little giggle, which was exactly what he was hoping for.

He grinned back at her. “Then why are you with him?” He was starting to flirt now, himself, and not as expertly as her.

“He’s much more convinced that we’re together than I am,” she said. She smiled, almost shyly but not quite. “Personally, I’m not all that sure.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about what we’re going to do when we get to Edinburgh. I’ll get some money sent to me from my bank—I can make a direct transfer and get us a hotel.”

She nodded.

“I might only be able to get enough money for just one room though.”

“Any more would just be a waste, wouldn’t it?” she told him with a sly grin.

He couldn’t agree more.

As it turned out, the vouchers couldn’t be split, so their only choice was to have the burger and coffee together. They drank as much tap water as they could manage while they were at it, used the toilets, and met back at the bike.

Craig came out last, wiping his hands on his jacket as he made his way down the steps to where they’d parked. Tracey was already waiting. “OK?” he grunted.

She nodded and smiled.

He pulled out the key and opened up the tank. He had a fuel gauge on the dash, but it wasn't very reliable, and frequently just made it all up, the level rising and falling at a whim. He peered in and couldn't even see the level of the petrol. He huffed in annoyance. He was all out of driving licences, and wasn't sure how he was going to get away with filling up again.

Picking up on the troubled look on his face, she asked, "What's the matter?"

He quickly made something up... "We can't steal more petrol—they'll have worked out which way we're heading by now. If we get reported a second time, the police will have our direction and speed, they'll work out exactly where we're going, and what time we'll get there. They could set up a road block." He was gratified that he had managed to get all the way through that without looking like he was pretending that Little Johnnie Bardon was the one who had tried to glue the tortoise upside down to the floor with chemicals he found under the sink and some electricity.

She looked impressed but it took her some effort. "So what do we do?" she asked excitedly.

He pretended to be thinking about this carefully. "We ride for now. We must have another 50 miles in her yet. When we run out, we find another place to fill up. We fill up, and apologise for having forgotten our wallets. We can leave them your driving licence as insurance—they'll take it, it won't be a problem."

She seemed a little disappointed. "Is that it?"

"Unless you've got a better idea?" he shrugged grumpily.

She shook her head.

He felt like this was a minor but significant victory, and hoped she still believed he was a dangerous bad-ass, because he certainly didn't. "Come on then!" he said, reaching out for his helmet. He looked around in confusion. "Where's my helmet?"

“What?” She hadn’t initially noticed, but hers was also missing. “I haven’t got them!”

They both suddenly began looking around, as if they might have got up and walked away all by themselves. Helmets were known to rarely do that, as it would have been considered a fairly serious design flaw.

“What the fuck?” Craig growled, his temper rising, rising towards a state of near panic. “We can’t go bloody anywhere without them!”

“I know!” she screamed. Suddenly a part of her brain remembered she was from South London, and it decided everyone else might need a little reminder. In a coarse, thick accent you could have stood a one-legged bar-stool up in, she yelled, “I bloody know that, don’t I?”

“Someone stole our bloody lids!” Craig slapped his hand to his forehead. This was a disaster.

“I fucking worked that out!” she squealed, quite a bit louder. “What the fucking fuck are we gonna do now?”

That was an excellent question.

Craig was not a happy man, and in that sense, they were now a very evenly matched couple. He stalked off to the information stand while she went to the shop, just to see if they were able to buy any kind of replacement.

There was a girl working there, inside a tiny cube of painted plywood. She looked like she wouldn’t help even if she could, but that such concerns weren’t going to prove to be a major issue.

“I want to talk to you!” he growled at her.

His desire to do so did not seem to be completely reciprocated. She slowly put down her phone, resenting him

immediately. “How can I...” she began, huffing a weary sigh before deigning to continue. “...help you, Sir?”

“I just parked my bike out the front,” he told her, pointing back to the parking area.

She began to frown, as though contemplating exactly how and in what way any of this might prove to be of even the slightest concern to her.

“Someone has stolen my helmet from right off the front!”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sir.” She clearly wasn’t, and made no attempt to sound like she was. Her voice was slow and monotonous, like she’d been trained to speak by a broken set of electronic scales. “Would you like the number of the emergency services? It’s 999. Shall I write that down?”

“I don’t want a fucking...” His sentence trailed off, as his anger choked the sense right out of him. “I want my helmet back.”

She nodded, and then very slowly looked around inside her little box. “It’s not here, sir. Is there anything else I can help you with? Would you like a leaflet about our weekend offers? Is the weather to your liking?”

“Well, what can you do?” All things being equal, this wasn’t making him feel any better.

“I can happily check again for you?” she said, holding back a smile, clearly trying not to laugh. “Perhaps by now, someone has turned it in.”

She looked down slowly, back up again, and shook her head slowly.

“Sorry. It appears not.”

“Is there a place for lost property?” He shrugged, though it actually sounded like a good idea as he heard the words come out of his own mouth.

“Yes sir!” she said wearily. She reached down, and pulled up a polythene bag printed with the logo from the gift shop. She reached in and pulled out two broken biro pens and a hamster-wheel. “Do you recognise any of these, sir? I think we have a Mariah Carey CD as well, which has been unclaimed for nearly 7 years. Nobody that worked here during that time even bothered trying to steal it, as I’m sure you can well imagine.”

“Is there anything you can do?” He was bright red now in frustration, and wanted to strangle someone, ideally her, and then her again, and about fifth or sixth on the list was the person that had actually stolen the helmets.

She had a proper, good, long look into the bag. Again, she shrugged and shook her head.

“I’m going to report you, you know!” he growled impotently.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, sounding moderately upbeat. “I’m sure my manager will be devastated to hear that your helmet isn’t in the lost-property bag, even though I checked four times for you.”

Tracey was nowhere to be found. The service area wasn’t huge, and he was fairly sure that a leather-clad slut storming around with a furious temper and a South London attitude would be a thing you could spot fairly plainly, even from a considerable distance, even with myopia and a particularly brutal hangover. They were probably aware of her from the international space-station, unless that turned out to be another cardboard set somewhere out in Nevada, right next to the remains of the other cardboard sets, multi-source lighting rigs, a big polystyrene rock marked ‘C’, and the hopes and dreams of every red-blooded American.

He went outside. She wasn’t there either, although the bike still was, which was something. He went around the services again,

checking over the shops, and again failed to find any sign of her whatsoever.

He went outside, again, frustration giving way to anger, anger giving way to fury, and fury giving way to impotent rage. Where was she?

Ah, there she was.

She scurried over with a half-smile, and a gait that suggested things were OK, but could be better. Considering he was wound up tight enough to burst, that was a pretty good state of affairs.

“Where have you been?” he asked with a barely contained growl.

“Sorting fings out,” she told him. Her accent had slipped, and she was now a solid South Londoner again, at least for the time being. “I think I’ve got a plan.”

That was what they had needed all along, and what had been conspicuously absent up to this point.

“A plan? What’s your plan?” he asked, almost with a hint of cautious optimism.

“You ain’t gonna like it. If it’s any consolation, I don’t like it, and I think I’m coming off worse.” She sighed, the expression of someone resigned to doing something that just had to be done, like everyone who worked for a living everywhere, ever. “Follow me.”

She started walking away, and he followed dutifully along.

“No.” She stopped suddenly and growled at him. It seemed she was in charge now. “Bring your bike and follow me.”

He kicked up the side-stand and began pushing the massively unwieldy bulk of the gigantic motorcycle. He huffed breathlessly as he gently rolled it back and forth to point the right way. Hefting it forwards with another gasp, he asked, “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” she grunted. Her tone made no suggestion that this was a pleasant surprise. She led the way to the trucks, parked on the other side of the services.

They walked past another little booth with a man giving out cards to his breakdown service. He laughed, “Would you like some details, Sir? A leaflet perhaps?”

Craig gave him an acid stare and opted not to answer.

“Tracey, what’s going on?” he growled, huffing from the effort of pushing his vehicle.

“You’ll see,” she shouted back impatiently.

“Well, at least tell me how far it is,” he gasped.

She pointed forwards to the trucks ahead. “Right there, we’re nearly there now.”

She stepped in between two large articulated lorries, while Craig followed along. She looked back, checking to make sure he was keeping up. This wasn’t an ideal situation, not ideal at all, but she was sure it would work and she wasn’t about to risk her share of a million pounds, not for anything.

Eventually they reached the back of one of the trucks. A man, short and swarthy, was waiting for them. He had thick hair which was matted and greasy, flabby rounded cheeks, and hollow, staring eyes. Craig stopped in his tracks and stared. She glared at him, willing him to behave himself.

“This is Anton,” she said.

Anton nodded a gruff greeting to the exhausted man pushing the perfectly functional motorcycle.

“Anton is driving the truck and can take us all the way to Edinburgh.”

Craig eyed up the truck optimistically. It was huge, and had a hydraulic platform on the back to hoist the bike up effortlessly. The doors were already open, the inside was cavernous, a box of metal

with a solid wooden floor. It even had tie-down straps. It was literally perfect.

“That’s brilliant!” He broke into a grin. He quickly dived into his pocket, pulling out the laminated instructions which he’d rolled into a tube. He read over them quickly. “This will work—it doesn’t say anything about riding the bike, we just have to get there with it in functioning order.”

Tracey nodded and gave a determined smile. “Get it on the platform,” she told him, her voice authoritative but oddly calm, resolved to what was happening.

He wheeled it forward and Anton pressed the button. With a whine of electric motors, it winched the platform upwards—the bike, and the pair of them. Craig hefted the back to face out, and then rolled it backwards into the truck. Tracey came down and flicked on a small 12v fluorescent light that was fixed to the roof.

“Will it work?”

He pulled a mass of webbing from the side and began strapping the Bandit to the wall. “Oh yeah, this will be fine,” he said happily. Relief had now washed away all the rage, and the missing helmet was almost forgotten.

Anton stepped up inside and watched, peering furtively around. “Is OK?” he grunted in broken English.

Craig happily gave him a thumbs-up as he finished locking the bike in place.

“You’re a genius!” he told her. “What do we do, pay him in the morning?”

“No.” She looked back at him, and then back to Craig. Anton was leering and it wasn’t a pretty sight. “We pay him now.”

“We haven’t got any money.” Craig frowned, somewhat confused.

“Yeah, but tomorrow morning, we’ll have a share of one million pounds. Tomorrow morning, we’ll have lots of money, and all this bullshit will have been worthwhile!”

She stepped forwards, her heart fluttered nervously, but not in a good way. Anton stared fixedly at her with a pair of empty, ugly little eyes.

“What does he want?” Craig asked from behind her, his voice low and suspicious.

She turned and gave him a weary look of resignation. “I’m going to fuck him, Craig. That’s what he wants. That’s what all men want, isn’t it?”

“What?” He sounded surprised, shocked even. “You’re... What?!”

She stepped up closer, now a few feet from him. “Anton,” she began with a sigh. “I’m not going to pretend I’m enjoying this. You do your thing, I’ll do mine, and we’ll just get this done, shall we?”

His face split into a wide grin. She could smell the sweat now—he was more of a deodorant man than a washing man, and he had clearly been out of deodorant for quite some time. She was nervous, as nervous as the first time she’d done it, those first romantic fumbles in the back of a stolen car in a supermarket parking lot. How far she’d come since then, she thought sarcastically. She told herself that this was actually pretty far from the same thing, but perhaps not far enough.

Craig watched aghast. “There must be another way?” his voice cried out from behind her, but it was weak and easily disregarded. “You damn well don’t have to do this!”

She touched his face. It was flabby; the skin was cool and dry, but sweat was glistening along his brow. “Craig, you might want to turn away or close your eyes,” she shouted back to him. “I know I’m damn well going to.”

There was no point regretting her decision. This was happening, and it was happening because the previous decision was more important than anything else. She wanted that money; she needed it. She didn't want to be with Paul anymore; she didn't want to be with any of the Pauls of this world anymore. She wanted to find her independence, to own a nice little flat with a front door she could lock and keep out anyone she chose. What was happening now was a small price to pay for being herself for the rest of her life.

She reached down and got right to the point, unbuttoning his jeans. She assumed they'd not had the attention of a female hand for some time, possibly ever. She popped open the button, and the jeans spread alarmingly as his swollen belly was suddenly released. She closed her eyes and sighed, thinking of a nice little flat somewhere with just her inside it. She would be reading a romance novel and laughing at the irony of it all.

His clumsy fingers were all over her, his hands were at her back, clawing at her flesh. One of the hands was suddenly bolder and made its way to the front, where it began groping viciously at her breasts. Clearly he wasn't big on romance, any more than she was.

She decided it best to simply speed things along. She stepped back very slightly and undid her jeans. With a wriggle, they fell down freely to the floor. She fixed him with a shy little stare, and slowly, very slowly, slunk down to the floor, lying down and wriggling her underwear free.

She could imagine Craig behind her, gasping in silent horror. Somehow, that actually did make it better, or at least a little easier. They had a long drive ahead of them, and now they had something really interesting to talk about, didn't they?

Anton dropped his trousers too. He grinned with his fat little tongue flicking over his lips. He pulled out a condom from his shirt pocket and began laughing as he knelt down.

As he leant forwards, she opened her eyes, feeling his hot, passionate breath against her skin. “No kissing,” she smiled at him, putting her finger on his lips. “That’s what we agreed.”

He didn’t seem bothered. He just yanked his shorts down and began fumbling with the condom.

She laid back down on the heavy, solid floor, feeling the dirt against her hair, but it was the other kind of dirt—the dirt she couldn’t wash off—that was foremost on her mind.

He grunted, his breath a low rasp, the occasional chuckling sound coming through from the back of his throat.

She felt his hand brushing beside her shoulder, then the other. He was in position finally. She shut her eyes, letting her mind go free.

This wasn’t going to be so bad, she told herself as the moment finally came. It wouldn’t be so bad.

And then it happened. He pushed aggressively, rather too aggressively inside. She gasped, but not in pleasure. Oh no... this was really very bad!

Craig could only watch in silent horror as Anton sighed in pleasure, and his moan was met with a sharp intake of breath from her. She bit her lip and rolled around while he began pumping away.

He looked away, narrowing his eyes in disgust. His hand instinctively reached up to cover them as he let out a grumble, a sigh of disapproval tinged with a hint of loathing.

At least he wouldn’t have to wonder what she looked like naked anymore.

They remained in silence as the truck pulled out of the services. Anton had seemed fairly happy with the arrangement; Tracey, a fair bit less so.

Somehow, Craig couldn't quite manage to find the words to begin the conversation—at least not nice words, and not to begin a conversation that anyone would want to have.

The truck shook around, bumping hard over every dent in the road. Tracey was quiet. She had done her jacket up all the way to the neck, and was sitting with her knees pulled up to her chin, her arms locked around them.

“Are you OK?” he finally managed.

She looked up at him with sad eyes. “I'm fine,” she said, sounding like she meant it. “It's hardly the first time I've had sex with someone without wanting to.”

“Paul hurt you?” Craig guessed, but somehow it didn't seem to fit.

She shook her head. She seemed to be thinking about something, something that bothered her. Finally, she said, very softly, “Stepfather.”

There was a long pause. “Fucking hell...” he breathed out hard, huffing heavily. He wanted to say that you can never tell about people, but it would have been quite obvious now that he had indeed given it some thought. “I don't know what to say.”

“There's nothing to say,” she told him, very matter-of-factly. “Would you have done the same thing in my position, if you'd had the choice? Was winning that important to you?”

After a short pause, he nodded in agreement.

“Good,” she smiled weakly. “Because I did ask him if he'd settle for a blowjob from you first. He wasn't very keen, I'm afraid, so I had to take one for the team.”

“I can’t say I’d have been thrilled about that either,” he admitted.

“Well... It’s happened now.” She took her arms from around her knees and stretched out her legs. “No harm done, really. It’s just one more ugly memory to lock up in the little box in the back of my head. That’s it. Nothing serious.”

He nodded, unable to find any words of comfort; any words at all, come to that.

“Do you have any children?” she asked.

“Yeah, a boy.”

“I thought it might be a girl...”

“I’m sorry,” he said, not even quite sure what it was he was sorry for.

“For what?” she shrugged. “For my stepfather not being good with boundaries? For my real Daddy leaving me? For my Mum liking gin more than she liked me? For me having sex with Anton, the lorry driver, to win a stupid competition?”

“Yeah, any of those, I guess.”

“Listen to me. We’re still getting one room tonight, like we planned. Nothing is going to happen, but we’re still just getting the one room. Do you understand?”

He didn’t. “Yeah.”

It was around 11.30 in the evening of a day that everyone involved would rather forget. They stepped into the foyer of a hotel—not a nice hotel, but one that was good enough. They were both exhausted, and would happily sleep under a moving bus, if they had to.

“Hi,” Craig huffed to the young man working there.

The man nodded back, smiling broadly, seemingly quite pleased to have something to do. “How can I help you, Sir?”

“I’m afraid we’ve been robbed,” he began. The journey had given him sufficient time to come up with a story.

The man looked shocked, but not altogether that surprised. “It’s an ill wind, brother; an ill wind indeed,” he said, rather bafflingly.

“If I can use the internet, or a phone, I can get some money sent, but not until the morning. I hoped I could have a room for the night, and pay you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” he shrugged. “Which do you need?”

“Which?” he frowned.

“We have a computer that’s free for customers over there,” he said, pointing to a small alcove with a desk in it, a computer monitor peering shyly out of the side. “Or you’re welcome to use the phone at my desk here. It’s no problem either way.”

“Um, right...” he smiled. “That was a lot easier than I thought—I was actually expecting a fight.”

“In Scotland?! Oh, no sir. We’ve worked very hard to lose that stereotype. You’ll find, in fact, that we’re all very nice.” Handing over the phone, he continued, “Dial 0 for an outside line. I’ll give you some privacy.”

Stepping away, he pointed to Tracey, and asked very politely if they were together.

She wondered for a moment and smiled, nodding that indeed they were. Thinking that brought a smile to her lips.

She watched Craig as he began dialling just out of earshot, wondering who he might call—his wife, his mother, a brother or sister, perhaps? She realised just how little she actually knew about him. She didn’t even know why he was doing all this, but everyone must have a reason, something driving them.

Eventually, he hung up and spoke to the man at the desk. The man nodded and shrugged, but she couldn’t hear a thing.

“... so you have no ID?” said the young man.

“I’m afraid not,” Craig agreed. “My ex-wife is going to send me money tomorrow morning. I can collect it by 10am, she says.”

There was a lengthy pause as he looked them over. “No problem. These things happen, I guess. I will need you to fill in your name and address.”

“Sure, sure, that’s great.” He filled out the registration form quickly. By the time he’d finished, the man was back.

“Here’s your key, sir. You look like you’ve not eaten. I can arrange some sandwiches if you like; nothing special I’m afraid—the kitchen is closed now.”

Craig grinned widely. “That would be amazing!”

The man flashed them a happy smile and left to make the arrangements.

“Sorted?” she asked.

Suddenly Craig looked quite worried. He grabbed her by the arm and led her to the alcove where the computer was. She was worried too now, and returned his troubled stare.

“My brother wasn’t there,” he said, keeping his voice low. “I had to call my ex-wife.”

“So?” she shrugged, her eyes widening from the infectious alarm of it all.

“Someone died.”

“Who?”

“Someone on the challenge. I don’t know who, but someone has been killed.”

She breathed a deep sigh, and rubbed her temples wearily.

“Paul, maybe?”

“My brother, maybe. He’s also doing this bloody stupid competition, and he’s not answering his phone. But it could be anyone—we’ve no way of knowing who it is.”

She bit her lip as he began shaking his head.
“Shit!”

21 Freeharbour Road, London, W2

Frank stared at the little slip of paper, wondering just exactly was going on. This made no kind of sense to him whatsoever. He frowned; he winced and then he frowned some more. Life had seemingly become infinitely more complex than he remembered it being. He had only been out of the world for the last few years, and was pretty sure it used to make a good, old-fashioned kind of sense, most of the time. This was meant to be a challenge but it was just an address.

What could it possibly mean?

He thought that maybe it was best to see what other people had, and perhaps that would shed some light on what was expected of him, even though that was strictly against the stated rules. As there was nobody there to ask and nobody watching, he thought it would probably be OK to bend the rules a little bit.

“Excuse me, young man?” he asked very politely to a gentleman walking past him.

“Fuck off, Granddad,” he grumbled back at him, without even bothering to look up.

Frank let out a sigh. He had read somewhere that, in some ancient Sumerian ruins, they had found a stone tablet describing the writer’s dissatisfaction with the youth of the day. It had been going on for countless years, decades, centuries, millennia, but he felt that in modern times the problem had certainly accelerated. He actually wasn’t particularly old. He had some old-fashioned values, but that didn’t make him useless. He tried not to take it personally; he tried, and failed. He didn’t want to hate them—the young—but he did, and he couldn’t really help it.

A pretty young girl walked up to him, her own slip of paper in her hand. “Frank?” she asked, smiling sweetly and looking really just as confused as he was.

“Yes, my dear!” He turned to face her, a friendly smile on his face, even if it wasn’t entirely sincere.

She held up the slip of paper. “I think we’re partners, Frank.”

“Excellent!” He looked, just to check, and seemed slightly surprised to find that she was indeed correct.

She was short, but he wasn’t tall by any measure either, so they were very nearly the same height. With heels, she would have been slightly taller than he was. She had dark, wavy hair down past her shoulders, brown eyes, and a slender face. She reminded him somewhat of his wife when he’d first met her, not so much in the way she looked, but maybe in the way she dressed, the manner in which she carried herself. Perhaps that wasn’t it either. Maybe it was the way she struck him, and she was indeed quite a striking young lady.

She pointed to the paper. “You have our challenge?”

“Oh yes.” He flustered for a moment and handed it over. “I’m not quite sure what to make of it, I’m afraid. I’m not quite sure what to make of any of this, if I’m completely honest.”

“I’m also beginning to wonder just exactly what it is we’ve gotten ourselves into.” She frowned, glancing around.

A man nearby was shouting. He threw his challenge on the floor and stormed out angrily, smashing the door loudly behind him. Over at the desk, another pair had found some manila envelopes.

“I think there’s some more instructions for us,” she said, pointing at the main desk.

“There are...” he corrected out of habit, before shaking his head and telling himself off for being so silly. “I’m sorry—I used to be an English teacher. Let’s go and see what’s going on, shall we?”

The whole pile had been discarded on the desk, so she scooped them all up and found the one with the address written on it. “This is us!” she grinned.

“I hope you wouldn’t be offended if I offered you a cup of coffee?” he said, ever so politely. So politely, in fact, that even he felt creepy about it. “I have a desperate burning need to be around less people.”

“I’d prefer tea!” she said graciously.

There was a café just outside, to the left of the church car park.

They went in and took the first table they came to. A plump man and a very skinny one, who looked like his underwear was full of ants, were sitting at another table closer to the back. Frank recognised them from the hall but said nothing.

He sat down opposite the young woman and piled his armoured Gore-Tex jacket on the seat next to him. “I’m terribly sorry, I’m afraid I forgot to ask you your name.”

“Samantha Baker,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand.

He did likewise, and they shook in very formal, albeit awkward greeting. “Terribly nice to meet you, Miss Baker.”

“Samantha will do.” She smiled politely, but was clearly finding his manners to be a source of some amusement. She pushed the envelope into the middle of the table. “Do you want to open it?”

Frank looked it over dubiously—the horribly confusing thing that might very well represent everything that was wrong with the world today. “Please go ahead, my dear,” he said and gestured to the thing.

She didn’t need telling twice. With a grin, she enthusiastically ripped open the cover, and tipped the contents out onto the table. There was a laminated sheet of instructions, a small black plastic box, with what looked like a large watch-strap fitted to it, and a big red waterproof Ziploc bag.

They looked at each other bewilderedly, then back at the mysterious red bag.

“Be my guest,” he said, eager himself to see what was inside, if a little sceptical about the whole thing. He wasn’t comfortable admitting it to himself, but he was even a little scared.

The waitress came over, looking bored, as if she slightly wished a truck would come crashing through the front of the glass window, killing them all and releasing her from yet another day of mindless routine that was slowly crushing the last, lingering remains of her life right out of her.

“Coffee please, with milk. And for you?”

Samantha looked up. “Tea please.”

“Anything to eat?”

“Do you have egg and bacon?” Frank grimaced to himself as he heard the words leave his mouth. It was a dingy café, and everything on the menu included either eggs or bacon in some way or another, so it was rather a redundant question. “Of course you do... I’ll have a fried egg and bacon sandwich please.”

Samantha, hesitated to order while glancing awkwardly back at Frank.

“My treat,” he said, sensing the obvious. “I insist.”

Her face lightened as she turned back to the waitress. “Egg sandwich, please. No bacon.”

The waitress nodded, and left. They were finally alone again, just them and the little red bag.

“Thank you, really!” said Samantha.

“What kind of person doesn’t like bacon?” he joked.

“The kind of person who likes pigs,” she said, without making it sound too much like an accusation, but only just. “I’m a vegetarian, since I like cows and chickens too.”

“Oh dear...” he frowned. “And I was just beginning to like you. You know, if we weren’t supposed to eat pigs, they wouldn’t be made out of delicious bacon?”

She pulled an expression like she knew something he didn't, and it was gone as quickly as it came.

They looked expectantly back at one another, and then back to the bag. The bag—this mysterious red container that sat there being the focus of everything to them both. It sat there concealing a secret, a compelling secret that they were both desperate to reveal.

“Open it, then,” he said impatiently, the corners of his mouth tracking up into a measured smile.

Much more gently this time, she pulled the plastic runners apart and peered inside. Her face sank, her expression one of bemusement. She tipped it up and out dropped a laminated plastic card, the size of an average bank card. On it was printed the same address, and the words, Sixty minutes. There was nothing more.

“This is weird...” She seemed perturbed and a little confused, and neither in any small measure.

He was just as bewildered as she was. He finally took the initiative and snatched up the instructions. He rummaged in the pocket of his jacket that was crumpled into a heap on the chair beside him. He came back with his reading glasses and popped them on. He read, rubbing his chin and making thoughtful noises.

“It seems we have to go to this address.” He realised just how crushingly obvious that was after he heard himself say it, but oddly not before.

She grinned at him sarcastically.

“There, we will find another of these bags with another address on it.”

“And so on!” she sighed. “So it’s like a scavenger hunt.”

He nodded. Picking up the little black box, he said, “This is a GPS tracker. Once it’s activated, we will have the time printed on the card—one hour—to find the address. The next clue will tell us how

long we have to find the next one. We can't carry the time over. Once it's found, the timer resets."

"How many clues are there?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't say!"

She whipped out her phone—an older smart-phone, unfussy and fairly battered with a cracked screen. "I don't suppose you have GPS on your bike, do you?"

"German potato salad? I should hope not."

"Global Positioning System..." she explained. "It tells us where we are, and which way to go. It helps you navigate."

"I see." He understood but didn't entirely approve. "So it's a map then?"

She looked up, about to explain further, but clearly realised that it was pointless to do so. "Yeah," she said with a nod. "It's like a map."

"My dear, my motorcycle is a 1986 Honda CB750. I think you'll find it's highly resistant to any kind of technology. If I tried to install anything with a microchip onto it, it would rebel violently, possibly bursting into flames. It's a thing of solid steel and wretched crudity, and that's just the way I like it."

She chuckled at him. "I have a Honda too, a CBR250. It's a thing of aluminium and production-line banality, and that's just about the only way I can afford to own it."

He chuckled too. "I like you, Miss Baker. You might just make me change my opinion that the youth of today are entirely the worst thing ever to happen to this planet."

"Well, don't be too hasty. I often feel that way, too." She held out the phone for him to see. "Here!"

He looked at the map. The electronic device had drawn a red line and worked out the mileage. "18 miles," he said thoughtfully. "49 minutes without traffic. We should make it with no problems."

“I think it’s safe to assume they’re going to push us hard.”

The waitress interrupted with their orders.

Frank sat back, smiling very politely and thanking her profusely for every effort she made. “Why would they push us though? I mean, what do they want?”

“I dunno,” she said with a shrug. As she took a bite of her sandwich, the egg popped and the yellow yolk oozed out from the side.

“I do understand that they want us to work for it.” He followed suit, biting at his own sandwich. There wasn’t really any way to ruin the construction of a bacon and egg sandwich, but they’d given it their best shot. “I mean, it’s a share of one million pounds. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy.”

“A possible share!” she corrected, holding up a finger. “I read the small-print very carefully. One of the teams has to solve the ultimate challenge for the money to be shared out.”

“What does that even mean?” He sipped at the coffee. It made him appreciate the food.

She shrugged back and shook her head.

“Would you mind if I asked how you even got involved in all this?”

“No, not at all.” She covered her mouth and swallowed. “I’m just trying to pay off my student loans. I was searching the internet for courier work, that sort of thing, and I stumbled upon this weird site about a motorcycle challenge—this one, to be precise. So anyway, a share of a million pounds with proceeds going to charity... it all sounds way too good to be true, but what the hell, I thought. I signed up online a few weeks ago, and they messaged me back yesterday with instructions... and here I am.”

He huffed and bit his lip thoughtfully.

“What about you?” she continued. “If you don’t mind me saying, it doesn’t look like you need the money.”

“My dear, I’m 63 years old. There’s nothing left in the world that money can buy me.”

“Nothing?” she prompted.

“Nothing that would be worth anything real. This society we live in—it’s a terrible place! Something’s changed, and very much for the worse. Education is the greatest gift we can give our young; it’s the country’s... it’s our obligation to the next generation, passing on the baton so they can have all the chances we did. It’s all different now though, and I’m not even sure when it all changed.

“Somewhere down the line, we stopped caring about them; we stopped teaching them to think. Convenience became our priority. We taught and rewarded them for parroting back facts without ever knowing how we came to find them. That’s not education—that won’t serve them when they’re the ones running the world. We taught and enforced deference, obedience... Those that didn’t toe the line were punished, denied opportunities because they couldn’t sit still for long enough.”

“Do you think you might have just taught at a really shit school?” Samantha suggested with a slight smirk.

“It was a very highly rated school. The student make-up was consistently praised by the governing agency for being representative of Britain’s diverse community. No, I’m very much afraid it is the whole system that’s become corrupted, rotten to its very core.

“And you know the worst thing? We even have the nerve to charge them for it—charge them way over the odds for an inferior product or service that they have no choice but to buy. Our children, our grandchildren, they’re starting life in debt up to their eyeballs, and not even any the better for it.

“But in answer to your question, the primary motivation for me was boredom. A friend signed me up as a joke, and I decided to call his bluff; and if I win, I’m sure I can find something good to do with the money.”

“I don’t have a grandfather like you,” she said with a slightly sad smile. “I wish I did.”

“I’m no angel,” he laughed. “When I was your age, I was quite a different man.”

“I bet you were!”

“It was a different time then, of course, a better time,” he said eloquently. “I don’t envy you of your place in the world, the youth of today. I read George Orwell, Aldus Huxley, and the other great thinkers of their time. They were right—the world we live in now is a terrible place. I wouldn’t want to be young and have all this to look forward to.”

She said nothing, just listened.

“I’m an old man,” he laughed. “You must feel free to tell me when I talk too much.”

He strapped the GPS tracker to his wrist. By now, all the others had left, dashing out to do who knew what. Only a handful of other motorcycles were dotted around now, left behind or abandoned. Theirs were the last two that looked as if they’d actually make it to the end of the road. His was black, big, and heavy, but clean and well looked-after. Hers was blue, tidy but was showing signs of skimped maintenance and corners cut.

“How many addresses do you think there’s going to be?” she asked grimly.

“There are going to be a lot, I’d imagine,” he said. This wasn’t going to be easy—it was never meant to be. It was going to push them to their limits, and then push them a little more. “My dear, I

have to ask before we go, but are you sure you want to do this? I have a feeling it's going to be quite hard on both of us."

"I'm sure." She wasn't, and this much was plain.

"You must feel free to back out at any time. If you feel this is going too far, you must feel free to say so."

"I'll be OK, but I do have one concern."

He plucked his helmet from the bike. "Go on."

"Can you keep up?" She grinned, and then added sarcastically, "Old man?"

He grinned back: he was now not in the slightest bit bored. "Let's find out, shall we?"

They found out pretty quickly, and finding out was the only thing that did happen quickly. Samantha knew very roughly where they were going, and led the way with the map on her phone to guide her. She had stuck the phone to the front of her dash, taping it on, and hoping for the best. Almost immediately, Frank had started to fall behind, but he mostly caught up at the various traffic lights they encountered on their way. After a few minutes, that stopped happening.

She stopped at the side of the road, looking up and down, scanning for him, but there was no sign. She bit her lip, worried that something might have happened. Had he fallen so far back that he had lost her, or had some terrible fate befallen him?

After several minutes, he rounded the corner, bumbling along in the line of traffic, going no faster than the cars.

She hopped back onto her motorcycle and pulled in front again, urging him to follow and try harder to keep up. She accelerated up and passed a car, then another. A bus up ahead blocked her view and she sat momentarily, waiting for it to pull in.

She glanced at the mirror and saw him steadily sitting behind the same car, about thirty meters behind.

She grumbled to herself. This simply wasn't going to work.

They came to another set of traffic lights, and she stepped out from the cars and raced up along the outside, pulling in her elbows to avoid the mirrors from the stationary vehicles one side and the ones coming straight at her on the other. Cars whizzed by her as she made her way to the front. She got to the red light, put her foot down to the ground and waited, leaving the bike in gear and holding in the clutch, anticipating a fast getaway.

She looked behind, and was relieved that Frank was making his way up the outside to join her, and not so far behind this time. She checked the phone, keeping an eye carefully on the lights. It wasn't far to go now, and she thought she had a good idea where she should be heading. They would make it, but it had not been as quick as she would have liked. It would be too close.

He finally pulled up just behind her. He stopped and pulled open his crystal clear, and totally road-legal, visor on his plain white, high-visibility helmet. He was just about to say something when the red light changed to amber. She dropped the clutch and pulled away, even before the green, and leaned in hard, taking the next sweeping bend, quickly making into the straight, and heading off fast. He followed, but again, he didn't follow quickly enough.

On the wide, straight road, he did seem to be making better progress. She filtered between lanes, always coming up to the front at the lights, overtaking as often as possible, and taking chances so she could keep the pace as fast as possible. She fractured a few laws, but stopped short of breaking them. Too much speed would attract the interest of the police, which would cost them a lengthy delay, and would definitely put them out of the competition. She had to temper her speed against the wider concerns.

She pulled the brakes hard and almost skidded to a halt as a red light caught her.

Frank pulled up next to her after too long a time. He turned to her and shouted over the traffic, “Do you have to ride so fast, dear?”

“Actually, yes!” she told him. She pointed to the map on her smartphone. “We’ve only just got time for this. If we don’t ride as fast as we can, we’re not going to make it. Try and keep up Frank!”

There was no time for more; the lights changed and they were off again. She shot in front of the other traffic, weaving into position in front of a white van, and went about the business of being the fastest thing on the road, by just enough not to get into too much trouble if she was caught. Frank still held her back. He simply wasn’t able to keep up. He rode like a man who was putting safety first and everything else second, but the challenge demanded more of him, perhaps more than he could deliver.

She clicked on her indicator, and took a turning into a side road on the left. She looked around for signs, but couldn’t find one. She accelerated and blasted down the straight urban road. She needed a road sign, a business with their address printed on the front, anything that could confirm she was on the right street.

She ended up right at the other end, and there at the corner was the road name. She pulled up to it and stopped. Adams Drive. Her heart skipped a beat.

She quickly started pressing the phone screen, desperately hunting for the road she was on.

Frank pulled up behind her, flicked open his visor, and craned to see what was happening. “Problems?”

She ignored him. Her eyes quickly flicked to the clock—they had less than 6 minutes to get to the address, and she had no idea where she was.

“Problem?” he said again.

She looked up, and began desperately explaining, “I’m lost. This is meant to be it; I thought this was it, but I was wrong. I don’t know where we are.”

He looked down at the screen. He very slowly, very meticulously got out a different pair of glasses and put them on inside the helmet. “I don’t like wearing these—they make me feel old,” he chuckled. “Only old people wear bi-focals, and they’re not good to ride with. Still, Maybe I should just accept that I am old, don’t you think?”

She looked up. Her expression was anxious and she was getting close to panic.

“Now let me see...” he said, having a good long look at the screen. He pointed to a side road, just off from where they were. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know,” she grumbled, and had a closer look. “I don’t think it matters at this point.”

As she zoomed in, the names shifted around, and it became clear that the little turn off was what she was looking for. “It’s down there”, she pointed back at it.” She quickly started the bike and made a U-turn in the middle of the street, hammering her bike, drawing everything it had out of it. She knew Frank wouldn’t keep up, but she just didn’t care now. She had less than 4 minutes left and there was still plenty to do.

She turned into the road. It was short, less than 20 buildings on each side. She feverishly began scanning for numbers. She found an odd—a number 11, and then 13. She rode along until... there it was, number 21. She checked—still 3 minutes left.

She jumped off the bike and ran the few short steps to the house. It was a grey building with a white front door, nothing impressive about it. Her heart was racing; she was focused completely on the task at hand.

Frank pulled up behind, but she didn't even hear him—she was busy with something else, something much more immediately important.

“Well done!” he said.

She spun around and yelled frantically, “I can't find it!”

He stepped off his bike and walked casually, slowly, easily up to the gate. She was about to knock on the door when she heard her name called behind her.

“Miss Baker.” Frank held up a red Ziploq bag. “It was here on the railing outside, just stuck on with tape. Sometimes it's better to take your time, or else you can miss what's obvious.”

She sighed, and cried out happily, at the same time as a wave of relief washed over her. She found herself laughing as she headed back. He unbuckled his helmet and began opening the bag. She pulled her helmet off urgently too, ran past him and snatched her phone, ripping it from the tape on her dash.

“It's another address, I'm afraid. 45 Newberry Lane, Woodford, E17. One hour!”

She began frantically typing in the details. “I don't know it. I've never even been near there.”

“You're not missing much,” he joked weakly. “I think it would be quickest to just go right round the North circular. There shouldn't be much traffic at this time of day.”

She looked up, actually quite impressed as her phone confirmed what he had said. “Frank, you have to ride faster,” she told him, pleading for him to try harder.

“I'm doing my best,” he grumbled haughtily, frowning deeply as if he disapproved of the idea. He actually did, and vehemently so. “It says it should take 55 minutes. Assuming you don't get lost again. That's what happens when you rely too much on your gadgets—you don't think for yourself anymore. Too many people these days let

computers do all the thinking for them, and where does it get you? Nowhere good, I can tell you that.”

“Frank, we’re not going to make it, are we?” She seemed to deflate as the realisation hit her.

“Maybe I can read the map this time?”

She sighed. He didn’t seem to be fully aware of what was at stake, or at least he didn’t appreciate the scale of it. This was important; it would make the difference between a life under the shackles of debt-slavery, or relative freedom. “Are you sure you can read this?” She narrowed her eyes at him as a thought began to form in her mind.

He laughed. “A map is a map!”

She looked at the two bikes, and then back at him. An idea had formed and she suspected it would be entirely popular. “Frank, you ride too slow! You know that, don’t you?”

“I ride safely, my dear,” he told her, seeming a little offended.

She eyed him up. He was slightly built, lean, and not much taller than she was. This could work, she thought.

“You read the map for me, and ride on the back of my bike! We need to work together if we’re going to succeed.”

He reeled slightly, pulling back and frowning from inside his helmet. She could imagine his mouth lolling open in shock and surprise behind the protective chin-guard.

“Young lady, there is no chance I’m going to fit on the back of that thing!” He laughed emptily, pointing at her small motorcycle, obviously hoping she was simply joking.

She stepped forwards and handed him the phone with the map set onto it. “Frank, you’re not keeping up and I can’t read the map and ride the bike at the same time. The only hope we’ve got is with you reading the map, and me doing the riding. It’s the only way, Frank.”

He looked again at the little bike. It was small, painfully small. That was simply not going to happen.

The CB750 was heavy but it handled itself well. It was nicely balanced and, once it was rolling, it was easy to ride, gliding into corners and accelerating with easy power. The brakes responded smoothly, and everything felt almost like new. From the moment she sat on it, she really began to like it.

“Turn left ahead,” Frank yelled. His visor was up, and the wind rushed through his helmet noisily. A man sitting on the back of his own motorcycle while a woman—a young woman, and little more than a child, at that—rode it for him. It was unthinkable. It was as if someone had cut off his penis and tossed it idly aside, since he would no longer be needing it.

Every Friday night, he would go to the pub, and meet his little group of friends; some he had worked with, others he knew from his various hobbies. They would swap stories, and his were usually considered something special. None of them rode a motorcycle, and his was big, black and intimidating—at least they thought so. They loved to hear of his exploits. He never made a story up; he exaggerated occasionally, but never resorted to an outright lie. He would often regale them with tales of his mighty ‘Nighthawk’, which he’d owned since she’d first rolled off the production line.

Somehow, he doubted that this would be a story he’d be sharing.

“Got it!” He winced as they blazed up along a row of slowly moving cars, the bike deftly stepping through a gap and accelerating hard to the front of yet another line. He wanted to cry out for her to slow down, but every time he opened his mouth, realisation hit him of just how ridiculous those words would be in this context.

The bike leaned in hard, sweeping them around a left hand bend and down a small high-street with a smattering of shops dotted around.

“When we get to the end, turn left again and we should be there!” He hoped.

He wasn’t totally comfortable with the phone but, as he mentioned earlier, a map is a map and he was confident that he was right about that. He checked the time—they had only 9 minutes left, and the clock was working against them as if it had a personal grudge.

Suddenly, the bike slowed and he was pushed forwards. He looked up to see yet another red light holding them up.

“How long?” she barked at him, snapping open her visor.

“Long enough, but only just,” he told her, pointing forwards. “If you’re going to ride, then ride. You keep your eye on the road: I’ll keep my eye on the map.”

She grinned, and he could see the smile light up her eyes. “Deal!” she agreed.

As the lights changed they were off. The bike lunged and he felt the acceleration pulling him backwards. He reached down reflexively, grabbing onto the metal rail.

“I didn’t know this old thing could go this fast!” he muttered to himself.

They found the address with just 5 minutes to spare. It was a shop this time, a newsagent with papers and magazines lined up outside.

After a quick search, he called out, “There!” She was scrambling around and looked to where he was pointing. She reached out and found the bag stuck to the bottom of the racking. She pulled it up and grabbed the laminated address inside, quickly typing it into her phone.

“How far?” Frank stretched and grumbled. He was aching all over by now. His back was sore and his shoulders ached. It didn’t help that he was in mortal dread the entire time they were riding, but that was something he didn’t feel like sharing out loud.

“Hang on,” she told him.

“Oh, my dear, I can assure you that hanging on is foremost on my mind today,” he said to her with a hint of bemusement. “Please don’t concern yourself with that.”

She smirked as her phone very slowly started filling in the map details. “It’s Streatham, SW16.”

“No North Circular,” Frank sighed. “We’ll have to cut through town to get there. It’s got to be over an hour this time, closer to two.”

She held up the phone. “90 minutes. 21 miles, but it’s right through some of the worst of the London traffic.”

“Well,” said Frank with a shrug as he began putting on his helmet. “We can stand here and moan about it, or we can get on and do it. Are we talking people, or are we doing people?”

She looked at him through her helmet sternly. She said, “You’re an English teacher, and I’m studying politics, so really we’re talking people, by the actual, absolute definition of those words.”

“Oh no.” He fastened his helmet and smirked. “When you really, absolutely, totally, completely, wholly and entirely need a thing done, everyone knows that you have to call an English teacher to do it. I thought it was simply common knowledge.”

“My English teacher was called Mr Paterson,” she told him. “He told me once that I’d go to hell if I didn’t wear proper underwear.”

Frank raised his eyebrows. “Eternal damnation notwithstanding, the suggestion of sensible underwear is probably good advice.”

“He used to stare at the girls until we all felt awkward, and tell the boys that God was going to be watching them if they played with themselves,” she said, muttering through her helmet.

“I was told that once when I was a little boy.” He stepped closer to her and lowered his voice. “I imagined that God was a girl, and that just made it all the more exciting.” He paused for a moment. Finally he said, “I actually got quite a taste for it.”

“Come on,” she laughed, dragging him purposefully back to the bike.

“Of course if there is a God, he is a man.” He stepped on grudgingly, taking his place behind her on his own motorcycle. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Why would you assume that?” She fired the engine to life, and it purred smoothly beneath her.

“Childbirth more or less proves it!”

She was tired, Frank could tell. She wasn’t used to such a heavy machine and, even if she was, riding it all day, snaking in and out of traffic, hefting it around corners, and all the while, bearing the weight of a passenger, would take a toll on anyone. Riding a bike was a physical act. It required the power of your whole body and, at times, it was demanding.

“How are you holding up?” he shouted above the rushing wind as it tore through his helmet.

She nodded briefly and yelled, “OK.”

He cast his eyes back to the map. Whatever strength she had wasn’t seated in her muscles, he knew that. She was no quitter; if he was a betting man, she seemed a safe place to put your money.

The bike swerved and lurched, avoiding the worst of the potholes, slowing cautiously at every junction in case a car pulled out without looking, but making the best speed they were able.

They weaved through the traffic, filtered to the front when they could, overtaking at every opportunity.

“Right here,” he told her.

She indicated and pulled to the middle of the road, checked the mirror, and then began to turn. There was a blaze of horns as another motorcycle cut up the outside. A young man delivering pizza wobbled past, screaming at them, riding carelessly. The Nighthawk shuddered as Samantha fought to regain control after the unwelcome surprise.

She regained her composure and took the turn.

“Pull over,” he told her, and she duly complied.

“Here?” She seemed surprised, lost in whatever rumination she’d given in to.

He clambered off the back. Everything ached now: his tired old body had had enough; more than enough. “According to your map,” he said, checking around, looking for numbers, “it’s over there!” He pointed with no small amount of surprise himself.

The street was a quiet one; a smattering of shops, a place selling plumbing supplies, a general store, and a blacked out store front with a sign that read Adults Only.

“That one?” she grumbled. “It’s a sex-shop.”

“Sex shop? What does that even mean? You can’t actually buy sex in there, can you?” His eyes widened in alarm. “Can you?”

She laughed at his abject naivety, and hoped he was joking, all the while suspecting he wasn’t. “I think they sell books, DVDs, toys, that kind of thing.”

“You think?” He crossed his arms and glared disapprovingly. “I’m relieved you don’t actually know.”

“Well, one of us is going to have to find out,” she told him.

They looked at one another for a moment.

He grumbled, hung his head sadly, and muttered grimly, "I'll go. You wait with the bike."

"Hurry up now!"

It was probably too much to hope that the bag might be secured outside, but he dared to hope it anyway.

He checked, running his eyes along the front of the shop, willing it to be there. Of course it wasn't, and he accepted this disappointment grudgingly. He was going to have to go in. He imagined what it might be like, somehow stepping into another world, a world where things he could scarcely imagine would be hanging from metal hooks, formed in greasy black rubber.

He was a quiet man, a man who had managed to get through his time in this world with the minimum of surprises. He was old fashioned, stoic, and had avoided the darker things in life. He'd only touched pornography twice, and both times it was when he was confiscating it from students at school.

His hand hovered near the door handle, but just wouldn't go any closer. It was as if a force was pushing him back, edging him away. At this point, his brain began screaming in frightened horror. He edged away slightly, but realised that was the wrong direction and tried a little harder to put that right.

What would they think of him? Did the people who used places like this look like him? Did he look like them?

"I'll go!" Samantha grumbled, pushing past him.

For a moment, he was relieved that he would be spared such horrors, but then the gentleman in him pushed to the fore and asserted itself. "No!" he said ever-so-bravely. "This is a man's job, I'm afraid. This is no place for a young lady like you!"

And with that, he reached forward and twisted the door-handle.

It was like somehow stepping into another world, a world where things he could scarcely imagine were hanging from metal hooks, formed in greasy black rubber. There were things that looked like penises everywhere, in every available colour; especially purple, for some incomprehensible reason. He could barely comprehend someone wanting a toy penis, but he was forced to wonder if people really woke up and thought, yeah, I don't have a toy penis and that's a serious problem for me right now. I have a burning need to own a realistic phallus, but one that's much larger than normal, so large in fact that it could cause serious internal damage, and ideally, I'd like it in the colour of a mouldering corpse.

It seemed horribly apparent that this was, indeed the case. He made his way to the counter where a bored, unpleasantly unpleasant man was eyeing him up without anywhere near enough suspicion. In his mind, which was now reeling in horrified disapproval of all things rubber, this only confirmed that he probably did indeed look exactly like the average pervert.

He coughed and said, "Excuse me, young man. I'm looking for a bag."

The man, who wasn't particularly young, sat up and took all this quite seriously. "A bag, you say? What kind of bag?"

"A little red Ziploc bag," he explained, hoping that the explanation would wash away any lingering concerns that he was the kind of man who would buy a gimp-mask with optional snooker-ball gag attachment.

"Hmmm, I'm not sure..." he shrugged, looking somewhat confused.

Frank sighed. Confusing a man who sold things for a living that were intended to be rammed into places that nature had deemed fit only for one-way traffic in the opposite direction was a pretty

impressive feat. He finally clicked his fingers as realisation dawned on him of a better way to go about this.

He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out the previous bag. Holding it up, he said, "Perhaps someone left one of these here? It's got an address in it."

"Oh." He seemed less confused, and then suddenly quite confused again. "Yeah, a guy came in this morning and dropped it off. He rummaged under the counter and handed over the bag."

"Excellent." Frank beamed a happy smile. It was the smile of a man who wouldn't have to go rummaging through his darkest nightmares on every shelf around the store.

"So, mate. What's all this about?" the shopkeeper asked.

"I wish I knew!" Frank admitted. "It's a game, of sorts. Like a scavenger hunt on motorcycles."

"Right..." he shrugged, seeming oddly satisfied.

"Perhaps, though, you could tell me what the man who left it here looked like?" Frank ventured.

"No." He crossed his arms over his chest and leant back in his chair. "He paid me £20 to keep my mouth shut. At least, I think that was strongly implied."

"Well, he's never going to know, is he?" Frank suggested.

"Well, that might be true," he said with a shrug and looked away. "I guess I could tell you—there's no harm in it, is there?"

Frank nodded that indeed there wasn't. There couldn't be, could there?

"OK then. I'll tell you." He leant towards him, and Frank edged forwards expectantly too. "...If you buy something."

"Buy something?" Frank was devastated. He looked around aghast. "Buy something?"

"How about something nice for the wife?" He held up some lacy black underwear with fluffy pink balls where the nipples would

sit, and a convenient opening in the crotch region for when you just couldn't wait the five seconds it might take to slide them off.

"My wife died four years ago," he said indignantly. "At this point, I feel like she's probably the lucky one."

"Daughter maybe?" he asked with a wry smirk. "I don't judge!"

Frank glared at him accusingly and growled, "Don't mention my daughter..."

"How about this then?" He placed a box on the counter. Inside was a complete set of edible chocolate penises, in dark, milk and white chocolate. "They're suggestive and delicious. It's a guaranteed way to finally get your dick into a woman's mouth. I'm guessing that doesn't happen to you very often?"

"Oh my god..." Though, it did seem oddly like he was getting off lightly. Frank hung his head and nodded. "Just wrap them up, I'll take them."

"Excellent choice," he said, pulling out a plain white polythene bag. "That will be £7.99 please."

Frank pulled out two notes and placed them on the counter.

The man smiled greedily and swiped them up. "So, this man, he was about your height, youngish, mid-twenties I would say. He had a thick South London accent—a bit too thick, like he was putting it on. He didn't seem too bright, but wasn't completely stupid. Dark hair, cut short, and he was wearing a leather bike jacket."

"I don't suppose you know what bike he was riding, or if he was with anyone else?"

"There was another guy—short, young. The first one was definitely the brains of the outfit. I didn't see the bike."

Frank took the chocolates and his change, half grunted and half mumbled his thanks, and turned very quickly to leave. His face flushed with embarrassment as he came to the door.

The shopkeeper shook his head and laughed. "Weirdo."

"What kept you?" she grumbled, leaping up from the bike as he came over.

"I'd rather not talk about it," he told her. He handed over the address and looked anywhere but directly at her, his face flushing crimson. He might not ever look at a woman again, and certainly not in the same way.

She quickly started putting the details into the phone. "You bought something?"

"He wouldn't tell me who left the address unless I did," he said sadly.

"Who left it?" She was suddenly more interested in this than the address.

"A young man, South London accent, black leather jacket, medium height, short dark hair."

She frowned thoughtfully. "There were a few people like that there at the church-hall this morning. Maybe it was one of them?"

"You think one of the people actually doing this challenge is the one who set it up?" Frank asked, beginning to wonder himself.

"It makes sense." She looked up, waiting for the information to load onto her phone. With a naughty smile, she said, "So what did you buy? Can I have a look?"

"It's just chocolate. I'll throw it away, I think."

"I'll eat chocolate. I am a girl, you know." As she reached out for the bag, she caught the expression on his face, and began to laugh. She looked inside and immediately her laughter stopped.

"Actually, I'm not hungry right now though. Why did you buy this?"

"It could have been so much worse, believe me."

She did, and she laughed again. “Oh wait, here it is.” She frowned as she opened the bag and read the contents. She looked back at him, a confused expression on her face. “Look!”

“Well... That’s weird.” The map led back to the church, to the café right next door.

She smiled hopefully. “Maybe we’re finished!”

“For a share of a million pounds?” He shook his head. “I very much doubt it.”

“How long do you think it will take?” She read the note again, frowning thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Maybe 45 minutes. It’s not that far.”

“According to the info, we’ve got twice that long.”

“Hang on... We haven’t finished.” Frank sighed, huffing in disappointment.

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve sent us back to the café. They’re giving us a lunch-break. That means we’re far from finished—it means we’re just getting started.”

Frank insisted on riding. Certainly she was faster, but she needed a break, and he knew the way back better than she did. He rode as quickly as he felt it was safe to, and they were still able to get back in under 40 minutes. He bragged about this as they clipped their helmets to the bike and went for lunch.

As they walked in, the same two motorcyclists were there, but this time they were just leaving. The larger of the two was glaring angrily at the back of the other man’s head. He was waving his arms around and laughing.

Frank looked at Samantha, who smiled warmly as he politely held the door open for her, in a very gentlemanly way. He glanced back at the others.

“I think we’re both very lucky,” he said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. “Those two do not seem to be getting along.”

She nodded. “I saw them this morning. I’m so glad I didn’t get the thin one.” She thought back for a moment. Two different men had actually tried to hit on her in the twenty minutes she’d been in the church-hall. Neither had been her type, and she wasn’t even that fussy. She looked back at Frank and smiled. “Actually, I think you’re right, I am pretty lucky.”

“Stop it,” he joked. “You’ll make me blush.” He caught the waitress’s eye and held up his hand. “A coffee and a tea please!”

She put up her thumb, acknowledging the order as they sat down.

“How are you bearing up?” he asked, his voice low and serious.

Her lips traced up into the ghost of a smile. “How are you bearing up?” she asked right back. “No offence, but you’re older than I am—this can’t be easy on you.”

“Absolutely none taken.” He nodded weakly. “It’s hard to offend a man who spent thirty five years teaching in a high school, with the name Frank Hardick.”

“Hardick?” She grinned. “Hard... dick?”

“Make jokes—I promise I’ve heard them all...” he said with a sense of certainty; of dreadful and awful certainty. “I can’t seem to think of any of them now, mind you.

“Anyway, I’m bearing up fine. I won’t pretend this is coming easily to me, and I do ache a bit, but I’ll cope. You, on the other hand, are built like a sparrow, and aren’t used to bikes that are actually made of metal. How are you finding it?”

“I’m alright,” she assured him. “I actually love the bike. It’s nice to ride, but it is heavy.”

“I’ve had it for over 30 years,” he recalled fondly. “It was a gift from my wife. She was a teacher too. She taught maths, so we were instant enemies at first. I finally got her to appreciate the magic of prose, the power words have to paint images in the imagination. She taught me to count without using my fingers.”

“Are you still married?”

He looked away sadly. “Oh no...” For a moment, he stared out of the window, lost in some old memory that all this had stirred in him. He looked back and smiled sadly. “Nothing lasts forever, I’m afraid.”

She nodded, wishing she’d never asked, the answer seeming to have come hard to him.

“Except Honda CB750s, of course,” he said, his face lighting up. “They last forever and a few days beyond.”

“Of course.” He smiled brightly. “How silly of me to forget.”

There was a welcome awkward silence for a moment.

“So what about you?” Frank ventured.

“What about me? There’s really not much to tell. I study, I work part time at a pawnbroker with a woman who’s a complete and total bitch. I live in a flat in Islington with my older sister, and every weekend I spend at least one night eating ice-cream for completely therapeutic reasons.”

“You are actually making me feel better about my life,” he joked. In reality, there was not much that could actually do that. He looked away thoughtfully for a brief moment. “There’s something I want you to have.”

“Me?”

He put the box of chocolate penises on the table and pushed them over to her. “They’re yours. Seriously, I want you to have them.”

“This might be the strangest thing I’ve ever been given.” Horribly enough, it was also the most romantic. “Thank you very much for giving me your... collection, of delicious penises.”

He laughed and then said with a sigh, “This is proving to be a very strange day. I do hope we’ve seen the worst of it.”

They each ate a toasted cheese sandwich, which was a huge improvement over breakfast. Frank checked his watch. He looked at it closely; it was a Rolex, hand-made to an exceptional standard. He’d always wanted one, and it was one of those things that became accessible as you got older, he had found. He had also come to find that they often came at a price that was altogether too high.

“It’s time,” he said finally.

She nodded in agreement as she swallowed the last of her tea.

“I’ll pay,” said Frank, not giving her a chance to argue. He got up and walked over to the counter.

A minute or two later, and after a short chat with the waitress, he returned with another red bag. He placed it in the middle of the table.

“There it is.”

They both looked at it, just staring for a moment. This morning, it had been a mystery; it had been the dawn of a new adventure. Now, it was more like a punishment. It was something they knew was going to drag them to the edge of their limitations.

“I’ll do the honours then.” Frank sighed and ripped the top open, peering inside, as Samantha got her phone ready for the next address. He held it up and read it. “33 Isaac Road, NW6. We have one hour.”

“We’ll need it,” she grunted. “It’s 19 miles, and the GPS says at least 55 minutes.”

“Not the way you ride.” He smiled but it was an empty expression—smiling was the last thing he felt like doing.

“We need to go.”

She rolled on the throttle, powering along the outside of a row of cars. The light ahead wasn't going to stay green for long, so she took a chance and gunned the engine. The motorcycle gave everything it had and blasted ahead at full power. She grimly accepted that if a car moved out unexpectedly, a door opened, or if someone pulled out, there would be nothing she could do. Her reactions weren't fast enough. They were riding now with tarmac beneath them and nothing but luck to light their way.

She made it, wincing as they crossed the green light. It was a crossroads and it would be here that the worst might happen. Fortunately, nothing did, and she breathed a heavy sigh as they made it without incident.

Her heart was pounding and she was sweating. This was going to be close; far too close. It had taken them longer than 5 minutes to get themselves back to the bike. That meant they were right on the edge. If they hit traffic, if they even had to stop for too many lights, then they wouldn't have enough time to finish. Worse still, they had no way of knowing how many more clues there were. It was reasonable to expect that they would be getting harder—the next was likely to be much worse still.

The road bore left and she followed it, going as fast as she dared on the heavy old bike.

“Next right!” shouted Frank from behind her.

She nodded and began looking for the turning. She saw it ahead, a blue car pulling out from the side made it easier to spot. She slammed on the brakes, leaving it to the very last moment to save whatever few precious seconds she could.

Then it happened.

She lost control. The bike went into a slide. The back wheel lost all grip, and began to overtake the front. Her reactions pulled in the levers for her, the clutch and the brake. That only made it worse and the bike fishtailed from one side to the other, flapping around with increasing violence. She fought for control, as Frank yelled in panic behind her, making the terrible problems seem even worse. The bike was slowing, but it was just too heavy, and suddenly, before she even knew it had happened, she was on the floor, the rough tarmac nipping at her skin while the machine dragged itself along, sending up a shower of sparks as it went.

She rolled. The whole world spun in an ugly blur of flashing colours.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. There was a horrible, ugly silence for a moment and then the world seemed to slowly filter back to her.

She was dazed. She wasn't entirely sure what had happened. She wondered if she'd hit some diesel, a wet manhole cover, or some other trap that was hidden in the tarmac, ready to assault her. Just then, something more important occurred to her...

Frank!

She sat up quickly. Her arm ached dully, her knees were stinging, but she felt sure nothing was broken. There was an eerie quiet, a near silent gasp all around her as if the world had seen her fall and was as shocked as she was. Cars had stopped; people were standing around looking, waiting for somebody, anybody else, to do something. The scene around her had frozen in place.

"Frank!" she cried out in anguish.

He was lying behind her, and not moving. She felt the cold, damp fingers of dread clawing through her. It began in the pit of her stomach and rose up, chilling her along the very length of her spine.

She tried to run over, but her left knee was having none of that. It sent a painful warning, and she cried out in surprise, slowing down to limp over at a more conservative pace. “Frank!” she cried again, closer to panic than ever before.

Frank grunted and hefted himself upright, to a gasp of relief. He started to unclip his helmet.

“Wait,” she cried out, close to tears now. “You might have hurt your head.”

“My head is the only thing that doesn’t hurt,” he told her as he took it off and rubbed his gloved hand over his thinning grey hair. “Are you OK?”

She sighed, slumping down next to him, her eyes filling with tears of relief. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Several passers-by had helped. They had wheeled the big Honda down the side road and left it parked up against a wall. As nobody was injured and nobody else was involved, the police weren’t called, which was quite a relief to both of them.

“What happened?” he asked, rubbing his left arm. There was a dull pain in his elbow from hitting the road, but he assured her it was nothing serious. “Why did you lose control?”

“I don’t know,” she said apologetically. Truth be told, she was mortified. She had nearly killed Frank, and done hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds worth of damage to his treasured motorcycle. She stared at the thing. The pegs and levers were bent down one side, the engine was scuffed, the tank was horribly dented, and the exhaust on one side was ruined, an ugly gouge torn out of the polished metal tube.

Oddly, he didn’t seem overly concerned. He hadn’t lost his temper, he hadn’t shouted, he’d not even frowned.

He looked at her sympathetically and smiled. "It's not a classic, you know," he said. "The exhausts are cheap to replace, and I'd always fancied upgrading them. I've got a perfect excuse to do that now, haven't I?"

"I'll pay you back. Whatever it costs, I'll get the money for you."

"And how would you do that?" He gave her a friendly laugh, a laugh that was completely free of accusation. "Are you going to sell a kidney?"

"I'll sell my bike," she told him. Clearly, she had thought this through. "This was my fault, and I want to put it right."

He knelt down, examining the damage to his motorcycle more closely. He wriggled his fingers underneath the worst of the dents to the tank. "Broken fuel line!"

She bent down beside him and peered long and hard to where he was pointing. A short rubber hose ran from the tank to the carbs, delivering fuel to the hefty engine.

"It's split!" he continued, and finally there was a frown. Fuel was running down the side of the engine, pooling on the floor beneath the bike.

"I'm really so sorry," she said, shaking her head.

He smiled, and slapped her playfully on the arm. "This didn't happen in the crash. Fuel was splashing out already." He leant down towards her, smelling her leg, much to her surprise. "You stink of petrol. It's all over you."

She frowned. "So? What does that mean?"

"Well, petrol is slippery stuff. If it gets onto the back wheel, you can easily lose control." He turned off the tap, killing the fuel supply, and pulled the tube off at both ends. He held it up, and looked at her quite angrily. "Look, right here—it's been cut. Someone put a knife to it."

“What?” She was horrified. “Someone tried to kill us?”

“I don’t know. They probably just wanted us to lose our fuel. That would put us out of the competition, and get them a bigger share.” He shrugged, his anger passing quite quickly. “If they had meant to kill us, they could have cut the brakes. Let’s be grateful they didn’t think of that.”

“So this wasn’t my fault?” she said, her expression lightening, a ghost of a smile flickering over her lips.

“No, it wasn’t your fault. But it has had the desired effect, I’m afraid. We’re out of the competition; we’ve lost,” he told her assuredly.

She nodded sadly in agreement. “But we’re OK. It could have been a lot worse. Not for your poor bike of course...”

He grinned reassuringly “She’ll be back, and as good as new. I won’t be rushing to let you play with her again, though.”

“Believe me, I wasn’t asking.”

“You know what, my dear. I think we need a drink.”

“Tea!” she agreed.

“No my dear,” he laughed. “We need a drink.”

He bought them a pint each and a shot of whisky, insisting they both needed it. The pub was dingy, dim and poorly lit, with rough fabric-covered chairs around wobbly wooden tables. It was almost empty, save for a few early drinkers, and it was mercifully quiet.

“So, what now?” He sipped at the whisky. “What’s going to happen with you?”

“This whole thing was just a pipe dream, really,” she said. “I knew it was too good to be true and I never really expected it to work out; I just dared to hope. I’ll get my student loans just like millions of others, and I’ll work for the rest of my life to pay them off.” She looked sad, beaten and defeated, but not just by the

competition. She carried the weight of a heavy burden on her shoulders. She was smart enough to understand the world, and that was, sadly, no blessing.

“Can’t your family help you?”

She shook her head. “My dad left when I was very young. He was a good man—he sent us money, but he never made much. He remarried a few years ago; he’s got a new life now, and I’m not a child anymore and I’m not his problem. My mum, she’s living with a builder. They don’t have space for me, and certainly no money.”

“Family!” he exclaimed, and shook his head sadly. “Some people don’t realise just what a gift a family is.”

“A gift?” She had never thought of it that way. The idea made her smile to herself.

“Even better than the gift of chocolate penises,” he assured her, not that his personal experience of such things was extensive.

“You’re a good man, Frank.” She sipped at the beer. It was warm, flat and strong— not at all what she’d expected.

“I enjoyed this,” he told her, his face seeming to light up. “I enjoyed meeting you, most of all.”

She thought about the right words to say for a moment, before replying, “I enjoyed meeting you too, Frank!”

“Truth be told, I’m bored,” he said, his expression darkening. “A few years ago, I retreated from the world—I cut myself off, I suppose.”

“Something happened?” She almost regretted asking, but it was that time and such questions were inevitable.

“My wife was taking my daughter and grandson out to dinner. I was to meet them at the restaurant later. My son-in-law couldn’t drive, you see, and there wasn’t room in the car.

“I took the bike. She always refused to get on it—she said it was too dangerous. Too dangerous!”

“They never arrived. A young drunk ran them off the road, killing them all, and not quite immediately.”

“Oh my God...” she said, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “I’m so sorry!”

“I got quite a lot of money in compensation and insurance; more than enough to see me through to the end of my days, for whatever that’s worth. I retired, I drew the curtains, and I just stayed out of things and I let the world go about its business. I wanted no more part of it, and I was quite sure it had no further use for the likes of me.”

He finished his whisky in a single gulp. She felt like doing the same, and followed suit. It was definitely a story best tempered with some strong-liquor.

“But maybe, just maybe, we can help each other out...” he suggested, as if about to make a business proposition.

“How do you mean?” she shrugged, wondering what she could possibly offer a man like him.

“I have absolutely no need to go back to work—none!” he explained. “But I used to love teaching. I just couldn’t see a need anymore. Today has shown me two things. One, is that it’s time for me to get back into the world; the other, is that I need to be far more selective as to whom I allow to ride my motorcycle.”

“OK...” she chuckled, and agreed with a nod.

“I could work for three more years, and earn enough to cover all of your classes. You wouldn’t have any debts to deal with. It would give me a reason to get out of bed in the morning, and that’s worth a lot more to me than money.”

“I couldn’t...” she flustered, scarcely believing what she was hearing. “What are you saying?”

“Allow me to rephrase it a little more simply,” he began. “I’m asking if you’d permit me to pay your tuition.”

“I can’t do that,” she stammered. “It’s thousands of pounds; tens of thousands of pounds!”

“I’m not going to beg,” he grinned. “But if we were to do this, it seems that we could both walk away from today with exactly what we came here looking for. We can both still be winners.”

“But... people don’t do things like this.”

“And isn’t that everything wrong with the world, right there?”

She just stared, her mouth gaping open, shocked into silence. She simply couldn’t find the words.

“You know what?” he said, and took a sip of his beer. “I’m going to take that as a yes, and assume that we have a deal.”

**Ride for 30 minutes, find a bar, and drink one pint of beer in 30 minutes. Repeat this pattern until midnight without consuming any food.
If you are arrested, you are disqualified.**

He blinked, and read the note again. He looked around and grinned to himself, assuming this was some kind of joke. He began to laugh—an ugly, hollow-sounding thing, and it died away quickly. He grunted to himself, peering again around the hall. Other people looked no happier than he felt.

It was a church hall like any other. It was little more than a hut, really, with plaster-board walls and solid metal roof beams painted green. The floor was made of wood, scored badly by many tables and chairs having been dragged across it. It was large, big enough for jumble sales, teen discos, youth-clubs or scouting, and had probably seen all of these and more.

It was a place you could rent—a place anyone could rent, and clearly that’s what had happened. Someone had chosen this anonymous place to host this meeting because it was just that: anonymous.

He went to grab someone, to ask what the hell was going on. What the hell was going on?

Two weeks earlier, he’d had found a website while browsing for charities and churches. He had come across a motorcycle challenge—a way to raise money for a children’s charity with a game attached. He had learned to ride as a young man in Africa, a passion that had never left him. He’d signed up, as it sounded like it could be fun. It also offered something rather special as an added incentive.

For a £25 signing-up fee, he could stand the chance of winning a share of one million pounds. He was no fool—nobody hands you a slice of a million pounds without there being a catch.

He carefully read the rules, such as they were. They said that he would be handed a challenge on the day, a secret until then, each of them different, and each would be necessarily difficult. You would have to solve them by midnight that evening in randomly selected pairs. You were strictly banned from discussing the matter with anyone else. If you completed your challenge, you could go back and take an additional challenge, and if you completed that, then you would be eligible for an additional share of the million dollar pot. If, and only if, someone solved the ultimate challenge, then the pot would be divided up between everyone who had completed a full challenge without breaking their individual rules.

It seemed easy enough. He read it, and read it again until quite sure he understood. He sat at the computer for an hour, a further hour after he had sent off the application. It all seemed so very strange.

A challenge...

He would have to complete some kind of difficult task, and if he managed to, he would win his share of the money. There was no way to know how many people would enter, no way to know how many people would complete their task. What was the ultimate challenge? Was it lurking hidden among the other challenges, or was it something special? Was it above or beyond the worst of the others?

Ronny Mthethwa was not a happy man, and it showed on his expression. He was a Christian; he didn't gamble, and he didn't drink. He rode a motorcycle, and that was his only simple pleasure, his only real indulgence. He had hoped to win some money, most of which he intended to donate to his church, but this was no way to go about it. This was no way to go about anything!

"What is this?" he growled, shaking his head and tutting to himself, the frustration building within him. He wanted to find an

organiser, and force them to explain themselves to him. This was just ridiculous.

He looked around the room. There were fewer than 30 people, and many were walking out already. Had they gone to begin their challenge? Had they decided to quit? How many more might quit before the day was done?

He huffed and shrugged to himself. With so few people left, the rewards were high. Still, no rewards were worth the price this challenge might cost him. He could die, but there were other hidden costs, a worse price to pay. There were dangers involved, dangers to himself and others. Could he look himself in the mirror tomorrow? Could he peer deeply into his own dark eyes and live with what he'd done? Could he carry on, knowing he'd risked the safety of others for his own greed, for a momentary lapse into arrogance?

No. He knew the answer well enough and he yelled in disgust, "No, I won't do this!"

People turned to look at him, but he didn't care. He flushed with anger. How could someone wish him to risk his life in so meaningless a way; worse still, the lives of others? How dare they think him so trivial that he would submit to such a thing.

"Damn this!" he shouted, and threw the note on the floor.

He stormed out, grunting and pushing past people rudely as temper overwhelmed him. He stalked towards the exit, and pushed the door hard. Being a strong man, it swung open equally hard, crashing into the wall behind it heavily with a loud crash. As he stomped out, every footstep calmed him, the swell of rage in his chest receded as he made his way outside. He found himself breathless, his lungs heaving for air, his heart fluttering, light-headed with adrenaline.

He stood by the door and took a deep breath. He regretted his rudeness: he regretted his outburst. Nobody in there had done

anything particularly to deserve it, and he had done this thing close to the house of god. He was better than this, and the people inside had deserved better from him also.

He slowly, more calmly, stepped towards his bike—a Royal Enfield 500. It was a thing of sculpted beauty in black and chrome. A thing from a bygone age, a bike made proudly today from the designs of yesterday. It was heavy, not fast, and not powerful, but a thing to be proud of nonetheless. How many machines had such heritage, such a rich and vibrant history?

“Are you Ronny?” a voice called out.

He glared up angrily, stirred from his wandering thoughts. “I am Ronny.”

The man was quite large, slightly overweight, and not imposing in the least. His eyes were diverted downwards to the ground, and his manner was stiff and awkward.

Ronny huffed, “What do you want?”

“You’re my partner.” He held out a slip of paper with his name on it. He looked away, his eyes still averted downwards, and his head turned slightly to the left. His arm reached out, locked tight at the elbow, and he leant forward, keeping the maximum distance between them, perhaps. “We have to do the challenge together. It says in the rules.”

“I am not doing any challenge,” he told him firmly—rather more firmly than might be required. He sighed and reminded himself to be more polite, to be a better Christian. Don’t let the animal control the man.

“We have to do our challenge together. It says so in the rules,” he repeated, and still his eyes looked away, peering to some nothing that was far away in the distance. He was dressed not at all like a biker, at least in the conventional sense. He wore workman’s boots, heavy fabric trousers, and a generic padded jacket that could have

belonged anywhere. He could have neither fitted in nor stood out in any crowd. He was an outsider.

“I cannot do this challenge,” he told him angrily. He soothed himself with a calming breath, and continued with a more balanced and less confrontational edge to his voice. “This is dangerous and foolhardy. My life is worth more than a challenge drawn at random from the box. Yours is, too, my friend.”

“I’m not allowed to do this without you,” he said firmly, his fists clenched. His lips narrowed, his face reddened, and his jaw tightened. He seemed angry, frustrated maybe, but whatever he felt, it seemed aimed at himself, not really directed towards anybody else.

Ronny walked over to him, as calmly as he could. The man was still looking away, not quite nervously, but there was something about him that didn’t sit right. He couldn’t quite decide what exactly it was.

He said, “I cannot. You must not, either; this is a path you should not walk. It is a path that no man may safely walk.”

“I won’t walk.” He pointed in the distance, but his eyes never moved. “I have a motorcycle. My motorcycle is an Aprilia Pegaso Strada 660 with a Yamaha XT Engine. It has 50bhp and a seat height of 780mm. It will make me smile.”

Ronny frowned. Something was definitely not entirely right.

“My name is Daniel. I’m 38 years old and I weigh 92kgs.”

“Daniel,” he began more gently. “I cannot join you on this challenge. I can only urge you to look inside your heart and see that this is not a good idea. It is suicide if you try this.”

“You have to do this challenge with me,” he said. His mood shifted unpredictably and he was looking angry, angrier than before, as if the frustration had suddenly built to near breaking-point. He

tensed his jaw and frowned, narrowing his eyes angrily. "It's the rules. You have to. You have to follow the rules."

Ronny tried to be sympathetic, but it wasn't something he was good at. "I am a free man. In my country, I was told what to do and when I could do it. I chose not to listen; I chose to make a better life. Now, no man may tell me what it is that I have to do. Nobody has that right. I cannot do this challenge, it is against what I know is right. Only a fool would try."

Daniel's eyes glared away into the distance, his lips beginning to curl up into a snarl.

"I'm sorry, Daniel, but I have made my decision."

He breathed heavily, his chest heaving as if he was breathless from some terrible exertion. He slowed himself, and looked up, but still not straight at him. "You are meant to be my friend," he said more calmly.

"We do not know each other, Daniel. How can I be your friend?"

"My brother said that if I do this, I might make some friends." Daniel suddenly looked like a sad child, broken from an overly harsh punishment. "I don't make friends easily, my brother says."

"I am also careful who I consider a friend," he said very firmly. "I wish you the very best of luck, Daniel, and I will pray that you do what is right. God be with you."

Ronny threw an open-face helmet on, an old-fashioned thing that fitted very well with the theme of his motorcycle. He had chosen it quite carefully for that very reason. He fired her up, and it clattered to life unevenly, smoothing after a few seconds, and settling into a rumbling flow. He nodded, as motorcyclists do to one another. He pushed the bike into gear with a touch of his toe, and he rode away. The engine burbled and grunted as he pulled out of the car-park.

Daniel stood and watched the glowing red tail-light from the edge of his peripheral vision. It shone brightly as he stopped, and then it slowly edged away into the distance, finally vanishing altogether.

“You were meant to be my friend,” he whimpered to himself. He jotted down the Enfield’s number plate in his dedicated notebook, and turned to walk away, a tear beginning to form at the corner of his eye.

He pushed open the café door and walked inside.

The woman working there looked up, her face a sad thing, lost in the mindless monotony of endless routine. It broke into a weak smile as she saw him, not enough to light up her face, but enough to take the edge off of her sadness.

“Morning, Daniel. The usual?” she said knowingly.

“Morning!” he replied without looking over. “The usual, please, thank you.” His head slumped, and he slouched as he walked. The usual was a single boiled egg and two slices of brown toast, cut into perfect triangles. The butter had to be added to the side of the plate for him to spread it himself. It all had to be perfect, it just had to be. He walked up close to the counter. His table was free—the best table in the shop, he had always maintained.

He sat down at the back, facing the window. He quietly picked up the menu and began reading it. He knew it, he knew everything on it, but he read it anyway because he always read it. Routine was important; things couldn’t change. Some things were just too important to change.

“No Craig today?” the waitress asked conversationally.

“No Craig today,” he replied, without moving his eyes from the menu.

“What’s he doing?”

“Making friends.”

It was rare that he showed subtle emotion. Occasionally, he'd get angry; sometimes he'd laugh, but never in public where others could see him. Now he frowned and his shoulders slumped slightly. Only his brother would really have noticed such a thing, and these actions would have told him that he was sad. The morning had not gone well for him.

“He better not be making women friends!” she joked, but there was no smoke without fire, and her words carried the slightest hint of sincerity—a tiny slither of threat. “You tell that man that he's mine, and as soon as his divorce comes through, I'm having him.”

Daniel nodded in agreement. He frowned at the thought. “I'll tell him that he's yours. I think he knows, because you tell him a lot.” She told him a lot.

“It never hurts to remind a man of things,” she chuckled to herself knowingly, clearly having a superior level of experience on the subject.

Such things weren't clear to Daniel, but he nodded regardless and made a mental note of her pearl of wisdom. “You need to remind men of things,” he said, and now this was a fact—a thing added to his understanding of the world, and the ever-grinding, seething mass of humanity which was so elusive, so complex, and so unutterably alien to him.

She came to his table and put down a cup of tea. It was in his favourite mug with a small chip on the handle. Two spoonfuls of sugar and a dash of milk, too hot to drink and with a spoon in it so he could stir it himself. He looked up from the menu, and then his eyes flashed away, almost instantly. It was as it should be.

“No work today, love?”

“I had a day off,” he said, his eyes fixed once again on the menu. “I had a day off to make friends with my brother, but nobody

wanted to be my friend. I don't make friends like my brother. He's good at making friends. I don't know how."

She paused, not quite knowing what was the right thing to say. She sat down at the seat opposite.

He kept his eyes ahead but he shuffled in his seat, slightly awkwardly, pulling himself back to sit completely upright.

"You know, I have bad days too, we all do," she smiled sadly at herself. "Most days here are pretty awful—we get no end of idiots to deal with. It's hot, it's greasy. I have to wash up. I have to mop up vomit at least once a week."

"I clean up," he nodded very slowly. "I don't have to mop up vomit once a week."

She laughed, "Well, that's something." She reached out to put a supportive hand on his arm, but he backed dubiously away, and she stopped herself, maybe she thought better of it. "The point is, things change. One day, it will all be better. This is just a bad day; it's not your whole life. It's just one bad day."

"My whole life is just a bad day," he repeated, not quite correctly, and getting the sentiment somewhat jumbled.

"Not quite..." she sighed, and hefted herself up from the table with an audible groan. "Things do get better, Daniel."

He frowned thoughtfully to himself as he thought really hard, his mind plunging into a pool of logic. "I don't think I can get better."

She gave him a supportive smile, looked over to some waiting customers, and then back to him. She said, "I know you have trouble understanding people. Things seem confusing to you, but, sometimes, that's how we all feel. You're not that different, really."

He said simply, "Craig says you don't always say what you mean. I always say what I mean. This is what I mean, so I say it. I mean this, what I'm saying." He shook his head very slightly. It barely moved noticeably. "People don't make sense."

She sighed and walked off to her customers, glancing back to him sadly.

He put down the menu, and fixed his stare at his cup of tea instead. He glanced very quickly around the room. There were motorcyclists in there now, he could tell. They had helmets with them. They wore armour and padded jackets. They had red, ruddy cheeks and noses, and they were smiling. Smiling meant they were happy. Bikes make people smile, his brother had always told him.

The challenge had made people friends. Craig was right, as usual. He was always right—he was his big brother, and he was always right. He just forgot sometimes that his little brother wasn't like all the other people: he wasn't as good. Bikes didn't make him smile, and nothing made him friends.

He stirred his tea, ten times in each direction, as he sat alone.

Find places where the speed limits are 30, 40, 50, 60 and 70 mph. Ride a motorcycle at twice the limit in those places, and in the correct order.

Greg pulled the slip out paper out from the box. He read it. He laughed. It couldn't be serious, surely. Could it?

This was meant to be a charity run; according to the website: this was a ride to raise funds for sick children. With that said, it did seem odd that they were offering the chance to win a share of a million pounds, and there were other terms that were stranger still.

This couldn't seriously be his challenge, though, he pondered, while his brain went off and did its own thing. A man could die trying something like that, he thought, the idea meandering around inside his head, washing all else completely away.

He looked around the room, waiting for whoever had drawn his name to come forward so he could find out who his partner was. It was hard to tell what was happening. There were around 20 people, maybe more, and some had already left. Some were shouting; others were angry. Several were walking away in disgust. Whether they were giving up or not, he had no way to tell.

Considering how hard the challenge he had chosen was, and how exclusive the criteria seemed to be, he could well imagine that not many people would be able to see it through. Each share was likely to be substantial.

"Are you Greg?" a voice called out behind him. "Sorry, I don't know what we're meant to be doing."

"I am Greg," he said, reaching out to shake his hand.

He seemed perfectly normal—about 30 years old, very short, and with light, slightly off-blonde hair. He was average height, average build, and he was wearing a sensible pair of boots, a cheap

but sensible fabric motorcycle jacket, and a matching cheap but sensible pair of motorcycle trousers.

“Steve,” he said.

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to like this, Steve,” said Greg, handing him the challenge.

Steve didn’t seem to like it—he had been right about that. He screwed up his face in an expression of curiosity, then he frowned and scratched his head before looking back. “I can’t do this!”

Greg raised an eyebrow knowingly. “Maybe for a share of a million pounds, we can?”

“I’m sorry,” he grumbled. “I mean, we can’t do this. It’s crazy.”

“This whole thing is crazy.”

“Can we pick a different challenge?”

Greg shook his head solemnly. “It says in the rules, we’re not allowed. What we pick is what we get. There are no second chances.”

“I have a Kawasaki ER650n,” Steve said solemnly. “If I’m lucky, riding downhill with the wind behind me, the slipstream of a truck in front, and I’m farting, all at the same time, then I might, just might, be able to squeeze 110 mph out of it. But I won’t.”

“Great!” Greg grumbled and rolled his eyes. “I’ve got a BMW R1200gs. It’s great on gravel-tracks, but it tops out at about the same kind of speed, maybe a little more.”

“So...” began Steve, rubbing his temple wearily. “We have to break 5 different speed limits in a day, an offence that will earn both of us a permanent ban many times over. We have to do that on motorcycles that aren’t capable of doing it, and we have to do it without getting caught.”

“I know,” he grinned. “Easy, right?”

“Oh yeah, piece of cake.”

Steve insisted that the best way to deal with things was to get an actual piece of cake. “Everything’s better with cake!” he insisted.

Greg nodded in dubious agreement as he sipped a pretty excellent cup of Café Americano.

“I actually work right across from here.” Steve pointed over the road to a very nondescript building. “We publish a number of work-related magazines. I’m an editor; I do articles for ‘Tractor Times’ and ‘Woodwork Wonders’. As a consequence of this, I consider my life to have been largely a failure up to this point.”

“That wasn’t the dream?” Greg laughed. “I work in a marketing office. We sell fake marble slabs and pillars.”

“Is there much call for that?” Steve asked politely.

“If there was, we wouldn’t need a marketing office,” he said and shrugged.

“Maybe you’d do more business if you had your own alliteratively titled magazine?” Steve suggested sarcastically. “Mundane Marble Marketing Monthly, perhaps?”

“Thankfully, I don’t have to market Woodwork Wonders—that would just about push me over the edge, which I’m pretty close to already,” Greg assured him.

“Yes, you could instead go soaring over the edge and do something incredibly stupid, like entering a competition which pushes you right up to the very limits of your driving license and beyond.”

“That, basically,” he said with a nod and then smirked.

“So,” continued Steve. “I find myself coming in here quite often. Good cake, right?”

“Good coffee!” Greg nodded. “I’m a bit of a coffee fan.”

“Greg...” Steve picked up his slice of something chocolate, looked worried for a moment, and put it back down on the plate again. “Are we really going through with this?”

Greg shrugged and took another sip of coffee. “Eating cake? I was thinking the same thing when I realised we were fully grown men in a cake shop. The fact that yours has a little pink blob of icing on it really brought the idea into sharp focus.”

“I mean this challenge—the one that is likely to get at least one of us killed, and will riddle the other with so much guilt that they take their life two years later,” Steve said, managing to sound somewhat optimistic.

“I have a dream, which doesn’t include selling fake marble building supplies,” he told him. “I know that might come as a huge shock to you.”

“You have dreams beyond fake marble building supplies?” he asked sarcastically, as if such notions were the stuff of nonsense. “What more could there be to life?”

“I want to tour the world on my bike,” he explained. “I’ve been dreaming of taking a year off and really seeing what’s out there.”

“As in, the whole world?” Steve asked rhetorically. “Isn’t that a bit, you know... crazy? I hear it’s a pretty big place.”

Greg shook his head. “No crazier than spending your life selling fake marble building supplies during the week, and then getting drunk all weekend, while you dream of a life of not getting drunk at the weekend to help you forget that all you’re doing with your life is selling fake marble building supplies.”

“I do see your circular point.”

“This is my only chance! I’ve tried saving, but when you sell fake marble, you need to drink a lot at weekends, rather a lot more than you might imagine. It’s even worse when you realise I’m actually very bad at what I do.” He grinned, and Steve grinned back. “Not the drinking part—I’m very proficient at that!”

“Well, I have a very good reason for doing this too.” He raised his eyebrow, and looked as though he was about to make a startling revelation. “I want to win a lot of money. I mean, like, a shit-tonne. I just want the money.”

Greg laughed loudly. “Yeah, well, that’s as good a reason as any, there’s no denying that.”

“Past that, I haven’t given it much thought, to be honest.” Steve took a bite of cake, and it was clear that he failed to see how it could make him seem like any less of an adult man to be doing so. “My girlfriend wants to get married. She said that 4 years of being engaged is enough. I could see her point and agreed with her wholeheartedly. Sadly, she didn’t mean she was leaving—she meant I had to pay for a wedding. I felt rather cheated by the whole thing.”

Greg shook his head in dubious sadness. “I’m so very sorry.”

“And then she’ll probably want kids as well,” he said, languishing in self-pity. “And what do I get out of all this?”

“Alcoholism?” suggested Greg—an educated guess based on experience.

“If there’s nothing else on offer, I’ll take it.”

Greg laughed, relieved that they both seemed to be getting on so well. “I think we should do this.”

“I don’t,” Steve admitted. “But I do want the money. I’m part Jewish, you know, and I find such things as shit-tonnes of money to be a huge motivator, even with the lingering threat of death as a realistic proposition.”

“Reasonable,” Greg said, not unreasonably. “So the question then, is just exactly how we do it, since it does appear to be logistically impossible?”

“But, to be fair, that is quite a good question, and one with a very difficult answer.” Steve proved the point by offering none.

“It’s easy up to 50.” Greg pulled out his smartphone and began looking for a map. “My bike can make an easy 100 mph, and get there fast enough. I’m happy I can do it quite safely on a nice, quiet country lane.”

“Don’t we both have to do it?” Steve opened the envelope and had another good, long look at the rules. “You know, it doesn’t even say it has to be on our own bike. It just says ‘a bike.’”

“And we only get one GPS tracker!” Greg added. He looked over some maps of Kent, at places he was familiar with. “I reckon that one of us goes on ahead and scouts out the road, checks for police, makes sure there’s no traffic and nobody walking about. They phone the other one, and they make their run when we know it’s all clear. Easy.”

“Until we get to 60mph.”

“I think I can squeeze that out of my GS,” he said but the look on Greg’s face suggested he really thought otherwise. “I’ve got GPS on my bike—that’ll record my highest speed, and it’s as accurate as the tracker they gave us. We’ll know once we’ve done it.”

“But the last one,” said Steve as he finished putting the rest of his cake in his mouth. “Neither of us have a bike that can manage that kind of speed, and neither of us are completely retarded enough to ride at 140 mph on a public road. Or am I making foolish presumptions about you?”

Greg sighed. “You’re not wrong, but look at what’s at stake!”

“It’s worth a few risks,” he admitted with a shrug. “But we literally can’t make that speed, and, even if I could, I don’t think I’d want to.”

“Germany!” Greg’s eyes lit up excitedly. “The laws are different there! You can do it legally in Germany. We have until midnight—I could reach an Autobahn by then and do it legally.”

Steve sighed and shook his head. “It’s a good idea, but your bike still isn’t fast enough—unless the laws of physics and thermodynamics are different there as well?”

Greg sat back heavily in the chair and grunted. “I’m pretty sure they’re the same, just more strictly enforced. There’s also no speed limit on the German Roads. We have to double the speed limit, so that’s... what’s infinite times two?”

“We could maybe borrow a bike?” Steve said thoughtfully. “Do any of your friends have an insanely fast super-bike, and casually leave their keys lying around?”

Greg smiled sarcastically. “I don’t have any friends. I have a brother, but he has a Nissan Micra.”

“My fiancée has a Nissan Micra,” Steve added conversationally. “Maybe we should introduce them?”

Greg shrugged. “So, no, I really don’t know anyone who would lend me a fast bike. I don’t think anyone would even lend me a Nissan Micra, come to that.”

“Me neither. I’ve never ridden anything bigger than my little ER6 anyway. I’ve had it up to 90, but it felt really naughty and I slowed right down.”

“I used to have some fast bikes—really fast ones.” Greg sighed. “I guess this means I’m the nominated idiot then.”

“Oh yes,” he said with a grin. “It does look that way. I’m not suggesting I’m any less of an idiot, it’s just that you’re more specifically suited to this role.”

“Here we go. Top speed on my bike.” Greg held up his phone to show the information.

Steve frowned. “137 mph. So close.”

“Yeah, and it would take me all day to get there.” He shook his head sadly with disappointed frustration. “I don’t see any way to do this.”

“So what do we do?” Steve looked quite serious for the moment and, when he spoke, he sounded it, too. “I see it that we have two choices. We give up and go home—my girlfriend doesn’t get married this year, and ends up leaving me for the editor of a proper magazine, and you spend the rest of your life selling fake marble.”

“Or?”

“Or we give this a go; we get off our arses and we figure out a way to do this.”

Greg nodded in agreement. “Of course, we wouldn’t be selling fake marble and editing woodworking magazines if we were the type to get off our arses in the first place.” The massive flaw in the whole logic of this argument was glaringly apparent.

“I will concede that point,” Steve agreed with a nod, licking a piece of fondant icing from his lips in as manly a way as he could manage.

Greg finished off the last of his coffee. “You know what... We’ve got nothing to lose by trying!”

“Well, other than our driving licenses, our bikes, our health if we’re injured, our very lives...”

“Then we’re agreed.” And it seemed with those words that the matter was closed.

It had been a pleasant enough ride into the country, and they found themselves on a narrow country lane. There was enough space for a car to pass on the other side, and it was relatively straight with a good view ahead.

Greg happily patted the sign—a long grey metal pole with a round 30 limit warning posted on the top.

Steve looked down the road—it was clear, empty and seemed essentially ideal. “Oh, this will be easy.”

“I’m glad you think so,” he smiled back. “You’re doing the next one.”

“Me?” he seemed shocked. “Why would I do it? My bike isn’t fast!”

“You’ve got to earn that share!” Greg told him quite earnestly, seemingly quite amused by the whole thing. “I do this one, you do 40 and 50, then I’ll do the next two after that.”

“That’s not fair!” he protested, before realising he was doing only two, compared to Greg’s three; and doing the easier ones besides. “Well it is fair—more than fair actually—but I still don’t like it. Fair is over-rated.”

“You know what I don’t like?”

Steve suspected he was about to hear about how Greg didn’t like people trying to weasel out of things. “No,” he grumbled. “What don’t you like?”

“I don’t like KTMs. They’re horribly unreliable beasts. But honestly, I wish I’d bought one now. They’re a little bit faster.”

Steve fixed him with an apathetic stare. “Your point being...?”

“We’re all going to have to do things we don’t like today,” he said. He laughed as he strapped on his helmet and went to his motorcycle.

The BMW was a hulking beast; a machine built for long distance travel on rough roads. He clambered aboard and it clattered unevenly to life.

“What about me? Do you want me to scout ahead?” said Steve with a shrug.

“Nah, this is going to be easy. I’ll be back in two minutes.”

He kicked up the stand and clunked the bike down into gear. Pulling away, the big, flat, boxer engine was bristling with torque and it accelerated with a snap. He watched the clock, sitting at an easy 30. He peered ahead, his eyes just over the gigantic screen. There

was nothing in the way, so he dropped the gears down and twisted the throttle hard.

The machine responded with enthusiasm. She lunged ahead down the narrow road. The bushes and trees along the side quickly melted into a green blur as the needle shot around the face of the clock. It hit 60mph in a matter of seconds. He let it wind just a little higher, and then backed immediately off.

He made a U-turn and circled back to where he'd started—a simple victory that served to bolster his waning morale. He could easily do the next three himself, but he wanted Steve to do his bit too, not just be standing by to collect his winnings. To him, that was entirely fair, and such things felt important.

He pulled up, grinning widely, and took off his helmet.

“Well?” Steve yelled at him.

“Easy! It’s your turn now! Come on, follow me!”

He led them up through the lanes, right out to the bottom of a hill. It stretched up into the distance, snaking through oceans of green fields, split by a ribbon of grey tarmac. They pulled into a petrol station at the bottom, and Greg parked next to the shop. Stepping off his bike, he walked out to the road and looked up the shallow hill.

Steve followed closely behind him, grumbling to himself the whole way.

Greg pointed at a long straight stretch that led to a roundabout, off which the petrol station had been built. “This part here is a 40 mph limit.” He then pointed up the hill. “That is a 50 mph limit. It used to be known around here as ‘Death Hill’. My old man says that there was a café at the top. Sometimes, they used to put on a record, then try to ride to the roundabout and back before the music finished. Other times, they’d try and get to 100mph on

the way down. Either way, among the local bikers, it earned, for some reason, the name Death Hill. I won't bore you with all the details."

"Death Hill?" He glared at him. "You want me to ride at 100mph down a place called Death Hill?"

"Oh God, no," Greg assured him. "I want you to ride at 100 mph up it."

"Up?"

Greg laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. "Bikes have changed since then—it won't be at all hard. Trust me!" He slipped off the GPS tracker from his wrist and handed it over.

Steve narrowed his eyes and accepted it grudgingly. "So, I ride at 80 over there?" he said, pointed to the first road. "Then I ride around the roundabout and get up to 100 mph up the hill?"

"So it is your brain that's got the problem, because there's clearly nothing wrong with your ears." Greg grinned now, smiling widely, enjoying everything about this.

"You want to know something...?" he sighed. "I'm not at all sure I want to have kids either. I'm more of a dog-man. They're cheap, right?"

"Yeah, you can raise a dog on the wages you'd earn editing Woodwork Wonders for the rest of your life."

"Look how fast I go," he sneered, heading off back to his motorcycle. "Any last minute advice?" he called out as Greg followed behind him.

"Yeah, don't crash," he told him sarcastically.

"Don't crash..." Steve said back, grumbling to himself. "That's great. I was just thinking about crashing into a tree, purely for my own amusement. Well done for helping me avoid that terrible potential tragedy."

“Would it be a tragedy?” Greg said as he frowned thoughtfully.

“It would be, for woodwork fans everywhere!” Steve cried out, waving his arms up theatrically.

“I have an important job to do while you’re gone,” Greg told him, his expression suddenly quite serious.

“Yeah?” Steve looked interested as he yanked his helmet moodily from his bike.

“I’m going to have several chocolate-covered flapjacks, and think quite seriously about where I’m going to eat lunch.”

“Right. Thanks again for all your help and support,” Steve said grumpily. “And that advice again—was it to crash, or not to crash? I wouldn’t want to do it wrong—which one was best?”

Greg looked at him with a very serious expression. “Follow your gut instinct. I trust you!”

Steve had ridden once at 90 mph. He told most people that he had ridden over 100, but that was a huge slice of bullshit, as he would sometimes admit while horribly drunk to his closest friends, and while less horribly drunk to his girlfriend. He didn’t really consider it to be a lie, though, because nobody that knew him would take such a claim in the least bit seriously.

He wasn’t a fast rider. In his life, he had only ever owned two bikes, and the previous one had been a 250cc monstrosity that went so slowly that old women had overtaken him with alarming regularity; sometimes on foot. This was the biggest, best and fastest thing he’d ever ridden, and it had always seemed big, fast and plenty good enough. That was, until now.

He fondly remembered that first test-drive, several years ago. He’d taken it out and judiciously screwed open the throttle. The little

bike lurched and sprinted off with him grinning wildly, half excited, and half terrified by the power of it.

He decided, quite sensibly, because sensibly was how he approached most of his decisions in life, to ride the road first and see how it was, what the traffic was like, how fast it felt, what the corners were like, and whether there were any challenges that he really ought to know about. He rolled along for a mile and pulled onto the side of the road. He sat, his heart now thumping in his chest and his breath laboured.

90 mph was the fastest he'd ever been, and that was on a motorway where he was just about the slowest thing there. This was a road—just a normal country road. On one side, there was a bank and a verge, a solid sloping barrier of grass with a row of neat hedges. On the other, a steep decline to a barbed-wire fence that allowed a teasing glimpse of a row of orderly fields that stretched to the horizon. All very idyllic, but it did nothing to assuage his fears.

This was no place to die. Not for him, in any case, but he was open-minded enough to let other people make their own minds up about such things.

He waited until the traffic was gone—not that there was much of it. He watched a van rumble away in the distance until its red tail lights had completely vanished from sight. He flicked the throttle and slipped the clutch. He rolled the bike around in a tight U-turn and prepared for his run. There was nothing—no traffic, no vehicles, just him and a road ahead, the sweat on his brow, and the sound of his heart beating, thumping through his ear drums.

He went for it. He accelerated hard, flicking up through the gears and laying on the power. 30, 40 mph came up and he held on for more. He changed to third gear as he hit 60 mph. Wind rushed into his helmet, his eyes narrowed, the fear turned to exhilaration, the thrill stabbed now at his heart, the anxiety washed away, as the

adrenaline began to course through him. 80, 85 mph; he backed off on the throttle and the engine groaned, slowing him down.

He coasted along at an even 60 mph. It didn't feel fast enough as he saw the roundabout, and it slowly swam up closer, coming into view amidst the blurred green verge and tumbling hills. He flicked the indicator and prepared to turn. He dropped a gear; the engine whined, holding him back as he crossed onto the turn, and then he slowly laid on the gas, his hand gently twisting the throttle. The bike responded and he breathed nervously. The same fears prickled at him again, but the adrenaline was coming.

100 mph was his goal this time, and he had no time to scout out the road ahead. He was going for it! His confidence was riding high: all doubts had been briefly washed away. He went around some curves, and the fully open road stretched out before him.

He cracked the throttle open and the bike exploded with power, the revs firing him forwards like a bullet. He accelerated; he changed up and accelerated more. He came to a van, the same van he'd seen earlier, perhaps, and he pulled out to overtake. There was nothing ahead and this was it—he gave the bike everything he had, and it, in return, gave him back the same. 85 came and went. 90, 100, 110... He gasped—his chest was pounding, his legs numb.

He pulled in to the edge and let the speed melt away until he was sitting just on the speed limit. It seemed so slow now, so easy. His heart had begun to calm but his head was still swimming. He felt elated, as if he were floating on a cloud of sheer excitement. No amount of pink fondant icing, and sly comments about his sexuality, could dull the sense of victory and accomplishment he was filled with.

A light flashed behind him, and he felt a fresh surge of adrenaline—this time for a different reason. He was close to panic as a large motorcycle pulled in behind him and he was sure it must be a

police officer, about to punish him for his horrible, terrible crimes. He grimaced and looked over, with his most innocent expression.

It was Gary—he waved at him and pulled away, beckoning him to follow.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’ll love this place—the food is terrible!” Gary told him.

They had pulled in to a café at the side of the road. It had a sign that welcomed bikers, but it didn’t seem to be very welcoming to anything beyond cockroaches and the occasional rat.

“Really?” he grumbled. He looked around and had the expression of a man who was deeply unimpressed. “I can just go home and get terrible food. I can even make you something—I could drop it on the floor and tread on it to get the authentic feel of this place for you, if you like?”

“Well, this is, like, food, with the added bonus of a lottery system,” Greg explained. “You’re gambling on whether or not you’re going to get a nasty dose of food poisoning to go with it.”

“Oh, we’re playing the odds in every sense today!”

“Well done, by the way.” Greg slapped him on the back. “You did a great job of breaking the speed limit twice.”

“Thanks. Isn’t it ironic that while trying to raise the money to have myself effectively neutered, I finally actually get the chance to actually feel like a man? What a shame I wasn’t killed,” he said with a sigh.

Greg laughed. “That’s the spirit. You’re making me jealous—I’m starting to wish it was me getting married.”

“I would happily switch, but I don’t know anything about fake marble pillars, except that marketing them makes you miserable enough to dream about riding a motorcycle around the world,” Steve joked.

Greg shrugged and said, “That’s all I know about fake marble pillars, too. Does that mean I’m also qualified to edit Woodland Wonders?”

“It’s Woodworking Wonders, but I think the difference is mostly academic,” he said, thinking of all the wonderful things that life had in store for him. It made him shudder. “I think my fiancée might be moderately suspicious if a complete stranger came home tonight with a tiny spark of free-spirit left in his soul. I’d hate to see her happy—that’s the only reason I agreed to marry her.”

Inside was worse than outside, but being engaged had prepared him for that too. “This place is terrible,” Steve grunted loudly enough for everyone to hear, including the staff who glared at him angrily.

“Shhh,” Greg told him, with a finger pressed against his lips. “I don’t think they know. If they find out, they might actually try to leave.”

“Just order me something that doesn’t look too horrifyingly tragic while I use the toilets,” he sighed. He was sure the toilets were going to be awful, and in that sense, they didn’t disappoint.

Greg had sat himself down at a table, and Steve joined him there, removing his jacket and putting it on the chair next to him. “So what now?”

Greg was frowning at his phone. “Over there,” he said, pointing vaguely in the right direction. “There’s a main road. The speed limit is 60 mph. I’m confident that I can find a stretch and get up to 120 mph.”

“I’m confident you’re right,” he nodded. “But then, what after that?”

Greg sighed. “I do have a thought.”

“OK.”

“My bike is rated to a top speed of 137 mph. It’s got a huge screen and a restrictive set of exhausts.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that it’s not particularly aerodynamic, and can’t get rid of her excess gases quickly enough.”

“Ahh!” said Steve, as realisation dawned on him. “So you have been married before?”

“What?” He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “Oh, your life really is awful, isn’t it?”

Steve nodded, and then looked somewhat sad.

“What I mean is that, without the screen, and with some holes drilled in the downpipe, it might just be enough to get her up to 140.”

“I think you’ve been watching too much of the wrong kind of television,” Steve suggested. “But considering it’s going to be happening to you and not me, I’m all for it.”

“That’s the adventure spirit!” Greg smiled. “It’s not quite how it’s meant to work, but you’re definitely on the right track, albeit in the wrong direction, and rather slowly.”

“Do you want to know what I honestly think?” said Steve, his demeanour somewhat deflated. “I think we’ve had a fun time, but it’s time to pack up and go home.”

“You want to give up?”

He nodded. “100 mph was exciting. It was one of the most exciting things I’ve ever done, but it was scary, stupid and dangerous. I can’t condone you doing what you’re planning to do. I’m sorry—I think we need to give up.”

“Well, I’m not asking for you to do anything,” Greg reminded him, looking tense. “I’m not at all worried about the next bit, I’ll be honest. I’ve done that kind of speed before. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Steve said sadly.

“The speed laws we have were put in place decades ago, to control the speed of cars. Technology has changed immeasurably since then. Motorbikes are incredibly fast now, with brakes that are more powerful than anything they’d dreamed of back then. Cars are now capable of driving themselves. Pretty soon there won’t even be speed limits anymore; we just won’t need them.”

“That’s right, because people won’t be driving. But people are driving right now and they make mistakes,” Steve said, making an impassioned plea for common-sense. “It’s just too silly!”

“I don’t need you, Steve,” said Greg with grim determination. “I’m giving this a go. You’ve done your bit and are welcome to go home, but I’m giving this a go. It’s not that hard, and I’m going to see it though.”

“You are?” he said sadly, chewing his bottom lip thoughtfully.

Greg nodded, rather talking himself into it, and largely regretting doing so. “I am!” he said stoically.

“Well then, I’ll stay with you. I’ll follow on behind, and then I can call an ambulance when it all goes wrong—at least I can be mildly useful in that way.” He knew he should have stuck to his guns and called off the whole stupid thing. He felt that there would be regrets about not doing so.

“I admire your optimism,” Greg grunted.

The waitress appeared behind them and put a bacon sandwich down in front of Greg with a smile. She put one down on Steve’s part of the table too, making a point of banging the plate down hard and glaring at him.

“Thanks,” he said, innocently. He turned to Greg, “You’d think I just got engaged to her sister or something.”

Greg smiled.

Steve picked up the sandwich and frowned. “Bacon? I said I was part Jewish.”

“That’s OK, because there’s bread too, so it’s only part bacon.”
“Oh well.” He grinned and took a bite. “Nobody’s that Jewish.”

They pulled onto a wide A-road and Greg started to pull away immediately. He hadn’t chosen to discuss it with Steve, who seemed nervous about everything, but he had a plan. He wasn’t going to settle for 120 mph—he was going to see just how much speed he could really get out of the BMW. He wanted to see how close he could get; try to touch the upper limit, to really find out what she was able to do for him.

His GPS flashed on the screen in front of him, a more accurate measure than the clocks on his dash. He twisted the throttle, and the big ‘boxer’ engine delivered, thrusting him forward with a respectable lick of acceleration. In his mirror, he could see the little ER6 vanishing into the distance behind him. This was it: he was going for it.

He tucked down behind the screen. It was tilted back already, and he was hoping to reduce the bulk that was crashing headlong into the air. Still, it had the wind-resistance of a brick that was holding a toilet door open, and there was precious little he could do to fix it. He could tape up some of the cracks, seal up some of the joints, maybe? He could roll back the mirrors, reduce weight somehow. Would any of that make a real difference? he wondered.

The bike shimmied. He looked down and grinned at the grey blur beneath his boot. 115 mph now and going strong—she still had more to give. The trees and hedges along the sides were rushing by, the colours melting together. A car ahead came and went, passed easily, just nudging the controls to swerve smoothly around it.

He was in top gear now and still accelerating. He checked the tachometer. She was revving hard, and pulling slower and slower as

he reached the end of her power. She had less and less left to give, but he was going to wring out every last drop of performance.

Come on! He willed her to pull harder, as the speedo slowed and the tacho rose. 125, 127, but it was slowing now—she was giving everything she had, and it was a long way off what he needed.

He backed down. The tacho wasn't moving—she just had nothing left; she had already given her all.

He left the brakes alone, and just closed the throttle slowly to let the engine slow him down. He settled at 50 mph to let Steve catch up, and then he let the speed drop again to 40. He huffed indignantly, grumbling to himself. He saw the lights in his mirror, and the little machine making up the gap between them.

He indicated that he was pulling off—Steve was close enough to see and followed suit. The pair of them swept into the next turn-off. The road looped round hard, and then they rolled along until he noticed a gateway with a small gravel drive. He pulled in to stop.

Steve shouted expectantly. “Well?” He frowned when he saw the look on his face.

“I made it,” he sighed. “I got her up to 127 mph. No problem there.”

Steve punched the air in triumph. “That’s awesome! So why are you so glum?”

“Steve, that’s all she had.” He kicked the ground and huffed heavily. “She’s not going to make it; she just can’t go any faster!”

“Oh!” Realising what was happening, his mood deflated accordingly. “Oh,” he said again.

“I thought it was a good opportunity to really see what she had,” Greg explained. “She got to 127, but she ran out of steam. She’s just got nothing left.”

“What about with the screen, and drilling holes?” Steve said hopefully.

He shook his head sadly, dejectedly. “I might be able to save a bit of weight; maybe take off the mirrors, lower the screen. It might earn me a few miles an hour, but not nearly 15. They always estimate the top speed a little high. She’s not going to see 137, let alone 140. It’s just not in her.”

“I see...” He slapped him on the shoulder. “We tried though, didn’t we?”

He nodded. Indeed they had. But had they tried hard enough? Was there more they could be doing? Maybe there was just a little more? “Are we really giving up?”

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What choice do we have?”

“How far is your house?” His eyes narrowed and a sly, almost evil grin fell on his face like a shadow. He had a plan, not a good plan, not a sane plan, and absolutely not a safe one.

“Not far. Where is this going?” Ideally, not back to his house, he clearly hoped.

Greg bit his lip. “Do you have a passport?”

Steve shook his head. “I’m afraid all avenues of escape have been closed off to me. Literally, the only hope I’ve got in having a remotely decent life is to be fired from my job so that my girlfriend leaves me.”

“After talking with you, I’m starting to envy the dead,” Greg noted pointedly.

“It’s true,” he said and nodded solemnly. “They don’t know how lucky they are. I guess that’s the point of being dead, at least as I understand it.”

“I have a passport,” Greg told him.

To Steve this appeared to be just one more way that a man who sold replica marble slabs had of looking down on him. He was beginning to think that there might actually be a significant problem here somewhere. “Good for you?” he guessed might be the correct response.

“I can be back here in an hour!” he said enthusiastically.

“Great!” Steve said with sarcastic exuberance. “And when you get back, will you be making any kind of sense whatsoever?”

“I need my passport, and my driving license.”

“And that will make you ride faster somehow?”

“Yes.”

“I will confess,” began Steve, shaking his head. “I’m not very good with physics, but it does seem that the problem here is with you and not with me!”

“Down there!” he said, pointing down the road. “There’s a BMW motorcycle dealer. They have BMW bikes ready for test-rides. They’ve got to have something fast enough for this. I just need my passport and my driving license to borrow a bike.”

“Oh, that’s a spectacularly terrible idea,” Steve said, and then realised it actually wasn’t the most spectacularly terrible idea they’d had that day.

“I’m very keen to hear your much better one!”

“It’s your funeral,” he said with a huff. “I’m behind you the whole way—though not in a literal sense, of course. At least, not close behind you.”

Climbing back on his bike, he turned and said, “I hope you put this kind of exciting melodrama into your tractor articles.”

“Sure,” he said and shrugged apathetically. “That’s why I earn the big bucks.”

As the big, ugly GS lumbered away into the distance, he said to himself: “So what do I do now?”

Steve parked up and followed Greg inside the dealership. Greg might have many, many horrible defects, but his sense of direction and ability to communicate those directions wasn't among them.

Stepping inside the dealership, he noted that it was a cut above the usual shops he'd been in before, and certainly other motorcycle dealers could learn a thing or two from them. Many of these places just crammed the motorcycles onto the shop floor—there was little style, little real thought put into it. This was coordinated, organised, and looked oddly professional. It was odd indeed, and especially so for a place that had anything to do with motorcycles.

"May I help you sir?" said a girl as she looked up from her desk. She was fairly attractive, brunette, and dressed in a company uniform. She may have been paid to speak with him, but it was still the longest conversation he'd had with a woman for a long time, at least one after which he was still smiling.

"I've got a Kawasaki," Steve said, pointing outside, wondering just exactly why he'd said that.

She smiled knowingly. "I'm sure we can fix that for you!"

"Can I just have a look round first?" Noticing the free coffee machine, he added, "I'm actually waiting for a friend—he's a BMW rider, he's looking to upgrade to something more dangerous!"

"No problem," she told him. "Help yourself. Just call me if you need any help with anything."

"I will!" He wouldn't.

The free coffee machine was the entire focus of his attention right now. He noticed the magazine rack right next to it. This was like his dream bedroom—beautiful motorcycles, a coffee machine, clean and fresh-smelling everything, and to make it even more perfect, his girlfriend wasn't in it. He did quite pointedly realise that it was time to do some very serious thinking about his future.

After what felt like just over an hour, the big BMW rolled up outside. It no longer appeared to be that large of a motorcycle, since the showroom was full of much larger ones in a variety of truly awful colours.

Greg came in and went over to join him. The coffee machine was set on a desk with a row of stools beneath it. He sat down and demanded a coffee.

Steve grudgingly poured him one, grumbling that he wasn't his mother, but was actually quite enjoying pressing the buttons. It made him feel important, which was something Woodwork Wonders rarely did and, more often, didn't.

Greg turned round and surveyed the scene. "What have we got here?"

"Motorcycles!" Steve pointed out helpfully. "Look! That one over there is like yours, only bigger."

Greg turned to glare at him. "Which means the same engine will be doing more work, so it will be slower. We need something altogether faster."

"Sure, silly me," he said and rolled his eyes. "I don't know much about bikes but if you wanted to know how to make a tractor out of wood, I'd probably be the man to come to."

Greg frowned thoughtfully and swiped up the free coffee, his favourite kind of coffee. "Can you make a tractor out of wood?" he said curiously.

Steve shrugged an ambivalent response as Greg began to make his way over to the desk. He followed, grudgingly, haltingly, unenthusiastically. He sat down heavily and waited for this horrible plan to unravel like a ball of wool attacked by a kitten that had got into a stash of amphetamines.

"Are you free?" he asked the young woman.

She smiled politely, gesturing around the empty showroom.

“That was a stupid question,” Steve observed. “I mean we understand that the coffee is free, but there must be a limit to how far you’ll go to sell bikes.”

She looked at him in surprise, and Greg was also now off his stoke. He played the whole thing down. “Please ignore my friend. He’s going to get married soon, and will probably have ginger children.”

“God, I hadn’t even thought of that...” He grimaced. “That could actually happen, couldn’t it? Somewhere, hundreds of years in the future, a descendant of mine could be journeying out into space, riddled with crippling neurosis and sporting a head-full of wiry ginger hair.

“What use will there be in the future for the wonders of woodwork or a love of tractors?”

There was a long moment of silence.

“What?” Greg frowned at him curiously.

“He’s going to end up as a waiter or something!” Steve grumbled to himself.

“Anyway...” she said, trying to get things back on track, or at least less off-track.

“Yes!” Greg agreed happily. “Because my friends are so unutterably awful, I’ve booked a touring holiday through Germany and into the Black Forest to get away from them.”

“I don’t blame you,” she agreed, casting an acidic glance back to Steve, as she raised her eyebrow curiously.

“Well I’ve had a GS for a few years, now. There’s some autobahn riding, and it’s just not really fast enough. I’ve never taken it off-road, and I’ve come to accept that I never will,” he explained.

“Most people never do,” she said with a chuckle. “They’re mostly sold to people who dream of riding around the world, but really just spend all their time riding to the coffee shop.”

“My God!” Steve grinned. “It’s like she can see the inside of your soul.”

“I’m sorry about him,” Greg sighed. “His fiancée doesn’t let him out much, and he gets a bit over-excited.”

“That is actually true,” he agreed. “Today, I had to tell her I was at a funeral. She told me to have fun.”

Greg desperately tried to keep the conversation on some kind of track, and at this point any track would do. “So, I’m looking for something that’s easier to ride quickly, something with a better pace. Something that’s still good for touring, but better at swallowing the miles quickly.”

“Did you have anything in mind?”

“Not really, but I’m hoping for a test drive. I only get weekends to myself at the moment, so I don’t have a lot of time. Anything you’d recommend? Something in stock, and available right now, hopefully...”

“Well, this is what we have!” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “The R1200R is more like what you’ve got—it has a similar boxer engine with the same torquey power delivery. It’s up to 125bhp, a little more than your GS. Or we’ve got the S1000S—it’s 160bhp, but it’s a more conventional layout. It is quick, though.”

“That second one sounds good,” he said thoughtfully, trying to seem like he really cared one way or the other. He had heard the words 160 bhp and that was all he really needed to know. “My friend has one—he said it was brilliant.”

“He said that?” She smiled, but it was hard to read what might be going on behind her professionalism. It didn’t matter, he only wanted it for half an hour—that was all he needed.

“Can I try it?”

“I think so.” She checked the diary and nodded in satisfaction. “I will need your ID—do you have a passport and driving licence?”

“I do.”

“Well, let’s see what we can do for you, then!”

The bike was grey and black, and the styling was appalling, but somehow it looked OK in the flesh, tolerable even. It was a bike that was sold on reputation; a motorcycle that would perhaps stir your emotions, if not impress your eyes.

“Are you really doing this?” Steve chuckled, shaking his head and looking like he was by far the more nervous of the two.

Greg nodded that indeed he was. Indeed, he absolutely was.

“You do realise just what a hopelessly dreadful idea this actually is, don’t you?”

“Is it a worse idea than marrying, sorry, what was her name?” he asked.

“Prunella.” He winced at the sound of it. “I know you’re right, but you don’t have a Prunella at home to give you something really worth dying for.”

“I have an ex-Prunella and a son that hates me,” he told him with a sigh. “He’s only 7. I can’t even get joint custody. I see him one weekend a month. He won’t call me daddy, and thinks I want to hurt his mum. There are days when I kind of do.”

“OK, you win this round,” Steve told him sarcastically.

“And let’s not forget, I sell fake marble slabs,” he added. “It’s not exactly living the dream. Your terrible future offspring might be ginger space-waiters, but what will mine be? Driven insane by crushing boredom, I would guess, if they inherit too much of my DNA. He’ll probably end up delivering towels. Maybe they’ll end up working together?”

“But at least you can provide for the boy, right? I guess...”

He grinned. “I’ve got life insurance.”

“There’s that abundance of confidence again, the one you’re always filling me with.” Steve shook his head and looked really quite nervous.

“He’ll be alright, if the worst happens. He’ll inherit a hefty cash pay-out, my incredible good looks, and bottomless reserves of charm. It’s better than neurosis, and possibly ginger hair.”

“He’d be better off with ginger hair than with your looks and charm!” Steve told him. He rested his hand on his shoulder and shook his head sadly. “Be careful out there, Greg!”

The girl came out with the key. She handed it to him, making a big show of it. “Please don’t break this bike,” she said, making it sound like she meant it, though it was unlikely it would make any difference to her one way or the other.

“I won’t,” he said with a grin as he put on his helmet. He locked the strap and turned the key. The digital dash flashed to life, splashing information all over it. The fuel pump whirred and then she was ready. With a press of the starter button and she purred to life. It was smoother than his BMW, almost silky-smooth. He twisted the throttle gingerly, and the revs stepped up in instant response.

“I think I’m going to like this!” he said. He clicked it into gear and pulled away, taking it easy as he got a feel for the machine.

Steve shook his head. She looked at him and tried to be the professional. “And what about you—can I offer you a test-ride?”

He looked over sadly, and smiled a weak, pathetic smile. “Lucky for you, I’m almost married, or else I might just have taken you up on that. If it wasn’t for an accident of fate, you could be rejecting me right now! You must feel terrible about that.”

Greg headed straight to the nearby motorway. The bike was responsive—a hint of throttle made her growl, and the power was

delivered instantly. By the time he was at the slip-road, he was already considering buying one with his share of the winnings.

He took it off to the side and laid on the power. The countryside blurred away, melting into a stream of blended colour. The acceleration was amazing—it just seemed endlessly powerful, as if it could keep going faster forever.

There was no proper screen, just a low fairing that offered no protection to anyone larger than a small child. He tucked down to reduce the wind resistance, but still the air blew across his helmet and, as he went faster, his eyes blurred and stung and the whistle of the air rang in his ears. He didn't care—it was exhilarating! His heart fluttered lightly as the excitement filled his body. He joined the motorway. There was traffic, but not much, and it was travelling fast.

Not much was moving at the speed limit already, and he had only to touch 140mph for a moment. If he could do that, he had won. He had beaten this stupid challenge, and raised the money for a trip. He would have earned the money for his trip, albeit in the stupidest way possible.

He saw it—a pathway. He looked down and was already making 80 mph, but it felt like nothing. This motorcycle had so much more to give; so, so much more. There was a gap that stretched upwards before him. There were no trucks bunched into the side lane, a clean, smooth run.

He felt a surge of adrenaline and he twisted the throttle.

It was like releasing a monster. The caged-up beast was unleashed, the bike growled angrily, the machine lurched forward with a jolt, and he was pushed firmly backwards, holding on with a pure effort of will. His helmet roared at him as the wind rushed through.

It was smooth—the bike held the line perfectly and pulled and pulled, faster and faster. The wind-howl was suddenly all there was.

The sound of the engine, the roar of the exhaust was gone, and all that remained was him and the speed: the world was melting away around him.

He was smiling to himself. Cars passed by in a blur as he overtook them. They wouldn't have a chance of keeping pace with him. He glanced very quickly to the dash, and straight back up ahead.

He didn't catch the speed, his eyes firmly rooted to the line he was following. He tried again, risking a longer glance. That's when saw it—145 mph. He began to laugh.

It was finally over.

Deliver the items to the addresses in the correct order.

Paul wasn't impressed. Not impressed at all, which was somewhat ironic, given that he was so unimpressive himself. He scowled, he grumbled, he grunted and he glared. He cast a glance back to Tracey, his girlfriend. She was getting far too personal with the man she was partnered up with, altogether far too personal.

He looked away, shaking his head. She was his girlfriend, he told himself. It wasn't like she was going to run off and have sex with some random stranger she'd just met—she just wasn't that sort of girl. Was she?

He tried hard to convince himself of that, and, eventually, the idea did more or less settle in between his ears where few ideas managed to achieve the same.

He held up the clue again. It made no sense, none whatsoever. What was he meant to deliver, to what addresses, and in what order?

“You Paul?”

He turned in surprise as a voice cut into his train of thought, derailing it instantly. It was a small, young man with the face of a poorly-shaved rat. He was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt that proudly announced that he ‘fucked on first dates’, and a leather jacket that was probably found in the dustbins behind a charity shop. His face was stretched tightly over his skull, and his eyes couldn't have appeared more dead if they had been made from pieces of glass.

“Who are you?” Paul grunted defensively.

“Kyle, innit.” He shrugged, and made a clicking noise with his mouth like he'd just finished chewing on an unpleasant-tasting penis.

“Yeah, I’m Paul.” He nodded, and tried to make himself seem larger by puffing out his chest. He widened his eyes and began nodding, as if agreeing with some joke that he wasn’t quite sure he’d understood.

“We’re partners, innit,” Kyle drawled with something like a London accent, but spoken through broken teeth by someone so lazy that they couldn’t quite manage the horribly difficult challenge of forming proper words.

Paul held up the challenge and looked around the room to make sure nobody was watching. “This is our challenge.”

Kyle continued pretending to chew some imaginary gum, rolling his eyes and looking away to the distance. “What we gotta do?” the little rat-boy said aggressively.

Paul grunted. The explanation seemed to be going about as well as trying to hammer a glass nail into a metal plank of wood. “Deliver something!” he told him, rolling his eyes. “That’s all, just deliver something to someone.”

“An’ den I get... like... a million paands?” Kyle grinned. His teeth were a graveyard where a million cans of coke had gone to die.

“No-one is going to give you a million pounds for delivering something to some address.” Paul frowned at him. A dog would have probably been able to grasp that. Granted, it would have to have been a gifted dog that liked doing tricks, and could maybe ride on a skateboard.

“But like... a million paands, innit!” He drawled an answer that wasn’t an answer to a question that also wasn’t a question. “Drugs, though, right? Get a million paands for delivering drugs. Innit?”

“Drugs?” Paul frowned as the idea rattled uncomfortable around his brain—not the most densely packed, or high-functioning region of his body. “This is a bike charity run for cancer or something. It’s not going to be about delivering drugs and shit!”

“Million paands.” Kyle grunted, drawled, or did something so that the words came out and were just about comprehensible.

Paul wasn’t thrilled about this. He wanted to do the run with his girlfriend, Tracey, not with a vaguely animated lump of meat that had assumed vaguely human form.

Rather than explain the finer points of earning a million pounds to someone who came with a written guarantee of a sexual encounter, he pointed to the desk where the clues were drawn. Someone had piled up envelopes which might, or might not, clear up some of the confusion. “Look, envelopes!”

The explanation really should have been enough but you can never be quite sure. Kyle shrugged and sniffed.

“Well, they might have more rules.”

Kyle sniffed and shrugged, just for the sake of variety.

“One of them might tell us what to do.”

He looked again. He shrugged, and looked at the floor, chewing again on some imaginary thing, or his tongue or a tooth that might have broken loose from his sickly, swollen gums.

“Go and get the envelope!” Paul told him, grunting angrily.

Kyle just stared at him, blinked slowly, and shrugged. “What one, innit?”

“Oh for...” the words trailed off, since engaging in further conversation seemed rather pointless. He walked over himself, swaggering exaggeratedly, and trying to appear bigger, meaner and more impressive than he knew he really was, since he knew he really wasn’t.

Kyle appeared to be following, for all the use he might be.

Paul rummaged, discarding the few remaining envelopes on the desk in a haphazard pile. He held his aloft, proudly. “This one!”

Kyle watched emptily. “This will tell us what it is we’ve gotta do?”

Paul grunted and began walking away, huffing in disgust. "Let's find somewhere more private."

McDonald's seemed like the perfect place to discuss the matter, since the local café already had several bikers in it. The rules had been quite strict about discussing their challenges with anyone from other teams. Doing so could get you disqualified and Paul wanted his share: he wasn't about to lose it for a stupid reason like that. He was looking for a much less stupid reason, such as the one sat opposite him.

He ripped open the envelope while Kyle watched emptily. Inside were ten red Ziploc® bags, a GPS tracker, and a set of rules. None of this made any impact on Kyle whatsoever.

Paul frowned. What if it really was drugs? Carefully, he picked one up and then dropped it, instantly concerned about leaving fingerprints. "What are they?"

"Bags," Kyle shrugged, his voice carrying quite well. "Probably drugs, innit?"

"It's not drugs," he hissed, shouting the words through a whisper. He sat back, swallowed his nervousness and picked a bag, trying to look as if he was filled with confidence. He gingerly pulled open the bag and tipped it up. Out dropped a small card with an address. He looked inside—there was nothing else in there. "That's it?" he said somewhat surprised, but with no small amount of relief.

"It's an address."

There it was - the smartest thing Kyle had said all day; possibly in many days; maybe ever.

"Give me that." Paul swiped up the instructions from the desk, not really talking to anyone—nobody sufficiently sentient to understand such difficult concepts appeared to be in attendance. "It's a list of addresses. We've got to take the bags to each one in

turn, and put them somewhere not easy to find, but not too hard to find either. A different group is going to collect them, and we have to race them.”

Kyle shrugged.

“The first one was delivered this morning by the organisers, so we have a head start. We’re up for the second through to the last, number 10.” He sat back heavily. “That’s a lot to deliver in one day. The addresses are all over the place as well.”

Kyle didn’t even bother shrugging. He was clearly a man of few words, fewer ideas, and still fewer thoughts. Paul grimaced. It was like being partnered up with a tent-peg that was hammered securely to the floor, tethering him to the spot, so he could scarcely move. Paul was no genius himself; he knew it, and had come to peace with such things, but this was something of an entirely different calibre.

His girlfriend was also far from an intellectual, although he unwisely, and perhaps incorrectly, assumed himself her superior. Even she, with her limited interest in the world around her, described him as a half person, half donkey thing with the intellectual range of a ‘Channel 5’ drama’. She also described him as having the sexuality of a cocktail sausage, and did so publicly; he had no idea how publicly, and, if he had known, he would have preferred the ignorance, the blissful peace of not knowing.

“I’ve got a plan!” he said, narrowing his crazy rolling eyes.

Kyle made some kind of gesture that would have been meaningless to anything that wasn’t biologically bovine.

Paul continued, “I’ll divide the addresses up into two piles. You cover one side of London, and I’ll do the other. Simple. We cover twice the distance in half the time.”

“How’d I doodat?” came the reasonably nonsensical reply. Frankly, this was now starting to piss Paul off, and it was beginning to show.

“You take your bike, I take mine,” he explained. “We deliver to each address on our own and meet back here.”

“I ain’t got no bikkke!” He spat the last words, sounding like he resented the world because of them.

“What?” Paul would have been flabbergasted, but he didn’t know what that meant, so for now, he simply remained fixed with surprise. “But this is a challenge for bikers! You have to have a bike! It says so in the rules!”

“Ain’t got none, innit?” Kyle explained succinctly.

“But if you haven’t got a bike, why did you even bother to enter?”

“Million paands, innit? I wanna million paands.”

“Oh my fucking God, I don’t fucking believe this!”

Nothing was going right for Paul. He was the kind of person nothing went right for, since he tended to do everything right wrongly, although he was well known for doing the wrong thing completely right, on certain occasions.

“So,” he growled at the horrible little man who just stood there wiping his nose and wobbling his eyes around like his brain was capable of nothing more—if it was, it would have been something of a waste. “You’ll have to get on my bike and help. I’ll do all the work then, shall I, seeing as you’re as useless as a towel made of cheese?”

“I aint gettin on no bikkke,” he told him, sounding like he really actually meant it, maybe. Who knew?

“You fucking muppet!” Paul yelled at him, cautiously, since he liked to look like a man who liked to fight, but was actually a man

who liked to avoid such things at any cost. “You might have already got me disqualified from this bloody challenge, now you want your share of the money and won’t do a damn thing to earn it?”

“I wanna million paands.”

Paul did indeed appear to be following his reasoning correctly. He picked out the appropriate bag and threw it on the floor in front of him. Quite angrily, he hissed, “Take that bag to the café, tell them that someone is coming later and will ask for it. Give it to them when they do. Do you think you can manage to do that?”

Kyle chewed on nothing a little harder. He looked away, and then very slowly, very methodically, he crossed his arms. “You do it, innit.”

“What?!” Paul was flabbergasted, even if that meant he’d have to look it up. It occurred to him that the complexities of actually communicating with the staff in the café might be stretching his abilities beyond their limits, such as they were. The fact that they were in a race wasn’t lost on him, and time was running out.

Grudgingly, Paul picked up the bag himself. “Get yourself ready,” he hissed. “When I get back, you’re getting on my bike and we’re doing this. Do you fucking understand?” For once, Paul actually sounded like he meant it.

“Awight,” Kyle shrugged. “Wateva.”

Paul stalked angrily off to the café, leaving the source of his frustration behind. He opened the door and, luckily for him, there were no motorcyclists inside. It occurred to him that if one had seen what he was doing, it might have disqualified him from the game. He looked around, trying not to look conspicuous.

He walked up to the counter, where a very bored woman was wiping some clean cups with a dirty towel. Barely looking up, she said, “What can I get you?”

“I just need a favour, please.” His London accent was suddenly, mysteriously gone, vanished in a moment as he tried to look thoroughly respectable. He pulled out the Ziploc bag, flipped it open, and pulled out the address. “I’ve got some mates dropping by later and they don’t know my address. Can you give them this? They’ll ask for it. Is that OK?”

“Sure, leave it there,” she said, gesturing with her eyes to the side of the counter.

He walked back to the church car-park, fuming with impotent rage. He rounded the corner, and there he was—the most obviously useless thing in the world. He was like a pair of brakes jammed full on. Just the fact of his existence was a problem, an issue that made everything else that much more difficult.

It was lost on Paul that this was exactly how much of the world viewed him.

“You ready?” he grunted.

Kyle nodded, just this once. In his hand he was holding a helmet which was progress at least.

“Where did you get that, if you haven’t got a bike?” he asked suspiciously.

“Faand it,” he slurred, and held it up to show him.

“That’s my fucking helmet.”

“Nah,” Kyle grunted, frowning. “Fannd it. Was dere, innit?” He pointed to Paul’s motorcycle, where he’d left the helmet fastened to the handlebars with a bicycle lock from Poundland—a lock that was now broken and lying on the floor in defeat.

He marched over and grabbed the helmet, wrenching it rudely from his grip. “You little shit! You tried to steal my bloody helmet!” His rage was becoming increasingly less impotent now, and

he felt like he might actually do something interesting. He felt his face redden, his muscles twitching.

“Ditn’t no, dit I?” it explained, with words that were almost words, but still made for a pitiful explanation.

“I’m gonna fucking smack you!” said Paul, furious, his fist clenching and unclenching. Stress was building, and he was only a stupid comment away from launch.

Kyle looked like he’d been smacked many times before. He didn’t wince or recoil away, but didn’t seem to be holding his ground either. He just accepted that this might happen, and that it was of no great concern either way.

“I’ll tell ma dad, innit?” he sneered

Paul couldn’t believe he was hearing this. “Your dad? How bloody old are you?”

“18. My dad’s a big bloke, innie? He’d kick ya fukkin arse, innit!”

“You stupid little shit! This isn’t your bloody playground at bloody school. We’ve got a chance to win some serious money here. You need to get your shit together!”

“He int ma real dad. My mum says ma real dad was a sold-ja. He fought in avgansaan and killed some mooslims. Or a fizziks teacha wot banged er at skool, she can’t be shor,” he explained. It was more likely the former, Paul assumed although there had to have been some element of foetal alcohol syndrome at play, so it was anyone’s guess.

Paul really wanted to kill him but, honestly, it felt like it would be doing him a favour. “Get a helmet.”

“Don’t need one, mess up ma air, innit?” he said, drawing like a child that was trying to speak while holding its lips together.

Paul made a grunting noise from the back of his throat. “Find a fucking helmet!” he spat the words through gritted teeth.

Kyle pointed to Paul's. "Faand dat one, dittent I? S'mine now."

With a satisfying crack that shocked them both, Paul slapped him, and really quite hard at that. He was a man with limits, but those had passed him by some time back. It was the last straw, and he lashed out without even thinking about it, without even noticing he'd done it at first.

Kyle reeled in surprise, his hand pressed to the side of his reddened face.

Paul was even more surprised. He blinked and looked at his slightly sore hand; it was tingling and numb.

"What da fark?" Kyle cried out through laboured breaths. "I shud fukken nife you for dat, man. I shud stik ya!"

Paul began to smirk. The quite feminine slap he had just administered was the manliest act he'd performed in a good long time. "Are you going to sort yourself out, boy?" he said angrily, riding on the crest of his adrenaline-fueled stupidity.

"Awrite, awrite," Kyle grumbled, leaning away and actually appearing to be a little bit intimidated.

Paul was loving this. "Get a helmet. You've got 2 minutes, and I don't care how you do it."

"OK," he nodded grumpily, and slunk off to 'find' something. There were still several motorcycles parked in the car-park, and he headed off in their direction, presumably with the intention of liberating something to which he wasn't entitled.

Paul shook his head and sighed. It was still something of a relief that the small matter of controlling him was now dealt with, and more importantly, without a knife being stuck anywhere in his chunky torso.

Paul's motorcycle was a Honda 600cc Hornet, lightly modified with 900cc stickers which, not surprisingly, had done nothing to affect the

performance. Still, it was no slouch and was able to make a good pace. It was a naked bike—no plastic fairing, just a traditional round headlight, and enough of everything else to keep it moving. He had a holder on the dash into which he could fit his phone; it had cost £2 on eBay, and still he moaned that he'd been ripped off since his phone sat at a slight angle. It had GPS, an effective navigational tool, plenty to get them to their destination.

They made their way to the second address, the first on their list.

They arrived outside a completely ordinary newsagent. Paul looked it over quite carefully, scanning every detail. He wondered if there was any significance to it; had it been chosen at random or did it mean something? He wondered briefly if there was a puzzle here for them to solve.

“We iz ere?” came a slurring nonsensical drawl from behind him. At least, he had been quiet while they were riding.

Paul pointed with his thumb, gesturing for him to get off, and, against the odds, he seemed to understand well enough. He stepped off himself and looked around. “OK, I’ll go in and distract them; you find somewhere to hide the bag—nowhere too obvious, nowhere too difficult. You got that?”

“Where?” he shrugged.

“Anywhere,” Paul told him, heading inside. He winced as he heard himself say, “Use your imagination.”

Inside was as equally far from special as the outside, no more, no less. An Indian woman looked up with distracted interest, and gave him an actually friendly smile. He smiled back. The smell of various aromatic spices hung in the air, but not in a way that was even remotely pleasant. The shop was dark; posters blocked the windows, robbing the place of natural light.

He grabbed a pack of mints and took them to the counter. “Just these please,” he said, rummaging through the coins in his pocket.

He paid, and while she went to get the change, he glanced outside, hoping to see nothing crashing to the floor, on fire, or his bike missing because Kyle had ‘fand it’. He looked back, took the money with a muttered thanks and he left. All nice and simple.

That couldn’t have been easier, he thought to himself with a happy smile.

Kyle was standing with his hands hanging limply at his sides. He was slouched over and chewing on whatever was, or wasn’t, in his mouth.

“Done?” Paul said, hopefully. After all, what could possibly go wrong?

“Yeah,” he shrugged, and pointed to the ground where he’d simply dropped the bag on the floor.

“What the fuck?” Paul was actually shocked—genuinely, really shocked by this. How hard could it actually be to do the simplest of tasks? Even a dog could hide a bone, and without spending too much time away from its skateboard. “You were meant to hide it,” he growled.

“Iss dere,” he said, pointing again. “I ‘id it, innit?”

“It’s on the bloody floor. It’s not hidden at all!” Paul nearly screamed at him, managing just barely to hold his temper in check. “Do you even know what hide means?”

“Yeah,” he frowned like a man insulted; like a gentleman who had ordered a fine wine, and had been served the wine he ordered, but that of a different year. He looked like a man who had just bought literally anything that had been made in China. “I ‘id it. Last place dey’d fink ov lookin’, innit? Da fuckkin floor.”

“It’s a bright red, fucking bag!” Paul knew any effort was largely wasted, much like being nice to Tracey after three shots of tequila. He clenched his teeth and raised his hand to slap him again—slap him so hard that his grandchildren were going to come out retarded, though this was largely a foregone conclusion in either case.

He winced this time, holding up his hand to cover his face. “Nah, don’t slap me agin!”

“Get in there and distract them while I hide it properly,” Paul hissed at him coldly.

“Yeah, awrite,” he grunted, looking out from behind his hand to make sure he was safe. “Dunno wat ‘destrakted’ means.”

“It means, go in there and make sure they’re watching you and not me.” Paul cringed, his slapping-hand rested on his temples where a pretty respectable migraine was starting to form.

“Awrite den.” He slunk off, dragging himself into the shop against some kind of internal resistance, like a man wading through knee-deep apathy.

Paul grumbled, and quickly tucked the bag into some racking at the front of the shop. It was just so simple, so why was it just so hard?

Suddenly, there was yelling, and Kyle quickly dashed out of the shop. “Lez go, innit?” he said wide-eyed and showing the first signs of motivation that he’d exhibited all day. Perhaps he was growing as a person?

Paul was pleased to see he was finally getting with it, finally understanding what was at stake, maybe? As he reached for his helmet, an Indian man came running out of the shop, sweating and heaving under the weight of a mighty belly.

“You there, you bloody bastard,” he called out, pointing to Kyle.

Paul just stood in horror. Oh no.

Kyle cried out, "I never dit it. I din do nuffink."

The Indian man shouted in a horrifyingly thick accent, "You bloody bastard, you steal from me, I call police, then we see how you like it." He ground the language like a piece of meat being forced into a mincer.

Paul did agree with the previous sentiment that maybe, just maybe, it was time to go.

"I called the police!" the shopkeeper screamed over and over again.

Paul threw the bike into gear and pulled away. Kyle was barely on the back, and frankly, he just didn't really care. He cranked the throttle and got away as fast as he could.

"A sex shop?!" Paul grumbled as they pulled up outside. "You've got to be joking."

Kyle stepped off the bike and mumbled inside his liberated helmet, "My dad tuk me ta a sex shop wuns an' 'e sed 'e waz gonna mak me a man. He bort me a big blak rubba cok."

Paul just narrowed his eyes, as his brain screamed at him.

"He izn't ma real dad. Mum sayz 'e left to kill mooslims or suumink. Dem mooslims need killin', innit?"

"I think it's best if you stay here this time. I'll go and hide the bag." Paul glared at him, and hung his helmet on the handlebars. "On second thoughts, you come with me. I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"Wateva." He grunted, sniffed, wiped his nose on his sleeve, played with his balls, spat on the floor, and then followed along as requested.

It was like somehow stepping into another world, a world where things he could scarcely imagine were hanging from metal hooks, formed in greasy black rubber. There were things that looked like penises everywhere, in every available colour, especially purple, for some incomprehensible reason.

Paul felt just a little awkward, and more than just a little, if the truth be told, as it rarely wasn't when it came to matters of sex. This time, when he spoke, his words were only the truth. "Bloody hell, I don't like this."

The place was dark. In the corner, an old bald man was browsing through some things on a shelf. Paul couldn't see, nor did he want to, what he was looking at. The man looked up accusingly, and then settled back into his furtive rummaging.

Paul gingerly stepped through the place.

The proprietor looked up again, grinned to himself, clearly quite well used to the uninitiated customers that passed through. "Can I help you, gentlemen?" he called out cheerfully, with just a hint of sarcasm.

Paul was trapped then—there was no escape from his fixed gaze. It wasn't as if he could just say he was browsing; he couldn't pretend to suddenly be interested in leather whips, chains and fur-lined handcuffs. His mind just wasn't at all interested in joining in—it just stood there glaring at him, angrily tapping its foot with its arms crossed defiantly; it seemed to be saying, you got yourself into this, you get yourself out.

"Um, yeah..." He made his way to the front, careful not to let anything touch him. "I just want to leave a note for a friend."

"You want to leave a note for a friend?" The man chuckled and looked around, as if seeing, really seeing the shop for the first time. "This isn't a post office."

“Yeah.” Clearly he was quite right about that, although a lot of the underwear did have openings that would have been suitable for the purpose of sticking a small note into. He coughed, pretending to clear his throat. “I’m meant to meet someone here, but I’m well early.”

“It’s not a coffee shop either,” he huffed. “If you want a 10 inch dildo, this is the place; if you want to hang out with your mates, probably it’s not ideal.”

“Yeah, we were going to buy something,” he shrugged, digging a hole he wasn’t sure if he’d ever find a way to escape from.

“And what is it you’re looking for?” he asked sarcastically, leaning back and finding sudden interest in the conversation. “I’ve got crotch-less panties, schoolgirl uniforms, adult diapers and inflatable sheep, all on special offer today. You look like a sheep-person, if I had to guess.”

“No, it’s not for me!” he said hurriedly.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and assume you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“I’ve got a girlfriend!” he growled, his accent deepening, although strictly speaking it wasn’t his accent. Even more strictly speaking, it wasn’t his girlfriend. “It’s not for her—she doesn’t like all this stuff.”

“Your girlfriend doesn’t like sex?” he smirked. “Yeah, that does make a bit more sense.”

“No.” He shook his head, gesturing with his hands for all this to stop. “No!”

“I do have a 15 inch rubber penis, fresh in this week, The Gargantuan. It might just be the perfect thing for the discerning gentleman.”

“It’s a joke,” he said quickly. “For a stag do, or... or something. We want to get something as a laugh.” This actually made perfect

sense, and he was impressed he had thought of it. His brain relaxed slightly, and felt a little, but not much, more like joining in.

The man seemed to lose interest slightly. "Oh, we get a lot like that here."

"But my mates haven't turned up," he said with a shrug. "I just want to leave a note for them, then we can come back later and get it."

"Most of the stuff here is aimed at men who aren't getting it," he commented dryly.

Paul was out of his depth. "Can I just leave a note?"

"This isn't a post office!"

"Please?" This could have all been so easy...

"£50," He shrugged. "£50 and you can you leave your grandmother's spleen for all I care. Otherwise, you can go and find a post office with a coffee shop in it."

"I haven't got £50," he grumbled. He looked at Kyle hopefully, more hopefully than anyone had ever looked at him before, at least more than once.

"Wat?" he snapped, putting down a toy penis.

"Have you got £50?" Paul asked, relieved that he appeared to have been following along nicely.

"Nah," he grunted, tutting noisily.

"Well, what have you got?"

"Dunno." He tutted some more.

"Well, have a bloody look and see," he yelled quite angrily.

Kyle tutted, and very slowly, offering a significant degree of passive resistance, he searched his pockets.

"Well?" Paul was losing his temper, and was no longer above administering an educational slapping.

"Wat?" he grunted again.

Paul rolled his eyes. "What have you got?"

“A Kitkat,” he said as if revealing a pearl of great wisdom, but in the stunted manner of a monkey whose head had been attached to the body of a completely different monkey by a Russian scientist.

Paul was vibrating with rage. He rummaged in his own pockets and scraped together... “£20?”

The man looked at the dog-eared notes accusingly, rubbing his chin as if weighing up the massive ramifications. “I don’t know. £20, and this still isn’t a post office.”

“£20 and a kitkat?” Paul reached for the stars and grabbed for the moon.

“Go on then!” he finally agreed. “It’s your lucky day, since I have a soft-spot for chocolate made by evil corporations.”

Paul snatched Kyle’s lunch to weak protestation, which took the form of some very severe tutting. He handed them over, frowning. “Evil corporations?”

“Look it up—inform yourself.”

“Isn’t it a little hypocritical for a man who sells The Gargantuan to be passing judgement on the moral value of others?”

“How little you know of what it is that we do here!” he said sadly. “Now piss off before I change my mind.”

As Paul pissed off before he changed his mind, there was some laughter that he chose to ignore.

“Where now?” He rummaged in his pocket and checked the list. Groaning, he said, “We already dropped off the clue to the café, so we don’t have to bother with that one. Next up is NW6.”

Kyle had probably never left the part of London where he currently resided, presumably in the same bedroom he’d grown up in, and maybe had been conceived in, as well. All this supposed that the biology of his kind was the same as what we humans consider normal. All of this was like trying to teach ageing physics-teachers

not to have sex with retarded pupils, in case of the terrible consequences that could befall us all, and thinking about it was just too much for Paul.

He didn't even shrug; not so much as a flicker of a reaction. Paul, momentarily wondered why he would even want to win a million pounds. His entire aspirations so far had climbed no higher than a Kitkat, which he'd stolen from a local newsagent.

Would being wealthy really change him very much? Was his dream to steal a higher class of chocolate bar from a more exclusive news-retailing emporium? Was he secretly dreaming of one day pilfering a Cadbury's Flake from WH Smiths? Of course, in the mind of Paul, this was discussed in a more down-to-earth manner using words of three syllables or less.

"Alright, this is going to be another long ride," he grumbled, putting the coordinates into his phone.

Kyle just remained essentially still. His movements were random and sporadic, and seemed to serve no useful purpose. They essentially added up to nothing, and if an expert in body language had examined them, they would have likely drawn the conclusion that, right now, not very much was going on inside his head. This was absolutely true, and for two very good reasons. The first being that, right now, not very much was going on inside his head; and the second being that not very much was ever going on inside his head.

Paul just stared. Shaking his head, he remembered that all this was a race and that they had a goal to reach. He threw his leg over his bike and turned the key. He felt the tail slump with the extra weight as Kyle joined him. He pressed the button and they rode off along the road.

Paul was not a particularly fast rider, even on a 900cc Hornet, which his motorcycle absolutely wasn't. He travelled quickly, but never

took risks; he nervously picked his way through traffic, taking time to pause, waiting for the chance to cut through.

He had no passion; he took no pleasure from the performance of his machine. It wasn't part of who he was. He was a man who owned a motorcycle, nothing more. It was no more a part of his soul than rational thought was part of his daily routine.

The phone blinked that a turning was ahead, and he duly followed without a second thought—it wouldn't have occurred to him not to. Disobedience was not his strong suit; he was the sort of person who, on occasion, might find himself staring at cartons of fruit juice marked Concentrate.

Eventually, he turned the final corner and rode along a straight, long and even road which took them under a narrow railway bridge formed from rusted steel girders, painted a dark and ugly blue. He slowed down, convinced he was close. He saw the road name and it was, indeed, correct. He pulled over and peered to the opposite side of the road.

That appeared to be exactly what he was looking for. It had a driveway, a place of ramped concrete on which to park. Beyond that were a few nondescript windows peering out from a tatty and run-down building, a painted brown door, and some very small signs set into a shambolic and crumbling brick wall. It seemed like nothing particularly interesting, certainly nothing as terrible as a sex-shop. He sighed happily and checked the flow of traffic. When a suitable gap appeared, he turned into the road and headed over to park.

He narrowed his eyes, squinting at a tiny sign with the details printed on it. Sure enough, this was the correct address. He shrugged to himself—at least this would be easy. Kyle was already off the bike; he had learned that much, at least.

“Wat is dis place?” he grunted from inside a little pink helmet that was considerably too small for him. His little pink nose, which was considerably too large for him, jutted out through the opening.

Paul shrugged. He had literally no idea. “Let’s just get this over and done with, shall we?” He reached inside his jacket and pulled out the little red bag. “We’ll just tuck this in somewhere and be on our way.”

He waved the bag around, as if fanning the ground with it. Biting his lip thoughtfully, he looked around for somewhere to hide the thing.

“Excuse me!” a voice surprised him.

He was shocked. He jumped and turned around, startled with eyes wide open, peering about guiltily.

“What are you doing?”

This wasn’t a question that was easy to answer. The woman asking it was around fifty, overweight, dark-skinned with braided hair and a blue floral dress. She spoke with a heavy Caribbean accent but, more importantly, was glaring at him accusingly and looked like a force to be reckoned with. He hadn’t reckoned on a force of any kind, and consequently he was unsure how to reckon with it. He froze for a moment making a rather stupid grunting noise as his brain ran out of charge.

“What is that bag?” She pointed and looked angry—really angry, like he had stolen her lunch. She frowned and began wagging her finger at him in admonishment. “Oh that’s it!” She rolled her eyes. “I am phoning the police.” She hefted her not inconsiderable bulk and moved with a speed that belied her great mass.

Paul sighed. It could be worse, perhaps. Somehow things could always be worse. He looked at Kyle and winced. “Wait!” he cried out, running inside the ramshackle building.

The interior had the look of being made out of old wrecked portable cabins, the kind you might find serving as a temporary office on a building site. These were anything but temporary. The walls were dirty and grey, and had been standing for some time, perhaps too long a time. Posters were plastering the walls, and they looked ominously as if they were trying to teach him something. He sprinted down the corridor to where the woman in the floral dress was heading to a reception area.

“You!” She turned and pointed again. “We don’t want your kind here, selling your drugs. These people have enough problems without you people.”

“You people?” he repeated, pointed to himself. “I’m not a you people. I’m not a drug dealer.” Why on earth would she think such a thing? At this point, he noticed the little red bag in his hand. Groaning to himself, he made an effort to clarify the situation. He said, “This isn’t drugs: it’s an address, that’s all!”

She stopped. She was angry, and she glared at him as if he was beneath contempt. It was a look he was comfortably familiar with. This was all fair enough really.

“Look!” He opened the bag and took out the address. He stepped very gingerly closer to show her that there was nothing untoward happening.

“I fort it was drugs, too, innit?” Kyle very helpfully added.

“What are you doing here, then?” she asked, balling her fists and digging them into her sides. “Explain!”

It wasn’t going to be easy.

“I wanna miwion paands,” Kyle said, not entirely constructively adding to the conversation.

She looked at him suspiciously. “Are you mental?”

“Nah...” he grunted, almost as if such a thing might be an insult, and, if so, then only to people who were actually mental.

“Yes, he’s mental!” Paul said quickly. “He’s a bit slow. He’s very slow, actually.” No lies so far...

She suspiciously sniffed the air close to Paul’s face with an angry frown. “Something is wrong here,” she shouted, and then began to laugh. “I know. You have come at the wrong time.”

Paul frowned, not sure where this was going. She relaxed and turned away, walking slowly back to the reception area. Paul gingerly followed, feeling like he was meant to, for some reason. Reason was not the order of the day, and some was better than none.

She turned around suddenly, alarming him slightly, and was now armed with a clip-board.

“See!” she said, pointing to the board, which explained essentially nothing. “Your kind of people meet at 10am on Monday. The meeting now is drug abusers. Next is the support group for serial wife beaters, and after that, chronic masturbation.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you serial wife beaters or chronic masturbators?”

Paul shook his head—indeed he was not, not that he was in any way sure how such things could possibly be measured. How much was too much?

“So bring the little potato back Monday at 10 a.m.,” she told him. “We’ll look after him. We teach them to make coffee this week without drinking straight from the kettle. We’ve been teaching some of them that for three weeks.” She rolled her eyes and she laughed loudly. “I’m on first-name terms with a cute ambulance-driver!”

“She finks I’m slow!” Kyle frowned, as if this was entirely unreasonable.

Paul couldn’t help but agree with both of them. “Sorry for the misunderstanding!” he added with a shrug.

“No problem!” she laughed, a hearty roar of a thing. She casually tossed the clipboard aside, and rummaged behind the desk for something. She waddled back over, still laughing, and presented Kyle with a small lollipop. “There you go, you funny little half-potato man,” she said to him. Then she reached down and ruffled his hair.

He looked at it suspiciously, and then snatched it up.

“Many support groups meet here,” she explained to Paul. “I think there is one for people like you who have to look after the potatoes.”

“Are you meant to call them potatoes?” Paul asked, glancing back to Kyle and wondering if he was actually a potato.

“If I called him a rock, would he be any less a potato?”

This was an excellent question, and he nodded weakly in agreement. The only way Kyle would be any less of a potato was if the entire world and everyone in it was suddenly transformed into something considerably more potato-like than he already was.

She continued, “You are welcome to come and talk about how you have to bath him, and think about throwing in a toaster, like Mr Rogers did last week.” She roared with laughter, and then suddenly stopped, looking worried. “Do you know Mr Rogers? Because it’s meant to be anonymous—I shouldn’t say his name, or tell you he chronically masturbates while thinking about serially beating his wife with the very same toaster.”

She laughed again. “We get all sorts in here.”

“They get all sorts in there,” Paul grumbled. He just abandoned the red bag in the corner, slinging it on the floor as he walked out.

“I like ‘er,” Kyle slurred, with the lollipop stick poking out of his mouth.

“Let’s just get out of here,” Paul grunted. That migraine was really settling in for the day now.

“Where?”

“I don’t care,” He scowled. “I’m getting something to eat and then we’ll see.”

“You gived away ma lunch,” he frowned accusingly. “Watcha gonna do abaat it?”

Paul just grimaced at the whole horrible day. “Just get on the bloody bike.”

“You ow me a kitkat,” Paul heard someone muttering through their helmet behind him.

“Just shut up!” he growled. He angrily threw open the throttle and dropped the clutch. The bike lurched, pulling away quickly, giving all it had. It accelerated off the drive, pulling hard onto the road. He just wanted it all to stop.

Suddenly it all stopped.

There was no skidding, no braking, no nothing. Somehow, the bike simply stopped going forwards. It did it so abruptly that Paul had no way to join it—he was thrown forwards, smashing himself into the dashboard painfully, and being winded in the process, perhaps snapping a rib or two as he went.

It was all a disjointed blur, and he couldn’t work out what was happening. The motorcycle was accelerating, but then it didn’t just stop, it ceased. All forward motion came to an abrupt end. This violated the laws of physics, even as he understood them.

He was vaguely aware of spinning, of falling from the bike to the floor, but in oddly slow motion as if everything was happening at once, but in a fraction of a second that had been stretched out infinitely. He saw something even more bizarre than this violation of the rules of conservation of momentum. For a moment, just a moment, he saw the figure of Kyle, swimming through the air, kicking his legs and waving his arms as he’d been launched over the

bars, and was heading straight forwards, helmet-first, directly into solid tarmac.

For the first time that day, in just an instant before his body slammed into the very same tarmac, he smiled.

It was the little things.

Ride for two miles.

Find somewhere private and open the envelope.

It wasn't entirely unexpected. The only slightly confusing element about all this was the fact that the slip of paper—the challenge he was holding—had come out of an envelope. Was he not meant to have opened it? That made no sense, and he dismissed the idea as silly. Maybe this whole thing was silly.

“Daryl Thompson?” came a voice from behind him.

He looked up from the note that had wrapped itself up in the tendrils of his imagination, and his mind was wrenched back to the real world. The man had a shaved head, and wore an expensive set of matching racing leathers. He was overweight, but in a way that gave more of the impression that he was a large man who had only recently let himself get out of shape. He had dark, dead little eyes that were peering straight at him, like those of a shark.

“I'm Daryl!” he said simply. He reached out to shake his hand as the other man extended his own.

“Kevin Dixon,” the man told him, peering around, his eyes eventually finding the tab of paper. “Is that our challenge?”

Daryl shrugged and handed it to him. “Seems pretty easy to me.”

“Too easy...” Kevin sneered. “So where's this envelope?”

Daryl shrugged and looked away, scanning the area. A nearby desk had a group of people around it, milling about, taking their rules from a pile of envelopes. It had to be there among them.

Kevin followed his eyes and grinned. It wasn't a pleasant sight, and Daryl, as many had before him, began to quite dislike him.

The pair of them, now partners, went over to the table. Daryl was content to wait, but Kevin simply wasn't built that way. He pushed and elbowed his way to the front, sometimes muttering the

odd excuse me but not making any effort to sound like he meant it. He swiped up a handful of envelopes, flicked through them casually, and discarded the remains on the edge of the desk, pushing his way back through the small crowd without another word.

Holding the envelope up, he said, “There we go! It says the same on the envelope as it does on our clue.”

“So we ride?”

Kevin grinned and barged straight past him. “Yeah. Try to keep up, little man.”

They pulled in at a coffee shop, several miles along the road. Kevin led the way on a new-looking yellow Ducati that had never seen a cloudy day. Daryl followed on a slightly less new Suzuki GSXR750 that had never seen a professional service. Kevin rode erratically, sometimes accelerating without warning through gaps he should have left alone, at other times waiting too long when opportunities opened up. He rode as if he were fearless, but lacked the experience required to keep him alive in the long-term.

Daryl knew his sort—knew them, and had little time for them. He had little time for most people, when it got right down to it.

The coffee-shop looked expensive, and didn’t have a single can of instant anything, anywhere to be seen.

Kevin glanced around, clearly trying to decide if it was up to his standard, and eventually seeming to accept that it was, if only just. He loudly went to a table and arrogantly slammed his helmet noisily down on it. He unzipped the top portion of his leathers and slipped it off so that it hung around his waist looking rather ridiculous. He wore a dark crimson T-shirt with Ducati picked out in bright yellow letters.

“Oy, love!” he called out noisily, clicking his fingers in the air and causing the few other customers to turn and look with annoyed

expressions. If he noticed them at all, he gave no sign of it. “Do you come to me, or do I have to order at the till?”

The waitress was a pretty girl, but young—young and inexperienced.

“I can come over,” she told him quietly, her voice an apologetic whisper, her eyes veering downwards towards the counter nervously.

“In your own time, darling!” He dragged out a chair and slumped noisily down into it. He began leaning back to make himself comfortable in it, and dropped the envelope on the desk, slapping it down hard.

Daryl sat opposite and eyed him cautiously. This was not a man that was easy to get along with. He was the kind of animal that hunted in packs—packs of people just like him, since nobody else could easily tolerate them. For now, he kept his temper in check and did his best to ignore everything but the job at hand.

Gesturing towards the envelope, he said, “So what do you make of all this?”

Kevin shrugged. “Make of all what?” He really didn’t seem to understand that everything wasn’t completely normal.

“You saw it back there,” he said, nodding back towards the road from where they’d come. “People looked pissed off. I saw at least two walk out. One big African guy was shouting the odds. God only knows what their challenges must have been. Don’t you think this is all a bit weird?”

“There’s something you need to know about me.” Kevin leant forwards and rested his elbows heavily on the table. He gestured with his hands, and had a completely straight face as if about to deliver something of great import.

“Daryl...” he began seriously, “I don’t give a shit. I literally don’t give even the tiniest shit about any of them.” He laughed, and flopped backwards in the chair.

Daryl huffed. “I saw bits of the other challenges. There’s nothing on ours. Why do you think that is?”

He shrugged. “We’re in this for a share of a million. What did you think—we’d be delivering flowers to under-privileged children? This isn’t going to be a walk in the park, mate!”

“This all seems very strange to me...” Daryl said, speaking forcefully since subtlety didn’t seem to be working. “The whole competition seems strange. Now we pick this challenge that’s so bad that they make us ride two miles out before we’re even allowed to find out what it is. Doesn’t it bother you?”

Kevin looked thoughtful for a moment. “Now that you mention it...” he said as he looked away in the distance, perhaps pondering something deeply, his hand rubbing his chin. “No. Not at all.” He laughed even louder than the last time. “Allow me to refer you to my previous comment—the one about shit, and my specific predilection towards not giving one.” He smirked at his own brilliance.

The waitress came over and pulled a pen from the binder of a small pad. “Can I help you?” she said automatically. Kevin pointed to Daryl.

“Double espresso please,” Daryl said, his preference in most things edging towards what was simple and strong.

“I’d like something tall, white and frothy,” Kevin told her flirtatiously, his tongue flicking along the edge of his lip.

She kept her eyes on the pad, but they flashed up nervously as he spoke, returning to her notes as quickly as they could.

“Um...” she said thoughtfully. “Latte?”

He grinned at her, now openly licking his lips. “Do you like lattes?”

She smiled awkwardly. “I guess I do. They’re OK.”

“Latte it is then. If it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me, if you know what I mean. I’ll have it just the way you like it.”

She smiled very thinly, and made her way hastily back to the counter. His eyes followed her hungrily.

“You’re old enough to be her father,” Daryl said, with more than a hint of disapproval. He wondered what he’d do to a man like him if he ever caught him looking at his own daughter in the same way. A violent image flashed through his mind and he dismissed it quickly. He noticed his hands were flexing into fists. He opened them and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Kevin grinned. “Some people like espresso, some people like latte,” he told him suggestively. “My liking latte doesn’t stop you having your espresso, does it? So what do you care?”

“Some people like to focus on the job at hand.” Daryl glared at him, then looked away angrily, trying to control his temper and just get this done. He thought about the task in hand, about only the task in hand and tried to let everything else flutter straight out of his mind.

Kevin glared back. “I’m only looking. It doesn’t hurt to look—it’s not like I bent her over the table right in front of you, is it?” he said coldly.

Daryl tried very hard to get things back on track, a track where nobody was getting punched in the face. Picking up the envelope, he said, “Shall we focus?”

“Did I say you could touch that?” Kevin growled at him, almost snarling.

Daryl’s eyes swivelled up to fix on his. They narrowed defensively, he felt a sharp intake of breath, and his hands clenched

once more into fists. He said, very coldly, “You chose the partner, I chose the challenge. This is mine, and for the record, I don’t need your permission to do anything.”

There was a moment of silence. Kevin slumped back in his chair and grinned. “That’s the spirit. Nice to see you’ve got a pair of balls on you, after all. I was beginning to worry.”

Daryl huffed. “Something tells me that I’m not the one we need to worry about.”

He tore open the top of the envelope and tipped out the contents. There was a whole set of laminated rules and a large, flat object, tightly sealed inside some bubble-wrap. They looked at each other and both of them frowned curiously. Kevin made a grab for the object, Daryl for the rules.

He found the one related to their challenge and read it carefully, frowning the whole while.

“What is this?” Kevin actually sounded surprised as he held up a pair of large, matching smart-phones. “OK, that’s weird, I will give you that.”

“Fuck!” Daryl closed his eyes, shook his head, and breathed out heavily. This was not what he’d had in mind.

He now had Kevin’s full interest and undivided attention.

“Listen to this...

“Your challenge is to prevent as many other teams as possible from achieving their goals. You may use any methods at your disposal to stop them. You will collect the shares of each team you stop, but will not collect any shares yourselves merely for participating. The only money you can earn is from stopping other teams. Each team has been issued with a GPS transmitter, which the phones in this package have been programmed to track. You will know where each of them is at any time.”

“Yes!” Kevin said excitedly.

“What do you mean, Yes?” he said angrily. “This is terrible! We have to play dirty. Not only that, we’re putting ourselves in harm’s way. It’s one thing to play a game. It’s another to stop other people from doing it.”

“No, it’s brilliant!” Kevin grinned. “We can make a packet doing this!”

“But they’re just normal people trying to do whatever is it that they want to do.” He sat back and began rubbing his temples as dark images danced through his twisted imagination. He clenched his teeth and grumbled loudly, forcing himself to stay calm through a force of pure will. No matter what he did, the image of him punching Kevin in the face just wasn’t going to go anywhere.

“Fuck their dreams,” Kevin said with a vile smirk. “Mine are better. They’ll rest easy tonight knowing the money went to good use.”

“What use is that?” he asked accusingly.

“Is it any of your business?”

Daryl nodded to himself. He had to admit that he felt that it really wasn’t, even though he couldn’t help but imagine himself kicking him hard and repeatedly in the testicles. He could almost hear himself shouting that he deserved it for cutting his knuckle with one of his now horribly broken teeth.

He shook his head and tried to ignore all that, to get his temper under control.

“You know what?” Kevin began, as if a fresh idea had struck him. “I think we got off on the wrong foot, you and I. I know I can come on a bit strong, but it’s just my way. My wife says I’m an insufferable prick—I think she’s being generous.”

“She’s clearly very much in love with you,” Daryl told him sarcastically. Maybe it was best to just ignore his failings and get on with things together? It was why they were there, after all. The

image of him in his head that was doing the kicking stopped, paused momentarily in front of the hapless sack of skin. It gave one more kick for good luck, not Kevin's of course. In Daryl's mind, it was about time he ran out of luck.

Kevin nodded, equally sarcastically. "We're partners now, and we're going to do well out of this, so let's get on like mates, OK? At least for the day."

He reached out his hand to shake on the deal. With little choice, Daryl grudgingly did the same and they shook on it.

"Now that we're friends, I can tell you that I've got some debts," he explained. "The wife discovered the joys of store-cards. Credit, and an inattentive husband, who likes lattes, is a recipe for disaster, I can comfortably assure you. I'm hoping to make enough to get back to nothing, if you know what I mean—clear the debts.

"I have my own company; I sell top-flight designer clothes on the internet. With a global recession, business isn't what it used to be. Desperate times call for desperate measures," he said, grinning and showing off a mouthful of very slightly crooked teeth. "So here I am."

"I guess people buy copies and fakes now, instead?" Daryl guessed.

Kevin laughed, a huffing, spluttering grumble that was accompanied by a weird nasal drone. "Well, I sell copies and fakes, don't I? The funny thing is that they're better than the originals, so nobody really gets bothered about it."

Daryl laughed with him and the tension broke.

"Mind if I ask what brought you here?"

Daryl stopped laughing. He huffed to himself as his mood darkened once more. "My daughter," he told him softly, his voice low and grave. "She's got a hole in her heart and she needs a

transplant. She's not going to last much longer, so I need to jump the queue. That costs money..."

"And you haven't got any?"

"I do OK, I earn good money, but not in the quantity I need. Her being sick is killing us too—we're falling into debt, I'm missing work over it. My wife... she never went back to her job. I'm running out of choices and time."

"That actually really sucks, mate. I'm sorry for you."

Daryl nodded graciously.

There was an awkward moment of silence, before Kevin turned around sharply and snapped, "Where's my fucking latte?"

His fucking latte wasn't worth waiting for, though the espresso was perfectly passable, in so much as Daryl never gave the matter another thought. As they drank, the two of them went through the list of challenges and their rules.

"So we don't know who got what, we don't know who's doing what, and we don't know in what order they're doing them." Kevin stated the matter succinctly, explaining what Daryl already knew well enough. In fact, he had explained all that to him twice already.

Daryl looked at the screen of his phone. "What we do know is that one group is going to Scotland."

Kevin shrugged and nodded in agreement.

"Well, they're an easy target. They'll ride slowly, they'll be making fuel stops regularly, and they're limited on what routes they can take. They should be easy to find, and easy to catch up with."

"Nah!" said Kevin firmly. "That means a lot of effort only to knock out one team. By the time we get back, other teams will have finished."

“Good point,” Daryl said grumpily. “But the rest of them are just riding around all over the place. We have no idea where they’ll be going. We could end up trying to catch them all day.”

Kevin shrugged again.

“So we split up,” Daryl told him. “If all we manage to do is knock out the group going to Scotland, then at least we get a full share. If one of us manages to get one in London, we’ve doubled our money. That way we’re taking a gamble but we’re backing ourselves up with a safe option too.”

“That makes sense,” Kevin agreed, snapping his fingers and pointing at him rudely. “I fucking like it.”

He checked the rules and couldn’t find anything that suggested that they had to stay together. In fact, the reasoning behind them being issued a pair of phones strongly implied the opposite.

“So we’ve got these phones,” Daryl added, holding them up before discarding them to the table.

Kevin nodded and shrugged. “So what are you thinking?”

“Well, these other people think that the GPS trackers are there so the organisers can follow them. Actually it’s so we can.”

Kevin shrugged again and was nodding along in agreement.

“So maybe nobody is watching anyone? Maybe whoever organised this has just got everyone following the rules, and has us all running around doing their job for them?” he said thoughtfully. More dark imagery ran through his mind.

“People are basically honest—they stick to rules, I find,” Kevin smirked greedily. “If they think someone is watching them, they do what they’re meant to do.” He chuckled to himself. “Most of them...”

Daryl frowned to himself, tutted, and looked away. All this was very odd—it was almost too clever. “It’s lucky we’ve both got fast

bikes, isn't it?" he said finally. It was as if it had all been entirely planned this way and he was beginning to suspect that it had been.

"Yeah!" grinned Kevin, and looked to the ceiling. "Someone up there likes me."

"It's a good job someone up there does," he said sarcastically, but not entirely so.

Kevin rolled his eyes and seemed to take it as a joke. He held up two other laminated sheets of rules. "Look at this! They've got one group dropping off addresses, and another group collecting them." he smiled, his lips stretching into a slightly vile grin.

"So?"

"Well, it looks like you're right. It looks like the organisers of this are pretty smart. Whoever arranged all this has got us all doing his work for him. It shows that he's a clever and nasty bastard. But that's not the point."

Daryl shrugged, waiting for him to continue. Continuing speaking didn't appear to be a weakness of his and he didn't think he'd have to wait long.

"These two people are following a route. I can track them down—I know where they'll be, and I know they'll be close by one another. I can take them out easily, both of them, I reckon."

"Which means another two full shares each!" Daryl just tried to think of the money, instead of pulling out anyone's teeth with a pair of rusty pliers. It wasn't easy, and Kevin wasn't making it fun either.

"So you go to Scotland," he continued, issuing orders as if he had any right to do so. "I'll stay in town and catch these clowns."

Daryl grimaced to himself. How many of them also had daughters, or sons, or other sad reasons for doing what they were doing? Thinking about all that just made him angrier and that just made him think more about visiting horrible acts of violence against

Kevin. Eventually he said, “Agreed.” He tried to put all this out of his mind.

“Rock and roll!” Kevin exclaimed excitedly, downing the remains of his latte and then clapping his hands together enthusiastically.

“But what I said earlier...” Daryl began. Something deeply troubling had been on his mind the whole time and he just couldn’t shake it. “We both have fast bikes. Ours were the fastest ones in the car park— the only two sports-bikes there.”

“Lucky!”

He shook his head. “More than lucky. I’d say that someone planned it to be this way.”

Kevin grinned darkly. He was very obviously enjoying this. “Well, if they did, we had best not let them down.”

The road was wide and clear, the surface smooth and black. It was punctuated with the occasional patch from repairs, and gigantic, worrying skid marks from poorly driven trucks. The fairing had an aftermarket screen—ugly and tall, but functional; the wind blew over him—still not perfectly, but far better than stock and he could make a faster, better time. Daryl leaned forwards, not enough to be really uncomfortable, but enough to make the higher speed more bearable. He was doing well over a hundred miles an hour and the bike’s engine was singing, a smooth growling whine as the exhaust burbled behind him. It had more, much more to give.

At the speeds he was riding, he couldn’t be far behind, and he felt sure he should catch up to them soon.

He had mounted the phone on his dash and glanced down at the trace. It was ahead, but not far, and it was moving almost as quickly as he was. They must have got moving earlier, and that had given them a solid advantage over him. Going through the rules,

coming up with a plan of action, and riding the two miles to find a coffee shop had given the others a good head start and it was preying on his mind that the organisers had intended exactly that that should happen.

With time to think, this was what he was thinking about. He wondered what kind of devious, vicious mind would have come up with this. What kind of person would pitch people against one another, pushing them to the very limits until their very lives are at stake? Who would have thought this up and what did they have to gain from all this?

With a quick glance at the screen, he could tell that he was less than an hour behind and quickly catching up to them. Sooner or later, he knew, they would have to stop.

Daryl watched the screen carefully. Each group only had one tracker, and the map showed points moving all around the place. What seemed most logical was to find those doing the delivering first—they would be ahead, and the easiest to find. Three different trackers were close to the area he was monitoring, and none of the marks were near the start of the course, so he had decided to move along.

He found the third address and punched it into the device on his dash. If he went there, he could simply wait until a team arrived and an opportunity presented itself, he reasoned. It seemed as good a plan as any.

He got on his bike. The seat was barely a seat at all—it was solid, uncomfortable and rigid. Nothing about the machine was built with such concerns as comfort in mind. It was fast and functional first, beautiful second, and there simply wasn't a third: everything else was completely unimportant. He leant forwards and started her up. The dry clutch rattled horribly, but the Italian V-twin engine

roared to life like a hungry predator awoken. It made him smile every time he heard it. He flicked the throttle and headed off along the road.

Daryl slowed down and glanced at the screen. They had stopped. The map wasn't detailed enough to show very much, but he guessed it had to be a fuel stop. If he was lucky, they'd eat, and they could be there long enough for him to catch them up. He smiled darkly as he remembered just how twisted all this really was.

His conscience pricked at him once again but he pushed such things from his mind. As loathsome as Kevin was, he was right about a few things. This was about his daughter and making sure he had the money it was going to take to help her. He couldn't let himself dwell on the moral price he was going to have to pay. Instead, he focused on her face. He pictured her brave little smile and, when that didn't motivate him, he could always imagine himself twisting corkscrews into Kevin's eyes. Doing that was oddly relaxing.

He threw a look behind and checked his mirrors. There was nothing significant about—a few cars, a few vans. More importantly, there was no sign of any police and he knew there were no traffic cameras ahead. Deciding it was worth risking it, he opened the throttle and the machine roared, pushing up to 100 and then 120mph.

Kevin rode down the high-street, his engine roaring beneath him. His motorcycle was striking, as was his clothing. He had chosen it because it was built, calculated and designed to get the very absolute most amount of attention. But for once, he actually would have preferred if it didn't, and wished he could more easily blend in. Every time he saw another motorcycle, he knew their eyes were on him. He normally enjoyed their envious stares, their burning glares,

jealousy of his material wealth. He relished having what they wanted to have, being what they wanted to be. To him, all of that was worth any price.

Nobody that morning could have failed to notice his bike, as nobody hardly ever did. It was bright yellow, expensive, exclusive, and rare. All this meant that nobody was going to miss him now—he could hardly move unnoticed, when he now most needed to.

He pulled into the side of the road, still some distance from his target. Sure enough, several GPS trackers were showing traces nearby. One had to be one of the two groups, either delivering the addresses, or collecting them. He hoped it was the ones delivering.

He figured he had some time, so he took his keys from the ignition and swaggered into a hardware shop he had found along the way. He unstrapped his helmet and lifted it up so that it rested on the top of his head precariously.

He looked around with a vicious grin on his chubby lips. This was perfect—tools and supplies were everywhere, hanging from the ceiling, lining the walls.

An old man stepped out from behind the counter. He looked him up and down disapprovingly and grumbled thinly, “Can I help you, sir?”

“I hope so!” he said as he grinned widely.

Daryl pulled into the services at the side of the motorway. Some of these places were huge with petrol stations, shops and restaurants. Others were small, the kind of thing you’d expect to find at the side of any main road. This was one of the latter. He pulled in slowly, scanning for any signs of another motorcycle. He rode the full length of the station, seeing nothing but cars, but knowing it had to be there somewhere.

He looked around, grunting to himself as he made his way along. He checked his screen, gazed around and then checked it again. The tracker hadn't moved, but there were no motorcycles, other than his own. He grumbled, cursing his luck. The screen was small, the map was tiny... They must have moved away quite recently, the tracker simply not having updated yet. In any case, he didn't know how accurate it really was.

He decided that, while he was there, he might as well fill up with petrol, in order to save time later. He rolled the bike back to the pumps, edging along while he sat perched on the seat, his toes pushing him backwards. Once he was lined up with a pump, he climbed off the bike and pulled the keys from the ignition. He opened the tank and slammed in the nozzle angrily.

He peered around, a dark frown etched on his face and then he looked again at the screen as the fuel pumped into the hungry metal tank. The tracker still hadn't moved away. It should have been along the motorway by now, heading off at a decent speed. His frown deepened—this made no sense. The pump clicked and he looked up in surprise to find his tank was full. He pulled out his wallet to go and pay, grumbling all the way to the shop.

When he came back, he was chewing on a bar of chocolate, for energy, he told himself, since lunch wasn't going to happen until after he'd finished his job. He noticed a girl sitting some distance away. She was quite pretty and alone as she watched the entrance fixedly and kicked her legs about in boredom.

He guessed that she had broken down and, on any other day, he would have gone over to make sure she was alright—perhaps she was in trouble and needed a lift somewhere. But not today—today was about his daughter; today was about that one last chance to make a difference. He couldn't afford to care about the problems of some stranger.

He fired up his bike and edged forwards. The tracker was still motionless and had to be nearby somewhere. It was time to go and find it.

Who would have thought it would be this easy to completely destroy someone's life? Realising he was being melodramatic, he decided he wasn't ruining their lives, not that it bothered him: he was simply stamping on their dreams in order to favour his own. That was much more decent of him.

He pulled quietly up the road and hid the bike in a side-street. He left his helmet on so that nobody might recognise his face later, if such a thing ever became an issue. His bright red and white leathers were hardly the garb of a thief in the night, but he had to do what he had to do and he had to do it with what he had to do it with.

With a final, furtive glance, he stepped into the car-park of the church hall, feeling like he was dressed more like a loud comic-book super-hero and much less of a silent ninja. Several bikes were still there, and he grinned to himself. How many groups could he take out simply by sabotaging their machines?

In his hand, he carried a small plastic box-cutter knife. He approached the first bike—a big, old, black Honda. He didn't know what it was, nor did he care. It was old enough to have a fuel tap with a rubber tube feeding petrol to the engine, all exposed and on the outside. He looked around one more time and there was still nobody around. He cut a small v-shaped nick into the hose, near the metal pipe. Petrol immediately began to ooze slowly out. Once the engine was running, that was going to start to split, they'd lose their fuel and the delay would push them out of the game.

He stepped up to a purple Suzuki, and laughed openly. What horrible thing could he do to it that the owner hadn't already done before him? It was such a mess that he decided that shooting it

would have been an act of kindness. He settled for stabbing the rear tyre. He ran the blade back and forth for a few inches, cutting a hole that no simple patch would fix. That was a costly and time-consuming repair, and he was satisfied he'd done enough—enough to ruin their chances.

Finally, he came up to a scooter. At first, he assumed it had to belong to the cleaning staff, maybe a woman who belonged to the church. Eventually deciding it best not to take chances, he jammed the blade into the rubber brake-line. As the corrosive fluid began to leak out, he twisted it and it snapped off. He looked around furtively again, and then pumped the brake a few times. Fluid began gushing out as he did. He pumped and pumped until there was no resistance—the brake was dead and did nothing when he flexed the lever. He smiled and turned to walk off.

All too easy!

Daryl was tired now. He should have sent Kevin—he knew he should have sent Kevin. He would have argued that he would rather have been whizzing around London, but that could have been answered with Daryl's own impressive propensity to not give a shit, and made even more difficult to argue with by adding a few threats of violence. Threats of violence were too few and too far between so far, and Daryl decided that there needed to be more of them.

The tracker he was following had appeared behind him. That made as much sense as buying a brand new Ducati when you're suffering crippling debts, but making sense was clearly not the theme of the day for any of them.

He pulled into a layby to check the screen. Something was wrong here—none of this quite fitted together logically. He stopped the bike, got off, and stretched. His shoulders were aching, his back was throbbing, and his wrists were numb. He took off his helmet,

and for the first time, he seriously thought about giving up. The phone didn't appear to be working—the GPS had to be wrong. He looked it over very carefully, zooming in the map around the area he currently was. The tracker was close—very close. Was it going the wrong way?

He looked up and frowned. As he did, a dark red Suzuki Bandit went past with a low rumble from a steel aftermarket exhaust. He watched it go, transfixed for a moment. Slowly, his brain began actually functioning as a brain and he realised that he was meant to be following it. He began grinning to himself, focusing on the task at hand, and momentarily the reason why was forgotten.

He slammed his helmet on, then his gloves, and he threw his leg over the seat. The engine purred to life and he shot off, accelerating hard, not to catch up but to follow. They had to stop again soon, he was sure. He was actually not entirely sure, but at least his optimism hadn't completely escaped him.

Kevin laughed to himself. There it was - a little blue Honda Hornet parked right on a nice big driveway. This was going to be easy!

He watched as the rider and passenger went inside. He had seen the rider that morning—someone had tried to speak to him, and he'd been rude and insulting. Normally, that wouldn't bother him in the slightest, but today it seemed justification for something a little special. He rode past the driveway and pulled his Ducati up onto the pavement.

He quickly ran back, looking around to see if anyone was looking. Bright yellow motorcycle and brightly coloured leather didn't seem to have made much of an impact—nobody appeared in the least bit interested in him. On the contrary, people went out of their way not to notice him.

He reached into his leathers and pulled out what he'd been saving for just such a special occasion. He wasn't a monster; he was happy to slash a tyre, a brake line, a fuel hose. That was enough for most people, but this was a rude little git. This was someone who deserved something a little better.

He unwound the length of towing wire he'd found at the hardware store. It was a twisted piece of metal cable with each end braided into a loop, tough and slim. It was strong enough to pull a motorcycle along, or strong enough to stop one dead, if needed.

He hooked one end around a metal railing, and fitted the other end to the bike. He hooked it around the rear of the frame, somewhere tough enough to take the full load of the machine, if the idiot did try to pull away and snap clear of the locks. He padlocked both ends and ran off laughing to himself, chuckling inanely at how hilarious this was going to be.

None of the others would really know. Those with slashed tyres and broken hoses would never know it was deliberate. It could have been an accident, a bit of bad luck. But this guy would know. He would see the wire and know he wasn't going anywhere. He'd know he'd been caught and would fume around angrily with impotent rage. He was trapped like an animal in a cage, and there was nothing in the world he could do about it.

Kevin jumped back on his bike and raced off as fast as he could. He turned quickly into a side street, another, and then one more. He parked up again and peered round the corner, his helmeted head just leaning out from the edge of an old red-brick building. He had a view of the whole thing, and he began laughing again, chuckling uncontrollably to himself.

The little shit would learn some manners now. He imagined him seeing the lock, ranting in rage, demanding that someone help but nobody would, because nobody could. They were solid padlocks

—they weren't easily going to break. It could take hours for him to figure out what to do, when minutes was all he had.

They came out, arguing over something. He couldn't hear, but he had a fine view of the action. He chuckled again. One of them seemed irate; he must have seen the lock. He held his chest as he laughed even louder than before.

They got on the bike, and Kevin frowned inside his helmet. The laughing vanished instantly and his jaw began to slump open in surprise. What on earth did they think they were doing?

They started up and pulled away, gunning the engine hard. Kevin watched in confusion. The length of wire trailed out behind them. His hand reflexively went to his mouth in surprise, in dread, in abject horror.

The line went taut. Bang! The motorcycle stopped suddenly. The front wheel jerked in the air, and the rider was thrown forwards clear over it. The passenger launched right up over him, flying several meters though mid-air, struggling as he went, flailing around helplessly.

The bike crashed noisily onto the side as the passenger smashed into the ground, tumbling along on the solid tarmac road, landing squarely on his pink helmet. The sound of an anguished scream filled the air followed by the weak plopping sound of something soft hitting something far less soft.

"Oh shit!" Kevin pulled his head back from around the edge of the building. His head was buzzing, his body was damp with sweat. He realised he was shaking as he got on his bike. He fired it up, turned around and rode off, not looking at the screen, just riding, and doing so as fast as he could.

Daryl pulled in and parked up his motorcycle. The service station was certainly more impressive than the last one, if you were the sort

of person who was easily impressed. For him, it was ideal. It was big enough to swallow the pair of them and for him to go unnoticed while he worked. He rode through the car-park carefully, looking for the red Suzuki Bandit he'd been following.

He was hoping he might find it parked up in some secluded spot, but it was close to the entrance, which was less than ideal. Nobody seemed to be paying it any attention, which was much more ideal. For that, at least, he was grateful.

He sat on his bike for a moment and just thought about things. They were nowhere to be seen, so he had some time, but the real question was just exactly what he was going to do with it. How could he put them out of the race? How could he stop them?

He hadn't actually thought this far ahead, even though he had been sat on his motorcycle riding in a straight line for several hours. He realised now that he'd missed some very obvious planning where he should have been considering what to do, instead of picturing Kevin tied to a telegraph pole being slowly roasted to death. Even now, with the whole matter right before him, he felt more preoccupied with whether or not he would smell like bacon.

There had to be something he could do without drawing attention to himself; some insurmountable obstacle that would destroy their chances, something to keep them off the road long enough to make them give up. He frowned to himself thoughtfully, glaring with notable menace towards a pair of telegraph poles.

Then it hit him—it was so simple, so obvious, even if the air wouldn't be filled with the soothing odour of freshly grilled bacon and the screams of someone begging for their lives. .

With a smile on his face, he rode over and parked right up next to them, slamming on the brakes hard and making the tyres growl as they shuddered over the tarmac floor. He made a big show of removing his gloves, his helmet, and unzipping his jacket. He

pulled out his phone and pretended to make a call. He made himself a part of the scenery, something quite totally normal that nobody needed to pay any attention to.

“OK,” he said finally, loudly pretending to end the call. Quite matter-of-factly, he picked up their helmets from the front of their bike, along with his own. He walked inside carrying all three, looking for all the world like there was nothing more going on than a bunch of friends out riding together. We’re just here on a nice little road trip, he told himself. I’m taking our lids inside where they’re nice and safe, no problem at all.

He walked confidently, seemed as if he didn’t have a care in the world, and nobody did notice, and nobody seemed to care, either. There he was, breaking the law in a not insignificant way, committing an act of sabotage and theft; he was doing it in broad daylight in the middle of a crowd, and he was totally invisible, moving unnoticed, unseen, and without leaving an impact on a single soul.

He smiled to himself—it was just so easy, so ridiculously easy!

He noticed a sign to the toilets, and thought that would be perfect. He went inside, intending to hide them in a toilet cubicle, and lock it from the inside somehow. He noticed a cleaning cupboard, which he thought was even better. Two of the cubicles were occupied, but they couldn’t see him and there was nobody else about to disturb him. He quickly tried the handle and the door opened. He put the helmets in, closed it, and made his way out.

Simple. That was enough. They were stuck there now, trapped for who knew how long? Eventually, they would find their helmets and ride back with no harm done. That was the way to do it. He grinned at the nice, simple way he’d managed to deal with all this.

It was time to head back to London himself.

Eventually Daryl pulled into a gravel driveway outside a large, traditional country pub. It was a nice place, nestled into a calm and peaceful spot somewhere in the Kent countryside. It had an old stone wall around it, a wooden wheel from an old horse-drawn cart outside, and a garden for the few days when the sun might deem to shine. It was known to be welcoming to bikers, had a reputation for decent food, and was big enough to be pleasantly quiet.

He saw the unmistakable canary-yellow Ducati parked outside. He grunted at it, as if the machine itself was to blame for all that was wrong in the world and the hatred suddenly welled up inside him. He hung his helmet on the handlebars, casually discarding it as he snatched a deep lungful of air. As he stepped away, he paused, thinking for a moment about his day. He went back, grabbed it, and carried it inside with him. Never again would he leave a helmet on his motorcycle unattended.

He stepped inside and found it was warm and inviting, with dark timbered beams set against painted orange plaster. Decorative brass ornaments hung on the walls, and there was soft music playing in the background. It was a sane little bastion of peace and reason away from a day that had none. Although it was all pleasant enough, it was hardly his thing at all. He preferred a darker, more intimate place. He liked a bar where people knew him, where he didn't have to order a drink, because they knew exactly what he liked.

He saw Kevin straightaway and walked over, not in any particular rush. He pulled off his jacket, threw it on the chair beside him, and sat himself down. His large body ached. He was stiff and heavy and even the act of moving came at an effort. A comfortable seat was a welcome thing, and he sighed as he sank down into it.

"How did you do?" Kevin grinned expectantly. He sipped on a pint of strong ale that he shouldn't be sipping on. Daryl very much doubted it was his first.

The guilt should have been hanging on him hard, but it strangely wasn't. Daryl had done what had had to be done, and he'd done it for the very best of reasons. He didn't know those people, they meant nothing to him, and perhaps that was all there was to it. It bothered him that it didn't bother him. Surely, he should feel something; surely, he should be troubled by his actions in some way? He just felt numb—it didn't trouble him at all, nor did he take any particular satisfaction in it. What did this mean about him? Was he a monster?

What bothered him, if nothing else did, was that Kevin was earning a share from his things that he'd done —that was beginning to stretch his patience just as far as it would go. His imagination filled with an image of himself brandishing a chainsaw. Kevin was naked, tied face-down on a bed with his ankles tied to the corner. Daryl was the one grinning expectantly in his mind.

"It was a long day," he began. "I caught up with them. I finally found them in a motorway service station."

Kevin smiled. "And?"

"And what?"

He goaded, "Details! Don't leave me hanging. What did you do?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it?" He sat back heavily in the chair, sighing deeply. "I mean what do you do? I didn't want to go too far. I wasn't going to hurt anyone and get myself into trouble. I like to find a nice, safe, easy way to deal with this sort of thing."

Kevin looked curious, as if these words somehow weren't resonating with him at all.

"I hid their helmets. I swiped them off the bike, just as casual as you like, and I just carried them inside. I hid them in a cleaning cupboard. They weren't going anywhere." As he said it, Daryl began to smile to himself.

“That’s bloody genius,” he laughed. “You’re a bloody genius, you are.”

He didn’t feel like one. He didn’t feel much of anything at all but, slowly, he was taking a certain kind of satisfaction from all this. “So how did you do?”

“Well, I had a slightly more interesting time than you. You’ll never guess where I found the first lot?”

Daryl shrugged. He was in no mood for playing games.

“They were back at the bloody church car-park,” he sniggered at himself. “I found three there. I cut the fuel line on one, the tyres on another, and the brakes on the third.”

“You did what?” Daryl frowned at him sharply, despite none of this coming as the least bit of a surprise. Kevin wasn’t the one out of the pair of them with brains. The only way to test that for sure was to pop his skull open and have a look inside. A baseball bat ought to do it, he thought. The sports shop on the high-street had metal ones.

“I did a little slash down the fuel line and cut a notch. It was going to split later; their petrol would have gone everywhere. They would have been well out of it. The next one, I cut the tyre so that one wasn’t even leaving the car-park. Last one, I slashed the brakes and pumped all the fluid out.”

“So those people could have been hurt?” he said accusingly. For a moment he felt angry and wondered if he cared because of the risk to others or because he had been so clumsy.

Kevin just shrugged. “Someone did get hurt actually. It all went a bit wrong after that.”

“Really?” he asked sarcastically. Now he definitely felt something. A knot in his stomach began to tighten and he felt the first faint tendrils of rage coursing through him. His face began to redden.

“I put a lock on the next bike. It was some little mouthy shit and I recognised him from the morning. I thought I’d play dirty and wrap a steel rope around his bike.” He began to laugh. “I locked it both ends, one end to the bike, one to the steel railings along the side.”

“Right...” He wasn’t unimpressed.

Kevin suddenly looked quite serious, his eyes wide with excitement. “He bloody rides off, doesn’t he? The wire is about 5 or 10 metres, I guess. It goes tight and they go flying off over the front. Bloody idiots didn’t even look. They were all over the place.

“I got out of there pretty sharp.”

“Were they hurt?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so, it wasn’t that fast,” he said and shrugged. “But in any case, I didn’t hang around though to kiss them better.”

“Sounds like you had a busy day,” Daryl said coldly. It sounded like no serious harm had been done, as luck would have it. Kevin was a liability. Not only was he getting a share, he was taking stupid risks, risks that could end up costing Daryl everything.

“I found another one, too.” He laughed even harder. “They were down by a canal. One of them just threw his bike in the water. I was just staring at them, I couldn’t believe it. I left them to it. I’m not messing with that kind of crazy.”

Daryl didn’t know what to say. What was there to say?

They ate some passable pub food, in semi-silence—Daryl was in silence, Kevin was very much not. Daryl sat there wincing as the sound of Kevin’s voice cut through him with every word, jangling his nerves, offending what little sensibilities he had. He swallowed the last chip and gave a thoughtful sigh. He wondered how much battery acid it would take to dissolve a human body. He assumed it would

still dissolve while it was still alive. He imagined Kevin thrashing around in a bathtub full of the stuff. Acid would splash up into his eyes, burning them out of the sockets of his skull. He'd slip down in agony and a mouthful of it would glide into his gaping mouth, ravaging the soft tissue in his throat.

He realised he was smiling.

"There's one more," said Kevin, holding up his phone. "I've been sitting here watching. They've been rolling up and down the roads near here. We can get them. That's another share without even breaking a sweat."

"And how would you do it?" Daryl asked pointedly.

He rolled his eyes and seemed to be considering that very thing. "I've still got some leftover bits. I bought some nails, a tyre-lever and some other tools.

"I just grabbed anything that looked nasty."

Presumably it was the similarity in their way of thinking that first attracted his wife to him. He decided not to voice that opinion, for now. "You need to be more careful. You're going to get yourself caught, and if you do, this whole thing falls apart."

"I don't give a shit," he said evenly, sounding like he really, really meant it. "I don't get you. Your little kid is lying there dying, and every share takes you one step closer to saving her life. I'd have thought you'd be totally up for this.

"I should be holding you back, but here I am, having to force you to go out and make a grab for it."

"Don't mention my daughter," he growled at him angrily, without even looking up, afraid that his temper might finally slip its leash.

"Yeah, well I will," he said confrontationally. "I'm doing this. I've been sitting here for hours thinking on it. I'll do it with or without you, and I'll have your share if you don't want it."

“I can’t talk you out of this, can I?” he said.

“This is how the world works.” Kevin’s mood darkened, his eyes narrowed, and his voice lowered as he continued to speak. “People hurt each other. There isn’t anyone out there that would help out anyone. Nobody gives anything to anybody.” He paused for breath, his face reddening. “Do you think anyone on this competition wouldn’t have done the same to me? Of course they would, and probably they would have done worse. I’m just getting them before they get me. Law of the jungle: survival of the fittest.”

“And if I come along?” Daryl asked.

Kevin grinned. “I knew you had some balls,” he said as he broke into a beaming smile. “Equal shares, right down the middle. You and me, boy!”

Daryl looked at the table. He couldn’t believe he was going to do this. Was he really this kind of person? He felt nothing, just empty inside, and he knew exactly what was going to happen next. Was he a monster?

“I’m in!” he said.

It took them an hour, but they caught up with the GPS signal. It pulled up into a motorway service station, scarcely 20 miles from the church. Kevin insisted on leading, and they pulled into the forecourt, creeping in on low revs so as not to draw too much attention to themselves.

He got off his bright yellow motorcycle with a sinister smirk carved across his greedy little features. “Did you see it?”

“An old purple KLE500,” Daryl said. He’d seen it, the odd little thing that looked blue under the yellow glare of the station lights. It was parked some way off, in front of a shopping complex. It was hard to miss.

“How are we going to do this then?” Kevin rummaged through his pockets. He laid a few fairly hefty tools down on his seat and grinned. His eyes lit up happily as he held up a tube of super-glue. “How about this? We can pour it in the lock—how’s that for nice and simple?”

Daryl frowned to himself, his brow coming down over his heavy, jagged features. A part of him knew this was happening, and that he was really going to do this. He could hardly believe what he was becoming. Was this what he always was? Was the potential always within him, just waiting for the right crisis to bring it out, or were all people capable of being pushed too far?

He said softly, “Do you think it’s really right to do it to them, before they do it to us?” Was he abnormal, or were people just basically bad? He remembered a time in college where he’d beaten another young man to the ground. It wasn’t until a teacher had dragged him off that he’d stopped hitting him. He couldn’t even remember why he’d lashed out. It just seemed that he deserved it. It was probably some minor infraction, like the time when some horrible child he’d been at school with a decade before - he’d somehow set fire to a tortoise and would have got away with it, if another child hadn’t told everyone all about it.

He’d punched the young man to the ground in the school bathroom and broken his fingers. They said he’d probably never have the full use of them again. He’d only been 12 years old but it had shown him what kind of man he was going to grow up to be. He might have done terrible things, but the people he did them to deserved it. He could say that, at least.

“They’d do it in a heartbeat. Anyone would.” Kevin looked him up and down. “You run over and do this, and then we’ll ride off, no harm done.”

“You do it,” Daryl said firmly. It was clear he wasn’t going to budge.

“You only did one today,” Kevin grumbled, sneering.

“They just went inside,” Daryl told him firmly. “You’re running out of time.”

With another grumble, Kevin turned and began walking across the grass. The motorcycle was close, but far enough that the rider would never catch them before they could be gone. It was perfect, just perfect. Sniggering, he took off the little plastic lid, turned it over, and jabbed it hard into the metal top. Glue began to run down the sides of the metal tube.

He laughed out loud as he pushed the top into the ignition and squeezed. The clear liquid drained out. It ran thinly over the edge of the metal barrel, filling the lock, and overflowing down the sides. He began to cackle as he turned and headed back, all finished, and assured of a job well done.

He was going to have to do something about Daryl, he thought to himself. He wasn’t pulling his weight in this partnership at all, and hadn’t earned his share. He would deal with him later. He was no small man, and clearly a man with no small temper. Still, he had dealt with such men before, and he was still here; he would come out on top.

If Daryl’s daughter died and rotted in hell, it meant nothing to Kevin. Let her die! In this world of his, only the strongest survived, and Kevin - he was the strongest.

He heard voices and turned quickly to throw a glance over his shoulder. The riders were coming out with cups in hands. He sped himself up and dashed the last few meters, breaking into an evil little chuckle as he did.

He tucked himself behind the wall and laughed. “Daryl, you are going to want to watch this,” he said, pointing behind him.

“Nah,” he said, throwing on his helmet. “I’ve had a stressful day.”

“Haven’t we all, mate?” he grunted, grinning to himself.

“Do you want to know what I do after a stressful day?” Daryl began with a sigh, slipping on his gloves.

Kevin flashed one more look behind him and followed suit, pulling his helmet over his head. “Go on.” He liked where this was going.

“I ride fast,” he told him. “Now, your bike might have the edge, but I reckon I have the bottle. I reckon I can make it back to the church car-park before you can. In fact, I know I can. You’ve already lost. People like you are all about show: there’s usually nothing else to you.”

“Are you shitting me?” Kevin grinned, and ran his hand along the tank of his beloved Ducati. “You’ve got to be shitting me!”

“Let’s see, shall we?” Daryl got on his bike and started it up. It fired up with a roar.

Kevin laughed loudly and did the same. “I’m starting to like you, Daryl. You’ve certainly got some nuts on you. I’ll see you there then—I’ll be the bored looking bloke playing with his phone and waiting for a guy who’s all talk!”

“No, you won’t,” he said simply, a man filled with confidence.

“Done!” He twisted his throttle, and the Ducati growled aggressively over the noise of the Suzuki. He took off, roaring out of the petrol station as fast as his bike could carry him.

Daryl just sat there. Had he really done this? Was it worth it? Strangely, there was no guilt. He just felt numb inside, like no injustice had been done. It was just the world being the world. It seemed fair and equitable. There was balance.

He stopped the engine and got back off the bike.

He reached into his pocket and took out a nut. It was a wheel nut, and more specifically, one from a Ducati. Even more specifically, it was the exact and precise one holding on the front wheel of the very same bright yellow Ducati that had just roared out from the petrol station at full speed.

After all, that's what the world was like.

Get them before they get you. Right?

Ride 35 miles from here, wait there until 11pm, and then head back. You must arrive before midnight, and you may not use your headlights, indicators or horns.

The clock on the wall was ticking away, very, very slowly. Every second seemed to drag on for an eternity, sliding by in its own good time, or seeming to not slide by at all.

“15 minutes.” He sounded nervous, and with good reason. “This is insane, right? We can’t seriously be doing this, can we?”

Colin Davidson was a young man, and he was at that awkward age in life. He was earning just enough money to buy the motorcycle of his dreams, but wasn’t earning quite enough to be able to afford to insure it. It was the same with women—he was too young to attract sensible, mature young ladies who were looking for a relationship, but too old to date young girls who had no idea what they wanted. Everything about him was right there, somewhere awkwardly in the middle, right where nothing really belonged.

“We’ve talked about this,” Mike told him with a sigh and a good-humoured smile. He was older, a mature rider in every sense. He was seasoned and experienced, with too many miles under his belt to even bother trying to remember most of them. His life was largely a blur now, but that bothered him not in the slightest. As things happened, an amusing anecdote would pop into his mind, and that was quite perfectly fine with him. He needed nothing else; he was a man largely at peace with himself, the world, his past, and whatever future he might have left.

“I’m just nervous,” Colin told him apologetically, wiping the back of his hand across his brow. It hardly needed saying.

“Don’t worry, we’re both nervous,” he assured him and quite honestly so. “We’ve done everything we can. We’re ready.”

And as far as they could be, this was true. They had ridden out near Ashford, a town in Kent with a good road system leading almost all the way back. It gave them options—different routes if there was traffic to deal with, and all of them with some degree of lighting. At that time of night, they were confident that there wouldn't be much about; they'd had all day to discuss the matter, and this was what they had both decided was best. It was a decision they hadn't come to lightly.

“It's not the speed that's worrying me, it's the lights.”

A perfectly valid concern that Mike shared, albeit less vocally. He was, once more, the voice of reason. “Don't worry. We're ready. The LED side-lights are bright enough that the police literally won't know the difference, on the tiny off-chance we actually see any. We'll stick to the main roads—they should have good lighting, so we'll be absolutely fine.”

“But they don't throw any light,” he protested weakly, as he had many, many times before. “We won't be able to see where we're going.” Colin was sweating, and it wasn't at all hot. He was nervous, twisting around in his seat as the anticipation ate him alive. As the time grew shorter, the situation, for him, got worse.

“It's going to be fine,” Mike assured him calmly; sincerely or otherwise.

They were sitting in a café on the edge of a motorway. It would take just a few seconds to get under way. They'd thought of everything, he was sure. He said, “We'll hold an even 80 mph all the way. That will buy us enough time to slow down once we get back towards the church hall. That's not fast for either of our bikes. We're ready for this, Colin. We're ready!”

He sighed, wiping sweat from his brow and nervously chewing his bottom lip. “I know,” he agreed, but it sounded as if he was saying it more for the sake of hearing it than for actually meaning it.

It was as if hearing himself agree might make it more true, might calm him down in some unfathomable way. He said wearily, "I know we're ready."

"There's still time, if you want to back out," Mike told him evenly. "There's no judgement here. I've told you that."

"I won't." He shook his head vigorously. "I need that money. My folks are going to lose their house without it. I was born in that house—I'm not going to let it go easily."

"I'm doing this, Mike."

"Well then, keep that in mind. Focus on the good it will do for you." He sounded so painfully calm that it was almost as if he was bored with the whole thing. In terms of listening to Colin's frantic grumbling, that might well be true.

"Is that what you do?"

Mike laughed at this as if he'd heard a joke. "I'm doing this to raise money for a motorcycle safety charity. If I spent time focusing on why I was doing it, the irony would drive me completely insane."

Colin laughed awkwardly, he wasn't entirely sure why.

"We're going to be fine." Mike smiled broadly. He always seemed so utterly sure of himself that people around him began to wonder how he could be anything but completely and totally correct.

Colin breathed heavily but seemed to be calming himself down. "Waiting is the worst thing," he said.

"Yes it is," Mike agreed. "Whoever arranged this knew a few things about the human condition, but not in a good way, at least not in a good way for us."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this person must have understood how people's minds work," he said. "They knew only too well that sitting here for the whole day would cause us to worry, to get stressed out. They knew it

would wind us up, hurt us even. Which means they have no empathy. They're like a psychopath—they understand the emotions of others, but don't experience them themselves. This person is cold and calculating, someone who could kill without regret."

Mike regretted this as soon as he said it - not that it wasn't true. He screwed up his face and grumbled at himself.

Colin's face flushed hotly, and he began to nervously stammer while his brow moistened with a fresh river of sweat. "He's trying to kill us? You really think he's trying to kill us?"

"Or she is," he chuckled to himself. "In my experience there are few things more vicious and calculating in this world than an angry woman."

Colin managed to spit out a sentence with some difficulty. "But why would she want to kill us? Why would anyone want to kill me? I work for a loan company."

"Well, there is a school of thought that suggests that if all the loan companies and banks vanished from the face of the earth, then we'd all be much better off because of it," Mike told him.

"I wouldn't be better off," he said sadly. "I'd be unemployed."

"It's a generalisation," he began to explain, but thought better of it. His eyes rolled up to the clock. Soon! The time was drawing close.

"Are we ready?" Colin was anxious. He seemed almost keen to get started, although a day spent with him meant that Mike clearly knew this was not the case, and it was not the case to a huge, vast and overwhelming degree.

"Not yet," he smiled. "Don't worry, I'll tell you when we're ready. Let me do the worrying for you: you're not very good at it."

It was important not to jump the gun here, as Mike had explained many times already. Leaving a moment early could mean their disqualification; a few extra minutes sitting on the bike waiting

could rattle both of their nerves. They were best off where they were for now, just peacefully waiting. Mike was in control. He knew how people worked, just as well as anyone else.

“So you’ll lead, right?” Colin asked, and his voice began to crack as he spoke. The pressure was crushing him.

“Yes, for the 213th time; and yes, I counted,” he told him with a grin. “I will lead; you just have to follow along behind me. I think you’ll be alright to keep up, right?”

Colin nodded. He had a Suzuki DL650, a kind of road bike that could handle some adventurous off-road riding, in theory. It was right there in the middle of two worlds, neither one thing nor the other, just somewhere painfully in the middle where it wasn’t really ideally suited to anything. He had wanted the DL1000, but the bank manager said that it was more likely that, if he bent over, a school of dolphins would swim out of his anus and read the collected works of Charles Dickens to him, or words to that effect, which ultimately amounted to precisely the same thing.

Mike, on the other hand, had a very attractive Triumph Scrambler with several personal modifications that had spectacularly failed to improve it in any way, and only served to make it considerably more expensive to own. He could set a decent pace, fast enough to get the job done, and safe enough to see it through.

He turned one eye to the clock. It was almost time.

Epilogue

Craig found it hard to relax. He sat on the bed, and it was not a comfortable thing. Sleeping wouldn't have required any great effort after the day they'd had; the floor would have been adequate. Even the horrible things he'd witnessed seemed to have faded from his memory. The emotional impact had simply ebbed away leaving only the facts, the really important ones.

The fact, the really important one, was that they'd made it. They'd done what they set out to do, and they'd earned their share of the money, against all the odds, the odds that were stacked so heavily against them.

"Are you OK?" Tracey sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. She sounded like she was really concerned and not just trying to pretend she was, unless she was really good at pretending.

"Not really," he sighed, and sat up.

"It's more likely Paul that got himself killed," she told him supportively, her hand reaching up to rest on his shoulder. "That idiot wouldn't know which way to sit on a bike if I wasn't there to help him."

Craig flashed her an insincere smile and nodded in agreement. "What are you still doing with that prick?"

"We're not together. Not anymore, especially not after today," she said. "I've asked myself that very same question and today has answered it for me." She looked at him with sad old eyes, eyes that were considerably more mature than her face. She spoke with a tragic honesty. "I'm damaged goods. Nobody wants something as broken as I am."

"I'm a mechanic—I fix things," he told her.

For a moment their eyes locked together. Craig was the one to break away.

"I'm sorry," he said apologetically. "It's just..."

“You’re worried about your brother. I understand.”

“He’s special,” he told her. “I love him—I mean, he’s my brother. He’s not quite right, though, that’s all.”

“Special?”

“He’s autistic, they say. He’s not really that bad, it’s just that he’s, well... he’s different.”

It was difficult to explain to other people and he often struggled to do it. He’d grown up with it, and had simply accepted it for what it was over many long years. It was like using a word all your life, and then being forced to define it, and finding that you really couldn’t.

“He’s smart enough—smarter than me actually. He’s even quite good with computers, and is way better than me with maths. Its people that he doesn’t understand,” he struggled to explain. “He can’t socialise very well. He just doesn’t understand anything.”

“There are plenty of people like that, and I proudly count myself as one of them,” she told him softly.

He smiled. “He found this whole competition because of me, I think. I was joking with him a while ago. I was on the phone to my ex, and we were talking about the divorce. I told Daniel that her solicitor was killing me, and nothing less than a very sizeable lottery win was going to get me out of trouble. I told him I needed to win a lot of money, or die trying.”

“So he found this challenge for you?”

Craig nodded. “I didn’t take it seriously at first, but he really wanted to do it. I thought it would be good for him too; I thought it would help him to make some new friends. Bikes bring people together, you know? Bikes make people smile.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” she said “I mean, we don’t know anything yet. We don’t know if it’s him, or Paul, or someone we’ve

never even heard of. It could be one of the organisers, or some nasty bastard who actually deserves it. We don't know anything."

"I don't blame myself. I blame the guy who set this whole thing up. I'd like to get my hands on him, I really would."

Malcolm almost fell through the door. He was exhausted, his body ached. He was so tired that even his thoughts would only come to him with a struggle. He checked his watch. "11:42. We bloody made it! I don't know how, but we bloody made it."

"Just!" Karen followed behind, both of her hands massaging her lower back, and she was arching, stretching out the pain.

He groaned at her—even in a moment of successful triumph against insurmountable odds, she still found something to moan about.

"We still have 18 minutes. There really wasn't any need for you to ride so fast, now, was there?"

"I could have ridden even faster without your useless bulk on the rear end of the bike, holding me back!" he told her.

"Charming!" she said sternly. "How are you still single? It really is a mystery, isn't it? I would have thought that women would be lining up to have a shot at being the future Mrs Malcolm."

"Well, meeting you has put me off women completely," he grumbled. "I'll stick to my dog, thanks."

"I'm amazed even your dog can put up with you."

"I presume you don't have a dog for that very reason." He looked at her, and gave her a sarcastic little smile.

She returned his sarcastic smile with one of her own. They both broke into a laugh at the same time.

Her face dropped as she began really looking around. She couldn't have failed to notice that there were only a handful of

people there; so few had completed their challenges, and lived to tell about it.

“Look, it’s him!” she said suddenly.

Malcolm, merely interested in being alive at that point, looked at her distractedly, scarcely caring for what she had to say at the best of times, of which this wasn’t one. She was pointing to the corner of the room. He followed her finger to the biker, the man dressed in a black and grey racing suit. “What the hell?” he muttered in surprise.

With the very last of his remaining strength, he wandered over to greet him. “Daryl, isn’t it?” he said politely.

The man stood up. He seemed far less surprised to see them than they did to see him. “That’s right!” he agreed.

Malcolm reached out to shake his hand and smiled. “You were on the same bloody challenge the whole time?”

He shook his hand and smiled back. “It looks that way. Of course, we can’t discuss it, or we’ll be disqualified.”

“Of course...” Malcolm at first assumed he was joking, but when his expression didn’t change, he realised that he was deadly serious. “Well, let me just thank you again. You were right—nail-polish remover and WD-40 did the trick. The super-glue freed right up and the bloody thing worked fine after that.”

“I’m glad to help,” he smiled, but not quite as warmly as he was being smiled at. “Your ignition was greasy, I knew the glue wouldn’t work very well.”

Karen barged her way into the conversation, as she often did. “So, does anyone know what’s happening?” Her voice was like fingers drawn down a blackboard and set the jangled nerves of everyone who was forced to listen to her onto the very tips of their edges.

Daryl nodded back to her. “There were three accidents. One team ended up forfeiting over it, another ended up in the hospital. From what I hear, it wasn’t too serious—just a broken collarbone and a fractured rib. I heard one of those two might have had a concussion but they’re not too sure.”

“Bloody hell,” Malcolm said with a huff as he rubbed a nervous prickle of sweat from his brow. “That’s serious enough for my taste.”

“And the third?” Karen asked, evidently the only one of them capable of simple arithmetic.

“He died,” Daryl said quite calmly, as if it was nothing at all.

The three of them went silent. Malcolm and Karen looked at one another with expressions of dumbstruck shock. It could have so easily been them, pushed to their limit, exhausted, under pressure, taking chances on a bike neither of them really knew well or had learned to trust.

Another man stepped up and sat down awkwardly next to Daryl. “Died,” he said, nodding. “He died. He was riding too fast, and he died. He’s not alive now.”

Daryl smiled thinly. He held out his hand to the other man and said, “This is my new friend, Daniel.”

“Daryl is my new friend,” he explained with a smile, his eyes seemingly fixed in fascination on his own shoes. “He is my new friend. I don’t have any old friends.”

“How did he die?” Malcolm said solemnly. “I mean what happened? Do we know who he was, or what he was doing?”

“He lost control of his motorcycle,” Daryl told him very, very calmly. “Apparently, he was racing along, going at well over double the speed limit, and the bike got away from him.”

“Oh my God, that’s horrible.” Karen shook her head sadly, understanding only too well how easily it could have been any one

of them that it had happened to. "And he was here this morning. Just think, we probably met that poor sod."

Malcolm nodded in agreement. "Whoever set this up has a lot to answer for. They put us through hell today. People were hurt; people died, even!"

Karen shuddered at the thought of it. "I can't believe someone died. I mean, they're dead, just for playing a game."

"Poor sod. I hope it was quick."

"Precisely double the speed limit is quick," Daniel interjected, not quite really helping the mood. His shoes still appeared to hold the majority of his interest. "The national speed limit in the United Kingdom is 70mph. If you travel at double that then it's an automatic suspension of your licence."

Malcolm frowned at him. "I mean, I hope it was a quick death. I hope he didn't suffer."

"I hope so," Daryl agreed. "But it was his own fault. Anyone who rides at that speed is asking for trouble, don't you think?"

"I think we've all been asking for trouble today!" Karen told him.

There was nobody there who could really argue with that.

The church hall door swung open again, and two more men walked in. They clanked a couple of cans of beer together, and drank them down heartily. "Congratulations, everyone!" the taller of the two cried out loudly to nobody in particular.

The very small crowd all stopped to look at them in silence.

Greg looked from eye to accusing eye. Steve turned to look at him for a moment and whispered, "What's wrong? Did somebody die or something?"

Greg nodded, clearly quite well along the way to being very drunk himself. "That's a good question," he agreed. He turned

forward and asked it loudly to everyone. “What’s the matter, did someone die?”

“Yes,” Daniel told them quite matter-of-factly, plunging the whole room into yet more silence. “Someone died. He’s not alive anymore.”

Greg and Steve looked at each other, cringing at their tasteless entrance. Greg leant over and whispered, “Who was it? Do you think it was me?”

Steve whispered back, “No. I don’t know how it wasn’t you, but it wasn’t.”

“Well, I’ll be long dead before I ever test-ride a BMW again, but that is not this day!” Greg said with way too much enthusiasm, brandishing his beer can dramatically to the heavens.

Steve nodded happily, and shouted at the top of his voice, “I’ll drink to that!”

Karen was the first to huff in noisy indignation and turn away, surprising nobody that knew her.

“I work with Morgan,” Daniel began, although nobody was focused on him as he spoke. “Morgan isn’t nice to me. He’s not my friend, but he still talks to me. I like it when people talk to me.” He looked over to Daryl. His eyes flashed up, and then down once more. “Daryl is my friend now. He talks to me and he likes me.”

Daryl gave a measured smile.

“Morgan says that life is the ultimate challenge. He likes to bet. He told me I should gamble too, and that it’s fun to gamble. I like fun. He said it’s safe to bet on anything but death—death always wins,” Daniel said, his voice oddly mechanical. “Morgan never wins. He says that life is unfair to him and he’s probably destined to die a horrible death as an old and lonely man in some terrible place in some terrible future.”

“Pardon me, but Morgan sounds like a bit of a dick,” said Karen with a frown, crossing her arms. At this point, even Malcolm agreed with her.

“But my brother says bikes bring people together. Bikes make people smile.”

Karen and Malcolm looked at one another for a moment. He rested a hand warmly on her shoulder, and said to Daniel with an earnest expression, “Trust me, nothing could make this bitch smile.”

They all looked up as two more people came running through the door. One was an older, wiser-looking motorcyclist, the other a younger man who looked like he might fit in somewhere, so long as there was somewhere absolutely average for him to do it.

“We made it!” Mike cried out, checking his watch. “Only just, but we made it.”

“Well done, guys. I hope you had a better day than we did,” a man told him, stepping forward to congratulate them. “I’m Bob. My friend over there, who isn’t my friend, is called Tim. Tim is largely the reason we had a bad day.”

“Mike.” He reached out and the pair shook hands. “This is my friend, Colin. We had a good day. When you win a share of a million pounds, that’s a good day!”

Tim stood up, grinning and stabbing the air with his hands. “That’s what I think, but people don’t listen to me.” He stopped suddenly and looked oddly thoughtful. “I don’t know why people don’t listen to me, I really don’t. People should listen to me... but they don’t.”

“Well, winning’s nice and that, but I tell you... you could write a book about the adventure we’ve had!” Colin said, gasping and mopping his brow with his sleeve. “Or at the very least, a generous chapter.”

“I wonder if someone ever will?” said Mike.

“I will admit, I do feel better now,” Craig said, lying naked on the bed with an equally naked Tracey beside him. They were covered with a fine misting of sweat; they were breathless and both were sighing happily.

She nuzzled closer and rested her head on his arm. “I feel better too,” she admitted with a happy smile.

He raised an eyebrow. “So I think we can safely say that Paul is out of the picture?”

“Actually, I think I’m going to take a little time to myself,” she told him. “I think I deserve to be on my own for a while.”

He frowned and looked at her accusingly, his ego bruised.

“It doesn’t mean we can’t see each other. It just means I’m not ready to feel like someone owns me right now,” she told him evenly.

“I don’t want to own you,” he grumbled. “I’m in the middle of a divorce. I’m more interested in disowning people right now than anything else!”

“Great,” she smiled back at him. “Then you won’t have any problem with the arrangement, then, will you?”

“As a man who’s been married and with some experience of divorce, I guess I don’t!” he told her moodily. “I know when I don’t have a choice.”

“Good boy.” She patted him on the head, and then lay back down. She pulled herself up close to him.

“Do you really think my brother will be alright? We’re pretty close, you know.”

“I can tell that you are,” she said.

“I take him to a group every Monday morning—a group for people like him. There’s a big black woman who works there,

Florence, who calls him her ‘favourite potato’. She gives him lollipops like he’s a little kid but he likes it so I say nothing. It’s ridiculous because he has a job, and probably makes twice as much as she does. He makes a lot more than twice as much as I do!” he said with a smile. “I’ve got a spare room now, so he stays with me over in W2 a lot of the time. He’s got his own place, though—he lives in a flat, right above the café next to the church-hall, of all places. What a coincidence, right?”

Tracey just listened for now but was beginning to frown thoughtfully.

“He’s actually really smart, just has no idea about dealing with people, about real life, I guess. He knows all of the theory but none of the practice. He has weird habits—he has to eat the same type of chocolate bar every day, which has to come from the same newsagent near where our dad used to live years ago. It’s changed owners more times than I can count, but he still goes there every week, on a Wednesday, to buy his sweets for the week.

“He’s never had a girlfriend, either... lucky bastard!”

She glared at him. “No offence taken,” she grumbled sarcastically.

“I caught him going to a sex-shop, once. He said that someone had told him it was honest, much simpler than dealing with the real thing. Sometimes he’s normal enough, other times he’s just like a child. I had to help him put on a bet the other day. Some guy at work said he should try gambling, so he spent two weeks on the internet until he was like an expert. It’s scary how good he is with maths, numbers, figures and odds. I reckon that when he made that bet, he broke the bank!” he chuckled.

“Oh yeah!” She didn’t seem as if she was really paying attention, now. She was probably dreaming about a hot shower and the delivery of sandwiches. But then something seemed to flash

through her mind and her expression changed. She sat up, resting her weight on her elbow and she frowned thoughtfully and she began mulling it all over.

“The guy at work told him to bet on anything except death, because death always wins.” He snorted a laugh. “He told him that staying alive is the ultimate challenge!”

“So your brother...” she began, as her admittedly weary brain began to make sense of it all. Suddenly, her attention was as focused as a laser. “He’s like a computer genius, right?”

“Yeah, he’s pretty good,” he told her. “He can set up a website in minutes. He knows all the security tricks too, how to do everything anonymously.”

“And he lives right next to the church hall?” she asked with a frown.

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, don’t you see?” she asked, slapping him gently on the top of his head.

He frowned at her, shrugging apathetically. He saw nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.