

A-HOLES

by

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Prologue

There were many things I enjoyed in life: the first rays of sun hitting my face in the morning, the sound of warm rain on clear glass, the simple pleasure of reading a reasonably funny melodrama that didn't take itself too seriously, and the sense of accomplishment that came with solving a puzzle. What I really loved, of course, was drinking too much beer, pizza coated with a thick, golden-brown crust of melted cheese and the rare occurrences of when attractive women smiled back at me. The last of those was, to be absolutely fair, incredibly rare, unlike my intake of beer and pizza, and the results were beginning to show.

This was none of those things.

Interviews had always made me cringe, and there had been many, many opportunities to explore my hatred of them in recent times. Course interviews, mock interviews, and now actual job interviews for actual real jobs. I hated them all equally and with all the passion my dried-up, blackened soul could manage.

Making myself comfortable wasn't easy when the entire situation was designed to feel as uncomfortable as humanly possible. The chair beneath me creaked on its wonky wooden legs and threatened to buckle, and threats in this part of the world are to be taken seriously.

Still, this interview was definitely quite different to any I'd been to before, or had been prepared for. In fact, it was very difficult to imagine how it could possibly have been any more different.

"Nearly ready..." said the interviewer in a stoic, unemotional tone as he looked at some papers balanced on his knee.

I nodded back and braced myself. People all around were glaring in my direction, which didn't help me feel any more comfortable.

"Why don't you tell us something about yourself while we're setting up?"

“Well,” I began. “I’m no longer languishing in London, occupying a depressingly expensive and appallingly meagre flat that I still can’t really afford. I made the decision to upend all that and seek my fortune in a depressingly meagre foreign country, occupying an inexpensively opulent apartment that leaves me wondering just exactly how the global economy works.

“I have completed an appallingly expensive teacher training course, which has changed my life and made me a much better person. I’m now qualified to shape the minds of the next generation of baristas, waiters and gas-pump-technicians. My fortune-seeking plans, such as they were, seem largely on track, although the tracks no longer appear to head to quite the location I originally had in mind.”

There were a few chuckles from around the room.

The interviewer was an older man, a man it would have been hard to take seriously if not professionally obliged to do so. I was very much obliged to, and still found some difficulty doing so. He was a shambling, greying mess of a thing, dressed a little too casually in formal clothes and was sitting too formally in a casual seat. He had a mole on the side of his nose which might have been almost invisible if not for him frequently touching it while he spoke, tapping on it as if he was proudly trying to draw attention to this glaring physical shortcoming. He was bald and had had a little too much sun. He looked a little like someone had photoshopped a leather face onto a baked-bean.

Next to him was another man. He was a darker-skinned man with a thick head of black hair, cut so short to the scalp that it made him look quite severe. He was dressed more smartly and was gazing fixedly off into the distance at a television screen, or something—or equally nothing—somewhere close by it. He looked like the sort of man that, if you didn’t take him seriously, you might regret it. But, even when he frowned, there was a friendliness to it.

“Paul, is it?” the boringly grey man said, looking down at a scribbled set of notes. He was smirking to himself as he read them, and that did nothing to make him look any more intimidating, or serious.

I nodded earnestly. I doubted it was fooling anybody.

The setting, among other things, really wasn't helping. Maybe my experiences in London had left me ill-prepared for certain realities, but it was my expectation that interviews, in general, were conducted in offices with desks and filing cabinets and, at least, the tiniest hint of professionalism. This was a bar, with the ferocious stench of inadequate drains mixed with the over-adequate stench of ferocious cheap beer. All around us, people were going about their lives, such as they were. Some kind of sport was being lost and won on a noisy television some way off in the distance, and many other battles were being fought by the empty soulless creatures lined up along the bar. Most of them looked doomed to never again taste victory, and the very same turn of luck had likely led them there in the first place.

“Paul Band,” I added redundantly.

The interviewer's head looked up and his eyes narrowed as a grin fluttered across a pair of slightly cruel lips. He looked to the other, shorter man who flashed a grin back at him, revealing a mouthful of even, oddly too clean, teeth. He looked back at me and said, “It says ‘Bond’ on my notes.”

Whoever said the old jokes were the best clearly never had an alcoholic uncle that turned up to Christmas parties, already drunk and ready to tell you about his latest adventures. That's probably why I've always had a healthy loathing for puns and stale silly jokes in general.

“No!” I said, just the polite side of firmly. “It's Band, not Bond.”

The interviewer's eyes never wavered as he asked, “Are you sure?”

Why do they always ask this?

A ripple of laughter broke out around the room, a polite little chuckle that infectiously spread its way about. Someone started humming a theme-song.

“Yeah, I’m fairly sure,” I said. “It’s been my name for as long as I can remember!”

The interviewer nodded to himself and looked down at his notes. “I don’t know,” he said. “I think ‘Bond’ would be better.”

The other, darker man looked at him and frowned curiously. The interviewer pointed to his notes and asked, “What do you think?” The other man shrugged, said something incomprehensible and looked away.

“He said you don’t look much like a ‘Bond’ to him, but looks can be deceptive.”

“Well…” I began conversationally. “Anything would be better than ‘Band,’ or ‘Paul,’ come to that.”

The interviewer frowned. “What’s wrong with Paul? It’s a perfectly fine name.”

He made a fair point. Was it really that bad a name? “It’s just a bit boring. I think most people don’t like their own name.”

“Not at all!” the interviewer said, flicking his eyes down to his notes. He touched the mole on his nose several times and huffed a breath that could be smelled from an impressive distance away. He continued, “There’s Paul Kenneth Bernado. He was a Canadian serial killer who brutally murdered three women!”

“OK…” I managed to say.

The interviewer continued, “He was also a serial rapist. Does that sound boring to you?”

I heard the unmistakable sound of an ‘Ummm’ coming out of my own mouth as I shifted awkwardly around in my seat. This felt more of a beginning than an ending. “I guess that’s something…”

“There’s also Paul Runge, Paul Denyer, Paul John Knowles and Paul Drousseau,” the interviewer said thoughtfully, his attention

wandering off to who-knew-where. “Now I think of it, they were all serial killers too...” Sighing to himself, an expression of contentedness flashed on, and then off, his face. He eventually frowned and said, “That’s not to imply that you are a serial killer. Or a rapist.”

“What?!” I protested. “I’m not...”

“No, no, no! It’s not a deal breaker! I don’t judge what you do, so long as your interests don’t interfere with your work.”

“Yes, but...” I really wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to that. “Don’t you think you should care about something like that? Don’t you do background checks? Isn’t that sort of thing a good idea when hiring people who could be serial killers or rapists to work with young children?”

Whatever it was I was supposed to have said, I could be absolutely certain it wasn’t that.

“Not that I am one...” I added.

The interviewer nodded in agreement but a little wry smile fluttered over his lips. His expression shifted slightly as, perhaps, some kind of realisation dawned on him. He said, almost sympathetically, “Most of the Pauls were serial killers, but not rapists, and it’s rapists we have to watch out for—serial killers clean up after themselves meticulously, but rapists... they often leave witnesses. Very messy. I’m sure you’ll be fine, just don’t prey on the students.”

By now, the chuckles from around the bar had quite completely ebbed away into nothing, and a silent, moderately horrified hush had descended. With an almost entirely insincere smile, I said, “I’m sure that’s fine then!”

“I think one of them was a cannibal,” added the interviewer, seemingly unaware that the conversation had now completely derailed. He continued, obliviously, “Did I mention we supply a school lunch?”

“So long as it isn’t a meat that tastes like a cross between pork and chicken!”

The interviewer beamed a wide smile. “You’ll be lucky if it tastes like food.”

“Well, just as well I’m a vegetarian.”

Returning to an almost professional veneer—almost—he asked, “So why do you want to work here?”

A man sitting just behind him got up, wiped his hands on his well-worn red shirt, and enthusiastically scratched his groin. He yelled out to the bar for a beer, and then sat down heavily, slumping unprofessionally into his chair and muttering to himself.

Why indeed would anyone want to work here? It’s times like these I really have to question some of the decisions I’ve made.

“Well, who wouldn’t?”

“I don’t mean this bar, of course!” the interviewer added redundantly, pointing around the place with his pen while smirking to himself at some he joke he wasn’t sharing. “His bar!” he added, pointing to the half-drunk, or possibly half-dead, local man that was languishing behind him, dressed in a really filthy red shirt.

“Oh. He doesn’t work for the school?”

The interviewer burst out laughing. “I mean in my school. Why do you want to work in my school?”

“Who wouldn’t want to work in a language school in a third world country that holds its interviews in a washed-out bar where there are people lying on the floor, somewhere on the spectrum of unconsciousness, anywhere between comfortably asleep—admittedly highly unlikely—to dead—not quite as highly unlikely.”

Fortunately, the filtering mechanism between my ears was able to satisfactorily do its job, and none of that actually got as far as my mouth. Instead, I fell back on a well-rehearsed answer from the course literature.

“I’m looking for an entry-level job in a high-quality English language school. I’ve just finished my training and am looking to

develop my skills in a well-proven and trustworthy educational establishment.”

Impressed chuckles sounded from around the room, and I had to wonder if chuckles could ever really give the impression of being impressed. If you didn't question your mental health at least once before breakfast, you weren't living life to the full.

“Just finished your training?” the interviewer said with a little scowl. With a weary rolling of his eyes, he added, “I guess you're ready to show us all what a great teacher you are and dazzle us with your abilities?”

“No,” I chuckled professionally, to the extent that such a thing is possible or likely. As it turned out, not an easy feat to achieve. Thankfully, the training came to my rescue again. “I know the real world is going to be very different from the training course. I'm just ready to start working and begin developing my skills.”

“OK.” The interviewer tapped his nose, and his index finger slipped surreptitiously beneath his nostril as he sniffed suspiciously. “But why should I hire you?”

Expectant faces were now staring at me raptly. A bit of my soul died, no doubt the first of many small pieces. The place was like a toilet filled with the splintered remains of shattered dreams, all in vaguely humanoid form. Why should he hire me? Just look at the other options! Is he going to hire one of these idiots? Swallowing loudly, I returned my attention to the interviewer and tried to block everything else out of my mind.

“I'm keen!” I said. “I'm really excited to begin teaching, I'm enthusiastic and ready for a new challenge.”

The interviewer chuckled to himself. The chuckle turned into a hacking laugh that devolved into a low, rumbling cough, sending little beads of saliva spraying all around the room. “A challenge!” he said, as

he began to recover a little of his composure. With a little splutter, he added, “This is certainly going to be that, all right!”

By now, I was starting to wonder if the interview was actually going the right way. One thing was certain, and that was that it couldn’t have been going any worse.

An older man stepped up beside us, swaying very gently. He was tall, incredibly thin and was wearing a sleeveless net T-shirt that made him look like he was some sort of monstrosity that had been accidentally caught by someone while they were out fishing.

He had an almost perfectly round belly jutting from beneath a chest that had no other features than his own yellow/grey beard that was resting upon it. He said, croaking with a subtle Australian accent, a beer in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, “Why do you wanna teach for?”

Flustered, I said, “I always wanted to work with children!”

“Bloody weirdo!” the man huffed loudly, waving his beer around until a little of it sloshed out. “Children are the devil’s work!” Satisfied, no doubt, that his point had been made, he staggered back off to the bar.

The interviewer just gazed at his notes ignoring the exchange completely. “I guess anyone can just walk through when you have your interview in a public place,” I ventured.

The interviewer frowned curiously. He pointed a chewed-up pen at the Australian and said, “Well it’s a Saturday. Our Head of English doesn’t officially work today. He’s just helping out with the interviews.”

“Head of English...?!” I repeated, hanging my head slightly.

“I’ll tell you what I’m looking for,” the interviewer began with a weary sigh. “I need a teacher to work on Grade 4. My last one left for reasons I don’t really want to go into. It’s not like the school is cursed or anything—sometimes people just die. It’s what people do—sometimes.”

I raised an eyebrow. At least this sounded a bit like a positive development, when all was said and done. It had to mean the awkward

questions, and outright bizarre comparisons to criminals of dubious renown, and the even more dubious assistance of the apparent Head of English, might be behind us. “I think I could handle Grade 4,” I said thoughtfully.

The interviewer looked me up and down, as if noticing me for the first time. He nodded to himself and scribbled a note lazily. He turned and looked away wistfully into the distance.

After a moment, I followed his gaze and felt certain he was staring lovingly at a frothing glass of cold beer a customer had just been served. The customer himself looked as if the effort of picking it up might bring on a heart attack.

I snapped back, forcing myself to look away as someone at the bar appeared to have been bitten and accusing fingers were pointing at the Head of English.

“And what experience do you have?”

“Well, I have just completed the foreign–language training course with ‘Borderline English’ and that included twenty hours of in–class experience under supervision from my instructors.”

The interviewer grimaced to himself and had the look of a man who was trying not to look as if he wanted to smile, but wasn’t trying very hard. “So you’ve only got theoretical experience?” he said with a knowing, and slightly condescending, smirk. “I’m sure that will come in very handy when the kids are asking about splitting infinitives, conjugating verbs and why Mummy was making happy noises with Uncle Bob!”

“I do accept that there’s a difference between actual experience and theoretical practice...” I began.

“Good!” the interviewer snapped, ending the beginning entirely.

There was a certain degree of scowling involved.

Eventually, the interviewer sat back in his chair and said, “Well there’s no point asking you any more about your theoretical experience

as we both know how much good that would do. I do have a better idea, though...”

“Well,” I said thoughtfully, “I could tell you a short story...”

Chapter 1

It was the beginning of the new school year. The training course was behind us and was now a distant memory. It wasn't that any of it had been particularly difficult; some of it had even been quite fun. It was just that it had all felt a little too much like work, and work was something I had travelled halfway round the world to get away from.

But the course, and work, was over and we had celebrated enthusiastically, on a daily basis, for just over a week now. But everything has to be paid for and at seven o'clock in the morning, I woke with the most ferocious, brutal hangover I had ever had.

The beer was only half a dollar a glass and came served in a refrigerated mug with the frothy, bubbly head winking at you seductively. It was served by local women with unrivalled natural beauty who, suspiciously, became more beautiful and less unrivalled as the drinking continued. Whether any of this was true, or a product of the frothy, bubbling beer, remained open to debate. Debate was the second to last thing I felt like doing, the last being to make even the slightest, tiniest movement.

My head felt like a splinter of hatred had been embedded in it, a frozen shaft of pure evil, rammed sideways through my skull by something with the physical strength and unbridled resolve of my last girlfriend, after she found out that I usually thought about her sister while we were in bed. I never kept a diary again.

I felt so dry that, if I ran a tap, the trickling water would probably swerve off into a wide arc to be sucked into my gaping mouth.

The room was dark and smelled musty and dead, like a tomb where the hopes and dreams of countless ex-patriots had been quietly put to rest. A yellowing electric fan was clattering noisily away on the far side, bolted uneasily onto a plastered-over concrete wall. The sickly sand-coloured paint, the plaster, and the concrete were chipped away at

various points, and a spare wooden bed, which had been discarded on its side against the far wall, was liberally dusted over with splintered chips of all three.

With nothing but disappointment pouring in through my open eyes, I grumbled to myself as I dimly became aware of all this. It was as if I had awoken in the depths of depression, as if my inner turmoil had become a place and I had somehow become locked inside of it.

What could possibly make this place any worse?

“Good morning!” A voice, a woman’s voice, came from somewhere. Suddenly, my fogged brain cleared up. It was as if my head was stuck inside a cloud and someone had switched on a fan.

“Morning,” I said, as my eyes snapped open involuntarily. My voice had a squeaky note of surprise and couldn’t have sounded less manly if it had come out of a female goat at the moment of orgasm.

A low, gravelly growl, that couldn’t have sounded more manly if it had come out of a sweaty lumberjack who had just killed a grizzly bear by stomping it to death with his gigantic leather boots, said back to me, “I must have been hammered last night. Which one are you?”

Which one was I? That was a good question, and with a hangover this ferocious I couldn’t be entirely sure. “Paul,” I said, for all the difference it really made. “The clever one that everyone likes.”

She sat up, rocking the bed around on its rickety frame. Her head passed into a shaft of pale light that was making its way gingerly through a threadbare curtain. The silhouette of her face made her look rather like I was having an encounter with Alfred Hitchcock, only he was wearing a dishevelled wig that might have had small animals nesting in it.

I could feel my testicles recoiling in horror.

“Paul?” she said thoughtfully. It clearly wasn’t quite computing. Although nothing much about this situation was ideal, that was pretty far from a compliment and, if I’m honest, it hurt a little. “The boring one?”

she said pointedly. “The one that talks shit all the time? The one who never shuts up?”

Was I boring? I mean, I was in a whole new country. I had dumped my entire life, my entire career and started over with something new and exciting. Here I was, the morning after completing the theoretical section of the training course, and I was waking up next to a relative stranger who looked quite capable of killing me with her bare hands.

How was I boring?

I really wanted to articulate this, but the best I could come back with was, “Yes!”

There was a chuckle that started horribly, sounding like an old man enjoying himself by drowning kittens and then it managed to get worse. “I’m just glad you’re not Tim!” she said. “He was following me around all night. He’s proper crazy, and he’s got a face like someone gave a five-year-old a crayon and a blindfold and told him to design a handsome man.”

It was nice to know I was moderately more attractive than a man with a questionable grasp on reality, who might have been designed by a toddler with restricted vision. “Thanks,” I said. Things were evidently improving.

She laughed, and it was a thing that sucked and blasted huge volumes of air in and out through her much less huge nostrils. It was like someone was trying to start a broken chainsaw with a bigger, even more-broken, chainsaw.

“We should get breakfast!” she said. “There’s something about waking up with a strange man that always makes me hungry.”

It was now that I noticed how large she was. Her words implied that this was a less novel experience for her than it was for me.

“Coffee!” I grunted. “I need coffee!” Or a time-machine. Or some kind of memory-erasing technology. Either of those would suit me much better.

She turned to face me and the black outline of her head bore down on me terrifyingly. She waited for a moment, giving just a little pause. I wondered what mysterious feminine thoughts might be passing through her brain.

Finally, she said in a low voice, like she had been eating cigarettes put out in buckets of cheap whiskey, “I don’t think we fucked.”

The fact that my pelvis was in one piece and that I still had control over my spine did seem to suggest that. A huge sense of enormous, wondrous relief washed over me and I voiced that amazing sense of unburdening by saying, “OK.”

“I’d get yourself checked out anyway, though, just in case,” she said matter-of-factly. “It’s just common sense, when you think about it.”

“Do you have any STDs?” I said, regretting each and every word as I spoke them. We were already much further down the rabbit-hole than I would have liked to have travelled, and now it was looking like her hole might have left a more lasting impression than a strong mug of coffee could possibly erase.

She laughed again, a darker, more aggressive laugh than before. It was the kind of sound that could rip the dignity straight out of a trained military man, who was wearing full body-armor and was armed with a fully automatic weapon. I was only equipped with a pair of boxer-shorts and the vague hope that nobody would notice that I had worn them for three days without changing. I didn’t have a huge amount of dignity in the first place, to be fair.

“Do I have an STD?!” she chuckled. Regaining her composure, she added a little more sympathetically, “Mate, I only need two more for the full set!”

All this reminded me, rather pointedly, of my last conversation with my Dad, the one where he’d questioned if all this was a good idea and where he’d warned me to be careful and not do anything stupid. It was like my family didn’t know me at all.

“But we didn’t sleep together!” I pleaded. “You said.”

I felt the wooden bedframe wobble and grind as she shrugged. “No,” she said and a flash of orange illuminated her face as she lit up a cigarette. “No offence, but I don’t really find you attractive. I don’t see how anyone would, really.”

There was no fighting it, I was offended. I had always considered myself reasonably good looking, somewhere between not quite ugly and not quite handsome, but edging a little up past the average. I kept myself in fairly good shape, was not un-clever and I once donated to a charity when I was drunk. Sometimes, I was nice to people. “You don’t find me attractive?” I said, sounding a little pathetic. “My Mum always said that I was attractive.”

“You’re just not my type,” she told me, wafting her hand around as thick yellow coils of acrid smoke drifted out through her rugged lips. “I prefer strong, good-looking men who are interesting and don’t smell like they never change their pants.”

I just lay on the bed, wondering why it bothered me so much, when she added again, “No offence.”

“Come in tomorrow for a demo lesson, and you can show me your teaching skills first hand!”

Lou looked at me suspiciously. “He said the same to me. I hope it’s paid.”

I shook my head. “Unpaid. He was alarmingly specific on this point. Still...”

She shook her head and grumbled about it being too early for this.

The guesthouse didn’t serve the absolutely worst Western-style breakfast I had ever seen, but they gave it a good try. A waitress had come over, gazing raptly at her phone as she wound her way through the mismatched tables, each one somehow more mismatched than the last.

She served up two chipped china plates with a conservative helping of food that was partly too hot and partly as cold as the dead remains of my childhood hopes and dreams. I had ordered the full English breakfast and it had failed on all three counts.

We were somehow the first downstairs and had the table to ourselves. The place was mostly empty, the front of the bar open to a main road that hadn’t yet fully woken up. The streets were lit with a ferociously angry sun that was shining brightly off the plastered walls outside and casting long, cool shadows into the road. The occasional scooter rode past, as a curious mix of almost brand new, strikingly modern machines whistled by in near-silence, mixed with ancient, barely functional things that clattered past amidst curling plumes of grey soot.

I watched, idly uninterested, as an incredibly thin, pretty but hard-looking girl walked past, dressed in clothes that were far too suggestive for a morning walk to the local shop. I wondered what her story might be. Was this the legendary ‘walk of shame’ where a woman of the night returns to her coffin, not to be seen again until the sun sets?

Raj had approached us unseen and sat down opposite, flopping casually into a chair that creaked a lacklustre protest in response. He grinned, flashing a set of yellowing teeth, and said, “Morning, arseholes!”

The woman I had woken up next to narrowed her eyes at him and just stared. Finally, she said, “Why are you so cheerful? No mirrors in your room?”

“I got lucky!” he said proudly and I noticed his eyes flashing in the direction of the young local girl who had just left.

A tiny piece of my soul died. There weren't that many tiny pieces left.

My brain did some terrible mental gymnastics. I may not have ‘got lucky,’ but I was probably more lucky, under the circumstances. Either way, I had nothing to brag about.

She was sat right next to me and I suddenly realised something. “I never got your name!”

“Lou,” she said, as if she didn't care at all. She poked at a gigantic plate of fried meat, probably making sure it was as dead as it appeared to be. “And yours?”

“Paul!” I told her with a frown. Hadn't we already had this conversation? It was nice to know she cared enough to remember the small details.

I must have looked annoyed because she grinned at me and said, “I know. I thought we were playing a game, pretending I didn't wake up next to you so that you wouldn't be embarrassed in front of your friend!”

Raj sat up straight, his eyes beaming, his lips stretching into a snarling smirk. “You two guys? Did you bang?”

“Nah,” she said, getting her reply in before I could even begin to formulate a logical response. “I was just hiding in his room from Tim.”

Raj slumped back down dejectedly, as if this was a major disappointment. “Ah,” he said. “Yeah, Tim is pretty annoying. I think he likes you.”

She nodded. “I got that impression.”

I gingerly took a bite of something that had no business being part of a vegan breakfast. Was it a mushroom, a tentacle, a piece of a car? I had no idea.

Raj said to Lou, “Where are you from? I can’t quite place the accent! Australia?”

She looked up, glaring angrily from under a bushy pair of black eyebrows that contrasted sharply against her mop of long, scruffy, bleached straw-white hair.

“Australia? I’m from London!” she almost snarled, ripping a mouthful off of the end of a sausage. “I’m a Cockney!”

Raj frowned and shot a glance to me. “What’s a Cockney?”

Giving up on the thing on the end of my fork, I focused my attention on the coffee. “It’s someone from a part of London,” I told him. “Not a nice part!”

He shrugged and turned back to her. She was chewing away after sucking almost the entire sausage into her gaping chasm. He said, injudiciously, “Why do they call you that?”

She grinned and said, spitting little chunks of half-chewed meat, “Because I like ‘cock.’”

Raj looked horrified. I don’t know if I looked it, but I certainly felt the same. It was a mixture of surprise and revulsion.

“So,” I began, trying desperately to change the subject. “We’ve got our first demo lesson!”

Lou swallowed hard and the sausage vanished noisily. She didn’t seem to have a gag-reflex.

“Training is over!” added Raj.

There was a silence, the unpleasant kind of anticipation where everyone is expecting something from you and you don’t even know what it is they expect, let alone how to disappoint them. I tended to experience this feeling a lot when I first started dating a new girl.

“Borderline set up the interviews. You got one yet, Raj?”

Raj shrugged in confusion. "I didn't hear anything. Why didn't I hear anything?"

Lou said, with the forceful bluntness of a hedgehog's back being gently massaged by a passing lorry, "It's because you're not white. They're only looking for white teachers."

"That's not fair. That's racist."

I just sat in silence, agreeing with him. This was the first I was hearing about the fact that he wasn't included and I was just as surprised as he was.

Lou clearly knew more than I did and she continued casually: "They don't care about all that here. All that liberal stuff only exists in the West. Out here they don't care; they still say it like it is. They just want white teachers; officially they say they want 'native-English speakers' but that's just their way of saying it."

Raj glared at her as though she was the problem. "But that's not fair."

"It's your own fault for not being white," she told him with a wry smirk, pointing her fork at him accusingly before spearing a length of slightly under-cooked bacon.

Raj's expression shifted to angry. "I'm as good as you are!" he protested firmly.

I opened my mouth to say something supportive but was cut off by Lou who started laughing, loudly and rudely, at him. Both Raj and myself just stared at her for a moment, wondering what terrible thing was about to come out of her mouth; hopefully nothing as terrible as what had assuredly been put in it, presumably since she was far too young to know better.

"This training course has lasted three weeks. You've slept with 16 prostitutes during that time. You have an accent so thick that I understand less than half of what you say and, on the first day, you said your own name wrong. Twice. You can't spell, and you think 'subject-

verb agreement' is when two things rhyme. Parts of my breakfast are better than you."

The sympathetic part of my brain shrugged its shoulders, and I soon heard myself saying, "That is true. All of that is true."

"How dare you!" he said, flushing angrily. "You don't need to spell, know subject-verb agreement or speak without an accent to be an English teacher!"

At this point he looked away suddenly, seemingly embarrassed. Had he spotted the flaw in his argument? Whatever went through his mind, he just grunted angrily, "You're all racist."

"No," I said, trying to sound as fair and sympathetic as possible. "She's not saying that all people from India wouldn't make good English teachers. She's just saying it about you..."

It sounded better in my caffeine-infused head.

Raj got up and turned his back to us, huffing and pouting to himself. He muttered something noisily about finding an instructor and making a complaint about us. I couldn't honestly be sure—I only caught about half of it, and some of the words were definitely in the wrong order. Some of his infinitives may not have been correctly split.

Suddenly, he spun around, pointed accusingly and snarled, "And another thing..." He narrowed his eyes and his finger jutted directly at me, for some reason. "I'm not Indian!" he told us.

Lou just rolled her eyes. "Nobody here cares! You're not in the West any more, nobody gives a shit if you're offended."

My brain still wasn't entirely on my side and I added, "She's right!" This also sounded better in my head. "We were warned about this on the course. The culture is different here: they say what they think."

He huffed again and growled, "Order me a coffee. I'm going to use the bathroom."

Lou grinned to herself and said, in what I'm fairly certain may have been a borderline racist comment, "Don't forget to wash your hands, Raj."

"I think he took it pretty well," I said.

Ray, the instructor looked at me and blinked as I told him what had happened that morning.

"Yes, things are different here," he told me. He looked at his board and huffed to himself, shaking his head. "I think I'm going to assign you to Del from now on. You're a bit weird."

Was I? It was difficult to tell.

"Go on," he said. "Get up the front and do your lesson."

I nodded and made my way through the students and then turned to face them. I stood at the front of the class and it was nothing like I had expected. The fear suddenly gripped me and I felt cold as the blood seemed to drain out of my body.

There were around twenty little pairs of eyes staring back at me. They were in silence, just looking, peering into my soul as I stood at the front of the classroom. The room was painted yellow and the walls were punctuated with a few posters that seemed as useless as an English teacher that didn't understand basic grammar.

At the back was a banner with the slogan, 'Education is a gift we all deserve.' I began contemplating how ironic that was, considering this was a relatively expensive private school.

The desks were wooden, solid-looking constructions, with chipped, well-worn surfaces. The tops weren't covered in graffiti or scratched with the pins of a compass by bored teenagers, filled with annoying hormones they couldn't control.

It slowly dawned on me that I shouldn't really be noticing all this. I should be talking or teaching, or really doing something, anything, that set me apart from a plank of wood.

At the back was the school's principal and Ray, one of my training course supervisors. It was difficult to work out which one looked more drunk but the principal, an unusually tall local man, raised his hand, grinned widely and said, in butchered English that I should start any time. I couldn't help feeling that was good advice.

Suspiciously absent was the man that had interviewed me. No great pity there.

"Good morning, class!" I said.

To my surprise they all stood up, moving in unison like a wave of white uniforms washing up on a beach. They stood, their hands clenched together, palms pressed hard against one another and they all called out, a droning cacophony of oblivious conditioning, "Good morning, teacher," a sound that drowned out all thoughts of individuality. I found myself edging backwards in surprise.

"Ummm..." I muttered to myself, somewhat reeling in confusion. "Sit down, I guess."

As my instruction registered on their collective mind, they all sat, one mass moving as one as they shuffled down into their wobbly, blue plastic chairs.

Once things were silent, I took a breath and began the lesson. "I'm told that you're studying debating techniques. Is that correct?"

One voice droned out, as just over half of them sleepily replied, "Yes 'cher."

If I was living in a horror movie, then these were the best-behaved, laziest zombies ever caught on film.

"Right. Let's begin with something simple."

I had all this planned out. At home, in my guest-house room, where the stench of Lou's cigarettes had forever stained the yellow curtains, all this had seemed like a professional, smart lesson plan. Now, in front of an audience of expectant high-schoolers, it seemed that I was the least competent man alive—perhaps apart from Raj.

I turned and wrote what I assumed was the most clever, interesting and devious debate topic that a human–mind could conceive on the white board with a borrowed marker. I had borrowed it from Lou and it smelled suspiciously fishy.

Best not to think about it.

I heard a little sigh and a mutter flutter around the classroom as I turned back to face them.

I said, smiling to myself at my cleverness, “Dogs are better than cats!”

The students looked confused and the adults at the back looked bored as they scribbled notes on a pair of pads.

A hand was raised. A boy, slightly larger than the rest, frowned to himself and looked desperate for clarification. Trying to keep things on–track I pointed to him and said, “So, dogs are better than cats?”

He tutted to himself and said, in remarkably good English, “But teacher, they both taste the same!”

“Oh, my God!” I muttered in horror. A chuckle spread around the room but I couldn’t tell if it was aimed at him for landing a joke, or me for failing to reacting to it. To be fair, I didn’t even know if it was a joke. “Really?”

He nodded.

Quickly, I tried to regain a little composure. “So who can think of an argument for why dogs are better than cats?” I said loudly, trying to ignore him and move on. To clarify, I added, “Why dogs are better pets than cats!”

A young girl at the front put up her hand. She had a sweet, innocent little face with gigantic eyes behind thick, black–rimmed glasses. I pointed at her and hoped for the best.

She said, “I ran over a dog once in my car.”

“Oh...” I said weakly. How could this get worse? “Accidents can happen, I suppose.”

“Accident?” she said, cocking her head curiously to one side.

I was sweating now and it wasn't the hangover. “Perhaps someone would like to argue why cats are better than dogs?”

The boy at the front who had spoken before said, quite loudly, “Cats aren't better than dogs.”

It wasn't what I was looking for but I was ready to take whatever I could get. At least the conversation had started and I was grateful for that.

“OK!” I said, the relief evident in my voice. “Why aren't cats as good as dogs?”

He shrugged and looked confused. “There's more meat on a dog!”

“No!” I told him firmly, but edging more towards pity than anger, and much of it was aimed at myself. “You're not supposed to eat cats or dogs. They're meant to be pets!”

A voice somewhere around the middle called out, “My Dad says that people have to eat animals or else they'll try to take over the world. That's why Donald Trump is so fat!”

I didn't even know what to make of that. Was there a question in there that needed an answer? Was there a tiny kernel of logic we could expand on for the sake of discussion?

“Well, you don't need to eat animals at all. People can be perfectly healthy just eating a plant-based diet.” This was one of those times where you want to take it all back. You know you've done a stupid thing and you know there's nothing left to do now, but deal with the consequences of your own idiocy.

“But animals are made of food?” a young, slightly chubby girl said.

“No!” I told her, trying to sound like a teacher and not a crazy, self-righteous vegan. “Instead of eating meat, you can just eat vegetables.”

The dog–murdering girl at the front said, “Yes!” Finally, somebody was on my side, even if she did like running over pets, and other animals. Then, she added, “That’s what poor people do. Are you a poor people, teacher?”

I sighed and said, “It’s poor person, not poor people.” Not only did that not help but it didn’t help in a spectacularly huge fashion. There was a ripple of laughter which I fully deserved, to be fair.

“I don’t eat meat!” I said. “I’m not poor. It’s just healthier, and I think we should respect animals.”

The girl replied, “Animals don’t respect us. That’s why I ran over the dog with my car. It was peeing on my wheel but it won’t do it again because, afterwards, its spine was broken and all the inside bits were on the outside.”

An unusually large boy, who looked as if he should be in a cage, added, “It doesn’t matter, so long as you ate it. That’s what he means, isn’t it, Teacher? It’s alright to kill things as long as you eat them afterwards. That’s right, isn’t it?”

How could a day that begins in a smelly, claustrophobic guest–house room, where you wake up with a ferocious hangover and have to work out if you’ve caught a horrendous array of venereal diseases from a slightly racist Cockney, get any worse?

Well, that question was answering itself right in front of me...

“OK!” I said, loudly silencing the growing discord that was beginning to creep around the room. “Let’s discuss something else instead.”

A hand went up at the back. It was a lean young boy with half his head shaved so that he looked like a psychopathic serial–killer, and the other half sprouting a mass of wavy hair that was awkwardly styled into the look of a cheap 1970s lampshade. “Boys are better than girls!” he said firmly.

“You can’t argue that!” I told him, hopefully.

He replied loudly, "It's easy to argue that. Bigger brains, bigger bodies, stronger, more –"

"OK!" I snapped, cutting him off. "I think it might be better if we discuss something less controversial."

Such as? Anything? My brain reeled in horror and, as I opened my mouth, the only thing that came out was, "The environment." On balance, it could have been worse.

Down the back of the room, a smug looking boy, his arms crossed in front of his chest, said, "My Dad says we've already beaten the environment."

"You can't beat the environment..." I said, slightly bewildered. "We live there. We rely on it to survive."

"And now it knows who's in charge!" he said. He clearly meant it.

Another hand went up, thankfully. It was a slender boy. He looked as if the only use his head had was to keep his neck busy. His eyes were pointing off in different directions, his mouth was slightly open and I thought I could see a faint trace of drool running from the corner of his lip.

Not one to judge, I said, "Yes?"

He smiled, seeming keen just to have been chosen to speak. He said, "Why are you so fat?"

That was unexpected. "What?" I cried out in surprise. "What do you mean?"

The young girl next to him leant forwards and explained: "He says that to everyone. Don't worry."

"Ah," I said, relieved. "So, I'm not really fat?"

"No, you are," she told me. "But he says it to everyone. You're fat but you're not special."

Maybe I really should have slept with Lou. Maybe I'd have gotten an infection that might have killed me outright so I could have

avoided all of this. Her not finding me attractive suddenly became quite a serious nuisance.

“OK!” I said finally. “I’m going to split the class into two sides and we’ll discuss the topic!” We were yet to have a topic that didn’t involve eating house-pets or observing my physical shortcomings, so it was time to think on my feet.

I turned to the board and tried to ignore the piercing gazes of the sharp little pairs of eyes. I rubbed the writing off the board and got out my borrowed, fishy pen.

My brain, not my closest ally in all this, opted to write, “Education is a gift we all deserve.”

I pointed to it and said to them, “Right, let’s split you into two groups.”

The hand came up at the back, the one with the terrible hair, and the one that I should have expected. “Boys versus girls!” he said with startling enthusiasm.

“Well...” I began, flustering for a moment.

Another hand came up from a boy on the other side of the class. He asked, “Which side am I on? I’m gay!”

This could definitely have gone better.

I won’t tire you with the details of how it got incrementally and infinitely worse with each raised hand. Needless to say that, however I might have felt about the incredibly slow passing of time, I can happily report that the lesson did eventually end. It seemed almost tragic that my life chose not to.

As the students filtered out, I made my way to the back of the class to meet the two adult observers. The school principal was chatting away happily to the course instructor and there was a certain amount of shoulder slapping; they were clearly friends.

Ray had friends?!

The principal grinned and said, “Not bad. A little preachy at times.”

“Preachy?” I asked, a curious frown on my face.

The instructor, Ray, said, “You came across as a crazy, self-righteous vegan for a bit. You need to watch that. Not many vegans in this place!”

I sighed and said, “I thought there was a large Buddhist community here?” The pair of them looked at one another and seemed more confused than I was. They chuckled and then looked back to me.

I knew I had screwed it up. I had gone in with an excellent, perfectly formal plan that was so well-structured that it had absolutely no bearing on reality whatsoever. It had crumbled away around me and they had watched it all happen.

“We would like to offer you the job!” the principal said, his expression serious.

A happy smile spread across my face and I heard my own voice say in surprise, “Really?”

Ray told me, “We were going to give it to Tim but he threatened to have you killed, so I’m going to have to have words with him later.”

“Killed?” I said in surprise. That did come rather out of the blue.

Ray just smiled back and told me, “Yes, that was even his discussion topic. Apparently, the best way to do it is to stab you through the neck with a screwdriver and then hide the screwdriver in a box of tools at a local mechanic. Dogs will lick up your blood to hide the evidence.

“All things considered, I thought the discussion went pretty well!”

“What..?” I squeaked.

“So I’ll have a chat with him about boundaries,” Ray added with a smirk. He actually seemed a bit sad about it. “And you can begin here tomorrow!”

Trying to forget all about drowning in my own blood with a greasy screwdriver jutting out of my neck, I turned to the principal and said, “Thanks for the opportunity. I actually didn’t think that went very well.”

“You were the best applicant. I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

It was obvious he didn’t much care one way or another. He turned away and I managed to catch him before he made his way out, forcing himself through the dwindling crowd of students. “Do you need copies of my certificates or references?”

He looked curiously at Ray and I heard him say, “What’s he said?”

Ray just laughed. “Del is your supervisor now!”

Chapter 2

Del gestured me towards a chair. “Sit down, Paul!” he said. “Make yourself comfortable, I’ll get us a coffee. What would you like?”

The coffee shop could have been taken out of any city in the Western world. It was beautifully decorated, if a little on the corporate side, and had a certain rugged charm. The smell of freshly-ground coffee hung on the air and there was a faint background chatter of happy voices echoing around the lounge.

The sounds of soft, tinny local music wafted through my ears.

“Whatever you’re having,” I told him with a shrug. Truth be told, while I was living in London, I hadn’t really been a big fan of coffee. I mostly drank the instant stuff, served right out of the kettle into a chipped mug. The fancy names and sizes on the menu meant less to me than words like ‘discipline,’ ‘responsibility,’ and ‘effort.’

“You like it strong and black, do you?” he said with a suggestive grin.

What does he mean by that?! I flustered for a response.

“Just messing with you,” he countered, breaking into a wide smile.

He swaggered off to the counter with a kind of easy confidence that I very slightly envied. There was something annoying about this guy. You couldn’t help but respect him, and there was nothing I disliked more than having to respect people; I wasn’t thrilled about doing much of anything, really.

I sat back against a huge glass wall and half-watched the world go by. Since I had left home, my life had been a whirl that I was still trying to make sense of. It was nice just to sit back in peace for a moment and not have to worry about anything.

“Coffee is on the way,” said Del out of nowhere. I hadn’t even noticed him coming back. For some reason, I sat up straight and tried to look more formal. “Thanks!” I said stiffly.

“Relax,” he told me. “This isn’t a formal interview, this is just a chat. I’m taking over as your mentor and I just want to get to you know quickly before we get started.”

I nodded back and muttered, “Right.” It was hard for me to meet his steely gaze. “So you’ll be watching me while I teach?”

“No!” he laughed, his voice even lower, deeper and more grave when he was amused. “It’s not my job to follow you around making sure you’re doing yours. I’m just here to help you with any problems that come up.”

“Right, right,” I said.

“I work for the training group. We help you find jobs, we liaise with the schools our clients work with, and we are always there in the background to make sure everything runs smoothly.”

He was a fairly intimidating man. If things didn’t run smoothly, what would happen to the people involved? “Do things always go smoothly?” I asked.

“No,” he admitted. “They usually do, but this is a new country with a very different culture than people are used to. A lot of teachers have difficulty adapting to it and that can cause trouble.”

“I see,” I said. I didn’t, not really. A job was a job, surely?

“To an Englishman, the locals might seem lazy,” he continued, leaning back in his chair easily. “To them, Westerners seem like they’re always rushing. Teachers from some countries don’t get on with teachers from other countries. Things happen!”

“And you’re here to fix it?” I asked.

He nodded. “Paul, I’ve looked at your records, you seem like a good guy. You did well on the theory and the practical exercises during the course. I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

“I hope so too.”

He grinned, pulling back his lips across a row of perfectly straight white teeth. “I’m going to visit the bathroom,” he told me. “Why don’t you think about whether there are any questions you’d like to ask me?”

“Sure,” I said.

The way he strutted through the shop caught my attention once again. He politely gave way to men and flashed suggestive smiles to women, who seemed to soak up his attention like a sponge. There was definitely something about him that just made him totally likeable.

“Arschhole!” I grumbled.

Chapter 3

I found a space at the table. Actually, it was six tables all pushed together with another six made into a similar cluster over the other side of the room. The room wasn't large enough for all the tables and that problem was exponentially amplified when the same room was also filled with local teachers.

I had expected a ripple of conversation about classroom methodology and discipline but it was less a ripple and more of a tidal-wave, and it wasn't so much a conversation as dozens of people shouting over one another to be heard. I had no idea what the subject of all this was but I could pick out the odd English word, and clearly recognised the brands of several smart-phones and more swear-words than I could count.

It was earlier in the morning than I would have liked, that being any time before lunch, and I was in the teachers' office at my new job. I yawned to myself and then lurched forwards as something powerful and terrifying hit me from behind. I reeled forwards, catching myself before collapsing to the table in a startled, crumbled and dishevelled heap.

A little dazed, I turned to see what accidental incident had happened to rudely crash into me, expecting to see a driverless car or a large herd of wild animals.

"Hello, Peter!" Lou said with a jovial smile, like something you'd expect to see on the face of a recently fed lion. Her hand was still raised and it was clear that my life had nearly been ended by a friendly slap on the back.

"Paul!" I told her, smoothing down my shirt and standing upright, shaking off my appalling display of physical inferiority. "It's Paul."

One of the locals was eating something that smelled like a rat had tried eating it first but had given up. She froze in position with her hand embedded in a plastic bag, gazing at me raptly after I had nearly

careened into her, knocking her terrible snacks all over the floor where they really belonged, and had probably been found in the first place.

“I’m Lou!” Lou told the horrified, mesmerised local woman. Because that might not have done enough to assure everyone in the staff room that we were utterly reprehensible, she added, “I woke up in his bed yesterday but we didn’t fuck or anything. I don’t reckon he’s packing enough to keep me interested, if you know what I mean!” Just to drive the message home, she added, much more loudly, “Downstairs!” and pointed below my waist.

I closed my eyes and heard the grinding, gnashing sound of my own teeth inside my head. I sighed and added rhetorically, “It’s true. I had to burn the sheets and everything. We had to catch them first, which was good exercise.”

The local woman turned and faced the opposite direction, but her eyes remained fixed on us until the very last moment. Then she smiled awkwardly and went back to violently assaulting her own taste-buds.

“You got the job, then?” said Lou.

“Evidently you did, too. What grade are you teaching?”

She shrugged and began looking around for maybe a desk, perhaps a coat hanger or possibly any man that might be packing enough to keep her interested, if you know what she meant; downstairs! Who could tell?

“Grade 3, I think. I don’t know. Who gives a shit?” she said with the eloquence of a donkey trying to ballet–dance.

I frowned curiously. “I actually do give a shit. This is my job. We’re responsible for the education of young children. That’s a huge responsibility!”

She looked at me and her big, slightly misshapen, lips curled into a smile.

“Yeah, good one.”

I didn't know if she was just toying with me. I felt it was best to hope she was, and best to assume she wasn't.

"Why are we here so early anyway?" she grumbled, looking around the place. "Don't they know I need my beauty sleep?"

I looked at her incredulously. The thought that most people wouldn't have any trouble working it out for ourselves was foremost on my mind. Remembering that a friendly slap on the back was roughly equal to an angry punch to the face from just about anyone else, I decided that discretion was probably best. I said, diplomatically, "I think we have an induction meeting so they can show us around!"

She sat down on the table, not around the table on one of the many plastic chairs, but actually on it, perching herself precariously on the edge. "I need to know where the pisser is. I had a few too many beers last night, washing down a plate of those greasy sausage things they serve at the guest house bar."

I suspected I knew what she meant. "The 'shared family platter?'" I asked.

"Yeah," she agreed with a nod. "I had a couple of them."

"Sounds healthy!" I said, making the mistake of applying sarcasm, which would only drag this conversation out further.

She gave me a look that had probably been the last one some people had ever seen. She said, "The 'shared family platter' is still healthier than sarcastic jokes about the angry Cockney!"

"Seems likely," I said meekly and looked away.

I spotted another Westerner across the room. He was a tall, bald, white man. He saw us standing around and began making his way over, a beaming smile on his oddly-square face. He reached out his hand and said loudly, "Dak!"

I looked at Lou and she, similarly, looked back at me. Like an idiot, she said back to him, "Dak," probably presuming this was some kind of greeting.

I rolled my eyes and reached out to shake his hand. “I’m Paul,” I said evenly. “This is Lou, she’s a Cockney. I think there are only twenty names where she’s from and everyone has to share them. I also don’t think they have actual foreigners.”

Rather compounding the problem of dealing with Lou, he said to her earnestly, “Where’s Cockney? Is it near the Maldives?”

“I’m from London!” she told him, her accent deepening so far that it almost could have been coming from a drunken Australian who was paid to slur her words for her.

Dak looked at me, his left eyebrow raised curiously. I explained, “I’m from London, too, but it’s a part where we have schools—actual schools, with books in them. We have foreigners too; lots and lots of foreigners.”

Dak put his hands on his hips and stood grinning at us. He was casually dressed in a pair of light grey trousers that ended up sitting above a pair of brown trainers. His shirt wouldn’t have looked out of place on a beach in Hawaii and, as we weren’t on a beach in a Hawaii, it looked quite strikingly out of place. He hadn’t bothered finishing off his ensemble with a tie, which was probably for the best all round. I briefly wondered if he was colour-blind but no reasonable person would be rude enough to say it.

“Are you colour-blind?” Lou asked, gazing at his clothes. “No offence but your shirt is giving me a headache.”

He looked down at his shirt and frowned to himself. “No, I’m South African!” he said with a grin, as if this somehow explained everything. “My country was founded on the principal of not giving a shit!”

Evidently so.

I laughed politely and he chuckled along with me. He put his hand on my shoulder. He was of roughly average build and, as he moved closer, I was hit with a waft of absolutely brutal aftershave. “You’re

Grade 4, right?” he said. “I’m Grade 3. Those kids didn’t have a decent teacher all last year. One of them got caught in the playground making the kids all sit round him in a circle making yogurt. We asked him what he was doing and all he would say was that he liked yogurt.”

“I like yogurt!” Lou said, pushing herself back into the conversation.

“Wait for it,” I said to Dak rolling my eyes.

She added, “But the little pots are too small, they should make much bigger pots.”

“There it is ...” I said with a sigh.

She looked at me confused but, if she was planning any kind of brutal outpouring of spite, she was clearly saving it up for later. Instead of threatening violence, she said to Dak, “I’m on Grade 3.”

He sighed and looked her up and down sadly. He looked around to make sure nobody was listening. The room was louder than ever. Nobody was even listening to anyone else, so I was pretty sure we were safe.

In any case, he lowered his voice and said, “I’ll be honest...” he paused for a moment and fixed her with a look of deep sadness. “Those kids are total shits.”

“Really?” I asked. “We were told they were disciplined and wanted to learn.”

Dak grinned at me and stared as if he had caught me trying to teach a dog to be a cat. “Is that what you were told?” His sarcastic tone was clearly discernible through his heavy accent. “You find out for yourself, eh?”

My heart sank a little. I had been fairly optimistic, even after my demonstration lesson which had been less successful than every political decision that the West has made in the last century. I said hopefully, “What about Grade 4?”

“Animals!” he said with an earnest nod. He looked like he meant it.

“Great!” I grumbled to myself.

“So,” Lou began, licking her lip suggestively. “Are you single? Gay?”

His expression shifted from amused to defensive. “I’m gay!” he said.

“I don’t think that will be enough to save you!” I said, rolling my eyes.

She glared at me, then at him, grumbled and sighed to herself, muttering something about phone apps and needing to get her pipes cleaned. There was a fair amount of involuntary cringing from everyone within earshot.

She then perked up slightly and said, “Anyone else working here? Specifically, anyone with a working penis that he likes sticking into angry Cockneys?”

“And with low standards?” I added, just to help clarify things.

“Yeah, there’s one other working here at this campus. His name’s Cam. He smokes. I can’t think of any other way to describe him; he just smokes.”

“I see,” I said, knowing I probably really didn’t.

“Del comes around a lot, too. He’s an older teacher and now he just mentors the new starters. Been around a bit and knows the country well.”

“We’ve already met,” I added.

“Del probably isn’t your type,” Dak told her, his hands dug into his hips and his head cocked to one side in a kind of sympathetic gesture. “I think Del sleeps with a lot of girls but I don’t like to jump to conclusion or judge. Cam can’t even get prostitutes to sleep with him.”

She frowned to herself.

To cheer myself up, I ventured, "That's a fair amount of judgement, and jumping to conclusions, for someone who doesn't like to do it, Dak!"

Dak frowned expectantly.

"Lou could be a prostitute for all we know."

"I'm not," she said, evidently without taking offence. "I probably should have been. I would have made a fortune."

"Or died of starvation?" I suggested.

"No!" she said, perking up a bit and straightening her back so that her breasts heaved against a top that was way too tight for a woman of her size, or indeed any size. "I'll do anything. I'm bit of a submissive, you see. I'll let my men stick anything they want into anywhere they like."

"Oh no!" Dak cried out in justifiable horror.

Lost in my own inner turmoil, I found myself quietly envying his homosexuality.

"So," I said, eagerly trying to change the subject. "We're responsible for the minds of young people..."

Dak, recognizing the lifeline I had just tossed into the water, took the bait. "We are. We're shaping young minds!"

"So... How long have you been teaching?"

"Nearly a month now!" he said proudly, slapping his hands together with childlike enthusiasm.

Even Lou, who must have seen and done things that would make sailors blush, looked surprised to have heard that. She said noisily in surprise, "Just a month? Is that all?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I've learned so much in that time."

I was almost afraid to ask, but my stupidity often overwhelms the very small part of my brain where there is slightly less stupidity. I heard my own mouth saying the words, "What did you learn?"

“Subject/verb agreement,” Dak said, as if this was a huge achievement. Perhaps, for him, it was. Who could tell? I was beginning to realise that my expectations would have to get used to not being met.

“So where are the others, Del and Cam?” I asked, eventually.

“Smoking,” he said, gesturing with his head to the front of the building. “You can’t smoke around the children: they don’t like the smell.”

“Or the whole ‘dying of cancer’ thing?” I suggested.

“I’ve never heard them complain of that. It’s mostly the smell..”

“I should join them for a fag!” Lou said, propping herself up from the desk in a movement that belied her great size. I was almost impressed, more so that the desk hadn’t collapsed.

“I didn’t know you smoked!” I said.

“Oh yeah!” she told me excitedly. “I started because I’m fat.”

Dak placed his hand around his chin and began nodding curiously, as though he was about to reveal sage wisdom so sharp that it could slice open a tumour with a single, deft motion. “Are you?” he said in a tone that might have been sarcastic or simply a reflection of his incredibly shallowness.

“You took up smoking to lose weight?” I asked. “Isn’t that a bit like cutting off your testicles because your trousers are too tight?”

“Is that what happened?” Dak asked, realisation dawning on him. “That would explain everything.”

She glared at him momentarily and then turned back to me, frowning as though it was me that was being stupid. To be fair, the fact that I was still a part of this conversation did imply exactly that.

“Idiot!” she said. “I took up smoking because I’m fat! I don’t want to die of heart disease; lung cancer is much quicker. I’m playing the odds!”

“And I’m going to class!”

The odds that people like us would be standing in front of a class of children were heavily stacked against us—not as heavily as the smashed furniture and broken pieces of wood stacked up against the far wall, but they were significant nonetheless.

This was really my first time in front of an actual class of expectant students, without a safety net and left completely to my own devices. The fact that my training barely covered my ability to read and write was foremost on my mind.

I felt unprepared but the classroom certainly beat me on that score. To make my way to the front, I had to wind my way through desks that were unevenly lined up, and through a mismatched group of students who displayed varying degrees of utter dishevelment. Most were dressed in their white uniform shirts, the boys wearing blue ties, the girls wearing shorter ties and with far more extensive and flamboyant collars.

The girls had long, mostly sensible hair while the boys tended to sport styles that were bordering on ridiculous. It was as if they'd been attacked by a monstrous, self-aware sheep-shearing device that was jammed on the setting, 'Revenge.' I managed not to laugh, to compose myself and prepare to begin teaching, to pass my wisdom to the fertile young minds before me.

“Why does this room smell?” I asked, placing my laptop bag onto the stark wooden chair behind the front desk.

A young girl, her posture excellent and her uniform spotlessly clean, raised her hand. It jutted up so hard, and so quickly, that it was lucky she didn't dislocate her shoulder. “Teacher, this used to be a storage room.”

“I see,” I said. Compared to everything else, this surprise was so mild that it barely registered. “But why does it smell so really, really bad?”

The same girl still hadn't lowered her arm, presumably because I had not instructed her to do so. She told me, "It used to be the storage room for the canteen."

That raised more questions, of course, and also ensured that I wouldn't be eating there. I commented, really just speaking to myself, "It smells like dead rats."

"Yes!" she agreed, her arm straining to the ceiling.

I looked at the tiny forest of small eyes gazing raptly in my direction. The students were mostly so very thin, I couldn't help but wonder what might have happened to the rats.

I looked at the girl with her arm raised. I said, "Can you not put that down unless I tell you to?"

"Yes, teacher!" she agreed.

"Do you mean 'No, teacher?'" I asked.

"Yes, teacher."

I smiled to myself and moved along with the lesson. Her eyes widened in horror and a little chuckle fluttered around the classroom.

Obviously, they were more afraid of me than I was of them, as hard as that might be to believe.

With a deep breath, I began, "My name is Paul."

A chorus of, "Hello, teacher Paul," droned loudly around the room before quickly dying down.

"I'm from London. Does anyone know where London is?" I said, cringing at the condescending question. I hoped they weren't offended.

A boy, one who looked as if he probably wasn't a high-achiever asked, "Is it in Birmingham or Holland?"

"It's not in Birmingham or Holland!" I told him. "Does anyone know?"

Another hand went up. This time it was a girl, much shorter than the rest and wrapped up in a huge green jacket that was so much larger

than her diminutive frame that the arm-sleeves hung down past her hands.

“Yes?” I said, pointing to her.

“Hitler!”

“What?” I had really no idea what that was meant to mean.

“London isn’t in... in... Hitler. Anyone else?”

A third and final hand went up. It was a boy who looked either asleep or dead, the distinction not seeming terribly important. I pointed to him and he said smugly, “London.”

“London is in England!” I said, audience participation time over for now. “Have you all heard of England?”

A resounding chorus of confusion came out of them. Some clearly had, some clearly hadn’t, and some weren’t able to answer the question. One of them seemed to be looking it up on a calculator.

It was hard to tell if the horse was really quite dead, so I tried a little more flogging. “What comes from England? Can anyone tell me?”

“You?” asked a boy with the worst haircut I have ever seen.

Beside him someone was trying to catch a beam of sunlight that was shining through the window. He kept opening his fingers and examining his hand closely, looking confused that it was still empty.

“Yes!” I said. Loathe as I was to admit it, he wasn’t wrong. “I mean, does anyone know of anything important that comes from England?”

The girl at the front, her arm still pointing rigidly upwards said, “Teacher? London comes from England.” She grinned to herself proudly while yet another little piece of my soul died.

I was running low on little bits of soul.

“I don’t know how much of my soul there is left,” I said to Lou. She was already trying her luck with Del by the time the bell went for lunch and

she wasn't really paying attention to me at all. I wondered if all Cockneys were this rude.

I had to assume that it was lunchtime as the awful klaxon had exploded noisily through the crumbling building. It was either time for the monsters to have food rammed into them, or the nukes were flying and a merciful release was coming for us all. Unfortunately for the masses, there was nothing of value to be obliterated.

Del was standing outside, tall and solidly built with a neatly trimmed mop of hair on the top of his head, that was speckled with just a few white hairs. His posture was irritatingly excellent. When it came to smoking, he was a man who looked as if he took it very seriously. When it came to everything else, he looked like a man who took smoking very seriously.

Lou was waving her arm around, running her fingers through her chemically-damaged yellow hair and giggling girlishly at whatever jokes he was making. His expression seemed fixed throughout, with a smile carved across her sagging face.

I approached them cautiously, not wanting to involve myself in a courtship ritual, especially since she might be planning to eat his head afterwards and then, later, be consumed by swarms of her own offspring. I had no desire to flesh out any of my preconceptions of her nocturnal habits.

As far as I was concerned, she simply ceased to exist when I could no longer see her and anything that happened at night was between her, the unfortunate victim and the pharmacist.

"Paul!" she yelled, a high pitch wail that rivalled the nuclear lunch klaxon. I had briefly wondered if the earlier noise wasn't a notice to the students about the beginning of lunch and was, in fact, a dire warning to the canteen that she may be coming.

I grumbled and rolled my eyes. I had been talking to her about my lesson and she hadn't heard a word of it.

Del looked up and nodded at me. He moved with slow, deliberate motions as if something inside was operating him and needed to think very hard about doing it. “Paul, how’s it going?” he said, his lips curling into a very deliberate smile, entirely under manual control.

My morning had prepared me for this. I told him, “Yeah, apparently I’m Paul from London, Hitler, home of French–bread pizza, according to my Grade 4 class, which seems oddly obsessed with Birmingham and why it isn’t in Holland, as it turns out.”

Del nodded. He pulled a blue packet of cigarettes, and drew one from the box. He lit it with the burning embers of the last and slowly, methodically, slipped it back in his pocket. He looked up and told me, “You got the special class, I hear. Nobody else wanted them. They stuck them in the old storage room and quietly gave up on them until we found someone dumb, or desperate, enough to deal with them.”

Lou grinned to herself and said, “A bit like what happened to all your hopes and dreams!”

I shrugged and nodded in agreement. “When I was a kid, I think I wanted to be a fireman. I was a pretty terrible student and never listened to my teacher but I distinctly don’t remember anyone asking me what I wanted to be and replying, ‘I want to be the living embodiment of irony.’”

“Ah!” said Del with a sad smirk as he shook his head. “You’re clever, or at least you think you are. That just makes being here worse for you.”

“I’m starting to realise that,” I said with a sigh. “How long have you been in the country?”

Del sucked hard on his freshly lit cigarette and the tip glowed brightly. As a little grey smoke curled from his lips, he said, “Too long. Long enough to know what you’ll find out over the next few months.”

“Right!” I said, blinking away his bizarre statement. “What do people do for lunch around here?”

Lou said loudly, “They eat food!” She laughed as if a well-dressed man had slipped over on a banana-skin in front of her.

Dell looked at me and raised his eyebrows. He took a deep breath and said, “There’s a place around the corner that does rice and shit. I’m going there for a bite to eat. You’re both welcome to join me.”

“Rice and shit does sound appealing!” I said, somewhat cynically.

Del grinned and raised a finger. “There’s the cleverness again!” he warned. “If it made you happy, then you wouldn’t be rapidly approaching middle-age in a foreign country with no savings and no idea how you ended up here. And the really terrible truth is that you’re not just going to eat ‘Rice and shit’ but it’s actually the best offer you’ve had in as long as you can remember.”

As a man who recently woke up with a hangover in the same bed as Lou, I felt he had done a pretty great job of summing me up. I felt basically naked and, and for the second time recently. It made me feel quite uneasy.

We began walking off, heading wherever it was that lunch was going to be served. Del just began walking and, almost without realising it, both Lou and I were walking along behind.

“How was your first morning then?” asked Lou conversationally.

“I tried to tell you already but you weren’t listening,” I grumbled. “How was yours?”

She said, a little smile on her bruised-looking lips, “Not bad. The kids seem really smart.”

Del turned to me with a wide grin. “Do you have a clever comment to add to that?”

What more was there to add?

For lunch, we had ‘Rice and shit’ and it was disconcerting to find out that he hadn’t exaggerated in the slightest. I couldn’t work out what to call the place. Calling it a restaurant would have deservedly got you an express ticket to hell for blatant dishonesty. ‘Cafe’ was also too

grandiose a term since it was little more than a partly-painted brick box with plastic chairs and a few stainless-steel folding tables arranged crookedly about the place.

It existed somewhere between a street-vendor and a waste-management site. As it had running water and the appropriate smell, I decided to think of it as a toilet and to just get through the whole process of eating there as quickly as possible, while lamenting my shitty life.

“Where are you from?” I asked Del conversationally.

Lou looked up in interest, seeming to hang on his every word. He must have had an extra two decades on her and had the sexual magnetism of anyone with dyed blue hair. I wondered quite what the attraction was.

“Lots of places,” he told me wryly. “My parents travelled a lot. I was raised in Australia, mostly, and spent some time in New Zealand, Nairobi and Saudi Arabia. I went to university in Barbados, of all places.”

“That’s probably why I couldn’t quite place the accent,” I said.

“An accent is a badge!” he said. “For real sophistication, always look to the person who doesn’t have one.”

Lou seemed impressed. “Do I come across as sophisticated?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?” I retorted.

Confused, she turned to Del and asked, “I dunno, is he?”

Del grinned. “You’re just as sophisticated as anyone I ever met out here, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

I sat back trying to work out if that was a compliment to her, or an insult to everyone else.

The plastic seat was a little too small for me, so I had to shuffle around, trying to find a way to sit in it that didn’t feel too uncomfortable. It flexed beneath me, struggling to support my totally completely normal and average weight. I asked Del, “Do they have a menu?”

“I’m going to shock you here, Paul,” he said earnestly. “They don’t have a menu; they don’t serve wine by the glass; they don’t have a Michelin star; they don’t have a chef that has his own television show. And get this: they don’t offer discounts to social–media influencers.”

I was rather glad to hear about the last point. The rest did come as rather less of a shock than even Del might have imagined.

He continued, “They have rice or noodles. That can be matched to meat, such as chicken–bones, pork–bones, or beef with little bits of bone smashed into it. They might also have eggs, if the chicken didn’t run out of luck this morning, and they probably have a few mixed green things that can be added to the brown things that we’re not brave enough to ask questions about.”

“Great!” I grinned. “To be honest, I wouldn’t know what kind of wine to order with that anyway.”

Del laughed. Lou joined him rather more loudly and with more enthusiasm. All the while, she quickly shot him glances to see if he was noticing her. For the most part, it didn’t seem that he was.

“What more can you ask of life than an adventure every time you order lunch?” Del asked. The answer seemed pretty self–evident.

“And I’m a vegan!” I announced.

Del laughed again, and even harder than the last. Was he judging me? If he was, he probably had a point.

A girl came over to take our order. She seemed as young as my students, and had the same vacant, empty, glazed–over expression. It looked as if life was happening to her and she was just along for the ride, content to be left out of the proceedings.

Her approach to waitressing was curious. She simply stood in the vicinity of our table, staring raptly ahead as if a small but significant piece of her brain was off doing its own thing somewhere else. More likely it was doing nothing at all.

“So, vegan!” began Del. “Your choices are fried noodles with mixed green things or starvation. Do you have a strong preference either way?”

I made a humming noise at the back of my throat and rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “It is a close one. I guess I’m going with the noodles and will look forward to regretting my choice later.”

“A wise decision!” He turned and jabbered off something to the waitress. My brain, expecting more English, was left reeling in surprise. I was impressed! The waitress even smiled at him before she wandered off, scratching her arse and giggling about something that was very likely only happening inside her skull.

“I ordered you rice with burnt meat on top,” he told Lou, seizing the initiative. “It’s a daily mystery; it could be anything from ‘ground-squirrel,’ which is a euphemism for rats, to a ‘slender-pig,’ which is a euphemism for cats.”

“Anything that’s been a cartoon animal?” I suggested dryly.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Don’t order the ‘giant-nose-cow.’”

“Good advice!” I nodded, hoping he was joking.

“So how are you two settling in?” he said, reaching for yet another cigarette.

Lou spoke first, leaning back in her plastic chair which growled in protest. “I don’t mind it.”

“I don’t hate it,” I added.

He grinned to himself and sparked a disposable blue lighter in front of his face. “You’ll learn!”

“What are the tricks?” I asked.

He shook his head and chuckled. “No tricks. It’s not perfect. It’s got its good days and its bad. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. We turn over a lot of teachers: they come and go. You learn something, you teach something else. It’s all just life.”

“Very philosophical,” I said. Wise words indeed. Del nodded back graciously.

Lou said, with considerably less sophistication, “That’s really deep, Del. You’re so clever.” She was clearly from the shallow end of the gene-pool.

Del flashed me a smile and told her, while looking at me, “Being clever doesn’t get you anywhere in this world. It’s better to be lucky than smart!”

“A perfect retort,” I said cleverly. “That was lucky.”

He grinned and sucked a deep draw on his cigarette. “We got you two in there today, another new teacher starts tomorrow and two more next week at the Kindergarten. We struggle to find enough recruits to fill the gaps.”

“I guess they come for the rewarding teaching experience but stay for the food?” I suggested with a sigh.

“Only the smart ones!” he told me pointedly.

“Well, I reckon I’ll stick around,” Lou said proudly.

Del and I looked at one another. Something inarticulate was exchanged between us that caused us both to smirk.

“We’ve got a guy called Tim starting tomorrow at the next campus over,” he told us. “It’s just a few meters around the corner.”

Lou closed her eyes and groaned.

“Problem?” asked Del.

“He’s just an idiot!” I said with a shrug. “There were a few idiots on our course. He was one of them.”

“Yeah!” Lou agreed. “He has a massive crush on me. He came onto me on the final-day celebration and I ended up hiding in Paul’s room.”

Del nodded on with a sympathetic and caring look, which I doubted the sincerity of. “The jokes just write themselves, don’t they?”

“I don’t want him working at this school!” she said grouchyly.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “He’s just an idiot. What could he possibly do?”

Chapter 4

I was sitting in a rather impressive office. It was large, spacious and wasn't painted with the same cheap, durable and sickly yellow paint that everything else in the country appeared to be liberally smothered with. I was already sick of the sight of slightly-dirty yellow, the colour of a malnourished infant's nappy, or the eyeballs of every English teacher past the age of forty.

In fact, this room was finished in a classy shade of pale green with dark red-wood panels fixed around the lower halves. A desk dominated the room and I found myself sitting in a carved wooden chair on the opposite side of it. It wasn't comfortable; it was as if the only requirement was that it be made of wood, and the fact that it was a chair was of no concern whatsoever.

A woman, sitting in an even more carved and even more wooden chair looked over my CV. She didn't look quite like the locals and her English was certainly better than average, but I hadn't asked where she was from. She looked up and frowned to herself about something or other. Whatever it was, she wasn't sharing the details with me.

I sighed inwardly. This had been going on for quite a while and showed no signs of ending any time soon. She just kept looking, frowning and then looking again at my CV. She was older, coming in somewhere towards the later end of her forties, and seemed to have given up on attractiveness and substituted an unwarranted, misplaced sense of superiority in its place. It seemed to be bordering on hatred of everything that wasn't living inside her own skin.

"I see..." she said. What it was she saw was anyone's guess.

"Yes!" I said redundantly. What exactly was I supposed to say? I continued, hoping to bring this job interview to some kind of point, "So I decided to apply to your school. I hear it's one of the better ones in the country."

“Better?” she said haughtily, judgmentally even. That didn’t seem reasonable, given that when I had arrived at the office, she had ushered me in and then walked into her own door. She glared at me over a pair of gold-rimmed glasses whose frames were too thick and too ornate. She looked as if she was staring back at herself out of a wardrobe mirror in my grandmother’s house.

“I was told there were vacancies,” I suggested, anything to spark a conversation that might involve us both.

She picked up my CV again and began tapping on it thoughtfully. She looked up, huffed and put it back down on her desk, glaring at it accusingly.

I sighed and looked away. All in all, this didn’t seem to be going terribly well.

“So!” she said, rousing the tiniest, flimsiest shred of optimism in me. “You have a little experience.”

“I know!” I said. “I was there when I got it.” I instantly regretted that little joke and wished I had employed better judgment. I was frequently told that employing judgment wasn’t my talent, and I was oddly preoccupied with trying to prove it.

“It would be better if you had been at a better school.”

Meaning, what exactly? She felt my experience would have more worth if I had earned it at an establishment of a higher standard? Or perhaps that my current position would be improved if I’d applied for a job somewhere else. Who knew?

“Well, that’s why I left,” I lied. That actually worked out nicely. My real reason for leaving was that Tim had started working there, and kept sneaking in and gluing dead rats to the inside of my locker. Even my judgement knew better than to tell the truth there. “I’m looking for a position at a school where I can develop my abilities.”

“Abilities,” she said thoughtfully. She began playing with a sagging bulge of flesh that hung down like a curtain behind the bone at the bottom of her lower jaw.

“I only qualified a month ago!” I explained, mostly just to fill the silence. “My previous position didn’t really offer me the opportunity I was looking for.”

“We’re looking for...” she began haltingly. She paused, frowned and scratched the tip of her nose while sucking in air noisily through her teeth. “We’re looking for a teacher.”

This wasn’t going well. “I’m a teacher,” I said with a smile. “When do I start?”

She looked at my CV again and said, “Teacher? After one month at that school?”

I exhaled loudly. At least she seemed more preoccupied with my previous employment than about myself. That was something...

“Yes!” I said. “I do agree that it wasn’t a very good school. I hoped it would be better but I had just arrived in the country and I didn’t know my way around. I soon realised that I needed to find somewhere better. That’s why I’m here.”

“Here!” she exclaimed. She put my CV down onto her desk and took a moment to straighten it, so that it perfectly lined up to the edge of her desk.

It didn’t.

She looked up and said, “My daughter went to that school!”

“I see,” I said.

I didn’t.

Whatever was going on here, she didn’t seem keen on sharing enough of it for it to make any kind of sense. “What did she think?”

“She liked it,” she said, her voice a deep growl.

This might have been the most confusing job interview I had ever had. “That’s good.”

“But I didn’t like it,” she said, her body stiffening. She narrowed her eyes and glared through me, as if she was staring accusingly at something on the other side of where I was. She so strongly gave this impression that I turned to check, quickly peering behind.

“I had to take her out of the school. She learned nothing.”

I shrugged and gave a weakly apathetic smile. “I didn’t learn much myself.”

“Her English teacher gave her a project,” she sneered. “He wanted to know how to impress hot girls.”

I smiled awkwardly. “Don’t we all?”

“Did you ever make your students tell you how to impress hot girls?” she asked accusingly.

If only I had the imagination to think of it. As I hadn’t, I could only reply honestly by saying, “No. I never did that.”

“Good!” she said, and something like a smile fluttered across her awful lips. The little mound of flesh beneath her jowls tightened very slightly but not enough to stop it flapping around beneath her.

I winced and tried to smile. Perhaps this would soon draw to a rather confusing conclusion? Changing the subject, I ventured, “What happened with your daughter?”

She looked up, her hollow, predatory eyes peering out from under an unusually rugged brow. “She studies here now!” she said, her voice as low as the growl of a hungry dog. “It’s much more expensive.”

“I see...” I didn’t, and was really past trying by this point.

“You start tomorrow,” she told me as if she was doing me a huge favour. “You will not discuss the topic of hot girls, and how to have sex with them, with the students!”

Exercising my famed lack of good judgement, I joked back, “And this is a hard rule?”

“It is!”

“Oh!” I said. That was predictable. “Then yes. No! I won’t do that. I mean, obviously I won’t do that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously!”

Chapter 5

It had been a long, difficult and grumpy week. I twisted the throttle and released all the pent-up power of my motorcycle. The world around me flashed into a blur as the machine accelerated with a crackling roar of the engine.

I moved along at walking-speed, then it accelerated a little harder, and then a tiny bit harder still. All 125cc of raw power were giving me all they had, which wasn't really very much at all, even if it felt quite fast to me.

The thing had cost only a few hundred dollars to buy. This had been, for the most part, because it looked as if it had been maintained by a rock-wielding chimpanzee, owned by an epileptic grizzly-bear and had been styled by the man who did Donald Trump's hair.

There was no escaping the fact that personal transport was essential in the city. I had invested blindly, buying it largely because I liked the bright yellow plastic. To be absolutely fair, I didn't know much more about bikes than that they came in different colours.

The roar of the engine was impressive until Del had pointed out that there was a hole in the exhaust that wasn't meant to be there. Sometimes Del really annoyed me. The rest of the time, he only annoyed me a little bit.

The lights turned green and I shot forwards into the traffic. Cars, motorcycles and other assorted things spewed into a junction, clogging the road in all directions. Nobody followed the rules, if they even knew them, and riding was a dangerous, threatening experience that had a lot in common with throwing yourself off a tall bridge with suicidal abandon, and just hoping for the best.

But, despite the danger and the inconvenience, there was no properly functional public transport, which meant you had to be almost entirely self-sufficient. You had no real choice: you use your own

transport or you walk. I didn't like to walk. The only thing I liked less than walking was running out of beer.

I pulled up outside the bar, the bar at the front of the guesthouse. It was located along a street at the heart of the city, the tumour-ridden, barely functioning heart of a broken part of the world. I knew my cynicism was in danger of overflowing, but made no attempt to hold back the tide.

I kicked down the side-stand of my diminutive little motor-scooter and clambered off. It was light enough to drag up the cracked pavement onto a ridge that ran along the front of the bar. It was Friday night, work had ended and the sun had been chased away by the foul thoughts of the entire population of international teachers as we converged around this area.

We had cash in our pockets and absolutely nothing in our minds. The latter could be rectified with beer, a situation which also remedied the first point for us along with it.

Cam was already there, along with Lou and Del. Two of them had come straight from school, meeting the other, who had been there all day: sometimes Del worked from the bar. I saw them as their eyes looked up, catching me as I pulled off my loose-fitting yellow helmet.

Cam was holding a beer, staring unwaveringly at the thing. His shoulders were slouched, his head slightly slumped forwards. He looked as if the weight of the world was slowly crushing him.

Lou put her hand on his shoulder and gave him a sympathetic, almost maternal, look. She said to me, "This poor fucking idiot lost his bike. I think he might top himself."

Del smiled, shook his head and looked away. He sipped at a mug of beer and then said, "That's it Lou, you help the poor fucking idiot feel better about himself."

"He does feel better!" she said defensively. She looked over to his face, which never twitched, and then back to Del.

I hung my helmet on the broken mirror of my bike. It wasn't broken exactly: it just wasn't exactly a mirror, either. While that might have been a huge problem in England, where police might have sent the helicopters out to get me and had me executed for crimes against the Queen, here, it was just business as usual. If there were any laws, I hadn't managed to figure them out yet. Fortunately, nobody else had either.

I sat on one of the spare seats around a large table. There were two other people I had never met before and I simply assumed they were members of the group. There was a woman and a man. The woman was an overweight blonde with a face that was either young, but prematurely aged, or old but unusually youthful. She looked as if she'd suffered through a life that wasn't worth living and was just waiting for it all to end.

The man had a cigarette in his hand and was so drunk that it looked as if he would catch fire at any moment and might send a black plume of sooty smoke up to the heavens.

It appeared to me that life had failed them and they had, in turn, proved life absolutely right in that it hadn't been worth it putting in the effort. In short, they looked every inch like every other teacher in the town.

"Evening," I said, as I flashed around cursory smiles with my own abundant sense of complete superiority.

A few months in the city had changed me a lot. Where, once, I might have waited patiently for an introduction, now things were different. You didn't see strangers as people to meet and get to know: you just accepted them as temporary friends and carried on about your business. These new faces were simply new additions to my social circle and I thought no more of it.

Cam looked over, sighed and then returned his attention to his beer. He muttered something that was probably, "Evening."

Del sighed and explained, “Cam is staying in this guesthouse. He had a bit of trouble before and Lou suggested he stay here for a few weeks. One night in, someone steals his bike. He’s not happy.”

“Ah,” I said. “I got a message from Lou that Cam might kill himself and that I should come to the bar for a beer if I want to watch.”

Del rolled his eyes and said, “Yeah, with that strong maternal instinct, it’s hard to believe she’s single, isn’t it?”

I peered over to the new woman, who was staring fixedly at me. “Hi, I’m Paul!”

“Kim,” she said brashly. “You’re from London aren’t you? Whereabouts?”

“Not quite the nice part, but close enough to be able to lie about it convincingly.” My jokes rarely sounded as good out loud.

“I’m from Essex,” she said, sounding a bit sad about it.

“I’m so sorry.”

She then took a deep breath and said matter of factly, “Paul, would you like to fuck me?”

It wasn’t what I expected to hear and my brain reeled in surprise. Many thoughts seemed to flash through it at once.

The first was my logical, cold and reasoning mind which reeled up and said to itself, ‘What an interesting question! Let’s give this some due consideration before making a terrible decision!’ My more basic, animal instinct screamed a resounding negative while a crafty whisper somewhere around the back argued, ‘Are we absolutely sure we’ve had sex with enough women? Would it not make sense to have sex with one more, just to make up the numbers?’

While all this was going on, whatever part of me was in charge at that precise moment managed to say loudly, “Fuck me, no!”

Realising that had sounded a little rude, perhaps too pointed a rejection, I said more evenly, “It’s just that I was more thinking of doing something else tonight. No offence.”

“None taken!” she said, sipping on stale looking mug of beer. “My own boyfriend hasn’t bothered banging me for so long I think my hole has probably healed up.”

“Paul, do you need a beer?” asked Del, a little late for my liking, but better late than never. “I reckon you look like you need a beer.”

I turned to give him my full and absolute attention; anything to avoid Kim, really. “I absolutely do need a beer,” I told him. “I can’t think of a time when I actually felt like I needed a beer more than I do right now at this exact moment.”

Del flashed one of his ‘I know I’m superior’ grins and stood up, draining the last of his own drink in a single gulp. “Come on,” he said, gesturing back to the bar.

I followed along behind, picking my way through the crowds of early drunks. The street was mostly populated by off-duty teachers and many were well on their way to being completely insensible. Among them there were a few of the usual crumbling men, too old to be casually teaching, who would be slowly drinking their way through the day. I always winced when I saw them and hoped I’d enjoy better luck in my own life.

“Cam’s in a bad way!” Del told me with his deep, grumbling voice that sounded like he’d been sipping on glasses of gravel. “I know you two are mates. You should probably talk to him. He’s pretty torn up about losing the bike.”

He reached the bar and slammed his empty glass down with a cheeky grin to the barmaid. She looked up from behind her phone and smiled at him, slowly heading off to get him a freshly chilled glass from the freezer.

“I understand. It sucks to have your bike stolen, but it was just an old wreck, wasn’t it? It wasn’t much better than mine.”

Del smirked and turned back to me, a little twinkle in his eye. “Speaking as an old wreck myself, never forget that they can have value that isn’t always apparent to the casual observer.”

I smiled in spite of myself. The barmaid began heading back with two frosty glasses, ready for the thin, sweet local beer to be poured into them.

“Do you know something I don’t?” I asked.

“I think that’s a given, don’t you?” he said with a smile.

I huffed to myself and found him annoying again. “Nice!”

“Ask him yourself,” he told me. “All I know is that nobody gets that cut up about losing a clapped-out old scooter. Cam hasn’t missed a day off work in the time I’ve known him and I mentored him all through last year. This morning, he just sat down and started drinking at breakfast. That isn’t like him; something is up.”

I couldn’t help but agree. I considered Cam a friend, but how well did I really know him? “Sure, I’ll talk with him.

“By the way... What’s the deal with Kim and the new guy?”

“I don’t know. They were here when Lou and I arrived. The girl has offered herself randomly to six men since I got here, four times to me. The other guy is wasted; I have no idea who he is.”

“Great!” I sighed. The barmaid put two glasses of beer down on the counter. She was young, only around twenty years old, give or take, and was quite attractive. She flashed a smile to Del that went way beyond a friendly gesture. He largely ignored her, thanking her politely, but not offering her anything beyond the slightest cursory attention.

What was it about him that seemed to click with people? I generally found him annoying and arrogant but even I couldn’t help but like him when it really got right down to it. I didn’t enjoy admitting that to myself.

Maybe I was the problem?

He handed a beer to me and smiled. His eyes flashed back to the barmaid. A sly little grin fluttered over his lips and she responded with a little grin of her own. I was left just trying to figure out exactly what it was I was missing. Raw sexual magnetism seemed the most likely thing.

When I got back to the table, Cam was still slouching over his beer and I felt sure he had slumped a few extra degrees forwards. As we sat down, Kim leant forwards, craning across the wicker table to talk to him.

“No!” I said, holding up an admonishing finger to stop her. “He’s depressed enough.”

Lou glared at her and went back to gently, but a little too firmly, patting him on the back.

I took a sip of the beer. It was horribly sweet, fizzy and sickening to taste. As I realised that the flavour barely registered, it slowly dawned on me that I was getting used to it. I had only been in the country for a couple of months and already I was adapting. The crazy driving, nobody doing anything properly—or on time, the food that had to be treated with suspicion and the toilets that had to be treated with even more suspicion because of the highly suspicious food... I realised I was getting used to all of it. This was all becoming normal.

I looked over to the old drinkers, the wandering lost souls that haunted the many local bars. They staggered around, flirting lazily with the staff; they sometimes sat in silent contemplation, gazing out emptily into space or loudly laughing at things that weren’t even a little bit funny. What would it take to push a man like me into becoming like them?

Were we different by only a small degree? Was it only a question of time and circumstance that separated a young, motivated man from an old, lost-soul who was just killing time until time killed him back?

Del's voice broke into my train of thought. "Are you being clever? Is it making you happy?" I looked at him incredulously. "How's the new school working out?"

I chuckled to myself. "It's so bad!" I said. "They're utterly convinced that they're the best school in town but they don't care about the students in the slightest. Yesterday, I was in the middle of a lesson. One of the staff from the office came and told me they needed me urgently. I said I was in the middle of a lesson and could it wait until the end?"

"They told me to just write some rubbish on the board to keep the kids busy. I did it and went to the office to find out what the problem was. I got there and found out that there's a new admin-officer who just wanted to meet me and shake my hand. That was all it was about!"

"Typical!" he said with a casual shrug. "It's very sweet that you still think anyone cares about anything here."

"I care!" I sneered at him cynically.

He grinned, flashing his irritatingly excellent dental work. "And how is that working out for you?"

Without wishing to acknowledge that he was undoubtedly correct, I sighed theatrically and looked away. I turned my attention towards the new gentleman at our table; I wondered if he might be an interesting diversion.

He was shabbily dressed in a well-worn T-shirt. His lower arms showed the tips of tribal-style tattoos and his eyebrow was pierced. His face was flushed a dull crimson and his eyes were glassy and unfocused.

"Hello, mate," I said. "I'm Paul."

"Ant!" he snapped and then grinned to himself as if he'd made a hilarious joke. His words were horribly slurred and I could barely make out what he was saying. "It's short for..." His voice trailed off until he ended up just sitting there, smiling at nothing in particular.

Cam looked up slowly from his own tepid beer. He said to me in a soft, apologetic monotone, “He’s a bit drunk. He’s had three today already.”

I looked back at him and frowned to myself. It looked more like he’d spent the afternoon licking the backs of poisonous toads than sipping quietly at only three drinks.

“Three?” I said, confused.

“Yeah!” Without a hint of judgement, he added, “Gins.”

“Wow,” I said. “I guess the measuring glass must be broken. I’ll order my gin’n’tonics here in future!”

“Bottles!” Ant slurred, flashing a wide, beaming smile that showed off damaged, yellowing teeth with thick brown decay biting into the roots. “I’m a fukkin’ alcoholic, mate. I don’t piss around with tonic.”

Cam shrugged at me and nodded in agreement. “He actually is an alcoholic. He should be dead by all counts. It’s quite impressive.”

“Right!” I said. Time to make a dignified withdrawal from this conversation.

Kim, who had been sitting there watching the whole time, said, “The offer is still on the table.”

Frankly, the table was the last place I wanted to be picturing this offer. “Sorry,” I said. “It’s a hard pass!”

“Probably for the best...” she said with a sigh. “I can’t say I blame you.”

Cam looked at me and held up his near-empty glass. I raised my own and drank as fast as possible, swallowing it greedily until the mug was drained. “Yes!” I said, my throat burning, “I’m definitely ready for another.”

As we made our way to the bar, I slapped Cam on the back and said, “Why are you so broken up about that old bike, mate?”

“It wasn’t mine...” he said with a sigh. “It’s a long story.”

We got to the bar and the bored barmaid grumbled as she put down her phone. I held up two fingers and she nodded apathetically, slowly plodding off to pour some beers for us.

Cam had my full attention once again. He puffed out a deep breath and continued, "It belonged to my girlfriend."

"Oh!" I said, a little surprised. That made some sort of sense. I couldn't imagine that it would be fun for a man as quiet and reserved as he was to explain to an angry local woman that her bike wouldn't be coming home that night. I would probably be dreading that experience, too. "I didn't know you had a girlfriend. You're worried about telling her?"

"No!" he said simply.

"Then...?" I prompted. I began to realise just how little I knew about him. We had met around a month ago while working at the same laughably disorganised school. Since then, we had barely moved beyond conversations about the very same laughably disorganised school and our equally disorganised lives. Somehow, Cam's stories had slipped through the net and he'd managed to avoid telling us anything really personal about himself.

"She's gone," he told me, his eyes gazing into nothing. His face hardened. "She just never came home. It was about seven months ago. She was due in around five o'clock, as usual, but she never arrived."

"What?" I didn't know quite what to make of it. "You never heard from her?"

"Never!" he agreed. "Nobody knew anything. I checked her friends, the coffee shop where she worked, even her parents. Nobody ever heard from her again. She just vanished."

"What the..." I muttered to myself. A number of terrible fates flashed through my mind. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"No!" he said, shaking his head. "We were happy, I thought. We didn't have any problems, we didn't argue, she had no debts and didn't

gamble. She didn't take drugs and everyone liked her. I never found any clue."

"I'm sorry." What else could I say? "I guess I can see why this bothers you so much."

"Yeah!" he said, and the same slump returned to his shoulders. He tutted to himself and looked over, flashing me an insecure smile before giving me a lacklustre shrug. "I just miss her..."

That much was obvious. Even I could sense it and I don't usually care what other people feel at all.

"I don't know what to say?" I said. "Does that sort of thing happen a lot here?"

"Not really," he said. "It does happen though—I've heard stories. You certainly never expect it to happen to you!"

"I'm really sorry, mate!" I said, as sympathetically as I could manage. Unwelcome thoughts flashed through my mind. Had she been kidnapped and murdered, sold into slavery? Had she died in an accident and been buried by some rich arsehole who didn't want to have to pay compensation? Had she run away to join the circus? Had aliens beamed her up to their spaceship, perhaps mistaking her for a cow somewhere on a farm in some backwater American town? I thought that the simplest explanation would probably be the more likely.

I was sure he'd thought of all of that for himself, perhaps with the exception of confusing his ex-girlfriend for a cow that alien beings find attractive. For a fleeting moment I wondered what was in the beer...

"The bike was all I really had left of her," he said with a sigh. "I have a few of her clothes, an empty handbag, a pair of shoes and a leather belt." The waitress handed over two more beers with a friendly smile and quickly turned her back on us. I smiled back, but she looked away too quickly to notice. Del, on the other hand, managed to spark her interest, some magic I had not yet mastered.

“The hardest part is not knowing!” Cam said. The point was well made.

I wanted to say that the worst part probably wasn't not knowing and it might be worse to know she had accidentally fallen into a meat-grinder or had met a much more successful, more confident and more wealthy man. I guess it might be comforting to believe what he believed so I left him to it.

“Sure, I can see that,” I said, but not with a great deal of commitment. Could he tell that my mind was wandering? “Shall we get back to the others?”

He nodded, showing even less commitment than I generally did.

Later on, Kim cornered me and demanded a conversation. Against my better judgement, I allowed myself to be drawn into it. Cam, a few more beers sloshing around his brain, became a more active participant in life, such as life was, in this place.

I ended up buying her a beer, although she was begging for a glass of something more expensive. I figured that I wouldn't notice an extra fifty cents on my bar-tab at the end of the night. Really, I just felt slightly awkward about sitting there with a beer in my hand while she grumbled about not having the money to pay for one.

Reluctantly, I asked her, “So what brings you to this country?” Cam leaned forwards and seemed intent on listening to every word.

She sipped the beer, winced slightly and then deflated a little. “Well, I'm here with my boyfriend. He's useless. We haven't had sex in two years.”

I looked at Cam and wondered how long it had been since his girlfriend had vanished. He had said it was around seven months—that was a long time to be alone.

She continued, “I lost my little girl in England, so I came here to clean myself up.”

For some reason that piqued my interest. I felt a sudden pang of sympathy for her. It must be awful for any parent to lose a child. Perhaps it was just the beer floating around my brain but, for a moment, I almost felt that I cared. I hoped it would pass.

Cam seemed to connect even more and his face softened. “You lost your daughter? That’s awful!”

“Yeah!” she said, nodding her head and gazing sadly into her beer. “Child-protection took her away.”

“Oh!” I said. “She’s not...”

“I was on heroin,” she explained, against my better wishes. “My boyfriend is too. I’m a good Mum, though, when I’m not on the gear.”

Cam looked at me with a tiny smirk and caught me doing the same back. My eyes widened and I began to shake my head sadly from side to side. “I’m pretty good at being sober when I’m not drunk!” I said.

“It was getting bad though,” she admitted. “He started hitting me. That got worse and worse. Sometimes I think he’s going to kill me. He just loses his mind until he’s had a fix.”

“And so they just came and took your daughter away for absolutely no reason?” said Cam showing uncharacteristically wry humour. “That’s so mean!”

“Right?!” she said dimly. “So we came here. We figured a new start might help, somewhere we don’t know anyone so we can’t get any gear.”

I sipped at my beer and looked out onto the bustling street.

It had only been a week before that I’d sat there with Cam, eating a plate of sausage pasta. We had been talking utter crap about nothing in particular, nothing important enough for me to even remember, in fact.

Opposite the bar was a wide pavement where a few locals parked their bikes while they waited for a customer to ask for a ride home. A Western gentleman had walked over, sat himself down on the hard

concrete floor and had slowly tied a piece of fabric around his arm. While everyone sat watching him in bemused confusion, he took out a needle and shot something into his arm. He grinned and collapsed, lying there for around half an hour.

I had mentioned it to Del at school a few days later. He told me that things like that never used to happen, but they were happening now, and it seemed to be happening more often. Things were changing—that was something all of the expats definitely agreed on.

“I need some money!” she said. “I mean, I need to get laid. I’m not offering to do that for cash. I know I can’t compete with the local girls on that score.”

Cam looked at me and the faintest ghost of a smile flashed over his lips. I knew what he was thinking because I was thinking it too: Kim could barely compete with a shaved gorilla suffering a nasty case of bad breath and having a bad-hair day. Perhaps it was just the beer talking, but I felt sure there were times when I had found my own armpit more attractive.

“I can’t help you on either score,” I said firmly, as I looked into her one good eye, trying to ignore the swollen, bloodshot one on the other side. “I’m just a teacher. We don’t make a lot of money.”

She didn’t look too disappointed, but was clearly looking around, possibly sizing up the others in the bar, looking for a potential victim. I thought it was best to leave her to it.

Del was discussing the finer points of the global economy with a tiny, giggling local girl who had joined him at the table. He was explaining something complex in great detail but, somehow, his body language made it look more like he was bragging about the size of his penis.

Whatever was going on, she was interested and was hanging on every word he had to say. I watched for a moment, a little envious of his easy confidence and effortless banter. I just had to wonder how he did it.

Cam punched a hole in my sexual inadequacy by saying, “I feel a bit better! Thanks, mate.”

It took me just a moment to work out what he was going on about. Figuring out how Del was so much better with women than I was had become all consuming.

“Good to hear!” I said.

“It’s just a bike right? It’s stupid to worry so much about a thing.”

I think he was trying to convince himself more than anything.

Just then, I looked up to see a gigantic man standing in front of our table. He was a mountain of mouth-breathing, knuckle-dragging blubber, wrapped over a slouching skeleton. His brow seemed slumped with big, thick heavy lids sagging down over a pair of dead-looking eyes. His eyebrow was a single line, spread unevenly across his forehead. My mind filled with thoughts of an exhibit escaping from a natural history museum. In any case, this was not a handsome man!

He gazed intently ahead, his cold, little grey eyes flicking around slowly. My good sense was overwhelmed by partial intoxication and I asked, rather more aggressively than I normally might, “Can I help you with something, mate?”

He looked at me, frowning deeply to himself.

Kim stood up with a sigh and grunted, “That’s my boyfriend.”

Cam turned away and quickly covered his mouth with his hand as he tried to hold back a laugh. I wasn’t as quick and didn’t manage to stop myself chuckling.

“Yeah!” she said in agreement, nodding to herself. “He’s not much to look at.”

“Boys!” he said. Surprisingly, his voice was quite high-pitched and almost squeaky.

I tried again not to laugh again, and managed to do a better job of it this time.

“Looks like we’re going!” she said, draining her glass. “Lucky me!”

“Watch it…” he warned, sneering under a sort of squeaky growl.

Bravely, the beer spoke for me and said, “Maybe she’s not the one who needs to watch it, mate?”

The whole situation had already got the attention of the others, and fortunately they all seemed to side with me. Several pairs of eyes stared at him threateningly. Luckily, Del’s was among them.

He grabbed her wrist and turned away, half dragging her out into the road. I could hear them grumbling at one another as they picked their way through the frantic chaos of the traffic.

Cam shook his head and said, “Arseholes!”

What more could I add to that?

Del leaned in and asked, “What was that all about?” an amused frown on his old, well–weathered face.

“Who cares?” I shrugged.

Outside, the question was being answered for me.

The two of them stepped up to a makeshift taxi and she said something to him. We were too far away to hear what it was, but it was accompanied by an animated flap of her arms and a theatrical, slightly drunken motion of exasperation.

He answered it with a quick and powerful slap to the face. She jolted backwards and slumped down to the ground, collapsing on the spot. The sound was sickening.

“Fuck!” I said in surprise, jumping up from my seat.

Usually unflappable Del said, “Bloody hell!”

Cam’s face seemed frozen as he just stared at the spectacle.

My instincts took over and I took to my feet. I slammed my glass to the table and began making my way around it to the entrance. The place was small and the gaps weren’t easy to fit through. I worked my way out of the bar and began to make my way over to the boyfriend with

the intention of doing... god only knows what! I really had no idea what I was supposed to do.

I looked down the road, checking for the crazy oncoming traffic, and was surprised to find Del at my side. His fists were clenched and his jaw was locked angrily in place. He caught my eye and said with a ferocious growl, "I'm right with you, man!"

My respect for him soared. Of all the people in the bar, he was the only other one ready to jump up in defence of a woman who had just been attacked.

It was just so hard not to like Del!

By the time we got there, though, our heroic gesture had all come to nothing. We were just in time to see the broken tail-light of the little rickshaw as it made its way off, winding its way between the staggering drunken teachers who littered the streets.

"Shit!" I cursed under my breath.

"Don't worry!" Del slapped my arm in a gesture of camaraderie. "People like him always get what's coming to them!"

"Thanks," I said and tutted to myself. I looked up to see Del nodding to himself and looking at me with respect. I have to admit I felt a glow of pride.

After an awkward moment, he slapped my arm. "You're alright, Paul! Come on, this beer isn't going to drink itself."

Chapter 6

I sat waiting in a large, open and largely transparent opening. White metal frames held smoked panes of glass in place around me. There were seats, white vinyl sofas, running along two of the sides and there was a sliding door opposite. In the middle, penned off with a red plastic fence, was a rubber mat, liberally sprinkled with a smattering of broken toys. I had been waiting so long that I had broken several of them myself.

Somehow, all this managed to give more the impression of a dentist's waiting room than a lounge at the front of the reception area of an international school. This particular one was, oddly, situated in a towering city block. The whole, entire school was located in a single building, each grade occupying a floor leading up from the lowest at the ground to the highest, somewhere up at the top.

The bottom was fairly well appointed and that, in itself, was a refreshing change. It looked professional, the staff seemed competent, and people seemed to have a vague idea of what they were doing. I wondered how long that impression was going to last.

I am English, and therefore I had arrived at the interview early. I sat with a clipboard rested on my knee, a paper fastened to it with my application filled in while I waited in the lounge patiently, just trying not to dwell on the events that had led to me losing my last job.

Dwelling wasn't going to help, after all. I mean, how was I to know that the student I was comparing to a cartoon rat was the principal's daughter? The principal herself looked more like a cartoon dog—it was a mistake anyone could have made.

On reflection, I had compared a lot of students to a lot of cartoon animals. Perhaps that was a bad thing?

“Mr...” a voice called out. I looked up to see a small, demure local woman struggling to read my name from her notes. She looked

back up and flashed an awkward smile. There were no other applicants in the room so I just stood up and smiled back.

“That’s me!” I said, pointing redundantly to myself like a complete idiot. “Even my mother struggles with the name, so don’t feel bad. Actually, she’s dead so you can feel a little bit bad if you want to,” I added jokingly, to my humble regret.

“Can you walk this way?” She turned and gestured back through the open door to the main reception. I gathered my well-worn laptop bag filled with my certificates and proof of qualifications, and followed along after her.

“Is this a good school?” I asked conversationally. “Do you like working here?”

She screwed up her face for a moment and then looked squarely at me with a thoughtful guise. She even stopped where she stood. Had I done something wrong? Suddenly she broke into a smile and said, “I think it is a school.”

She turned and continued on her way, leaving me assuming, and hoping, that she had simply forgotten a key word, a word that might have changed the entire meaning of the sentence. She led the way through the middle of the reception area as I paid attention to everything going on around us.

I noticed the library located above, picked out with a glass front and announced by signs that proudly showed the way. I was almost optimistic. A few students quietly milled around, and everywhere there were posters explaining the rules, and the consequences of not abiding by them.

As I looked around, she had come to a stop at an elevator. She gestured to it and said, “Here!”

I frowned, wondering if it was, in fact, an office. It definitely seemed as if it was an elevator.

All doubts were removed as the wooden doors slid open with a ping. From it stepped a short local man with an unusual amount of hair. It seemed that he had enough hair for a much larger head and that perhaps his own head had been partially deflated. There had clearly been a design error at some point. There were several other anomalies about his person that suggested that he had fallen out of a defective mould. He subconsciously must have agreed, because a huge pair of thick glasses were perched precariously on the tip of his wonky nose, hiding a large portion of his face.

“I am Pho!” said the man, whose name I now knew was Pho. He leant forwards to shake the hand of the new applicant, me. “I am principal. I am in charge!”

I considered explaining that I was Paul, an applicant, and that I didn’t care. I really didn’t. Instead, I said, “Nice to meet you.”

The elevator took us to his office, but his office wasn’t his office at all, even though he kept referring to it as such all the way up to the top floor. It was a room where all the staff who taught English seemed to be. It was large enough to house the small faculty and there did seem to be enough facilities to go around. I wasn’t unimpressed. The interview was fairly informal and occurred in a quiet corner, some way off to the side.

Mr Pho looked over a printed copy of my CV and looked vaguely impressed. “You are qualified!” he said happily, looking up with a beaming smile. “And you have taught before.”

“Just barely!” I said, responding to both questions at once with a wry smile that shone a very bright light on my staggeringly poor judgement. “But yes, I am developing some experience.”

Pho looked me up and down, perhaps trying to seem intimidating. He narrowed his eyes and said, “Sir, what do you want from us?”

That did feel a little like a loaded question. What I really wanted was to go home at night feeling that I had made a real difference. I

wanted to reach the students, to feel like I was really connecting, putting fresh new ideas before them that might open their eyes to new ways of thinking.

Failing that, I would also be happy with regular and exceptionally large amounts of money for irregular, exceptionally small amounts of work.

But then, I would also settle for less money, more work, and to drown my disappointment with endless glasses of sickly-sweet beer, though.

I said, “I want the opportunity to properly teach eager students with a thirst for learning.”

Pho nodded to himself. He grinned and said, “Oh, we have that. We have the best student from the country. We believe in building the future for all, so it better for the whole country.”

I was cautiously optimistic. I nodded in satisfaction and said confidently, “I’m ready to start next week, Mr Pho.”

He nodded to himself and handed me a folded slip of paper. He tapped it twice and then backed away, smirking to himself.

I took it, unfolded it and read it back. It was an offer! Not the best I’d ever seen, but the hours were shorter than I had expected. I made an appreciative expression.

“Monday?” Pho told him.

“Monday!” I said with a nod.

Chapter 7

I woke up just before the alarm was set to go off, as I usually did. I even woke up early at weekends, even if I was suffering from a belting hangover, as I also usually was.

I grumbled to myself and slowly, really quite very slowly, dragged myself out of bed. I had found an apartment now and had got out of the guest-house lifestyle, although I hadn't completely escaped it. I was now sharing with two of the friends I had made along the way and we all still spent a horrifying amount of time there.

I opened the door to my large, and fairly comfortable, bedroom and made my way through the oddly-shaped living-room to the kitchen. There, I would be able to find coffee and something to eat, provided that my flatmates hadn't raided my shelf in the fridge, as they most likely had.

Cam was already there, perched on the breakfast-bar with a mug of coffee in his hands, clenching it lovingly and staring at a little wisp of steam that was gently trailing off it. He looked up, blinking, and said, "Coffee?" He slowly pointed to the coffee pot which had several mugfuls left in the jug.

Many people maintained that there was little more to Cam than the fact that he smokes, but I was still on the fence about that. Certainly, he was a fairly quiet, reserved and thoughtful person but I liked to think there must be some hidden depths. There was no sign of any so far, apart from his vanishing girlfriend.

I figured it would come up eventually, unless of course it didn't.

"Raj not up yet?" I grumbled. I ran my hands through my messy mop of brown hair, slightly thinning and, less slightly, greying. I was also getting a little fat and I didn't look great, if I was honest with myself about it.

Cam looked around as if he was actually looking for him. “No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

“The sofa is empty. He usually sleeps there, doesn’t he?” I said.

“He said it’s too hot: he sleeps on the balcony sometimes now,” Cam said in a dry monotone. “He made a little nest for himself in the broom-cupboard, too. Who knows?”

I chuckled to myself and poured some coffee. Cam made a very good pot of the stuff—at least he had that going for him, as well as smoking too much and generally not having any personality to speak about beyond smoking too much. Occasionally, girlfriends left him.

“Was he out drinking last night?” I asked conversationally. I spotted the lid of the dustbin was propped open, held up by a large number of empty beer cans jutting out from it. Cam rarely drank during the week, as far as I could tell, and I certainly didn’t remember having any beers after we got home.

Cam shrugged and never looked up from his mug. I sat opposite. The breakfast bar took up most of the kitchen area, which suited us fine. It was a long, grey stone slab supported by something slavered in uneven plaster and painted the usual yellow. It was a nice, social place to hang out while we discussed the world around us, not that Cam had much to say on the matter, but neither did he shy away from the company. He was quite the most sociable anti-social person I had ever met.

“Beer tonight?” I asked. Cam nodded in agreement. “It’s Friday night. I think it’s considered a crime not to go out and get drunk here, isn’t it?”

Cam looked up from his coffee and smiled thinly. “Where?”

I didn’t really mind. There wasn’t a huge amount to do in the city and there were a few small, vibrant pockets of activity where smatterings of bars were clustered around. After you’d lived here a while, you realised they were all pretty-much the same.

“We could head to the river?” I suggested.

Cam shrugged and nodded. He was always fine with whatever we wanted to do. Raj would go anywhere he thought he had a decent chance of meeting women but Cam rarely had any real preference.

“How do you feel your first week at your latest new job went?” he asked.

“I don’t know!” I said honestly. “When I first started at the school it seemed alright but I’m not even sure at this point if I actually have a job. I’m meant to be the cover teacher but I’m not actually doing much covering.”

I sipped at the coffee and it was way too hot.

“Yesterday they asked if I could teach guitar and I explained I didn’t know how to play a guitar. They tried to argue with me about it and I told them I couldn’t teach Chinese either, or quantum physics. They actually glared at me as if I was the problem.”

“Nothing changed at my school,” Cam told me. “Lou is getting more annoying. She’s always moody and takes at least one day off sick every week. She’s was a little better this week—she hasn’t threatened to kill anyone, since Tuesday.”

“Yeah!” I nodded. “I miss her, though. I don’t mind Del, either. He’s alright once you get to know him.”

“Yes,” Cam replied, completely failing to commit to any kind of expression of opinion. “You said he was a massive arsehole.”

I frowned and sipped again at my hot coffee. “I said all the instructors and mentors are arseholes. They’re even bigger arseholes than we are.”

Cam nodded.

I sighed and said, “I’m going to grab a shower. Do you want to go first?”

Cam shrugged and stared into his coffee. For a moment I thought of a fortune teller, flamboyantly dressed, uncomfortably forward and just

weird enough to be moderately unnerving. She was examining a crystal-ball, peering into the dark, clouded secrets that it might reveal about the infinite possibilities of the future. Was he about to do something similar?

Cam said, after a deep, contemplative sigh, “I like coffee.”

“The thought that Cam liked coffee kept me chuckling all through my shower,” I told the woman on the door of the school. She was always there, sitting alone while she checked the student IDs. She had always been friendly and happy for a short chat in the mornings. “There continues to be no sign of Raj, even though he also had to work that day. We have enough respect for each other’s privacy not to barge into his nest, so we continued on our way and left him to it. He was a grown adult, after all, whether he acted like it or not.”

She nodded and listened intently. She was a little shorter and looked up with an expression on her face as if she was interested in what I was saying.

My morning was never complete without more coffee. No matter how much I had, the amount I needed was always more. I had a routine now of arriving at work with a plastic cup of iced coffee. It was a local blend and smelled like coffee had been mixed into much older coffee and then stirred with the decaying stump of a dead animal’s leg. The ice had suspiciously yellow cores running through the middle of cylindrical lumps and the straws were extra-thick plastic and tasted slightly of cancer.

I had got into the habit of getting one for her as well. She always looked as if she wouldn’t really be awake for another few hours and always had that look on her face until lunch. She wasn’t really my type but she was quite pretty and I was keeping my options open.

But, eventually, it was time to go and do some work. I stepped into the elevator with two children and the doors slid shut behind us.

One of the students looked up at me with a beaming smile. She was around ten years old, although it was difficult to judge.

She said, "Teacher. You shouldn't drink that coffee."

"I know," I said and smiled back to her. I went into teacher-mode and put on my best role-model face. Reminding myself not to tell her she looked like any kind of cartoon animal, I said, "Coffee is bad for you, especially when you're young, but sometimes grown-ups like to have some in the mornings to help them get in the mood for work."

She nodded. The other one, a younger girl who looked so similar that I presumed they were sisters, added, "My Mummy says that if I talk to her before she has two cups of coffee then it either has to be an emergency or it's because I want to get slapped so hard that my grandchildren will come out retarded."

I blinked and stared at the numbers as they very slowly ticked by. "I don't know if I like your Mum, but I certainly agree with her, in principle," I said.

The elder girl said, "The coffee is sometimes bad, teacher."

I looked at the plastic cup of jet-black liquid over slightly yellow ice and smiled at the moderate understatement. "I know!" I told her.

"Two years ago, the police found out it wasn't coffee at all," she said, not knowing when to stop. "Sometimes it was old car-batteries that were set on fire and then ground up into powder. They mixed it with dirt and then flavoured it with chemicals and old, used coffee grounds.

"Lots of people got sick and some died. My grandma got so sick that we had to make a little hut in the garden for her to sit in because the smell coming out of her was so bad that it was making my Mummy angry."

"No..." I said, gazing forwards in horror. I was beginning to have a deeper understanding of Cam's lack of interest in the world that existed on the other side of his skull. "This lift is so slow, isn't it?"

“Last year they had to change the ropes in the lift for ones made of metal,” she said. It was becoming clear that she simply wasn’t going to stop.

“Oh, my God!” I heard myself muttering.

“It’s still safer than the stairs,” she continued obliviously. “Last year, my friend slid on the steps and broke her leg. The bone was sticking out through her skin and she was too scared to cry.”

The lift was so slow.

“I guess it’s lucky it wasn’t you,” I told her sarcastically. “Your Mum would have probably had you shot!”

She looked away sadly and said, “I never saw my friend again.”

I said, in my strict and serious teacher voice, “It’s quiet time now. Let’s have no more talking.”

“And then she finally shut up,” I said. At the entrance to the teacher’s office, I met Stu, an Australian. I told him about what the student had said about the lift and he laughed. We walked in together, both grumbling about the place, before he stalked off to get his lesson plans in order.

The best thing about the office was the lack of students who were intent on horrifying me with stories that threatened to destroy my will to live. Most of the other teachers tended to give it their best shot, though, so it wasn’t perfect.

As I walked in, several people nodded half-arsed greetings. It wasn’t the most social place I had ever worked. Granted, I had only been working there a short time but it seemed that the staff were not entirely happy to be there.

A young American walked past me and flashed a grin. “Still here?” he asked. “I give you till the end of the month!” With no further explanation, he walked off and left through the spring-loaded metal door.

I stood in silence, frowning to myself in confusion as he vanished. Was it an insult? A threat? A warning? I hadn't had my second coffee—or cup of ground-up battery—so it was difficult to know if I was annoyed, worried or if I even cared.

“Here we are again!” a woman’s voice called out. Unlike Lou, this was more like an actual woman than a horrendous force of nature, breezing through the world as if it was on a mission to do as much damage as possible. Her grinning face brought a grin to my own. She was attractive, with wide, bright eyes and her smile lit up the world around her. Of course, she was married to a man that stood nearly a foot taller than me and looked as if he’d fight me for a chance to win my own teeth.

Her name was Poo. She was a Korean art teacher who had, presumably, caught an incorrect flight and ended up in the wrong country. When we first met, she had asked me if I would be able to remember her name and I had told her that I really didn't think it was going to be a problem. At least, it wouldn't be as big a problem as her marriage to a gigantic German monstrosity that had a wide jealous streak and several warrants for his arrest.

“Morning,” I said. “I wonder if we’ll actually do any work today.”

“God, I hope not!” she said, rolling her eyes. “They don't pay me enough to actually do anything.”

She sat behind a desk that she had claimed as her own and I sat opposite.

“Well, life as a cover teacher hasn't been everything I hoped it would be,” I explained, gazing at my coffee, wondering if I could still drink it, knowing it was most likely a pile of things that had no place inside a human body. In fact, judging by the taste, it might be largely made of things that had once been inside someone else's. “I'm meant to be covering absent teachers but, so far, all I've done is one class for

Kindergarten, where I spent forty minutes working out which one had shit itself, and two classes explaining to eight-year-olds that water comes from clouds and not the moon.”

She rubbed her chin thoughtfully and gave me the sort of smile that made me want to give her something that would likely provoke her husband towards turning me into a stain on the carpet. “And rain doesn’t come from the moon, you say?” she asked snarkily.

“From clouds, apparently,” I said with an apathetic shrug. “Who knew?”

“To be honest, I always secretly suspected,” she said, a little too flirtatiously. My god, she was beautiful.

Sipping at the coffee, I felt that I could really taste the hydrochloric acid, but it was the heavy metals that really brought out the flavour.

“All joking aside, I’m bored and I really do hope I get to do some teaching today,” I told her. “It’s been a whole week of doing virtually nothing.”

“I have tried to keep you entertained,” she told me, putting on a sad face. “I’m sorry if I’m not fun enough for you!”

“I’ll let you off!” I joked weakly.

I just really wanted to teach, or at least do anything that stopped me sitting around falling in love with a woman whose husband would enjoy repeatedly stomping on my face.

I’ve heard many times to be careful what you wish for, and I heard it once more from Stu when I told him about my horrible life. That fact is never truer than in a school in a third world country that is run on a principle of total and utter incompetence, under a totally and utterly incompetent principal.

He told me he had some cover for me and led the way. I had been hoping for something to do.

I was taken to a high-school classroom on the top floor where I was invited inside. After that, I was pretty much left to my own devices. The co-coordinator, who spoke awkward little fragments of broken English, looked at me, bowed and said, “Teaching here. Cake are in pieces. Service for gratitudianally.”

I stood up in front of the class, somewhat bewildered. I hadn’t been given a book, I didn’t know what I was doing, nobody had even told me what grade they were, or even what subject it was that I was meant to be teaching them.

“Good morning!” I said, loudly and firmly, trying to look as confident as I could, under the circumstances. The class, comprising around twenty students, ignored me almost completely. The room wasn’t really large enough, and had no business being used as a classroom. Little wooden desks were dotted around unevenly, the kind that are shaped to fit comfortably around a human form, but absolutely never do. Home-made posters were on the walls, large sheets of white paper with horribly crude artwork and evidence of a lack of planning.

That philosophy had extended to the entire room. The blue paint on the wall had at least four different shades and there were large, ugly gouges ripped into it where desks had been smashed into the sides. The floor was littered with rubbish and clearly had been for some time. The students were dressed in yellow uniforms, but nobody was wearing them correctly. The end result looked rebellious and relentlessly chaotic.

“Are you our new teacher?” someone asked. I looked into the sea of faces, but none were even looking in my direction, so where the question came from was anyone’s guess.

I moved to the teacher’s desk, a slightly broken thing tucked away in the corner beneath a cracked glass white-board. It had a pile of junk on it, books for various subjects, most with missing covers and cracked spines. I picked up a handful and smashed it back down on the desk loudly.

A crash sounded through the room and silence descended over them.

“Good morning!” I said again, much more firmly.

Nothing... Pairs of eyes peered at me in abject silence. Then, a trickle of conversation started to break out as students began just chatting again, having no interest in me whatsoever.

I just stared back, wondering what this was going to take.

“I’m teacher Paul!” I virtually shouted. “I’m your teacher for the next hour!”

This time it wasn’t quite silence, more a slight reduction in the background hiss of chatter. Or perhaps the volume of the noise began to increase at a slightly reduced rate.

A girl near the back, horribly overweight, with her hair pulled so sharply back that her eyes were stretched and with makeup thickly plastered over her chubby face, said, “We’re talking, ‘cher!”

I had seen nothing in this country to make me think that discipline was very good, or even on a par with packs of some wild animals, but it seemed we were sinking to an all–new low.

“I can see you’re talking!” I growled. More loudly, I shouted, “And that’s the problem. It’s time to stop talking and start listening.”

My angry rant bought a few seconds of silence but the chatter seeped back almost immediately. What was I to do? How do you control a class like this? On the training course, they talked about maintaining discipline but that rather assumed I had some discipline to maintain in the first place.

Del had told me about maintaining my little bike, checking the brakes and tyres every week to make sure everything was in working order. This would be like doing that on a scooter with no wheels, a smashed engine and burned out wiring.

“Who can tell me what you learned in your last lesson?” It was worth a try. At this point, I figured I didn’t have very much to lose. Predictably, there was no reply.

I wondered what the school’s philosophy on beatings was? The only solution seemed to be to deliver swift and brutal punishment, the kind that left ugly, permanent scars. And not for the students... the violence should be visited upon the horrendous parents and appalling education system that had let things get this bad.

“You!” I shouted, pointing angrily at the largest boy in the room. My eyes flashed fiercely. “Stand up!”

A gigantic teenager with a head the size of an over-ripe watermelon frowned aggressively and pointed to himself. “Me?” he said in a grumbling low growl, glaring at me fixedly.

Realising I had slightly over-reached, I said, “No! You, next to him!”

A smaller boy stood up. He had the kind of face that you want to smash off his bones with a broom handle, just to do him a favour. He had the sneering, arrogant self-satisfied look of an utterly spoiled brat that you could plainly tell was backed up with a near-complete lack of ability.

“What?” he said, as if I was in the wrong for disturbing his conversation.

Now I was angry. I could feel my face flushing. “Don’t ‘what me!’” I told him sternly. I must have looked really quite mad because he shut up and looked rather scared. The rest of the class was now in silence, too.

I didn’t know if I cared enough to follow through with this. But, despite my reservations, this was working, I finally had their attention. I knew that my only chance was to make an example of this one little shit and then I might be able to exert some measure of control over the wayward morons I was stuck in the room with.

“What is wrong with you?” I said. “Don’t you know how to shut up when a teacher is in the room? Are you rude, stupid, or have you just made a mistake?”

I felt this was going well. Nobody would happily admit they were stupid, so I was confident he would say he made a mistake. I could build on that, and hopefully bring some order to the chaos.

The tubby girl yelled out in a horrible, shrill voice, “He’s stupid! He’s so stupid that he thinks tigers are female lions!”

“No!” he said, glaring at her. “I’m just rude. I don’t give a shit about female lions; and they are tigers, my Dad told me.”

The large, slightly intimidating mountain next to him suggested, “You’re rude and stupid!”

“I’m not stupid!” he said defensively. Less defensively he said, “Not that stupid.”

Feeling my temper flare again, I heard myself shout, “Shut up! All of you, shut up!”

Silence.

“It seems you’re all rude, and I don’t care,” I told them. “But it’s my job to make you less stupid. So you’re going to sit in silence while I try to teach you something.”

The girl at the back said, “Teach him that tigers aren’t female lions!”

Even before she had finished her sentence, the whole class had broken out into a cackling burst of laughter.

It seemed that this class might just be unteachable!

“So after that, I pretty much gave up.”

Poo flashed me a sympathetic smile. “Your day wasn’t great, was it?” she said, slightly understating the matter.

“It wasn’t!” I agreed. “It was quite a bit less than great. It was a quite a bit less than good, if I’m honest. It wasn’t much less than the total polar opposite of good, really.”

“Can I tell you something?” she asked, biting her lip and looking around awkwardly.

She looked so cute that I just wanted to blurt out something stupidly romantic. I didn’t want her husband to punch all of my front teeth out of my gums, though, so, on balance, I just nodded.

“I hate it here!” she told me earnestly. “I’m going to quit.”

This is the first sensible thing I’d heard all day. “This is the worst job I’ve had since I’ve been in this country.”

“I’ve never seen anything so corrupt and disorganised, and I come from Korea!” she told me. “This place is just about the money. There’s no interest in teaching the kids whatsoever. I can’t reach the children at all. They know there’s no consequences for their bad behaviour so they’ve just given up.”

That certainly resonated with me! I rubbed my temples wearily and told her, “Giving up definitely seems like the smarter move. I think I’ll try it.”

Looking a little sad, she continued, “I’ve worked in other schools, and they’re not this bad.”

“Still bad though, right?”

She nodded. “But this place!” she said in exasperation. “The students just ignore me, and so do the staff. I’ve heard that the school started out as a present from some rich minister to his youngest daughter and she hasn’t got a clue what she’s doing. It’s run as if a spoiled baby child with learning difficulties was left in control of a business.”

That was absolutely what it was like. I also couldn’t help but think she looked as if she needed a hug, but that offering to help out would probably result with my nose ending up a totally different size and shape, and maybe residing at a different address to my head.

“I’m going to resign!” I said. I didn’t know I was going to say that, but as I heard the words come out, I knew I meant them.

“Really?” she said, her eyes sparkling like little stars.

The downside of all that was that I would probably never see her again. That might end up being a net benefit all round, and would likely save me from a life-changing beating. “I think so,” I said. “I can’t work here. It’s a joke! Literally nobody knows what they’re doing!”

“Yeah!” she agreed. “I count myself among them.”

I laughed; rather I forced myself to laugh.

She continued, in perfect English with a voice like an angel breathing gently over a rose, “I don’t know how I ended up here. One minute I was in Korea, dreaming of being a graphic designer; the next minute I’m a teacher in a school where nobody wants to learn and I’m married to a guy I barely know.”

My ears pricked up at the last part. “Barely know him?” I asked, fishing for a few more details. Was there a chink in the armour? Was there some little crack in their marriage I could force my way in through? For a moment, I dared to hope.

“Yeah, we only met about six months ago and it was all a bit of a whirlwind. One minute I was a bored single traveller, next I was the wife of a big German man.”

“Don’t you love him?” I said. I almost regretted asking it but it was worth the risk. If she didn’t, perhaps there really was a chance for us?

“I don’t know,” she laughed. She looked at me with her big, dark, beautiful eyes and smiled. “He just has such a huge cock. I have never had such powerful orgasms in my life, and he is utterly relentless. Sometimes it’s three times a night and he’s still hungry for more in the mornings. I can barely keep up, but it feels so good to keep trying.”

If I could pinpoint the exact moment in my life where my soul died, it was probably right there. How could I possibly compete with

that? Perhaps I could suggest that she might like to try a nicely average penis, just for once, one that she will probably lose all interest in after a couple of weeks of lacklustre, selfish rutting? It's not awfully persuasive, I must admit.

"Oh!" I said.

She giggled. "I've embarrassed you?"

"No!" I assured her. "I love hearing stories of how you're repeatedly sexually satisfied by a gigantic German dick. What man wouldn't?"

She giggled again and said, "I don't even love him, not really. I don't know what I was thinking by marrying him. It's just that cock; it's so big..."

"Is it really that big though?" I ventured.

She held up her hands, palms apart, to roughly indicate the size.

I muttered, "Fuck," to myself, but loud enough for her to plainly hear. "Is he half Shetland-pony? There are female donkeys that would struggle with that."

She was looking right through me and grinning and I turned quickly, realising, to my horror, that the worst person to be standing behind me might actually be doing exactly that.

The towering figure of a perpetually miserable German was lurking, growling to himself about nothing in particular. He had a fixed frown as if his favourite kitten had recently died. "What are you talking about?"

She smiled sweetly and said, "Your cock! I was just telling Paul how big it is."

He nodded as if agreeing about something mundane—we might as well have been discussing the weather. "It is very big!" he said and held up his hands, exactly the same distance apart as she had held hers. I grimaced as he added, "I don't know how I fit inside. She screams very loud, but I think that's only because she likes it."

The only reason I can't be entirely certain about the exact point my soul shrivelled up is because it could have been any one of a number of moments. That last one was also a strong contender.

"Well, who wouldn't?" I said, sarcastically, a little emotionally battered." I clinked my glass with Cam and we both drank a large, bitter-sweet mouthful of cold beer. "And that's why I finally decided to quit my job!" I told him.

"I don't blame you!" he said, swallowing hard. "That school sounded awful."

"Well, it was," I said. "I mean, that was when I realised that Poo was really off the table. I had no good reason to carry on working there."

Cam frowned curiously. "When was Poo on the table?"

"She wasn't," I said. "That was the point. I wanted her to be, but she wasn't going to be."

"You wanted her to poo on the table? You hated the job that much?"

I shook my head at him. "The name of the girl I liked was 'Poo.'" I told him. "I didn't want anyone crapping on anything."

Cam nodded and said, "Right," as if the information had barely registered.

"Right!" I agreed and grumpily sipped my beer, wondering how this had all turned into a naughty-teenager misunderstanding that wouldn't have been out of place in a badly written eighties sitcom.

"Where's Raj?"

Cam shrugged. "I think he follows Del about a lot these days. He says Del is better at picking up women. He says there is nothing he can learn from you."

That seemed as harsh as it was fair.

“I don’t know if I like Raj,” I said. I was much more sure that I didn’t. He tended to eat all my breakfast cereal, and while that wasn’t a good reason to hate someone, it was a good place to start.

“I don’t like Raj!”

I looked at Cam in incredulous surprise. He had expressed an opinion, shown a strong preference, demonstrated that he had an identity. “You don’t like Raj?” I said in amusement.

He shook his head. “I don’t,” he said firmly. “I asked if he was from and he said he was from and he said that I was a filthy racist for not knowing. He brought a girl back once and I asked if she was his girlfriend and he said ‘How dare you! I would never date a girl like her, she’s a prostitute.’ He called me an idiot then, and said my parents must be ashamed of me. I later found out she’d stolen my phone but when I told Raj, he just laughed and said that I should be more careful.

“He’s definitely getting worse. I have to put the credit on his phone for him because he can’t do it, and he keeps telling me to make him sandwiches.

“What really annoys me is that he keeps stealing my milk.”

That might have been the longest Cam had ever spoken for.

“He probably puts it on my stolen breakfast cereal!” I said.

“Should we throw him out?”

Cam shrugged. “He’s the only one that knows how to work the air-conditioner.”

I nodded. That was an excellent point. I had to admit that I hadn’t thought of that.

We sat in silence for a few moments. Finally, I said wearily, “Cam, I need a girlfriend.”

He winced and said sourly, “It never ends well here, Paul.”

Chapter 8

“Can you tell me why you left your previous school?”

I was at yet another interview and was about as thrilled to be there as you could imagine. The man on the other side of the desk was grinning to himself happily, rocking slightly side to side while he dribbled on my CV. His eyes were wide with excitement as he read through it, or at least pretended to.

I had walked into the school and dropped off my application. The application was the usual bundled documents rammed into a manila envelope. It consisted of my CV, copies of my certificate that I earned by turning up to class with a range of brutal hangovers and not dying, and a picture proving I was a ‘native English speaker,’ the common euphemism for being White. Being allowed to work in this school seemed like anything but a privilege.

The principal’s office seemed to be mostly filled with crates of lager, as did the principal himself. There was also an overwhelming smell of stale urine which could have come from a darkly stained crack in the wall, the principal, or a very furry cat with holes in its coat and raw, red skin showing through from underneath.

There was a very distracting hole above his head in the ceiling from where I could hear the sounds of voices from small children. Occasionally, a foot would fall through, followed by the sounds of crying and what I hoped wasn’t a small human being slapped.

Why did I leave my last school indeed? It was best not to say that it was a complete farce of a place where the staff were so miserable that they had to nail the upstairs windows shut to stop people jumping out of them. But the real reason was because a large, angry-looking German had a bigger penis than I did.

What level of educational excellence could I expect to deliver if I chose my career steps on the basis of comparisons of my irritatingly

average genitalia? At least, I was cleverer than him. Sure, he had a doctorate in physics, biology and something to do with crystals that I couldn't even pronounce, but in every other way I was the better man and he had just got to my beloved Poo first; over and over again.

To be fair, I was largely over her now. A river of beer had washed away the pain and I was ready to begin again with a new hopeless object of desire, and to be thwarted by an even bigger, more talented and sexually gifted European.

He cocked his head to one side thoughtfully, clearly wondering why, instead of answering his question, I was gazing at the hole in his roof and thinking about German penises.

"Sorry, what was the question?" I asked as a small shoe came through the hole, accompanied by a squeal of muted horror.

"Why did you leave your last school?" he said again.

I looked around the threadbare interior which perfectly matched the shambling form of the principal with his fussy, oversized suit.

Grabbing the first idea that came into my head, I replied, "It was all too impersonal." I was sure I could run with that... "I felt that I needed to work in a smaller, more friendly environment, where I can more intimately touch the students."

He didn't seem to notice my appalling choice of words, and it seemed I had successfully appealed to his abundant vanity.

"This is more intimate," he said proudly, nodding with surprising enthusiasm. "We touch the students very deeply here."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh good," I said, trying hard not to chuckle.

"I like you, Mr Paul!" he told me, clapping his hands together happily. "You start here tomorrow and will join our family."

"Great! Most intimate touching happens in families, according to police studies."

"Fantabulous," said the educational director of the entire school. What could possibly go wrong?

Would I ever run out of sarcasm?
“I can’t wait to get started”

Chapter 9

I sipped slowly at a cup of coffee. I often found myself doing that—it was a cheap and a useful distraction from the increasingly crushing banality of life in this place. Sometimes, I felt as if I was descending down a never-ending spiral of human decay with little splinters of my soul being chipped away by every further experience.

At other times, I felt quite pessimistic.

The great thing about starting at yet another new school was that I met yet more new people, but often those new people weren't really worth meeting. In fact, most of the people I met were people I would normally take great pains to avoid if I was anywhere else. It was telling that they weren't anywhere else; they all seemed to wash up here, hopeless lost souls with nowhere else to go. Presumably, I was now one of them.

As if he were reading my mind, and trying to illustrate the point, Reg leant forwards to speak. We were perched on tiny plastic stools around a tiny wooden table. There was a hut at the bottom of the road away from the school where we usually met in the mornings before work. It was barely more than a few upright wooden beams with makeshift walls bolted to it, corrugated metal one side, planks of wood the other. One of the walls seemed to be made of a vinyl sign for a local proctologist with unnecessarily graphic depictions of his work.

They sold a little bit of every kind of junk-food you can imagine and the coffee was surprisingly good. Less surprisingly, that was particularly good luck as there wasn't anywhere else for us to go.

Reg said in his gravelly Australian accent, "I didn't get in 'till three last night. I was drinking on the street and met this girl. She was pretty clean and we struck a deal. It was too late to take her home so I did her down the alley beyond the bar. She was a screamer so we nearly

got caught.” He laughed, cackling to himself as if he had told the world’s funniest joke.

I sighed to myself. I checked my phone and was shocked to see that there were no messages from any literary geniuses who were excited to turn Reg’s story into a piece of classic romantic fiction. I had heard a similar story every morning so far from him and there was someone just like Reg around every corner, and under every rock.

“Down an alley, you say? She’s a lucky girl!”

He grinned. Reg wasn’t a young man and his skin had an oily reflective coating from his constant and relentless sweating. When he smiled, his teeth were brown, stained from many years smoking heavily and brushing lightly. His eyes were a dull yellow with surprisingly bright green irises that twinkled with the excited quality of a naughty young boy. His hair was white at the roots and dyed an unnaturally deep black that didn’t seem right at all. It was as if he’d used a dye that was meant for cats and not quite used enough of it.

The overall result was a man who looked like he didn’t fit, and couldn’t fit, anywhere else.

“She was happy,” he said. “She got paid for having fun and nobody punched her round the back of the head and stole her purse. That happens a lot to these girls. I don’t do it, of course, unless they deserve it. Some of them ask for it, you know?”

It was far too early in the morning for this. It was only my third day in my new job, teaching much younger students than I had before, and I was sick of it already.

Tom, a younger, more serious, Canadian man said in a low, thoughtful voice, “Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, after all!”

I rolled my eyes. Tom was a clever man and I was beginning to like him. He was a little odd, very quiet and seemed a little grim. He wore black-rimmed glasses and gazed out fixedly from behind them. He

was measured, careful and it seemed that he was weighing up everything all the time. When he spoke, he spoke with authority. It was just that he looked like a hamster who was trying to be a detective.

This time he had said something stupid and I capitalised on it ruthlessly. “How can prostitution be the oldest profession?” I asked condescendingly. “How can women professionally earn money from men who hadn’t yet developed the professional skills to have any in the first place? Before we can have prostitution, we have to have money, which means we need to have an entire economy.

“I really don’t think the global economy was a conspiracy started by a group of highly intelligent and forward-thinking nymphomaniacs who planned to exploit men to meet their needs.”

Tom smirked to himself in a measured little gesture of interest and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Good point,” he said. “I think I’ll write a blog entry about that and see where the reasoning takes me. Arguably, that’s a pretty good analogy for politics.”

I couldn’t argue with that, and felt a much stronger urge to argue with Reg.

“See!” Reg said with an annoyingly happy sing-song voice. “I’m contributing to the economy, and I’m involved in international government affairs.” He grinned and flashed what was left of his teeth. His mouth was like a graveyard where a helpless little boy who loved his mother might have been buried, leaving only this behind.

Tom nodded and said, “It’s often difficult to distinguish global politics and half-drunk fumbles with prostitutes down a dark alley.”

“Well, there’s the subject of your next two blogs!” I suggested grumpily. “You’re welcome. You owe me a beer.”

He raised a plastic cup of very bright orange tea as if he was about to give a toast. The vaguest flutter of a smile flashed over his lips.

It was Reg who somehow managed to voice the question that was going through my mind, and he removed the polite veneer I was

planning to paint thinly over it. He said, with the blunt honesty that only an Australian has, “Does anyone actually read your crap?”

Tom shrugged. “I have several hundred followers,” he said, a little too proudly. “I’ve always been interested in politics, and majored in it at university. I’m taking a few years out after my studies and just want to keep my mind sharp. I have always felt that if you go running after the audience, you end up sacrificing the content.”

“It sounds boring to me,” Reg told him.

I couldn’t really argue with that.

I had read one of Tom’s blogs and I found it stale, dry and difficult reading. It was littered with grammatical errors and I didn’t find myself really seeing the point he was trying to make. I was sure I could do better, if I could drag myself away from the much more important business of getting drunk as often as possible. I wondered, very briefly, if I was turning into an arrogant prick. The fact that I didn’t care either way suggested that it was probably already too late.

“It’s an intellectual pursuit.” Tom sipped his tea and looked away, as if Reg was beneath contempt.

I couldn’t really argue with that, either.

Reg turned to me. “So what do you do for fun, boy?” he said brashly. “You seem like an arrogant prick! You’re the kind of guy that loves to write down their annoying, self-important crap to bore other people to death. If you don’t have your own hobbies in this town, you just end up drinking until you shit out your own liver. What’s your thing?”

“I don’t see what the problem is with drinking until you shit out your own liver. It’s the world’s oldest hobby, after all.”

I didn’t find Reg as annoying as I felt I should. I did enjoy his refreshing lack of bullshit.

He laughed before pulling out his vape machine and taking a good hard suck on it. The unmistakable whiff of blueberries filled the

air, amidst a much denser cloud of smoke than I had expected. It was a good thing that those kinds of flavours were available to people who liked vaping so that kids could enjoy the hobby too. I had indeed become a cynical prick, but do pricks really have to confine themselves to being of just one kind?

“It really helps me to write all this stuff down. Maybe you should try it?” said Tom, as he sipped at his drink and stared. “If you don’t mind me saying, I don’t get the impression that you’re enjoying working at this school.”

Were we really having a conversation that didn’t question anyone’s terrible life choices? I dimly realised that that was exactly what we were doing, except that my professional life choices were now under scrutiny instead of the likelihood of various organs to exit due to the various poisons that entered.

“Not really!” I heard myself say. I wondered what I was going to say next. “It’s boring and the kids are dumb! I’ve never seen anything like it. One of them couldn’t spell a three letter word, or even point to himself when I said his name.”

Reg grinned knowingly and began nodding. “Well, what did you expect? This is a small school in a small town in a country nobody cares about. Did you expect it to be populated by scientific geniuses or the next generation of great philosophical thinkers?”

He was right, of course. I had brought a lot of preconceptions with me and had discovered that almost everything we were taught in the West is utterly, totally and completely wrong.

“I just didn’t expect so many crayons to be put up so many nostrils.”

Reg found this all highly amusing. When he had finished choking on his cackling, rasping laughter and coughing out plumes of grey, fruit-flavoured smoke, he said, “I had a little boy last year who ate crayons selectively because his Dad told him to eat more greens. I ended up

splitting the tables, the red, blue and green one. I put all the idiots on the green one and called it the ‘Veg-Table’ and used it as a punishment, a threat to the ones that didn’t try to drink the glue that they would end up there if they pissed me off.

“Ultimately, I ended up putting the teaching–assistant there because she kept spelling her own name wrong.”

I sighed and sipped my coffee. “It’s a beautiful story, Reg.” Maybe I should write a book. All this humanity might be lost forever otherwise, like a cloud of blueberry breath in the wind.

Reg, not knowing when to stop, just carried on going, “I ended up asking her on a date.”

“Seriously?” I grumbled to myself but loudly enough to be heard. “An inability to spell her own name is a huge sexual turn–on for you?”

“I take what I can get!” he said with a grin and a shrug. “I took her somewhere nice, somewhere where you pick what fish you want to eat and they kill it front of you with a special wooden hammer.”

“Romantic,” I said, my vegan sensibilities prickling. “Not enough dates begin with smashing the heads off of animals. I think that might be what’s wrong with the world.” On reflection, what might be what’s wrong with the world was actually sitting right in front of me, belching out blueberry–scented gas, sexism and generally being Australian.

Reg sighed and sucked on his vape. “She tried to charge me a hundred dollars for the date, even though I never even touched her.”

“She did what?” I said in surprise. It was nice that after everything I had seen, done, and had done to me, that there were still some surprises to be had. In fact, I had been warned by Del that you could expect a daily shock in your first year. He wasn’t wrong. Almost every single day we experienced a moment where someone would stare at some awful, terrible lapse in good–sense happening before us and mutter, ‘What the fuck?!’ People said it to me all the time.

Reg nodded. "As it turned out, the school's principal was hiring bar-girls to work in the school as assistants. He said it was cheaper and it made it easier to cheat on his wife. I wondered why all the staff were so attractive and why so many of them grabbed my groin as they walked past me."

"This story might be getting too beautiful," I grumbled. I wondered how much of this could even be true. Was Reg just deliberately trying to offend me? Was this a subtle little joke he was playing at the expense of the new boy? Were people just really like this here? I wondered.

Tom added, "It's true. One of mine tried to offer me a staff-discount."

And now that the coffin-lid had been shut on the few lingering shreds of my optimism, I decided it was time to go to work, seeing how many crayons I could keep out of how many children's noses.

"It wasn't the worst morning," I said. "Only three crayons went missing. We never found the orange one."

Cam listened intently as I told him about my morning. Of course, that didn't mean he was actually hearing anything I said, but it did me good to moan about things over lunch.

Lunch was a pile of oddly plastic-tasting rice with several fried eggs on top. My veganism had been demoted to vegetarianism so that my starvation could be promoted to survival. Whether survival was even desirable at this point was open to debate.

"I have a date tonight!" I said with a smile. It was nice to have something to look forward to. "I met her on the internet. We're meeting tonight at the riverfront for dinner."

Cam went even more quiet and stared emptily while he chewed on a mouthful of chicken bones. He spat out the worst of them as if he took no pleasure from anything in life. "Good for you," he said.

“Yeah!” I said with a smile. “It’s the first date I’ve been on for a while. It will do me good.”

“Yes,” he said simply. Suddenly, a thought flashed through his mind—I could tell because his eyebrow twitched. “Did Raj send you that link from the news?”

“No! I’ve barely seen him in the last few weeks. He’s always out these days and it seems that the only reason he comes home is to steal all my breakfast cereal.”

“I know,” Cam agreed. “It’s always too hot in the apartment now.”

To be absolutely honest, my concern for Raj didn’t extend very far beyond the thermostat settings either. “What news link?” I asked. “More power-cuts? More flooding? More corruption? What fresh level of hell are we about to descend into?”

Cam put down his fork and picked up his phone. Within a few seconds mine beeped. He put his down and said, “Look for yourself. It’s that guy...”

I looked for myself. It was what guy? The news story was about a man found dead in his guest-house. As I read through the article, I started to realise what he was talking about. “Isn’t that the abusive boyfriend of that girl we met the same night your bike was stolen?”

“Yes!” Cam said. “Heart attack, according to the article anyway.”

The article in question had fairly graphic pictures of a swollen, bloated, naked body being discovered in a local hostel. In the background was a picture of a very worried looking bleach-blonde woman who was undoubtedly familiar. What was her name again?

“Wow,” I said. “I don’t know what to say. I guess he really did get what he deserved!”

Cam didn’t nod, shake his head, or give any overt indication that he cared either way. He simply said, “Del said the same thing when I

showed him. He said he could always trust these wilds to handily dispense the iron will of justice.”

Hearing that didn’t improve my mood particularly. Hopefully, my date would do that.

“Well, couldn’t have happened to a nicer guy.”

“He had it coming!”

I had found myself telling Tom the sad story of the untimely death of an overweight, wife-beating drug-addict, and he nodded along with apathetic disinterest. I couldn’t really bring much emotional weight to it, because it wasn’t as if I could force myself to feel that it was really any great loss. More a fun and interesting anecdote than a terrible tale of tragedy. Who would have to die here for me to care?

Tom’s scant reaction suggested he felt much the same.

I looked to my classroom, the small, threatening little box that held my class of under-stimulated pre-schoolers. Most of my class was made up of part-time students, so by the afternoon, the numbers were more manageable.

I began my way to the room, ready to do battle against ignorance, and the consumption of non-edible stationery products. I let myself into the room and closed the door behind me.

The full-time students were mostly composed of two distinct groups. The two distinct groups stared at me in rapt attention, attention that could drift off to who-knew-where in seconds.

The first group were the kids whose parents didn’t have time for them. They were anxious, they were attention-seeking, and would do anything to get you to notice them. Sometimes they were sad, gazing off into the distance, depressed and demoralised, but those moods passed quickly and their excitement often carried them away on a sea of hyper-stimulated craziness.

This was a group that needed careful management; I wasn't particularly good with management, and my caring had been described in the past as lacking.

The second group were kids that even their parents didn't want around them. They were usually the ones with learning difficulties, something that was rarely admitted to in this place. They were held back because they couldn't meet the standard, so they were bigger, and angrier than the other students. They undoubtedly had other problems too, and although I was no expert, I could see that several had varying degrees of autism.

According to the local staff, 'their brains are no good.' There was no medical diagnosis beyond the opinion that they had received sub-standard goods in the genetic lottery. What hope for a future those kids had was anyone's guess. My guess took me to a depressing place.

"Good morning, everyone!" I said with barely sufficient enthusiasm to convince anyone I wouldn't secretly welcome my own death.

Fortunately, the building was so poorly constructed that death could come at any time, and I held on tightly to that reassuring hope.

The teaching assistant grinned at me and said, "Afternoon, 'cher."

I looked at the lethargic, empty gazes from half the room and the cackling cacophony of thrilled amusement from the other.

"Yes, afternoon," I said, not that it made any difference when most of them couldn't even correctly identify the first few letters of the alphabet.

"Today we're going to do some colouring!" I said, pretending to smile. "We're going to study the letter 'B' today." With a deep, cleansing breath, I shored up my resolve and prepared myself for the worst. "Can anyone tell me a word that begins with the letter, B?"

A hand went up and a voice cried out, "Potato."

“No!” I said. My attempts to sound supportive were also found wanting.

To a casual observer, a young student thinking that ‘potato’ starts with a ‘b’ might seem pretty terrible, but it wasn’t as bad as it appeared. The tubby little boy that said it answered ‘potato’ to everything, even if you asked him his name. I could only imagine his meals were quite bland.

“Potato begins with a ‘P.’ P is for plastic, pineapple, and psychotic delusion,” I said. “Plastic is what the Indian ocean is made of, pineapple is what men have to eat if their girlfriends moan about the taste of things, and psychotic delusions...” I pointed to the potato and tried to use him to make a point. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Predictably, he answered, “Potato!”

The boy sitting next to him said, over-excitedly, “His Daddy wants him to be a doctor.”

“Yes, that’s perfect,” I said with a happy nod. “That’s a perfect example of a psychotic delusion. Mind you, if he wants to be a potato, I think we should support him in his dreams. I, for one, really believe he has it in him to succeed.”

A very confused teaching assistant, who was probably a much better bar-girl, said, “I don’t think potatoes can be doctors!”

“And vice-versa!” I told her.

Now she looked even more confused.

There was something quite attractive about her, and any man who wasn’t interested in a woman for her brains might have found her quite appealing. Personally, I liked to talk to women. I wondered, very briefly, if that too was a Western-based ideal that happened to be completely, utterly and totally wrong? Talking to woman had got me precisely nowhere in life, after all. Worse, it had got me here, which was somewhere, but nowhere good. Ending up somewhere good was generally implied and I had singularly failed to do it. It was nice to be

good at something and I took some comfort in the fact that I was failing to the highest imaginable standard.

As I stood there, gazing into the abyss as it stared back at me, I wondered what I would talk about on my date that wouldn't make me sound as if I was becoming a little bit too cynical.

“You sound a little bit too cynical.”

She looked as if she was about to add something fairly rude, but she stopped herself. I didn't care, I was expecting it. That was how cynicism worked, after all.

The date was going fairly well, I thought. I had met her in a bar along the river, overlooking the boats as they slowly made their way along, scooping piles of expanded polystyrene out of the water behind the other boats dumping it in.

I had tried to choose somewhere romantic, somewhere with the very minimum amount of cockroaches. Sadly, the reason that the cockroaches were scarce was that they were all eaten by the rats; life was all about balance.

I noticed a few dogs walking around, clearly there to control the cats, which, in turn, had been used to solve the other problem. I was cautiously optimistic since there was a very welcome lack of gorillas to control the dogs. Even better, if there were any leftover rats, they appeared to have been confined to the kitchen.

I had ordered a pizza for us to share; I was now able to enjoy the benefits of a non-vegan diet, and was impressed that the things I was eating now actually tasted much more like food.

It hadn't arrived yet, but I had a beer and she was on her third weird pink cocktail thing, that I suspected might actually be glowing. Getting her a little bit drunk did seem that it would improve my chances of getting her a little bit naked, and she was certainly an active

participant in the alcohol end of things, ordering them faster than I could pay for them.

“I might be getting a little bit cynical,” I admitted. I felt that this deserved an explanation or, at least, some justification. “A few weeks ago, I had these two boys come in late to class. One of them is a complete idiot who just sits gazing ahead with a pair of blank eyes. The other is so far beyond stupid that I sometimes wonder if someone shaved an ape and sent it to school to study instead of him. He was late every single day, had been for every single lesson. He just grins at himself and can’t answer simple questions, like ‘What day is it?’ To put that in perspective, he’s a teenager studying in high-school.

“The pair of them came in late to class and walked up to the desk with a slip of paper in each of their hands. I assumed it was a late admission slip they had got from the discipline office. The smarter, or less stupid, of the pair said they had signed up to the WMC.

“I didn’t know what that was, and on the fourth attempt of asking, they said it was a maths competition. I kept reaching out for the paper, which I assumed they were trying to show me but neither of them moved.

“I said to the one who was always late that he couldn’t even figure out a clock—how was he going to function in a maths competition? He didn’t stop grinning, exactly, but he did grin a little less. He huffed and looked away but never said anything.

“His partner was staring at me. I said to him, somewhat in exasperation, ‘Are you good at maths?’ He looked as if he might be.

“He shook his head and said, ‘No,’ very firmly.”

She looked at me with a sort of crooked smile. “Right...” she said, clearly confused.

“So, dealing with this every day might be making me a little bit cynical. On the other hand though, sometimes funny things happen.”

She looked at me somewhat expectantly.

“A few weeks ago, I was playing a game with them. It was the turn of this incredibly overweight boy, who’s so bad at everything that all the other students laugh at him. He had to come up to the front and do a speed-reading challenge. I didn’t tell him that: I wanted it to be a surprise.

“So he comes up the front and I tell him to choose someone he thinks he can beat. He looks around and chooses a small girl from the middle of the room. She looked a bit confused as she comes up the front. I have to admit, I’m a bit confused too. She’s a good student and is a long way ahead of him. I don’t know what he’s thinking so I let it go and just wait to see how this plays out.

“I hand them both a reading assignment and let them go. They have to read as fast as they can and the winner is the one who finishes first. The girl destroys him. He flusters, splutters and then gives up.

“This always gets a good laugh; the other kids are chuckling away and loving the show.

“I give the points to the girl and say to the boy, ‘Why did you choose her? You knew she’d be able to beat you!’

“He says to me, ‘Teacher, I thought we were going to fight!’ The other kids went silent for a long stretch and then everyone burst out laughing.”

I sighed and shook my head as my date looked at me, blinking slowly and clearly not knowing what the hell she was meant to say. Her expression was that of a person who was more than slightly confused. I explained, “I don’t know in what world this kid thought that wrestling a small girl to the floor is an educational experience.”

After a lengthy pause, she said, “I see.”

I looked around but there was no sign of the pizza. I grumbled to myself and took a sip of beer. She stared at her cocktail and sighed.

On reflection, maybe the date wasn't going well at all. I wondered if I could salvage things. Perhaps more glowing pink cocktails would help?

"So what do you do?" I asked, conversationally, trying to look like a cool, confident, laid back man. For some reason, an image of Del came to mind. I hated when that happened.

She looked confused again and played awkwardly with her drink, staring at the curly red straw that hung out from the side. Finally, she looked up to me and giggled a little. "I do this..." she said with a slightly awkward smile.

"This?" I didn't know what she meant. I smiled and shook my head very slightly. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"This!" she said again, as if repeating the exact same word would suddenly explain everything. Perhaps if she said it a little louder, it might help?

"Still not getting it," I said, or maybe thought. I was completely lost at that point. It was like the time that one of the boys in my class asked me how to grow a beard and I realised he wasn't actually joking.

"Dates!" she said.

It was around then that the penny dropped. I was still clinging to the hope I was wrong, but a strong sense of dread began crawling up my spine.

"Dates?"

"Dates," she said again and nodded. A smile fluttered over her admittedly very pretty lips, but I was starting to find her a little less attractive by now. "Dates for money."

"Dates for money..." I sighed to myself and closed my eyes. How could I manage to be so utterly stupid? Admittedly, I always managed to find a way.

"And sex," she added, just to clarify, not that there was any doubt left at this point.

“You’re a prostitute!” I told her, although she probably already knew. Suddenly, I was thinking of all the penises that had been inside her and all the awkward, difficult situations afterwards where men had handed her the money and she had checked it carefully while they laid on their hourly–rented beds, wondering if they could pinpoint the exact moment where they had completely lost control of their lives.

She nodded and seemed relieved. “I give you discount because you buy me dinner,” she said, and very reasonably too. “And you not very ugly, so that good too. I don’t have to charge you the full fat–tax.”

There are few things in life that bolster a man’s ego more than not being required to pay the full fat–tax. What could be more flattering than receiving a compliment about your relative attractiveness from a woman that would have sex with anyone in exchange for money?

“I am quite cynical, aren’t I?” I said. “I wonder why?”

“Pizza!” Suddenly, the voice of a waiter cut into my cynicism before I drowned in it. “Spinach and feta cheese on one side, sausage on the other.”

I thanked him politely and watched him leave.

“I’m going to pass, I think,” I told her. With a huge outpouring of cynicism, I added, “Are you going to charge me extra for eating my sausage?”

Chapter 10

“Can you tell me why you want this job?” the interviewer asked, trying way too hard to sound efficient and just sounding vaguely ridiculous instead.

I huffed in annoyance and slumped back in the chair, sulking like a naughty child who was being lectured about eating too many sweets. I looked around the office; it was actually quite nice. I thought about how I was going to enjoy working there.

“It’s a job, isn’t it?” I said grumpily. “The fact is, I’d rather work here than starve to death on the rat-infested open sewer of the riverfront. And you’d be lucky to have me as I’m not a suicidal, chain-smoking, shit-eating alcoholic paedophile like almost everyone else in this town.”

The interviewer frowned at me.

I continued, “But the problem is that if I take this job, I have to deal with children.

“We all assume that we like children, until we spend any real amount of time around them. Then we realise that they’re not cute little people: they’re really just a vile symptom of a sex act between two desperately unattractive people who were both just afraid of dying alone.

“I now feel that the best thing to do with children would be to lock them all up in a gigantic stadium where all the gates are locked. The gates can only be opened if they solve puzzles and they have to run around learning how to do maths and languages to figure out how to escape. Every few days, we release a lion or two, and see what happens. We also don’t allow them food, but give them enough weapons to hunt one another.

“Only the strongest survive, so we actually strengthen up the gene-pool instead of just trying to teach the weak, flabby offspring of career sociopaths who can afford to pay the fees at the schools that can afford to pay the teachers.”

The interviewer glared at me and began shaking her head slowly and mumbling.

“I also think that we should take all the people that run the schools, round them up and set fire to them,” I added, conversationally. “I think the smell would be quite impressive.”

She frowned and began making notes on her paper.

“So the actual answer is that I want this job so I can afford to buy beer and continue drinking myself to death,” I told her. “It’s really the only way I can cope with the blisteringly awful reality of what I do.”

“I see,” she grumbled. “And when can you start?”

“When can you start paying me?” I quipped. “I mean, we all know that this is only about the money. The fact is that I’m actually a pretty decent teacher and they’re hard to find in this town, especially for the wages you lot pay.”

“I could drop my trousers, shit on the floor and rub it all over your face and still expect to get the job.”

I shrugged and sighed to myself. “Do you want to try that?”

“We have cameras,” she told me. “This is being recorded.”

“Great!” I said rolling my eyes. “That will keep my passion in check. I can’t tell you how many times in the last three minutes that I’ve thought about bending you over this office desk and having my way with you.”

She frowned at me again and said sarcastically. “You can if you want. I doubt I’d even notice.”

I shook my head and tutted at her. “Now you’ve just made this weird!” I grumbled.

“And you told me that you were going to take this interview seriously,” Lou said. “I know I’m not really the head of English, but you could at least try!”

“We’re friends,” I grinned. “You already told me that you’re going to give me the job. You said I had to buy you drinks all night and I did. It wasn’t cheap, by the way.”

“Fair enough.” She shrugged and stamped the forms. I was officially staff. “What about Cam?”

“He’s outside,” I said, pointing back to the waiting area. “I don’t think he’s going to offer to shit on the carpet.”

Lou narrowed her eyes. “You never know,” she said. “It’s the quiet ones you have to watch.”

Chapter 11

This city felt much more like a town than the kind of sprawling metropolis a word like City normally evoked. I had noticed just how small it was when I kept running into the same people, the same situations, the same things. Over and over, I felt trapped in an endless circle where nothing new ever seemed to happen.

This wasn't always a bad thing, and sometimes there were even benefits to it. Sometimes there was an advantage to the small-town mentality where everyone knew everybody else.

"It's not too bad here," Lou commented with a sigh.

She looked different. The few months we'd been living there had certainly made an impression on both of us. I wondered if I looked different to her? In what way had this place already made an impression on me?

She was dressed as if she had won her clothes in a fight with a homeless person. She was wearing a pair of ripped blue jeans and a pink jumper that was too tight for a woman of her size. Her hair was dyed a kind of rusty red and it looked as if her brain had ground to a halt, oxidised and leaked out through her scalp. I always knew that would happen eventually and had warned her several times about it.

She looked tired, beaten down by it all, as she sipped on a cardboard-cup of strong coffee and stared out aimlessly.

"Thanks," I told her and sipped on a cup of coffee myself. Like her, I had given up on the local coffee and was drinking higher quality, albeit more expensive, stuff from proper actual coffee shops. The price might have increased, but my anus was thanking me. Explosive diarrhoea was much rarer now, although not unheard of.

I had heard a story from a gay teacher we had worked with when we first arrived. He had warned me not to wear lighter coloured trousers after eating a curry. Doing so had caused a classroom-incident that he

seemed oddly rather proud of. He had farted, gingerly allowing out a little gas, hoping it would quietly escape and ease his growing stomach-pain. He had been standing in front of a class of young teenagers when the need had hit. What he had expected would be a tiny whisper had actually been a gigantic, biblical explosion of faecal matter that had escaped with a triumphant roar and left the wall behind him dripping with green-tinted slime.

I couldn't remember his name.

It was telling of my current experience that the best thing that had happened to me in a month was going on all around me at that very moment, and the only thing on my mind was the idea of not shitting myself.

"I appreciate you putting your neck out for me," I said to Lou.

She smiled back thinly. "Tim is head of English here. We're always desperate for good teachers, and he's forgotten how much he hates you. He forgets things a lot and keeps calling me 'Bec.'"

"Why exactly does he hate me again?" I asked, forgetting the story behind it myself. I was sure there was a very good reason for it, but I had been drunk many times since whatever it was had happened.

Lou frowned thoughtfully, shrugged and shook her head. "Who knows?" she said. "He's taking a few weeks off due to an incident where a bike hit a car. I don't know much more than that."

I looked around. The staff room at this new school was quiet and organised, well-appointed with individual desks and computers. It looked as if they respected their staff, and there was a good chance they might even respect the students too. I was happy to be there.

"Well, I'm glad to be out of that last place," I said. "I couldn't work there another moment. The guy running it was crazy. He sat in his office all day drinking beer and kept asking us to write exams for the kindergarten students. He had no idea what he was doing."

“This place!” she said wearily. “I need to get out of here. I can’t take much more of it.”

“I thought this was one of the better schools?” I said, suddenly feeling a little concerned. With my qualifications this was likely to be the best job I could get.

“The job’s alright. I mean the country. I hate it here, I need to get out.”

“Ah!” I said. Sure, it wasn’t for everyone. It had proven to be startlingly different from what I had expected, but I wasn’t ready to leave just yet. I had nothing to go home to and no real interest in being anywhere else, at least for now. “Where do you have in mind?”

“Anywhere,” she said. With a heavy sigh she flashed an insincere and weary smile. “What was wrong with your last place?”

I rolled my eyes and groaned. “Where do I start?” I looked around furtively and lowered my voice. “The last straw came around a week ago. I was working with a couple of guys: Tom and Reg. Tom seemed alright—a bit quiet, but he was smart and serious. He seemed to care about the job and he knew what he was doing. Reg was older, a typical drunken sex-pat that just spent all his wages on beer and prostitutes, and then borrowed money from everyone on the last week of the month.

“I wasn’t really keen on either of them and we never really hit it off. I could put up with them, and I could be basically friendly at work, but that was about all.” I sighed and checked around again to make sure nobody was within earshot. Lou listened intently.

“I was in class one morning and Reg knocked on my door. He came in looking worried. His usual inch-thick veneer of annoyingness was gone, wiped off of his smug little face. He told me I was needed in the meeting room.

“I went along and even the principal looked as if he’d seen a ghost, so I knew this was going to be something bad. I went in and I was starting to sweat. I had no idea what to expect.

“When I got inside, there were two guys waiting for me. They were Western guys dressed smart-casual, but they looked all wrong. Fake smiles plastered over the most miserable-looking pair of arseholes I have ever seen. They looked even worse than the mentors on the training course. One stands up and reaches out to shake my hand. He already knows my name.”

“Who were they?” Lou asked, her attention firmly locked on me.

“You’ll never guess!” I told her smugly. She shook her head. “It was the fucking FBI. The American Federal Bureau of fucking Investigation!”

“What?” she cried out in surprise. Then she remembered where she was, and looked around furtively. More reservedly, she exclaimed again, “What? The FBI? What the hell were they doing here?”

“They said they were investigating a complaint. I wasn’t under any compulsion to answer any questions and it was all purely voluntary. Then they dropped the bomb—they were here for Tom. He wasn’t Canadian at all, as he told everyone he was. He was an American and they were looking into him.”

Now I had Lou’s complete attention. “For what?”

“They asked a lot of questions about how he behaved around the children. They asked if I ever felt uncomfortable about the way he related to the girls on the campus.”

“Jesus!” she said and began rubbing her forehead. “You were in a primary school, weren’t you? That is beyond sick!”

“Yeah!” I agreed. “I walked out of that room as angry as hell and I swore I would never work with that man ever again. But then I got chatting to Reg.”

“Yeah?” she said, hanging on my every word.

“Reg told me he’s known Tom a lot longer than I have. He said he’d never once been even remotely suspicious of him. He’d never once seen him give a kid so much as a sideways glance. I realised he was right, but said it didn’t prove anything—these sick weirdos know how to cover their tracks.

“Reg said to me that Tom was a political blogger and that he wrote a lot of stuff about the American government. Apparently, Tom had had to leave his home. He said he’d come out here to get away from things before they got bad.”

Lou frowned and said, “But that could just mean he got into trouble in the US for the same thing.”

“Sure!” I agreed. “But, as Reg pointed out, if the FBI had any evidence they would have arrested him and he wouldn’t have been able to travel outside of the country. The FBI only operate inside America, so what are they even doing out here?”

“So what happened?” She asked. “What did they really want with Tom?”

“That’s just it…” I said. “We never found out. Tom vanished. Nobody’s heard from him since.”

“What the…” she mumbled.

“I know!” I said, nodding. “This place is weird.”

“I need to get the hell out of here…”

“We all need to get out of here,” Don agreed. “But it’s easier said than done.”

There was a pretty decent coffee shop near enough to the school that we could walk there during our breaks. They weren’t technically breaks, and we weren’t technically allowed out during them, but nobody stopped us so we just did what we wanted.

“So, boy!” Don said loudly. Don did everything loudly—even his silence was done at a suspiciously high volume. “How long have you been in the country for?”

This was the usual question we asked one another when we met a new person. It was as if we unconsciously understood that we were all on a single path that headed from some degree of interrupted normalcy to an ending so appallingly terrible that none of us were brave enough to talk about it, but we all secretly knew it was coming. All that mattered was where you were and how far along the journey you had currently travelled.

“Not long,” I told him. “It seems longer.”

“Eight years and counting!” he told me proudly. He was well-dressed, far better dressed in fact than the situation required. It was as if he had started with the scruffy, half-arsed and barely getting by standard we all managed—somehow—to maintain, and had gone so far out the other side that it looked vaguely ridiculous. I had a shirt with rolled up sleeves: his were rolled down, crisply pressed and the cuffs were held down by gold cuff-links. He finished it off with a charcoal-grey waistcoat that perfectly matched his suit trousers, and I could see the edge of a gold chain around his neck, below the pressed collar of his shirt.

He walked with an easy swagger and had a kind of greasy, over-the-top, personality that seemed like it was plastered over some severe and deep-rooted cracks.

“That’s a long time,” I said. “How did you manage to last that long?”

“I’m a survivor!” he told me, speaking loudly with a hoarse kind of croak to his voice. “I don’t mind it here. You just have to figure out what works best for you! I figure you never really win—you leave your home country and you just swap one set of problems for another. It’s

about finding the set of problems that best suit you, the ones you can best manage to live with.”

I pondered this as we made our way to the door of the coffee shop. “Most people figure out that what works best for them is being somewhere else.”

“Most people are idiots though!” he said, making a very good point. “Have you seen some of the teachers we work with? The one you replaced didn’t know what a verb was. He said that it was pointless learning grammar because he didn’t know any and he was an English teacher now. He said that to the kids!”

I wasn’t shocked. “Right...”

“Want to get a beer?” Don called out, shouting as if I wasn’t standing right next to him. Every word he half-yelled was accompanied by a flamboyantly over-zealous gesture, some wild and theatrical flap of the arms.

“Well, it’s 10am...” I said, stating the obvious.

“Yeah, bit early...” he said with a laugh. Rolling his eyes a little more heavily than was needed to make his point, he continued, “I meant later. Let’s meet down the riverfront and get so fucking drunk that we can barely find our way to the next bar to get even more fucking drunk.”

“Well, it’s Thursday...” I said, stating the obvious perhaps even more than the last time.

“I meant tomorrow!” he said. “So it’s a date.”

“Not a date,” I said firmly. “But I can come out for beer. Why not?”

“Not a date!” he agreed, pushing open the door a bit too abruptly and forcing his way in, against absolutely no resistance whatsoever.

“You’re not my type anyway.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” I lied.

As we made our way inside he said, even more brashly, and with a ridiculously raised volume, “I exclusively date pre-operative transsexuals.”

“Ladyboys!” I raised an eyebrow. Not many people I had met seemed more ferociously heterosexual than Don. He behaved like someone had taken the cliché of a jack-the-lad and nailed it to the psyche of a narcissistic male chauvinist. I realised I must have sounded surprised. “I never realised you were gay!”

“I’m not gay!” he snapped suddenly with an aggressive frown. Truth be told, there really wasn’t much aggression to him, and he was a lot shorter than me and so skinny that he looked like someone had put clothes on a fence-post. “I’m half-gay, at best. I just like to grab some bird’s cock while I’m doing her up the arse.”

“Right!” I said apologetically. “Nothing gay about that. Nothing more than half-gay, anyway.”

“Right,” he agreed. He looked me up and down. “Mind you, the whole spectrum of pre-operative transsexuals is all on the menu. Technically you do kind of fit in there.”

“I can promise you that you will never fit in here!” I told him very, very firmly.

“Transsexuals come in all shapes and sizes,” he told me with a wry grin. “I also ‘come’ in all shapes and sizes.”

He really wasn’t selling the idea of having a few beers with him the next day.

“Shall we just drink some coffee in silence?”

“Silence really was too much to ask,” I said.

Cam blinked and then stared unevenly. He cocked his head to one side as I explained who Don was, how things had gone the previous day, and why we were both meeting him for a beer that evening.

Cam, in a rare moment of expressing a thought or feeling that didn't entirely centre around his being slightly hungry, said, "Is he going to try to have sex with me?"

Enjoying an even rarer moment to cause a little discomfort to the otherwise slow and steady Cam, I said, "Yes. He probably will."

Cam wasn't a bad-looking guy. He was lean and always looked slightly hungry, and on top of that, he didn't dress particularly well. His hair was light brown and unkempt. He sported a horrible haircut, the shaved sides had started to grow out, and this made the top look as if a dirty mop had been placed carelessly on his head. He clearly didn't care about his appearance, and it was as if he had simply given up, though whether there had ever been a time he didn't look like that had never been revealed.

"Why wouldn't he? You're a fine specimen of a man!"

Cam looked at me evenly and blinked twice. "We both know that's not true," he said wryly.

He turned and went to the fridge. He pulled the door open and the whole thing clattered like a Chinese luxury car. "Luckily, there are only two beers left, thanks to Raj. We can have one each."

He handed one to me and snapped one open himself.

"That used to be a pack of twelve, but he seems to have found it before we got to it."

Cam needed to work a little on his humour but it was a valiant effort.

Snatching up a beer, I flashed him a hearty smile. It felt good to be officially joining the weekend and, as the first sweet, fizzy rush of toxic chemicals beat all of my taste buds into submission, it felt as if that was finally happening. Perhaps it was because my brain-cells were being beaten into submission right along with it?

"Where is Raj anyway?" I said. "Does he still live here, or does he just come round to steal our food?"

“He lives here,” Cam grumbled.

I couldn’t help notice he was drinking more. As I thought about it, it occurred to me that I rarely saw Cam without a beer in his hand at all these days.

“I know he lives here because he pays the rent.”

I asked, “Has he paid the rent?”

Cam shook his head. I grimaced. This was the second time now. The first time, Cam had had to chase him for two weeks, and once he did catch him, he had only managed to get around half of it.

“We’re going to have to chuck him out,” I said. I stepped over to the couch, a beige and black monstrosity that basked in its own abundant tastelessness. Cam parked himself in a small single-seat chair.

“Yes,” he agreed. “He hasn’t paid the rent for months. We should just assume he’s left.”

“His stuff is here though,” I sighed. It was piled haphazardly next to the sofa.

Cam shrugged and without the flicker of a smile, he said, “We could sell it to raise the money he owes.”

On the surface, that actually sounded like a good idea.

“Seriously?” I began. “When did you last see him?”

“Three days ago,” he said, frowning thoughtfully. “You know he’s working at the ‘Dancing Rhinoceros School for International Excellence’ now. He moved there a couple of weeks ago.”

I blinked incredulously. “There isn’t really a ‘Dancing Rhinoceros School for International Excellence’ is there?” I hoped there wasn’t. Rhinoceroses were rarely known for dancing or excellence, but to be fair, neither were the local schools.

Cam sipped his beer. He took out his phone, clicked on it for a few seconds, and then dropped it back down. He looked up at me with a vaguely blank look on his face.

“I texted him and told him to meet us in the usual bar, the one you stayed at when you were on the course.”

“The ‘depressing’ bar,” I grumbled.

“But why do you call it the depressing bar?” Lou asked.

I looked around the place. Nothing had changed since the day I had first clapped eyes on it. One man was slumped semi-conscious over the bar. Behind him was a small bamboo table with an incredibly old, overweight man whose face looked like it was melting off him. Opposite him was a very attractive, slender local girl who had barely bothered to wear enough clothes to cover her underwear, assuming she was even wearing any. She was bored and playing with her phone while he was gazing into the distance, nursing a beer.

The job of explaining why I thought the place was depressing was largely done for me. “Look at it!” I said. “How is it not depressing?”

“I don’t think it’s depressing.”

Del, who often joined us at weekends, said, “I think that young Paul just thinks he’s a little too good to mix with people like this.”

I began to open my mouth to protest that I thought no such thing, but caught myself and looked around once more. “Well... I am! I’d be a pretty sad piece of work if I wasn’t a little better than a man who’s drunk himself into oblivion before seven o’clock at night, and a melting-man on a date with, what looks like, an under-age prostitute.”

Del laughed and nodded in agreement. He had been making a point for me, not against me. He said to Lou in his deep, masculine growling voice, “This place isn’t the best. It’s alright to get a few beers in once in a while but it wouldn’t be good for a person’s soul to spend too much time here.”

I wondered how big his penis was.

Lou still looked a bit confused. She said to Cam, “What do you think of this place?”

He demonstrated his lack of an opinion on the matter with a shrug and returned his attention to his beer, where it really belonged.

“I told Raj to meet us here,” he said, changing the subject. “He’s behind on the rent again.”

I had explained all this already. “He always is!” I said, rolling my eyes.

Del sipped his beer and said, “He’s not coming to work at your new school, ‘Excellence International?’”

Even Cam was surprised by this. I told him, quite firmly, “No! Lou stuck her neck out to get Cam and me over there. Raj would screw things up for all of us.”

“What went wrong with him?” Del asked conversationally. “You all used to be good mates, didn’t you? He was assigned to Ray so I never saw his case-files but I met him a few times and he seemed like a decent young guy.”

“I don’t know,” I said thoughtfully. “He used to be...” I realised I really didn’t know how to end that sentence. He used to be an idiot. He had always been judgemental, racist, brash, arrogant and unpleasant. A better question would have been why we ever put up with him in the first place. I didn’t have an answer to that question either.

Cam said, “He knows how to work the air-conditioner.”

“That’s right!” I said in agreement. “Whenever I change the settings it just goes right back. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong, but it works when Raj does it.”

Del looked at me fixedly. After a long pause, he simply said, “I see.”

Lou was drinking something stronger than beer. Beer didn’t seem to work its magic on her anymore, she had told us. She sipped at a murky brown glass of liquid as two cubes of ice clinked around in it. She said, in her own unique style, “Our school needs the staff. All we

get is fucking monkeys. You are slightly less like a bunch of monkeys than we usually get.”

Del smiled and said, “Cheers! I’m sure Paul will be happy to drink to that.”

“Well, I like it!” I said. “It’s better than most of the places I’ve worked recently and it pays very well. I think I’ll enjoy it there! The desks even have computers on some of them.”

Del gave Cam a pointed little look and smiled wryly. He turned his attention to me and said, “I heard you went on a date. How did that go?”

I glared at Lou who grinned back at me. “Does everyone know?” I grumbled.

Del nodded. “I heard the news from far and wide. What happened?”

I sighed and took a long swig of my crappy beer. “She turned out to be a prostitute. I mean, why on earth would a prostitute chat with me for two weeks before agreeing to a date, just to then reveal she’s only looking for money?”

Del, in his uniquely insightful way, rephrased the question: “Why would you chat up a prostitute for two weeks before inviting her on a date?”

I gave him an angry stare, but it didn’t seem to bother him unduly. He probably knew martial arts and could kick my arse. He seemed to know everything else. “I didn’t know she was a prostitute, did I!” I thought that was a fairly obvious element to the story but I said it anyway.

“It happens to us all out here,” he told me. “Things are different in a place like this and you have to learn to accept it. I know you think you’re too good to pay for sex, but really what’s the difference? Everyone pays for sex, Paul. Everyone! The only difference with a

prostitute is that the price and the terms are made refreshingly clear up front.”

I didn't like arguing with Del because he had a way of always making you feel that he was right about everything. Still, I couldn't help myself from jumping to my own defence, and I suspect he knew that was exactly what I was going to do. “I'm not going to sleep with a prostitute!” I told him, frowning angrily to myself.

“And how much did your date cost?” he asked with a knowing smile. “And then, how did it feel not to get anywhere with a girl you liked, especially after spending so much time and money on her?”

Lou said, “I agree with Paul. I wouldn't sleep with a prostitute either.”

“Seriously?” I snapped at her. “Have we really found someone that you wouldn't sleep with?” As the words left my lips, I realised I had lashed out at the wrong person entirely. Luckily, she didn't seem to have noticed and just grinned and sipped at her drink.

“What if...” Del held up a finger as if about to reveal something of great importance. “What if you told her you didn't feel comfortable paying because that took all the fun out of it, but, of course, you'd happily leave her some money for a cab-ride home in the morning?”

“But...” I began, and then shut up. There was no argument to that. It would have solved all my problems with the subtle elegance of a grown man with a working brain, dealing with the ups and downs of life. It would have been a much more mature solution than shouting at a girl and leaving angrily.

“Shut up, Del!”

Del grinned at me and sipped his beer. He knew he'd won, but what bothered me most is that he'd won and had helped me out at the same time. He'd changed the way I was seeing things and had opened up my options in case something like this happened again. I hated it when he did that.

There was a moment of silent contemplation which Lou spoiled by asking, “Are there a lot of prostitutes here?”

Cam answered her, in an uncharacteristic display of humanity. “There are whores, wives and virgins.”

There was a surprised silence around the table.

“I was told that when I first arrived. It’s mostly true, too, so you’re lucky if you can find a nice girl that you can have a normal relationship with.” He hung his head. It was as if he wasn’t speaking to us anymore. “If you find one, you have to look after her.”

“It’s usually you that ruins the conversation, Paul,” said Del.

“I did try!”

Fortunately for the sake of the conversation, which was already on life-support, Don arrived. He rolled up on a big white scooter, a shambolic mess of a thing with cheap chrome-plated plastic parts bolted on. It was horrendously tasteless, as if he’d aimed for tacky and wildly overshot. He was dressed in a tight blue suit that was stretched over his narrow frame. The blazer was a little too wide for him, making it look like he’d suffered some dramatic weight loss recently.

He half-swaggered and half-staggered over to the table. He said, loudly enough for everyone to hear, “This place looks pretty crap. Haven’t you people got any taste?”

An awkward chuckle rippled around the table, and Del was the one who spoke. “We have already established that we have no taste in bars, beers, scooters, dates, jobs or friends!” he told him.

Don nodded graciously and dragged a chair to the table, plonking himself into it heavily. He looked around, focusing on Lou for a moment and then looking away. “Is this it?” he said, “Doesn’t anyone have any attractive friends?”

I shrugged, looked at Lou, and admitted sadly, “No!”

She looked at me with a sullen glare and said, "It's no picnic for me either. It's hard to meet a good man out here who isn't completely fucking useless."

"Hey!" I grumbled. "I'm not completely fucking useless."

"You're not a good man either."

"Touché!"

Del laughed, probably since he was the closest thing there to a good man who wasn't completely fucking useless. What he was looking for himself was anyone's guess; I was almost afraid to ask.

Cam said uneasily, "So how long have you been out here for?"

Don looked him over and grinned, flashing his pearly white teeth. "Too bloody long!" he said. "Long enough to have seen it all and done it all twice."

"Everything?" asked Lou?

I feared that he might be telling the truth.

He nodded proudly and told her, "Everything! If you can hold it down, I'll do it!" He grinned. "I hope you people don't mind, I invited a few of my friends along. It's not that I suspected you wouldn't be very interesting, I just like to have a backup plan!"

"None taken!"

I wondered what kind of people he would have as friends. Would they be clever, sophisticated people that would surprise us with their understated intellects, or would they be more like Don himself, crass and annoying? I didn't know if I cared one way or the other. This was all just a distraction and, at this point, I wasn't even sure what I was distracting myself from.

I tended to feel that the latter was more likely: they would be people I probably wouldn't want to have anything to do with. All I could be sure of is that they wouldn't be people like me.

Don looked up as the first of his friends arrived. "This is Raj!"

Cam and I looked at one another in surprise. Raj looked a little confused, then surprised, then confused again.

“You know each other?”

I dimly realised I hadn't seen him in weeks. He looked like he'd lost weight; he seemed nervous, twitchy and erratic. His eyes bulged in his skull and swivelled around urgently, flicking from one face to the next in no particular order. He grinned inanely and his teeth were yellowing inside his head.

“We all work together!” I said.

Don looked at me and laughed. “You know Raj? Are you boys into the gear too?”

Suddenly several pieces of the puzzle began fitting together. Just to double check I was following along correctly, I said, “Gear? No, just beer for me.”

Don grinned a vicious little smirk and his eyes flashed. “You don't know what you're missing, mate.”

Brain damage, kidney failure, paranoia and a whole host of mental health problems, presumably. I didn't bother to say anything; there wasn't anything to add that felt as if it was worth saying.

We had several more beers while we waited for the second of his friends, who arrived fairly soon afterwards. He looked familiar and he clearly thought the same of me. We stared at each other for a moment, and eventually I had to ask. “I know you, don't I?”

He looked closer and said, “I don't know. I think so. Probably we've run into each other at some point.”

Cam drained the last of his beer. With at least five of them sloshing around his brain he was a bit more outgoing. “You were there that night. I lost my bike and was here all day, same table, actually. We were all right here.”

The man shrugged and huffed to himself.

Cam said, “There was a girl, her boyfriend hit her.”

“Oh!” he said, slapping his forehead as realisation seemed to dawn on him. “Yeah, I know her.”

Don looked over with interest.

“Her boyfriend died,” I said. “The newspapers said it was a heart attack.”

Don swallowed a large amount of his beer in one go and said, “They always say it was a heart attack. It’s easier for everyone.”

“Drug overdose?” I suggested. “She said they were both running away from a habit.”

The new arrival, Ant, if I remembered correctly, shook his head and said, “Yeah, but not like you think.”

I shrugged. “What do you mean?”

“I know her,” he said. “I’ve bumped into her a few times around the town. She’s still here and we’ve got talking about things. She’s shackled up with a Swiss guy that owns a bar along the river, ‘The Cheesy Holes.’

“She is going around bragging that she killed him. She said to me that she shot him up with gear, mixed up a bunch of different things and gave him the whole lot. She reckons she killed him and got away with murder because the police here aren’t bothered.”

There was an uneasy silence.

“Bloody hell...” I said.

What else was there to say?

“...Right? Bloody hell.” I remembered telling this story to someone. I vaguely remember her face. She was a local girl with dyed brown hair but it was still long and dark. She was wearing a red dress and was always smiling when I looked at her.

We moved from one bar to the next, getting more and more drunk until I don’t remember anything. I think I recall offering to leave some money for a cab on the bedside table.

Chapter 12

This interview was a first for me.

I hadn't been sacked for gross incompetence. I hadn't run fleeing from the thought of gigantic penises being put into the diminutive frames of beautiful Koreans I hadn't lost my job at the hands of the evil and twisted machinations of Tim, who hated me for reasons that none of us had quite worked out.

I hadn't actually lost my job at all. I had simply been invited for an interview by a very friendly Chinese woman who said she had an offer I really should listen to.

I was never a person whose self-interest couldn't be readily appealed to so I went along with it to see where all this was leading.

The first surprise was that she came to my current school to do her recruiting. That seemed bold of her but she was made welcome and nobody minded her doing it at all.

“Good morning, Mr Band,” she said, beaming a huge, toothy smile from behind incredibly thick black-rimmed glasses.

“Good morning,” I said, trying to look comfortable, despite having no idea what it was about.

“I work for an international training and educational initiative,” she told me with a slightly wobbly accent. “We have members and staff from all around the world.”

I nodded and tried to look smart.

“We make applications to the training agencies like yours. Your name came up—you were recommended to us by the head of English here.”

“I see,” I said. Perhaps Tim didn't hate me after all. Perhaps he was just trying to help? Was this his way of apologising for threatening to kill me so many times?

“I have heard that you have excellent results and are a very promising teacher with impressive potential.”

Now I was a little suspicious. The only impressive potential I seemed to have was in slowly drinking myself to death in the local guesthouse bar. However, this was appealing to my vanity and a part of me was lapping it all up.

“I am widely respected,” I said. I wasn’t. Lou once said that my teaching technique was like watching Genghis Khan trying to get a herd of cats to ballet dance. Del told me that the only way I could get any worse was if I set fire to the students. “My peers regard me very highly.”

“Nice,” she said and began nodding. “Your head of English at this school says that you’re interested in this position?”

That position being, what exactly? She sounded so formal, so much smarter than most of the people I had met. I was letting myself dream of how wonderful her school must be.

“I am,” I said. “Could you tell me more about it?”

“We operate in seven countries so far,” she told me proudly. “We have an international standard curriculum established in America. We’re new here but we’re hoping to expand the program quickly. For that, we need teachers of your standard.”

“Fantastic,” I said. “I have to say, I’m very interested.”

She grinned widely. “And, of course, the times are flexible to suit you. You can work from a minimum of 8 hours a week.”

My mind filled with thoughts of hangovers that lasted several days. Would I be able to follow every draft beer with a shot of tequila if I took this job? Would I cease to be a budget drunk and become a fully-fledged alcoholic?

I knew I was smiling. “This all sounds wonderful.”

“I’m glad to have you aboard,” she said.

I couldn’t believe it was all so easy.

“I’m glad to be involved,” I said.

“Thank you so much!” she said with a wide smile. “This will mean so much to the students.”

They must really like what they’ve seen, I thought. Then I began to wonder what they had seen. My CV was a copy of Raj’s and my demonstrations usually only demonstrated my classroom ineptitude.

I said, trying to stay optimistic, “Can I ask what the wages are?”

“Wages?” Her smile vanished. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

She wasn’t the only one. “I mean, how much does the job pay?”

She laughed a little, as if I was joking.

“It doesn’t pay anything!” she said bluntly. “This is a voluntary scheme.”

“It doesn’t...” I was horrified.

“We’re helping local children,” she explained, but it only served to intensify my horror. “We’re looking to bring education to the poor, the students who can’t afford the best education but still deserve a chance.

“Think of the job satisfaction it will give you.”

“But,” I protested. “How can I get job satisfaction when it isn’t a job? Jobs pay money.”

She frowned at me. “You’ll be doing so much good by giving up just one day a week.”

My horror had reached a level where I needed to get away, to run screaming from the room.

“You’ll be helping!”

That was the final insult.

“No...” I muttered. “How dare you!”

“But,” she stammered. “Your name has already been put forwards.”

I shook my head and scowled angrily at the floor.

Well played, Tim. Well played.

Chapter 13

It was nice working with Cam and Lou again, and Del visited us often; it was like the gang was all back together once more.

Lou was definitely pleased to have her friends around her at work and she smiled a little more often. She still wasn't her old self, but there was an improvement and we were all glad to see it.

The new school was stricter. That didn't stop us slipping out for breakfast together and we did, as often as possible.

Del and I had ordered a simple croissant with a coffee each, Cam ordered a chocolate muffin, and Lou had everything else on the entire menu. I'd asked if she wanted it all mixed up in a bucket with an egg on top.

At first, the waitress must have assumed she was ordering for all of us, and there was some confusion when she worked out that the Spanish breakfast, the extra fries, two muffins and bacon rolls were just to be consumed by one person. That one person, and the only one not laughing, was a grumpy Cockney who now had almost perfectly white bleached hair growing out of her scalp. A worrying amount of it escaped quite frequently.

We sat in the corner, at our usual table, and watched the world go by.

"I like your shirt," said Lou.

This was a surprise. Shock even. She never gave compliments, so it wasn't long until shock gave way to suspicion. "How much do you need?"

Del chuckled as Lou frowned grumpily.

"I don't need to borrow anything! I might need to, next week, but I'm alright now. I was just trying to compliment your shirt. It's not the normal crap you wear—it's got a little bit of style. You don't look like

you went shopping in the discount bins at the back of a charity-shop for once.”

I looked down at it. It was a pale blue thing with weird collars that were cut slightly too short. It looked a bit wrong if I wore it with a tie, almost as if it was designed so that it could never be worn properly. For that reason, I only wore it when everything else was dirty or in the laundry. Today was one of those days, and those days were becoming more common.

Maybe Lou was right about something? The law of averages said that it had to happen sooner or later.

“I got lucky, actually,” I told her. “I was working with this guy a few months back and he gave me a load of his old shirts. He was pretty fat when he arrived, but he lost a load of weight and they didn’t fit him anymore. They fitted me fine though.”

Lou looked almost excited. “How did he lose the weight?” she said, leaning forward with an expectant look plastered all over her, admittedly quite chubby, face.

“Diet and exercise,” I told her with a shrug.

She looked away disappointedly and muttered, “Shit!” She was still grumbling to herself until her words were drowned out by a bacon roll, crammed aggressively into her gaping mouth.

“Did you ever sort out what was going on with Raj?” Del asked conversationally, biting into his breakfast.

Cam looked at me and then sheepishly down at the table. Cam didn’t look worried but he was certainly uneasy.

“No, not exactly,” I said. “We’re meeting him tonight and will find out what he’s got to say. He was too crazy the last few times we met, and I really couldn’t get any sense out of him.

“We didn’t get any money out of him either.”

Del rolled his eyes. “Good luck with that then! I hope you sort it out.”

After we finished eating, we headed back. Del joined us to do whatever he did back at the school.

I liked the school but it had its drawbacks. The biggest of those drawbacks were called Sam and Sue. They were Americans and had been utterly brainwashed into thinking that they weren't just right, but everyone else was wrong, and they were so right that their duty in life was explaining why their way of thinking was the only way of thinking to everyone who ventured too close to them.

Sam was a lumbering, overweight man whose age I couldn't quite nail down. He had a strange look to him, as if someone had stretched a balloon over a human skeleton and then inflated it very unevenly with lumpy custard. He was fat in the wrong places, but wasn't un-fat in any of the right ones. He loudly explained his many physical ailments and then condescended to anyone who chose a different lifestyle. It was as if he was making a point of proudly rejecting logic.

Sue was pretty much the same, but told everyone that she considered herself fierce, for some unfathomable reason. She had shaved the right side of her head and left the other side long with dyed blondish hair growing out of dark brownish roots, that cascaded lethargically over her shoulder.

She enjoyed explaining how and why women could do anything a man could do, and do it just as well, but didn't seem interested in doing any of the things women could actually do better. The net result of all this was that she didn't actually do anything at all, but she did talk about doing it very loudly.

She seemed to live her entire life second-hand, proudly showing off random examples of strong women who had beaten the odds and holding them up as examples of what she might be able to do, but didn't, if she could, but wouldn't.

Her early teenage students were convinced by all this and I heard some of them saying that the girls in class could all be scientists because

they were girls, and it didn't matter anymore if they were good at maths or science in order to do it. I honestly couldn't tell if she was just being poorly understood, or if this was what she was actually teaching them.

Frankly, I didn't care. It was becoming something of a trend that I increasingly didn't care about anything at all.

The four of us came in through the school gates and the two of them were waiting for us. The Americans! If the entire population of America was made up of people of incredibly low moral fortitude, poor-intelligence, and a total lack of quiet, reserved wisdom, these two idiots alone would still be enough to give the entire country a bad name.

They were the only people who could put up with each other, so they were inseparable friends, but we were pretty convinced they weren't a couple. They had check-mated themselves by both being so horribly unattractive and unpleasant that even the only people who could tolerate them weren't sexually interested. To be fair, we could be almost certain that at least one of them was gay, though we weren't totally in agreement about which one that was.

"Paul!" Sue said to me, eyeing me up and down rudely, and doing it quite deliberately. "I just want you to know I have no problem your being here."

It was probably meant to be her way of saying hello, but it sounded more like a thinly veiled insult. It occurred to me that she might find me attractive, which caused my testicles to retreat in horror. I quickly pushed Del forwards ahead of me.

"Have you met my training mentor? This is Del. He's old and knows everything." I turned around and saw Cam just looking ahead, sighing loudly to himself. I managed to say, "Del's like the opposite of Cam! Del, this is Sam and Sue."

Cam shrugged and said, "I'm actually older than I look."

She looked over them both and flashed Sam a little smile. "I hope you're better than the last lot of men we had here."

Del smiled back at her with the kind of look a person might have if they discovered their child had got his shoes on wrong feet. He had a smug look of self-satisfaction that he cleverly veiled behind a veneer of quiet civility. I knew him well enough to know he'd taken a dislike to her and hoped this would be fun to watch.

"Hello, Sam or Sue!" he said.

"Sue," she said. "Obviously!"

"None taken. I just didn't want to assume your genders."

"I'm proud of my gender!" she said, riling up instantly at Del's comment which had been delivered with the utmost politeness.

"Oh dear," he said. "Why?"

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, clearly not yet entirely sure yet the nature of the attack and how she should best be offended by it.

"I'm a woman!" she said instinctively.

I had observed that she did a lot of things without thinking.

Del smiled warmly. "My mother was a woman too," he said. "She was the best mother I ever had."

"Women don't have to be mothers anymore."

"I never said they did. But without mothers behind us, we wouldn't have people like you telling us that we didn't need them."

"What? No!" she said angrily. "I mean women can be more than just mothers."

"Ah. But that's not what you said. Women have always been more than mothers. But to be more than a mother, you have to actually be a mother first. You're not even a mother, so how can you be more?"

She glared at him and silently seethed.

The rest of us just watched. It was like slowing down to enjoy a really good car-crash.

It was at this point that Sam stepped in. "The point is that we're not defined by our genes. Gender is a social construct."

“So you’ve rejected science completely?” he said matter-of-factly. “So you don’t believe in privilege?”

“Of course I do.” Sam rolled his eyes. “Privilege is real. Ask anyone who wasn’t lucky enough to be born a man. Look up patriarchy theory some time; did you know that just one hundred years ago, wives were regarded as property?”

“So you’ve rejected history completely too?” Del nodded his head and somehow made it look as if he was taking this seriously, which only seemed to frustrate Sam even more. “By a hundred years ago, even feminists had all but given up making the claim that women were property, at least outside of the Middle-East. Your ideology claims that men have been oppressing women since the dawn of time, but the only ones holding them back are people like you. You only have to look into any household through history to see that where men wear the trousers, it’s women that let them.”

“My point,” Sam said, flustering somewhat. “My point is that to the unprivileged, equality looks like oppression. Society has handed men everything on a platter since forever, and women have been taught to just shut up and stay in their lanes. It’s only fair that men stepped up and did what they could to help women have their fair shot for a change.”

Del nodded along. He said, “Isn’t it a bit sexist to claim that women only achieved equality when men let them. I’m pretty sure that we had women scientists and leaders hundreds of years ago.” He smiled sweetly and gestured to the phone in his pocket. “I can look it up for you, if you want?”

Sam tutted and shook his head. “Sexism requires both prejudice and privilege. Women have never had privilege. You can be prejudiced towards men, but never sexist.”

“I see what you’re trying to say,” said Del. “So discrimination against people over unchangeable facts of birth can be fully justified? So now you’re all for women being sexist towards men? Isn’t that a bit of a

childish revenge fantasy aimed at people who are long dead, and never really existed anyway?”

“I’m not saying that...” Sam muttered and looked confused.

“To me, it sounds like your attitude is sexist towards women. Are you seriously saying that women can’t get anywhere by themselves without a man to help them up? What century are you from?”

For a moment, it seemed Sam was lost for words. He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it again. He huffed and turned away.

“I don’t appreciate your aggressive tone,” complained Sue, jumping in to rescue.

“Me?” Del asked. “I’m perfectly calm. We were just having a chat about ideology. I just don’t think you need a man to tell you it’s OK to dream.”

Sam and Sue looked at one another. Their pierced eyebrows raised and they shrugged at one another. She said, “But your tone...”

Del chuckled to himself and said, “Don’t tell me a strong woman is intimidated by the friendly tone of an old man who agrees with her?”

“No,” she snapped. “It’s just...”

I helped out myself and added, “Perhaps you could agree more politely? Perhaps with a softer voice?”

Cam said with a shrug, “I always speak softly. Would it help if I agreed with them?”

Lou stepped forwards and said, rolling her eyes, “Don’t encourage them. Nobody likes Americans. Treat them like people and they’ll get ideas.”

“Don’t be like that,” said Del. “It’s not their fault—it’s what they’ve been programmed to believe— things that don’t make any sense. They can’t help what they are until they learn to think for themselves. They’ve just got a little growing up to do, that’s all.”

Sam and Sue didn’t seem to know if he was defending them or insulting them. I wasn’t too clear myself.

“Well... it’s nice to meet you, anyway,” said Sam. He gave a very condescending smile.

Del reached out to shake his hand. “I’m sure it is, but you might want to rethink some of your old-fashioned ideas! People might get the wrong impression about you.”

Sam frowned and his eyes rolled up to the top of his sockets, as if he was trying to examine his own brain. “Right...” he muttered to himself.

Sue tutted to herself and said, “I’ve had this trouble with men before!”

“Men agreeing with you? I find that hard to believe, but wouldn’t dream of arguing with you about it.”

She looked at Sam and said, “We’re late to class. Come on...” And on they went.

Del shook his head solemnly.

“Do you know what really gets to me about people like that?” he began. “They come halfway around the world to experience different cultures, different facets of humanity, but they bring so much arrogance with them they just can’t see beyond their own conditioning.”

I shook my head and said, “They just annoy me.

“Idiots like those two don’t want meaningful social change, they just want to be special. They like telling everyone they’re wrong because it gives them a little bit of power. They’re usually people who couldn’t stand out in any other way, not gifted students, no talents, no special abilities. They like dragging everyone down to their ability so they can be big for a change. It’s a school-playground bully mentality and, for some reason, we’re giving it a voice instead of seeing it as the quaint and outdated garbage it really is.”

“Tell me about it,” grumbled Lou. “That woman told me I should dye my hair red.”

“Maybe you should!” I shrugged.

“I already did!” she snapped. She gave me a caustic look. “She told me I was a goddess and was beautiful just the way I am. She said I didn’t need to lose any weight either.”

“Well?” Del said with a shrug.

“Well?” she snapped sarcastically. “My blood pressure is through the bloody roof. The doctor says if that if I cough too hard my heart might come out of my nose. If I don’t lose weight fast, I’ll be dead before the end of the next decade.”

Cam said softly, “You’re so lucky.” I felt that he really meant it.

We all began walking into the staff area through, and amidst, a crowd of appropriately unruly children.

Lou continued to grumble at Cam. “I found out that marijuana oil is meant to be a cure for lung–cancer so now I’ve decided that that’s what I want to get. Think of it; you smoke all your life, eat nothing but junk and then when it all comes to an end, you cure yourself by smoking weed. I’m beating the system.”

I tutted at Cam and said, “Yeah, Cam. Don’t you understand anything?”

“I don’t think that’s really how anything works,” Del told her, “You should write a book explaining about how everything doesn’t work!”

She said, with a sharp edge of hostility, “You should write a book.”

“Well,” he shrugged. “One of us should write a book. Who would believe any of this actually happened if we didn’t write it all down and record it as fiction?”

“Maybe I should write a book?”

I told Don all about our meeting with the Americans, and asked him why he hadn’t been with us for breakfast. He just laughed, slapped

me on the back playfully and told me he'd tell me later. Then he staggered, or limped, off on his own way, chuckling to himself.

So I walked into my second class. The first was always terrible, attendance was usually appalling, and it was rare that all my students would actually turn up for it. The second class usually was a lot better—usually. I noticed a pair of gaps at the front table where two of my favourite students sat. It wasn't like them to be away from school and so their absence stood out.

Pointing to the empty seats, I asked, "Where are they?"

The girl immediately to the left put up her hand and, without waiting to be told to continue, said, "Dead, Teacher!"

My brain didn't immediately register that this could be correct. I waited for a moment and then said, "What?" It surely had to be a joke in bad taste, the grey mess inside my head decided.

"They were going home after school yesterday," she said matter-of-factly. "A car hit them and they were both killed. My Mum says they died instantly when it crashed into them. The driver never stopped."

Still not convinced I was hearing this right, I said, repeating myself, "What?" A cold chill went up my spine as my brain gave up on the whole business of making excuses or trying to apply logic to any of this.

"Dead," she said again, with a sad little smile. "Both dead."

"Dead?" I said. "As in, not alive anymore?"

The class began to nod back to me. I was struggling to believe what I was hearing. It was bad enough that two young students had been killed, but there didn't seem to be any emotion in the room. It was as if nobody cared. "They're dead? I can't believe it..."

The little girl who had told me began to smile. She said, "I'm top of the class now."

"Right," I said. This was actually happening. With an effort I tried to put it all out of my mind and carry on.

I moved to the middle of the room, standing at the front before a double-length white-board. “OK, today we’re going to look at the difference between first, second and third person perspective.”

As the words left my lips, I realised just how meaningless all this really was. What did any of it matter if two little teenage children’s lives could simply end like that and their passing had no real meaning? What did anyone’s life really mean? What was my life worth?

There was a grumble around the room. I pushed through it and asked, “Can anyone tell me what these are?”

A hand went up from a fairly overweight girl near the back with oddly gigantic eyes. I pointed to her and she began, “Third person is what you think it is, second person is what everyone thinks it is and first person is what it really is!”

“What?” I frowned. “No!” The temptation to compare her to a cartoon frog was almost too powerful to resist.

“Yes!” she snapped.

I stopped, rather surprised. “No!” I said again, but a little more forcefully. “It was a good answer, but it was not the right one.”

She pouted at me and then gave me an angry glare, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly.

Another hand went up. This one was on the end of an arm that stuck out from the side of a boy who looked as if tying shoelaces was a bit of a challenge. He said, “Is this about White privilege?”

“What?” I said in surprise, tinged with exasperation and lightly seasoned with a hint of disbelief. “What?”

“Yeah!” he said. He grinned to himself as though he had already won an argument. “First person is White men. Second is women and third is anyone non-White.”

“What?” I cried out. “What dark, dim corner of the internet were you playing on when you should have been sleeping last night?”

“Other teachers told me that!” he said. “So you have to check your privilege because you’re White.”

“Other teachers...” I rolled my eyes. I knew exactly who the ‘other teachers’ were.

“Story-telling perspectives have nothing to do with privileges, and being White doesn’t give you any, trust me on that!” I told him, foolishly thinking that had closed down the argument.

“But you are White!” he said, sounding like he’d revealed a hidden truth.

“I know what colour I am. I see myself every morning in the bathroom mirror! This class isn’t about juvenile Liberal attempts to redefine reality: it’s about English language and grammar, so let’s confine our answers to that, shall we?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at me. “You’re oppressing me,” he said.

I could feel the temper rising and decided to take it out on Sam and Sue at the earliest possible opportunity.

“Two thousand words!” I told him and his glare deepened into a confused frown. “Write me a two thousand word essay apologising for listening to stupid things other teachers say and disrupting the class.”

“What?” he grumbled, while the class around him started awkwardly laughing at him.

“And if you don’t stick to the English language today, I’ll double it.” I spoke with authority and felt pretty damn good about it. ‘Check-mate’ I thought to myself, proud that I had stamped down this outbreak of stupidity and could now get on with my class. “Now, who can tell me what first, second and third person perspective actually is?”

Of course, I was now faced with an unyielding wall of silence. It briefly occurred to me that maybe I was oppressing him.

“Do you think I was oppressing him?” I asked, as I told Don all about my class, but again he just slapped me on the back and told me he had a better story to share with me later. I shrugged and left him to it; his stories were usually horrible.

I stormed into the staff-room full of bubbling fury and ready to vent it into whichever one of the Americans I saw first.

Lou looked at my face and frowned herself. “What happened to you?” she asked. “You look like you picked up ten hours of cover.”

“Worse,” I told her, growling like an angry man in an action movie. “Have you seen Sue or Sam? I have to shout at them.”

“No!” she said and shrugged. “Don’t worry though: you’ll see them tonight. I invited them out with us for a drink.”

My anger, such as it was, was instantly washed away to be replaced with a sort of empty hole where my ability to relate to the universe used to be. “What...?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper. “You did what?”

“It would be good for Cam!” she told me, as if this was obvious and I was an idiot for not realising it. “He’s been alone too long and Sue is single, I think. If he’s actually not into girls anymore, no problem, because Sam is probably gay anyway.”

“Why would you do this?” I said to her in bewildered, horrified disbelief. “What about me?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know you liked her,” she said, horribly innocently. “...Or him, I guess?” she added with a shrug.

“I don’t like either of them.” I blustered. “Not in a romantic way, or in any other.” I wasn’t sure I liked Lou anymore either.

“I can’t believe her sometimes.” I grumbled.

We had been paid. The tendency was that we would gather randomly in the guest-house bar the first Friday after payday. We would

form an expanding collection of teachers, having previously decided that the correct collective noun for such a thing should be ‘clump.’

After our pockets were refilled with money, we would cluster together in order to spend enough of it to make sure we spent the rest of the month in virtual poverty. Conventional wisdom, if such thing wasn’t an oxymoron, dictated that we weren’t English teachers working abroad because we were successful planners. This could be seen graphically demonstrated all around the riverfront at the end of every month.

On the way there, I explained to Cam what Lou had done and enjoyed the horrified, sickened expression on his face. He and I were among the first to arrive but the rest wouldn’t be far behind. Work had finished for the week and it wasn’t as if any of them would be going to the gym, calling their accountants or consulting their business advisors. They would be there to drink.

I picked the largest table along the front of the bar, overlooking the road out the front and the river beyond. I didn’t imagine it would be long until the group expanded onto several more tables. Don was already there, sipping furtively at a beer that didn’t look in the least bit suspicious.

He looked up and welcomed us with a highly animated wave of the arm. He was still wearing his clothes from work and looked horrendously over-dressed compared to the tired jeans and worn-out, faded T-shirts everyone else was always dressed in, while out in the real world.

“Hey, bitches!” he said evenly. I could only presume we were the bitches he was referring to.

Cam simply waved back and muttered, “Hi,” so quietly that only I could hear it.

“It’s been a long week!” he told us, not that anyone was asking. “You’ll never guess what happened to me; I crashed my bike.”

“I think I would have guessed that, eventually,” I said with an animated sigh.

“I didn’t just crash it,” he said with a smug grin and a weirdly loud voice that cracked as he yelled out. It was as if his voice was naturally a quiet, understated thing and he was purposely trying hard to make himself seem bigger than he really was. In fact, it was exactly like that. “I got a bit hurt this time.”

“Sorry to hear it,” I said. Was I sorry? Did I care? I couldn’t help but wonder why I’d said it because, when I thought about it, I really didn’t give a shit either way.

Without waiting to see if anyone wanted him to, he carried on with his story. I wondered if Cam cared, or wanted to hear it. I was suddenly curious if there was anything left that Cam really cared about at all.

Don said, “Yeah, I was out a couple of nights ago. I was motoring along and seeing what my bike could do.”

“And you found out it could crash into things?” I asked sarcastically. I had gestured for a beer but it wasn’t necessary: they knew us by now and it was rare they wouldn’t bring one straight over if they saw us. I knew I wouldn’t have to wait long.

Don frowned and took my comment seriously. “Well, I was seeing how fast it could go, you see? I was a bit messed up as I’d been with my mate, Mac. It all seemed like a good idea at the time so I was riding along on this nice, long straight road at the dead of night. Nobody was about and it was all pretty safe.”

“Until someone was suddenly about and it wasn’t pretty safe anymore?” I guessed.

He nodded because, somehow, I had hit the round peg squarely into an imperfectly triangular hole. “Yeah!” he grunted. He shook his head and said, “Some old woman just pulled out without looking; it was completely her fault, you see? Next thing I know, I’ve hit her right on

the back wheel and I'm wobbling along with the front of my bike dancing around like a desperate bargirl trying to catch the last sober guy that doesn't look as if his heart will explode if he tries to get an erection."

"I don't know whether you need to work on your similes or if they're perfect," I said with a frown. "I literally can't tell."

"Probably both!" he said, sipping some beer. "So I lost it, the bloody thing went over and I ended up rolling along the road like a student with their clothes on fire."

"No, they're perfect!" Cam said to me, slightly awkwardly, but pointedly nonetheless.

"Yes," I agreed with a chuckle. "They're perfect!"

Don shrugged. I noticed how unfocused his eyes were. He said, "So I get up and I make my way back to my bike. At first, it all looks fine, but then I notice there's a little bit of pain from down below."

"How far down below?" I winced. This might not be a story I wanted to hear the rest of, but it might equally be for the best all round if the worst imaginable thing had actually happened.

I braced myself.

"All the way!" he said. "I look down and see a bit of blood on my shoe. I whip it off and notice that there's a bit of damage to my foot."

Cam was staring fixedly, a kind of awkwardly curious expression on his face. He said, "How much damage, exactly?"

"Well, the big toe was gone," he said calmly. "The two next to it were all bent into weird new angles. It looked pretty bad, if I'm honest. Luckily, Mac's gear is the best in town so I was alright with all this at the time."

"Gone?" I asked and eyebrows were raised. "When you say gone, do you mean it was no longer there in the actual, literal sense?"

Don sipped at his beer, chugging it down noisily. "It wasn't completely gone," he said as if he was actually a bit proud of all this,

and he nodded. “The old woman I hit walked over and handed it to me. It had ended up stuck to the back of her bike, splattered along the side of the plastic. It was actually a surprisingly clean cut. Most of the toe was more or less intact.”

Cam turned to me and looked a little sick. I can’t say I was particularly enjoying the story either.

Not knowing when to stop, Don just carried on talking. He said, “I had a cigarette and thanked her for my toe. I mean, it wasn’t going to get sewn back on; at least one of the bones was missing and I wasn’t going looking around on my hands and knees in the dark for it.”

“Easy come, easy go!” I said pointedly.

He nodded in agreement, the sarcasm not registering on him at all.

“A small crowd gathered and they were all trying to help, in their own way,” he told us casually. “One of them poured something on my foot. I guess it was alcohol-based antiseptic because it stung like hell. That was the first time it really hurt.”

Cam opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. Then he did it again and managed to accurately articulate what everyone was thinking. “Yuck!”

“I started getting a bit grumpy around then!” he said. “Someone was shouting at me to get to the hospital with my toe. I finished my fag first and then threw it down so I could get on my way and get this mess sorted out.

“That was when it happened.”

“What happened?” I asked. How it could get much worse was anyone’s guess.

Don smirked and said, “Well, my foot caught fire. It just lit up from the cigarette hitting the medical alcohol, I guess. Then, two of them came running forwards and stamped out the flames. I’m not going to lie; that really started to hurt.”

Cam said, “Yuck,” again and turned his attention to his beer, but anything other than this horrible story would have to be better, really.

At this point, Del and Lou turned up. Lou was looking as if something wonderful had happened but she often looked like that when school ended for the weekend. Del looked as if there was serious business to take care of but we were in a bar and he almost always wore that expression before the first drink.

“Gentlemen!” he said. I could only assume we were the gentlemen he was referring to.

“Del,” I said. “Don was just telling us about how he lost his toe this week in a motorcycling accident.”

Del nodded, looked at Don and simply said, “You are a fucking idiot.” Then he held up his finger to order a beer, as if he had no interest in the story whatsoever. I realised I didn’t really have any interest either and wasn’t sure why I’d listened as long as I had.

When you get down to it, a man losing his toe while crashing his scooter into an old woman because he was on drugs could only point to him being a fucking idiot. This whole story could have been avoided, and replaced, by someone pointing out that the person telling it was an idiot. We all simply could have moved on with our lives.

Having no life to move on to, I said, “Del makes a good point!”

Don said, as if offering a counter-argument, “It got worse actually. When I got to hospital they brought out a pair of bolt-croppers to cut off the other toes with.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Del. “They could have cut them off just below the neck and solved the whole problem in one go.”

Don looked angry and then the expression melted into a smile and he held up his glass graciously and he nodded slightly. What strange power did Del have, what was it about him that made people react like he was unquestionably in charge of everything?

“Luckily, they were eventually able stitch them back on the right way and they sewed up my toe–stump,” Don said, proving he really didn’t know when to stop. “There was no fitting the mangled one back on. I’ve still got it—no idea what I’m going to do with it.”

Cam gave an uncharacteristic opinion by saying, “This story needs more beer.” He should state his feelings more often because he is usually correct.

“And that story definitely needs more beer,” I said while standing at the bar later. I told Raj all about Don’s toe, and how the Americans were likely to be joining us. He nodded along as though he was listening but I could tell he wasn’t. “What’s going on with you, mate?” I asked.

“What?” he said. He had an aggressive little frown on his aggressive little face. “I’m fine, mate!”

“Are you?” I said. “I mean, you’re still way behind on what you owed Cam on the rent. We barely hear from you anymore. I’m worried about you! When we were training together, you were a different person.”

“I’m the same person,” he said with a hoarse laugh. “I haven’t been abducted by aliens or anything. I’m not a robot. That would be stupid!”

“Yeah, I did wonder if it was actually that, but I had almost ruled it out!” I said with my most pointed sarcasm. “I just mean, look at your friends now. Don, a shady dude who loses a toe and doesn’t notice, and who is the other one?”

Don’s friend was sitting at the table along with him and the two were discussing something furtively. He was a bit overweight and flamboyantly outgoing. He was the kind of man who liked to touch people while he talked and had an overtly feminine way of acting. If he wasn’t gay, then he was doing an incredible job of pretending he was.

“Mac!” Raj said. “Mac is awesome. Everyone loves Mac.”

“I’m sure he’s lovely, Raj, but what does he do for a living out here?” I said rhetorically, hoping to make my point.

Raj looked at me as though I was making absolutely no sense whatsoever. “He’s a drug dealer, innit. He makes more money than we do!”

“Yeah, I can see that...” I said, rubbing my temples in exasperation. “I’m not suggesting you marry him. I’m trying to make a point about the people you’re hanging around with!”

Raj laughed a cruel, snorting laugh. “Yeah!” he said. “You’re hanging around with them, too. You work with Don. What did you think people in this place were really going to be like? Did you think it was going to all be some fantasy of coming to the third world to spread your White liberal message of equality to the savage dark-people of the world?”

“Raj!” I snapped, not quite angrily but I was getting there. “You know that’s not what I’m about at all. I came out here to escape from under a mountain of debt. I even had to put the training course on a credit-card that I had no intention of paying off. You know I’m not a Liberal and I don’t care about helping anyone. Why would you say such a horrible thing?”

Raj glared at me and I found myself really looking at him. His eyes were sunken into his face, his skin had a grey sheen to it and he looked tired, like a man with flu who hadn’t slept well in months. This simply wasn’t the same man we had been training with. He said angrily, “You Liberals are all the same!”

“Liberal?” I said, shaking my head at him. “You know I’m not a Liberal. I don’t watch superhero movies, or hate Donald Trump, (I quite like walls and I think that building one would be a great way to keep Americans out of Mexico), and the only reason I think gay people should be allowed to get married is so they can be miserable, too. I

literally don't give a shit what anyone does, or what anyone thinks. I just want to get drunk."

"Exactly!" he slurred slightly as he spoke. It was as if I was arguing with a random noise generator, Donald Trump or the Liberals I had met out here.

"I just couldn't get any sense out of him," I grumbled to Cam. "He accused me of wanting to help people. Bastard!"

"I know I'm not getting the money back from him!" Cam said with a shrug. "Stop worrying about it."

It occurred to me that I didn't know why I was worried about it. Did a few hundred dollars really matter in the grand scheme of things? Truth was, I didn't know what really did matter. As I was pondering this through a slightly drunken haze, I heard Cam ask the only question that truly mattered.

"Another beer?" he said. Suddenly, as I listened to Sam and Sue explaining why they were right about everything and everyone else was wrong, as Don discussed making a necklace out of his missing toe, as Raj sloped off to the toilet with Mac to do who-cared-what, and while Del was chatting confidently with the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, everything made sense.

It didn't make good sense; it didn't even make for a very good story, but it was something... It was all I had.

Chapter 14

It was getting a bit boring, explaining why I was getting sacked all the time. I had briefly thought about having cards printed with a number of options on them, and I could simply tick the appropriate one and hand it over at interviews.

The interviewer this time was Ray, one of the mentors from the training course and the one who had happily had me reassigned to Del; I don't think he liked me. The first clue that day was when he met me outside the interview room and said to himself, more loudly than I had expected, "Oh, it's this fucking idiot again."

He looked at his notes and grumbled. "Didn't you work here before?" he said.

I didn't see much point in sugar-coating things. "Yes, I was here at the beginning of the school year," I said. "There was an incident where another teacher, Tim, reported me for calling a student incompetent."

Ray raised an eyebrow quizzically and said, "You called a student incompetent? Is that all?"

"Yes," I said. "Although I used more detailed language. I might have said he had the brains of a domestic quadruped and asked if his mother had engaged in sexual congress with a farmyard animal."

"I see," Ray said. He rubbed his chin. "That's not usually enough to get sacked for, or even raise an eyebrow in this school."

"Bad luck, I guess." I tried to look like the kind of man who should be hired for this position. A tie would probably have helped.

"But you didn't say that in class, did you?" he asked. "I mean, you didn't say that in front of other students?"

I huffed wearily and admitted, "I might have done."

"You fucking idiot," he said, which was reasonable, under the circumstances. "Mind you, it's not that bad..."

“Well, Tim reported it,” I said. “He made the language a bit more detailed still. By the time it came out of his mouth, I was reported to have made slurs against every race, religion, creed, lifestyle and personal preference known to man. He said I had also admitted to being behind several conspiracy theories and was plotting to take over four different countries.”

“And, I imagine, several domestic quadrupeds were offended too?” Ray shook his head at me, as I had done when the student in question had handed me his homework, which was a photocopy of someone else’s homework with the name crossed through and his own written underneath in red ink. “Well, at least you learned your lesson!”

“You would certainly expect that I had, wouldn’t you?” I agreed.

Ray looked at me as I smiled awkwardly back at him. “Why don’t you tell me why you left your most recent job?” he said with a sour expression.

“There might have been an incident where I questioned whether or not a student was the result of an unnatural pairing between a donkey and a family-sized bucket of margarine,” I began. “In my defence, she did look a lot like a blend of those two things and she made a really weird sound when she laughed. She got zero in the last quiz I gave her, and the only thing she wrote on the page was her own name and an offer of ten dollars if I gave her full marks.”

“You could have just declined the offer, you didn’t need to insult her,” Ray said, glaring at me. I felt he was judging me now.

“Well, I was obviously holding out for more!” I exclaimed. “You can’t get shit for ten dollars.” I might have got a little confused and made the wrong point.

Ray muttered something under his breath that sounded like ‘rutting ingot.’

“But!” I said quickly, before this got even worse. “I have learned my lesson now. No more insulting students, even stupid, lazy, fat or ugly ones.”

He looked at me as if he wanted to strangle me with my own entrails.

“...especially fat and ugly ones?” I suggested, hoping to clear up any confusion.

“Paul,” he began, “I’ve lost a few teachers to better schools recently. I need to make up the staff before I start losing students too. I’ve been hired to help get this place back on track.”

“You can count on me,” I said.

“I had better!” he growled. He took a deep, cleansing breath and told me, “If you screw this up, I’ll make sure you never work in this town again.”

I swallowed nervously. “OK.”

“I’m going to be watching you, Paul! Get your shit together!”

Chapter 15

I had found myself back at the school I'd started at when I had first been working with Cam and Lou. Their leaving had created a vacancy which my jobless self was happy to fill. I wasn't quite sure why I kept getting sacked from jobs with such alarming regularity. Certainly, the growing alcoholism, the apathy and the lack of knowing what the fuck I was doing might have been a contributing factor, but was I really bad enough to sack?

I couldn't help wondering if I really cared enough to even be thinking about it. As I stopped thinking about it only a few seconds after, the situation seemed to have largely resolved itself.

It was always nice to be working with new people who provided interesting, fresh opportunities for disappointment. I was, for some reason, teaching 'character development' to students who hadn't managed to develop any character.

I was chatting with a woman called Ami, an American woman who was attractive enough for me to not hold her country of origin against her, and I was telling her all about the terrible things that had happened so far.

"And," I added, finishing off the story. "He ended up sealing it in resin and using it as an ornament. His toe is sealed in a square block of clear plastic and is bolted onto the front end of his scooter. If you look at the back, you can see the splintered bone sticking out. He's been offered up to two hundred dollars for it so far, and that was from a student."

She smiled and then frowned. I knew that expression: it was the one where you assume people are joking about the horrible things that they've seen and then realise you're not. It's that look that tells you that a new international English teacher has just had a little part of their soul die. I knew that expression extremely well, staring back at me from my own bathroom mirror.

“So you worked at ‘Greatest Glory International School of Educational Excellence?’” she said conversationally, wrapping her beautiful pink lips around a plastic cup of iced local coffee.

Another sure sign of a new initiate was that they were still drinking the diarrhoea–inducing battery–acid coffee you could buy cheaply from every street corner. I was drinking one too, a sure sign of a man trying to impress a woman because he hadn’t had sex in more months that he would like to admit, at least without paying for it; which he also didn’t like to admit.

It had got so bad that I had even been thinking about joining a gym. In the end I just decided to get a good haircut and try to eat fewer doughnuts.

Both failed to varying degrees.

“Yes,” I said, ashamedly. “Every word in their name turned out to be a lie!”

“Did you know Reg?” she said with a bright, sunshine smile that lit up the wonderful porcelain features of her delicately feminine face.

“The casually hopeless Australian teacher whose mission in life it was to catch every STD known to man?” I asked sarcastically, assured in myself that I was being seductively charming. “I miss his stories of energetically banging whores in dark alleys.”

She frowned at me for a moment in silence. Finally she said, “He died!”

I have to admit to feeling just a little bit guilty about my outburst of honesty. “Oh,” I said. Suddenly, I worked out how to salvage a little goodwill back in her gorgeous, blue–green eyes. “We were friends. I had no idea he had died! Was it his liver?”

“Heart attack,” she said.

I nodded to myself. “They always say that here, no matter what really kills you. I read about a man who died of a heart attack after his head was found in a freezer with saw–marks on his neck.”

She looked horrified. I realised this wasn't going well.

I changed the subject with the subtlety of Raj approaching an attractive female. "So how are you settling in here, anyway?"

She smiled. "Oh, I hate it," she said matter-of-factly. I nodded along in agreement, not even really engaging my brain all the way. She continued, "I hate the heat, I hate the people, I hate the standards at the school, I hate the smell, the way everything is almost impossible to find and I hate the way everyone else accepts it all as totally normal."

I tried to take her seriously and said curiously, "What smell?"

She sighed grumpily and looked away. Her brown, slightly wavy hair fell forwards across her face and I wondered if she was really all that attractive.

Was she?

"Everything smells like shit," she said, which was a fair comment. Everything did smell a little bit like shit.

"It's just the drains," I said. "Technically it is totally normal here."

She looked at me as though I was trying to sell her a religion, one of the ones that came up to your door with pamphlets and wanted money for them. "Yeah, I hate that."

I wasn't sure if she hated the smell or the fact that it didn't bother me as much. I defended myself by saying, "Just give it a few months. You get used to it."

She rolled her eyes at me. "Yeah, that's my point. I'm sure prisons are full of people saying the same thing. Maybe people fighting wars and living in poverty are saying it, too?"

"I think we have all that here, too. They're big fans of wars and poverty in this part of the world," I said, not sure I was following her reasoning correctly. "Personally, I came for the art, music, culture, food and the warm, welcoming embrace of the local people."

“Her expression betrayed disdain at my attempts at sarcasm,” I told Cam, as we worked our way through lunch at a tired little cafe, down the back of a cluttered little street. I noticed that the smell was quite bad. Maybe she was right?

Cam didn’t exactly smile, but I was used to that. There was a little flutter at the sides of his mouth and a tiny, almost imperceptible, tensing of the muscles in his cheeks. It was accompanied by a weary sigh as he looked away, and this was as close to a smile as he ever tended to get.

“We have exams soon,” he said.

I briefly wondered how his brain had linked from what we were talking about to that.

“I don’t care about exams,” I said. “I care about the fact that I haven’t met a single girl I liked in months.”

Cam held up a finger and pointed out, “You haven’t met a girl that liked you back in months, is what you actually mean.” He looked at me fixedly, almost expressionless. “Every few days you’re telling me about a new, perfect girl you just recently met.”

He was right but that didn’t mean I was wrong. I felt that the subject needed to be changed.

“We’ve got exams at my school, too,” I said. “I gave them out their review books. I explained that they had three lessons to work through them to practice for the upcoming exams. It was theirs, nobody was going to check it. It was just their notes to guide their review. Guess what happened?”

Cam tutted to himself. “They all started copying the answers from one another, all getting them wrong?” he said knowingly.

I nodded and grumbled to myself. That was what always happened.

My vegetarianism had slightly slipped. I now tolerated things that would have sickened me before. With that in mind, I was eating something with rice that looked as if it had been squeezed out of a

reluctant cat. Cam had told me not to ask what it was. I had found that that was probably the best approach.

I filled the usual awkward silence with more conversational noise. “It’s nice not to have to work with Sam and Sue. Being sacked does have its advantages.”

“They’re not too bad,” Cam said. He thought everyone wasn’t too bad. He existed in the middle of everything with no emotional highs or lows. I wondered if he could process things that challenged the upper or lower limits of anything. If you asked him if he preferred black or white he’d probably answer grey. I had once asked him if he thought Europe or America sounded like a better place to live and he suggested I thought about Canada.

“They are quite bad,” I said.

“You deliberately annoy them,” Cam argued, quite correctly and I couldn’t really disagree with him. “They’re very poorly educated. They just recycle all their talking points from some social media bubble without ever really thinking about it themselves. They’re not bad people; they just don’t know any better.

“They lack the mental capacity to ever self-improve. What you’re doing is victimising someone for what’s effectively a mental disability they were born with. You wouldn’t shout at a dwarf for not being as tall as you, or a German for not knowing any good jokes.”

I looked at Cam for a moment in shock. He was right, probably—I don’t know. He certainly sounded right at that moment. But, the surprise came from the fact that he was expressing an opinion, one that went contrary to my own. It wasn’t like him to have thoughts that belonged to him. He usually just nodded in agreement and went along with things.

The unbridled drama of hearing Cam express himself plunged me into silence.

“So I just ate the rest of my reluctant cat–squeezeings without another word.”

Lou shook her head at me, and perhaps muttered something about not really caring. I thought my stories were great. I liked to add lots of fun details to make them more interesting. I put care into my anecdotes, not like some people.

Lou had told me a story earlier that night. She had arrived and plopped down into her chair with a weary sigh and ordered a beer, holding up her hand and snapping rudely at the waitress who smiled back even more rudely. I don’t know how it was possible to smile rudely, but that was certainly the impression I got.

She then told me she had a story to tell. I didn’t really want to hear it but I very graciously let her speak. As usual, she had put no flair into her work, she just told me about some stuff that had happened without any particular effort.

She said to me, “I met this guy on the internet.” Certainly don’t care so far. She told me he was a ‘Finsub’ and asked if I knew what that was.

We quickly ruled out European underwater military forces, Japanese cruelty–sandwiches and Russian surnames before she explained to me that what this actually was. It was a man who got sexual pleasure from having a woman have total control over his finances and torture him slowly by cutting off his supply of wealth. I cleverly asked why he wasn’t married then, but I don’t think she understood the inference.

He had, apparently, asked her to take over control of his bank account and deprive him of his resources, eventually destroying him altogether. She seemed troubled by this, which was odd because it was essentially what she had done to her last two boyfriends in the admittedly short time that I had known her.

She grunted and huffed and eventually asked what I thought. That was when I told her that Cam had expressed an opinion.

I do admit that her story was possibly a little more interesting.

“You know, I really don’t care about your cat–squeezeings!” she said, nailing the point home. “I don’t know why you’re a vegan anyway.”

I shrugged and said, “Well I’m not. I’m just a vegetarian now!”

“What’s the difference?” she said and lit up a suspiciously expensive cigarette. “Which one is more annoying?”

“Vegans,” I told her, with a knowing nod. “It was my main reason for becoming one. But then I found that Sam and Sue were too, and that made me start craving animal flesh.”

She looked me up and down and her head cocked to one side. She looked confused for a moment and then said, curiously, “But you don’t actually eat any meat, right?”

I nodded in agreement, impressed that she was following along. “That’s right,” I said smugly.

“So,” she said thoughtfully. “Why are you so fat?”

I certainly wasn’t fat and I frowned accordingly in righteous indignation. I protested by saying, “How am I fat?”

“By being overweight!” she said.

It was difficult to argue with that; I tried but nothing came to mind. I meekly grumbled, “I’m not American fat. I’m maybe German during the winter fat, perhaps a little Russian military officer fat?” It wasn’t much of a defence and Lou grinned at me as though her hurtful comments had scored an easy victory.

“Shut up,” I grumbled, rubbing my ample belly. It was true that I had put on a little weight over the last few months. Maybe I needed another haircut?

Changing the subject, I said, “I don’t usually go out for a beer on a work night.” I sipped at a beer, on a work night.

“Yes you do!” she frowned at me. “You’re a borderline alcoholic. Last week you went out to drink every night except Tuesday.”

I sighed to myself and frowned. As I searched my memory, I realised she was right. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I hadn’t had a few beers; generally quite a few beers. I admitted, “Cam and I didn’t go out on Tuesday because I confiscated a bottle of whiskey from one of the students and we stayed home and played cards and got hammered drinking it.”

Lou frowned at me. “I’m worried about you.”

“Why?” I laughed. “Because I tell you I stayed home and had a few whiskeys? So what?”

“Paul, I was there with you! It worries me that you don’t remember.”

I realised her point was valid; I wouldn’t admit it but it was well-made nonetheless. “Maybe you need to be more memorable?” I suggested.

“I’m extremely memorable.”

To be fair, that was entirely true. I didn’t know many people like her and used to think that they didn’t exist outside of badly-written comedy novels, lazy kitchen-sink melodramas and the other random nonsense in-between.

She had once told me she’d met three men in a nightclub after matching with them on an internet dating site. Not being able to choose between them, she simply took them home and banged all three of them. On another occasion, she flirted with a man who was deeply and confusingly unattractive. She ended up taking him into the bathroom and did something to him that made him come out with a wide grin and a slight inability to casually walk in a completely straight line.

She said he smelled like a rugby-player’s jockstrap and spoke with a certain amount of authority on the matter. As he was also about as attractive as lipstick on a potato, I wondered why she had done whatever

foul act of degradation she had put herself through. She grinned at me when I asked and simply chewed on a slice of pizza she had taken from him.

“Fair point. Yes, you are memorable!” I said, remembering the way she had cut a swathe through the gentleman population of the town in exchange for slices of free pizza. “So is herpes, crabs, syphilis and AIDS.”

She grinned even wider and said proudly, “I don’t have AIDS: I’ve been tested.”

Cam didn’t laugh at what I thought was a pretty funny comment. Perhaps he didn’t understand what was funny about it. I explained, “You know, she has been tested for AIDS...”

“I get it,” he said. He sipped at a beer as a loud motorcycle rolled past, burbling from a broken exhaust.

“I don’t get it!” Lou said with a curious frown. “I said it and I don’t understand it.”

That made me laugh but Cam remained as amused as ever; somewhere between anyone whose cat was just accidentally run over, and a person who just found out that they’ve spent a year getting to know the perfect woman online and then meeting them for the first time in person and finding out that they were Lou.

“Don and Mac are coming,” Cam said. He gave me an odd expression and then added, “I invited Sam and Sue as well.”

I gave him an odd look back. “Why would you do that?” I asked. “You know I don’t particularly like them.”

“Yes!” Cam agreed evenly. “You said you hoped that they would be hit by a truck that was carrying high explosives and that the ground beneath them gave way in the gigantic ensuing blast. You said it would be perfect if there were sewage pipes beneath and they ruptured so that a massive brown, flaming mushroom cloud of shit and piss erupted from

beneath, a foul smelling plume of boiling waste that burned itself into the surface of everything around. All that would be left of them were a few broken teeth, blasted into yellowing, faeces-stained walls and that it would still be a more befitting epitaph than they actually deserve.”

I nodded. “So I was clear on the matter.”

Cam shrugged. “I quite like Sue,” he said. “I’m not so sure about Sam, though. When he gets really drunk, he makes a lot of racist jokes about Jews and not all of them are funny.”

“I thought he was a gay Liberal!” I said with a frown. “Are they allowed to be racist?”

“I don’t know. It’s like the old saying goes: if a tree falls down in a forest and lands on a Liberal, does anyone care?”

I opened my mouth to speak but couldn’t find any words. Had Cam made a joke? Was all of this a joke? Was he making fun of me?

“How do you know I’m not a Liberal?” Lou said conservatively. “I might also be gay, for all you know.”

Cam and I shook our heads in unison. “You’ve seen more cock than the urinals in an Irish bar, selling beer for half price,” I said with a degree of certainty.

She glared at me for a moment and said, “I could be in denial.”

Cam asked, “Are you gay?”

She shrugged and looked thoughtful at us both. “After hanging out with you lot, I’m beginning to wonder.”

Fortunately for everyone, Don turned up around this point with his friend Mac on the back of his scooter. He stepped off, buried under a pile of fake confidence that bordered on arrogance, and casually lit a cigarette. With all of the entire world’s supply of irony at his disposal, he simply said, “Hello, losers!”

Mac was more charming and chose to slap me playfully on the back. “Nice to see you all, darlings,” he said in his remarkably camp

way. “I hope you saved me a seat but I’m more than happy to sit on someone’s lap if you’d rather. We can talk about whatever comes up!”

As he was quite considerably overweight, loud and ferociously homosexual, none of us felt as happy about the prospect as he seemed to. “Mac,” I said. “Good to see you.” It actually was. Mac was so friendly, happy and outgoing that he was impossible not to like.

Mac sat between Lou and myself, and said, suggestively, “I have some of the very finest Peruvian-flake secreted about my person. I spent all day yesterday fishing through the biological waste of a very timid South American, but it was worth it in the end.” He sprinkled some white powder onto a key and greedily, noisily snorted it into his left nostril. His eyes bulged momentarily and he shook for a moment, shuddering like a puppy that had been filled with caffeine. Then a broad smile fluttered over his lips and he turned to grin at me. “Need a little nudge?”

“I’m alright for now,” I said, wondering what Peruvian-flake was and what kind of nudge it would take to spend hours of my life sifting through buckets of shit looking for it. “I think I’ll pass.”

“Oh darling,” he said with a theatrical flourish of his hand, his voice loud and shrill. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

I had a rough idea.

I turned my attention to Don and said, “We were just talking. Lou and I got here first and then...”

“Stop!” he said. I was quite surprised at the forcefulness of his reaction. “You always do this,” he said. “You always explain exactly what happened just before; it’s as if you’re narrating the DVD of your own life. It’s weird, and your life isn’t so interesting that I won’t be able to figure it out for myself. Don’t worry, I’ll catch up.”

“OK,” I grumbled at his rudeness. “I was just trying to be polite.”

“Polite!” he said and then laughed a hacking, growling, humourless laugh. “We’re all living in a desperate foreign country where

you can buy a human for less than a good motorcycle. You don't need to worry about being polite here."

It was true. Young girls lined up outside the main city hospitals in the morning selling their babies. I had been warned that you had to be there early if you wanted to get a good one. I was told that a common scam was for pretty girls to go there with other babies from less attractive mothers, so they could get a higher price.

It was so common a practice that the only required legal procedure was to take the girl and her child to a local police station, sign a standard form and the child was then legally your own property, after certain bribes were paid to certain officials, of course.

I didn't feel that knowing this required me to allow my manners to slip.

"Anyway, you're not polite," Don said rudely. "You said that Lou was so fat that she had more rolls than a bakery."

"Did you?" Lou said, glaring at me. She looked as if she might hit me, but to be fair, she always looked like that.

The problem was that I had said it, and not just once. I nodded sheepishly. "Yes," I said. "In my defence, I'm a little overweight myself. It's like a Jew making a joke about another Jew; it doesn't really count."

From the look on her face I could see that it did count, unlike her intake of calories. I didn't say that out loud, for obvious reasons.

"Fair enough," she said with a shrug. "I do need to lose a bit of weight. I put a load on after I had my accident."

Shockingly, it was Cam that actually cared enough to ask. "Really? What happened?"

Lou said casually, as if it was nothing at all, "I had a motorcycle accident. I came off a bike at one hundred and forty two miles per hour."

"What?" I cried out in surprise. "You had a fast bike? You really don't look the sort?"

She shrugged and told us her story.

“It was my boyfriend’s bike and he said I couldn’t ride it, so I took it out to prove him wrong. I wanted to see how fast it could go, and it turned out that no matter how fast I wanted to go, it went a lot faster.

“So I was riding along, and then, out of nowhere, a family of ducks decided they wanted to cross the road in that little procession they do with the mummy duck up ahead and all the little ones in a line behind them. I swerved to avoid them, lost control of the bike, and next thing I know I’m lying on the floor in an awful lot of pain.”

“Were you badly hurt?” Don asked. He was leaning forwards, his attention entirely focused on her for the moment. He sounded, and even looked, like a reasonably normal person.

Nonchalantly, she said, “Well I broke my femur in seventeen places, shattered my upper right arm, my left leg was off in a different direction, I dislocated both shoulders, broke my collar bone, fractured my skull, cracked three vertebrae in my spine, three of the fingers on my left hand snapped and I lost twenty percent of the bone mass of my left kneecap. I’m told that my scapula will never be the same again.”

“So that’s a yes then...” I suggested, after a long pause.

She shrugged and nodded. “I also punctured a lung when my ribs broke, so I was spitting up a lot of blood, I had a severe concussion, my spleen was ruptured, one of my kidneys was damaged, I had torn all the muscles in my right arm, my eyes had gravel in them, and I had detached my left retina. And there was damage to five other organs I can’t remember the names of. I had to have my gall-bladder removed, and I broke a couple of nails too.”

Don shook his head in horror. “Was the bike alright?”

She shook her head and said, “Not really.” She took a long sip of beer and continued, “The bike hit a car, that swerved off the road into an oncoming truck. There really wasn’t a lot left of it after that. You couldn’t even tell that it used to be red. There was a lot of red about anyway, so that might have accounted for it.

“It was all pretty impressive in its way. The ten mile tailback it caused even made the news. I nearly went to prison for it because I wasn’t insured, I didn’t have a licence, and he’d told me quite specifically not to ride his bike which made it ‘Taking Without Consent.’ But, you know, I had a point to make.”

It felt more that she had made her boyfriend’s point than her own.

“So what happened?” Cam said, breaking another lengthy silence.

She smirked at him and shrugged. “Once the doctors had stitched me back together again—with only a few small bits left over—I discharged myself via the bathroom window to avoid the police guard, and here I am!”

“I’m surprised you were even conscious,” I said.

“I’m not convinced she’s conscious now...” added Cam.

“Seriously though,” said Don. “At that speed, shouldn’t they have been cleaning you off the road with a hose?”

“Gawd bless the NHS, is all I can say,” she said with a wink.

“Point is, I’m not going to prison over a stolen bike. I mean, I did the right thing! None of the ducks were even inconvenienced!”

“Well, that’s something, at least,” I ventured. “You’d think they’d take that into consideration.”

“Right! I mean, the busload of orphans weren’t quite so lucky. When the driver swerved to avoid the rest of the crash, it ended up half over the side of a bridge teetering on the edge, like at the end of that movie. I mean, they all survived thanks to the driver’s strict policy of buckling up for safety, so they only suffered a few broken ribs and a loss of dignity. It’s not as if any of them died—well, the driver did but that’s what you get for not buying a German bus, really.”

“So...” I began but my brain just froze up. Sometimes there were just too many questions and the average human brain simply crumbles under the weight of them all, as if Lou was to wear high-heels.

I didn’t say any of that out loud either.

Don said loudly, “Who needs another beer?” He slid back behind his veneer and pretended to shrug all this off. Why anyone would actually want other people to think they were a horrible, annoying dick when they really weren’t was beyond me.

I made a greater effort to appear like I wasn’t horrible, annoying or someone that could most easily be summed up by the name of any kind of genital. It wasn’t easy and I felt that some people were catching on to the facts. At least I hadn’t forced a busload of orphans off the road or killed a driver.

“Beer!” I agreed.

“After all that, I felt that we all needed some!”

Del nodded along and sipped on his beer. Don had pretended not to care about Lou’s story. The others had simply hung their heads in contemplative silence. But where the others tried to exude a certain emotional disconnection with reality, Del was the real deal. I could tell from his expression that he genuinely didn’t care. None of this affected him. He was above and beyond it, better than all of this.

He smiled thinly, a little smugly, and puffed on a foul-smelling, ridiculously strong cigarette. He said, as if talking to a student in one of his classes: “Everyone has a reason for being here. Not many of them are entirely altruistic.”

“I know...” I said, trying to sit up straighter and look a little taller. I wondered what ‘altruistic’ meant.

“What’s your story, Paul?” he said with a knowing grin. Sometimes, it was as if he was looking into my soul. I felt that he was looking right through me, peering into the essence of what made me who I was.

I took a deep breath and said, “You really want to know the truth? You want to know the story of what led me to this country?”

Del looked me fixedly in the eye and puffed out an acrid grey breath of coiling smoke. Narrowing his eyes he said simply, "Sure!"

I leant forwards and said softly, "You really want to know?"

He nodded and smiled wryly.

"I was bored."

He laughed at me and took a deep swig of beer.

"I was burned out on doing one dead-end job after another," I told him. "I didn't feel that my life was going anywhere. My last job in the UK was working in one of those dodgy loan-places where desperate people borrow some cash against their wages. It was pretty awful and depressing. I just woke up one morning and knew I didn't want to be there anymore and started looking at my options."

"You're a rare breed," he told me. "Most of the people here are running away from something. Many of them can't go home for various reasons. It's not as good as it looks on the surface."

It doesn't even look particularly good there. I looked around the bar and had to admit that the surface had all the depth of a muddy puddle. If it truly represented humanity, then it was a miracle that we had ever given up shitting in the corner of caves.

I realised that someone was doing something questionable in a dark alcove, which more or less proved the point I was trying to make to myself. Why was I trying to make points to myself? Was beer the answer or the question?

"Are you alright?" Del asked. "You had a weird look on your face for a moment, like you were holding in a fart."

"I was just thinking."

"It must have been some powerfully philosophical stuff," he said with a grin.

"Sure," I said. "Powerful, philosophical stuff." I'm pretty sure I slurred slightly and probably pronounced both words incorrectly.

“Probably really incorrectly...” I added, putting the final flourish on the end of the story.

Lou looked at me incredulously and said, “You don’t half talk a lot of shit!”

I leant forwards and grinned at her, slightly drunkenly. I told her, with all the certainty I was still able to muster, “I know.” For some reason, or no reason, the thought flashed through my head that my mother had once told me that if enough people tell you that you’re ill, you should lie down. She had died of cancer some years before after failing to get herself diagnosed, insisting to us all that she was perfectly fine while everything going into her came out moments later from seemingly random places.

The only other piece of advice she’d ever given us was to save for a rainy day. It was clear she hadn’t followed that either, when we had to pay for her funeral, which ended up taking place on a suspiciously bright and sunny afternoon.

The group had largely split up by then, with various people milling around, half-drunkenly slurring stories at one another, shouting and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Peruvian-flake seemed to have taken the edge off of Don’s drunken nonsense and he staggered over, seeming almost normal, for once.

“We’re going to go somewhere fun,” he said. “You’re not invited.”

I shrugged to myself. I was almost ready to collapse anyway and didn’t care if I wasn’t considered fun enough to go to a guest-house bathroom and snort drugs off the keys of a man who referred to himself as a ‘penis with a man sticking out of it.’ “Good,” I said.

He slapped me playfully on the arm and looked around. He seemed to glare for a moment at Cam and then he turned back to Lou and I. “You and him are good friends, right?”

I nodded. I could see Lou nodding as well.

“Sure,” I said. “He’s a good guy when you get to know him.”
That might have even been true. Who knew?

“You know his girlfriend left him, right?” Don said.

We all knew that. It was about all we did know about our friend.
“He told us that she vanished; he never heard from her again.”

“Is that what he told you?” Don smirked and chuckled rather cruelly. Whatever point he was trying to make, he certainly had my attention. “I know he tells people that, but it’s not quite what happened. I’ve heard things.”

Lou looked at me and cast a glance back to Cam. He was at the bar, lining up a row of tequila shots. She said softly, her voice lower than usual, “What are you talking about, you fucking moron?”

“Let’s just say I heard differently,” Don said. He flashed a row of near-perfect teeth and had the smuggest expression I had ever seen on his careworn, wrinkled, sandpaper-soft skin.

“No!” I said in surprise. “That can’t be right. It’s Cam. The only thing less interesting than Cam is doing your own tax-return.”

I turned to Lou who was staring back at me in surprise. Her expression shifted to a look of suspicion and then she said, “You do your own tax returns?”

I looked down and sighed. “No, not properly.” I told her. “That’s part of the reason why I had to leave England.”

Don said, sounding like a spoilt little child that was desperate for a little bit of attention, “It’s true. Everyone knows about it but him.”

“Knows what?”

“Never mind!” he said. “You’ll all find out soon.”

Just then Cam turned from the bar with a tray of drinks. I looked back to see Don stepping onto his scooter. He flashed me a dark, ugly grin as he rode off into the night.

Chapter 16

“Why did you leave your last job?”

I sat in a very firm office chair, that didn't smell of leather at all, and gazed at the CV. Interviews were boring, so boring that my mind often wandered off to other places. My mind wasn't terribly good at wandering and rarely ventured further than the local bar.

The young man opposite was very roughly my own age and he was dressed quite poorly. His brightly-coloured shirt was creased and his trousers were so threadbare that they were barely trousers at all in the conventional sense. Between us was a desk with a pile of papers scattered haphazardly across it.

I wasn't enjoying this at all.

He said something to me but I wasn't really listening. I stared out of the window, wondering why I was even there. Had leaving my home country been a good idea, I wondered?

If I didn't want to be arrested, then it probably was.

“Sorry,” I said, snapping back to the interview. “I was just thinking about something else.”

“No problem,” he said with a smile. I got the impression that he was a nice person. He probably loved his mother. He looked like he meant what he was saying, but he also looked like he wouldn't say anything that was worth listening to.

“So,” I asked. “We were talking about a last job and why it was left.” I tried to look a bit more focused and even made an effort to look directly at him.

“Sure,” he said with a wide grin. “As I was saying...”

“Wait!” I said. I held up a hand for him to stop and I blew out a heavy lungful of air. “What was your name?”

“Rob!” he said. He looked like a Rob, somehow.

“OK, Rob,” I began. “I just remembered something.”

“Sure. What was that?” He spoke with a thick American accent that put me in mind of homesteads that had been in the family for generations, and where farmyard animals weren’t entirely safe from sexual advances.

“I just remembered that I don’t care!”

He frowned and looked a bit scared.

I explained, “I don’t get any extra money for doing this. I only agreed to it because Ray threatened to have my testicles removed if I didn’t.”

“Um...” he muttered.

“Look,” I told him, “I’m not interested in this interview. I just want to get the whole thing over and done with as quickly as possible.”

“Sure,” he said and smiled awkwardly. He clearly didn’t have a clue what was going on. Nor did I, in fact.

“It’s not like I’m qualified to do this anyway,” I told him. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Right...”

“Do you want this job?” I said to him.

He shrugged and said, making it sound almost like a question.

“Yes!”

“Great!” I said and stamped his CV. “The boss left me in charge of the interviews. I don’t want to do this. You seem like a nice enough guy and I’m sure you’ve got lots of experience. I have a good feeling about you so I’m just going to hire you and hope for the best.”

“I don’t have any experience,” he told me with an irritating outpouring of honesty.

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “So long as you’re not a criminal or are sexually attracted to children.”

He looked at me and frowned.

I sighed and grumbled, “You’re not a criminal or are sexually attracted to children, are you?”

“No!” he exclaimed loudly. “I’m not a criminal and sexually attracted to children. But don’t you need to do a background check to see if I’m telling the truth?”

“Do I need to do one?” I asked.

He shook his head firmly, “No, Sir!”

I shrugged. “The system works.”

Chapter 17

I saw myself as a consummate professional, which meant that when I walked into a classroom I was ready to do my job. My personal version of reality and the one other people seemed to agree on didn't always mesh very tightly together, like Lou's legs.

I had a selection of worksheets prepared for emergencies and this was yet another morning when I needed one. The 'hangover' sheets, as they had come to be known, were vital to the smooth running of my class, and the idea had very quickly caught on throughout the campus.

I had briefly thought about charging for them but nobody had any money, so that idea went absolutely nowhere. Still, most people would happily get me a coffee in exchange for a worksheet when they turned up at work with an important part of their brain not deeming fit to join them.

Another problem with my business model was that people frequently just didn't turn up at all. In those instances, I usually ended up having to cover for them and that was when my worksheets came in very handy. It was bad enough teaching my own classes but dealing with other teachers' problems was undeniably worse.

I would generally throw them a worksheet, warn them it was going to be silent study, and then sit back with my phone and search through dating apps for girls who were good enough for me but didn't yet realise that I wasn't good enough for them.

The downside of all this was that when I needed my worksheets most, I was usually ending up doing other people's jobs for them for free. It was at times like this that I just liked to sit back and remind myself I wasn't an accountant, a businessman, an entrepreneur or even a success. This didn't seem as if it was going to be changing any time soon.

All of this was why the first day of my working week was frequently Tuesday. I was managing to convince the administration department that this was a cultural norm and that I was a member of a religion that had frequent holidays that fell just after the weekend. I realised I might be going too far when a Jewish teacher accused me of making it all up to get extra leave. He asked me for some pointers in exchange for some really odd-tasting fish.

This was all working out just fine, so long as I avoided Ray, who spent most of his time avoiding work himself.

I stood before my first class and huffed to myself. There was a group of students all gazing at me with rapt attention. I didn't care about any of them, not even the tiniest little bit. I slid off my slightly battered laptop bag and rested it on the desk. I carefully put it down so as not to jar the personal laptop inside, my connection to the internet and the only reliable sexual outlet I actually had that didn't try to steal things from me afterwards.

There was a question that was always asked and I waited for it as I unpacked the hangover-sheets from my bag.

“What are we going to do today, teacher?” There it was: someone always asked it. You could literally be trying to explain that very thing and someone would interrupt you with that question. It was as reliable as death, taxes, and the woman on the phone not looking like the girl in the photo.

A tidal wave of sarcasm washed over me. “What do you think we're going to do?” I asked. “Does it look like we're watching a movie?”

A voice from the back, where the students that nobody would ever suspect might be intellectually gifted, said excitedly, “Are we watching a movie?”

“No,” I snapped, although it did actually sound like a good idea. I could have just skulked at the back of the class and nursed the headache

that was threatening to rip my skull apart. But I hadn't thought of it and that was the student's fault for some reason. "We're not watching a movie," I barked angrily. "We're not here to have fun. We're going to review something from a worksheet I printed out last night."

"Are you sick again teacher?" the class monitor called out sympathetically.

"I'm not sick!" I told her grumpily. "I just have a case of 'Monday-morning,'" I said with a wry smirk at my clever little joke at myself.

There was some confusion on her face as she said, "But it's Tuesday?"

I nodded and it felt that if I didn't stop moving my head then my brain might slosh out through my nostrils. Perhaps that would be for the best?

"As I've explained before, I have a very particular religion. Sometimes I have my Mondays on Tuesdays," I said patiently. "When that happens, I usually feel quite bad from all the..." I quickly racked my brain for something to add, "...fasting and abstinence."

"Did something happen to you?" she asked. I glared at her. Something had indeed. Something had happened that had been going around in my head for weeks.

It seemed like only yesterday I was quite happily drunk when Don came up to speak to me. In fact, it had been only yesterday when Don came up to speak to me but that time he only wanted to tell me my hair looked as if a blind man had cut it with a blunt pocket-knife and a rock.

Don and I were increasingly not what I would call friends.

The time that was so preoccupying me was when he had told me that Cam's girlfriend, the one he missed so horribly, hadn't vanished into oblivion at all, but something else might have actually happened.

What could it be, I wondered?

“Teacher?” a voice called out. I looked up and realised I’d been preoccupied with more interesting things and had been silently staring at the wall for a little too long.

“Yes!” I said. “Right, shut up everyone and listen.” I threw a bunch of papers at the most annoying student I could find without walking too far. He sighed, picked them up and stood up from his seat. “This fine young gentleman is coming round with some worksheets to help you get ready for the last round of exams. Work through them in silence today and I promise we’ll watch a movie, or something, tomorrow.”

There was a ripple of interest around the room. Watching a movie was just too good an idea not to capitalise on, so I decided to run with it. Sadly, it would take too much planning to do it right away, and planning was not my strong suit.

A hand went up near the front. “Teacher,” the girl it belonged to asked, as she stared at her sheet in confusion. “Some of the words on this worksheet don’t seem to be spelled right. I think ‘sheet’ has two ‘e’s and not an ‘i.’”

I snatched one up from my desk and glared at it. Sure enough, there was a minor error where I may, or may not, have been a little drunk while creating something to ‘get the little shits working’ and had confused some of the words ever so slightly.

“It’s fine,” I told her. “It’s the European spelling.”

“Do they speak English in Europe?” she said, looking like she was thinking very hard about it.

“Of course they do!” I told her. “We won two world wars. That’s why everyone has to speak English now.” I thought about that for a moment and wondered why it wasn’t true. What was the point of winning wars if everything just carried on the same afterwards? Did war even have a point at all? Without conflict, the plot of my favourite video games would be very dull indeed, so I guess there’s that.

It was the first time I'd really thought about wars at all, except in how much I wouldn't enjoy being in the middle of one, which was quite ironic since I spent so much of my time and money simulating the experience.

"So, class!" I called out, using my loud and authoritative voice, the one teachers use when they try to pretend that everything is fine, even though they know they screwed something up. "Ignore the spelling mistake on the top and just get on with the work."

"Teacher," the same girl asked. "I don't think this is the right spelling of fork, piece, shot and count either."

"It's European," I told her bluntly.

"So she shut up after that," I told Lou. "She questions everything. I hate kids that question everything."

I thought about that and then simplified it down to a more accurate sentence.

"I hate kids in general, actually. I never knew that about myself before. It's funny what you learn while you're teaching."

"Very philosophical," she said.

I didn't know if the situation demanded sarcasm. I was a little disappointed with her tone. She stabbed her fork into something brown and wretched which, luckily, didn't make a pathetic squeak in response. The poor, dead thing was rammed into her gaping maw and then the fork was pointed at me, jabbing in the air like a weapon. "Look, Paul," she said, "we need to talk."

I shrugged and ate some of my eggs. "What about?" I asked innocently. "I did wonder why you asked me to have lunch with you. I don't mind really, so long as you didn't have in your mind that this was a date."

"We need to talk," she repeated. "We need to talk about Cam!"

“Cam?” I asked and pretended that I hadn’t been driving myself half crazy about the whole thing myself. “What about him?”

“Well, he’s your best friend,” she said. “Remember what Don said? Well I’ve been thinking about it and I’ve decided that we need to do something.”

My egg had a surprising amount of crunch to it. I winced and said, “Don isn’t reliable. All of that lot are off their heads all the time. We can’t take him seriously.” But I had taken it seriously. Cam had always acted a little off. There had always been something not quite right about him. What was the truth behind what had happened?

“I know what you mean about Don and that lot. If I could choose any three people to go out for a proper drink with, it wouldn’t be them.” Lou sighed and then sucked in a heavy, melodramatic lungful of breath. “Still, I can’t get what he said out of my mind.”

“What are you thinking?”

Lou sounding incredibly focused for once. “Do you think he killed her?”

“What?” I almost spat out my crispy egg-shell.

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it?” For some reason, the thing that struck me most wasn’t that she was accusing my best friend of murder, but that she was doing it in well-formed, grammatically-correct sentences. “Think about it. Cam is quiet; he’s always thinking, watching and learning. He has a dark secret about how his girlfriend simply vanished and then he goes into a depression, that never leaves him, after she’s gone. Maybe he’s haunted by guilt?”

“It sounds more like you’re accusing Cam of being an ordinary man!” I told her. “I mean, he’s a quiet guy, he hasn’t met anyone since. I don’t think it’s that big a deal.”

“Then what is it that Don isn’t telling us?”

I had to admit, that was a good point. Don liked drama. If there wasn’t something suspicious behind the story, he wouldn’t have been

interested in bringing it up. I hated it when people used logic on me. Actually, I wasn't a huge fan of people in general.

“What do you want me to do about it?” I said, shaking my head at the ridiculousness of all this. “Do you expect me to ask him what really happened to his ex-girlfriend? Or, maybe we could investigate together like a pair of television detectives and uncover the awful, terrible, horrible truth ourselves?”

“Yes!” she said.

I have to admit, I hadn't expected that. I was just being a sarcastic asshole for the sake of it and she called me out on my nonsense with a single, masterful stroke. I was left then with egg on my face, not least because I was eating clumsily.

“Really?” I said. “I can't just go up to my best friend and ask him if he killed his girlfriend!”

Could I, I wondered? Perhaps I could. Maybe that was exactly the right thing to do in a situation like this. It was difficult for me to judge since this situation had taken me right out of my comfort zone, and I wasn't really the best at spotting what the right thing to do was in any case.

All this reminded me of when most of my uncle had been found in the chest-freezer in his own garage back home. I had only been about five when it happened and had been told to shut up about it. Nobody liked him and everyone sided with my aunt about it afterwards. My Mum had told me that this was what happened to people who smoke but I always suspected it had something to do with why my aunt always had black eyes. Nothing ever happened to her afterwards. Things just went on as usual, except that my dad would never again let us eat sausages.

I winced as my adult brain fed all this back to me and I worked out what had actually happened. Of course, this couldn't have been what happened with Cam; we only had a small fridge, after all.

“We have to find out,” Lou told me bluntly. She looked determined and wasn’t someone who took no for an answer. I had spoken to her last boyfriend and he’d left me in no doubt that this was correct.

“Do we, though?” I said, doing my best to weasel out of it. I was so much better at weaselling out of things than facing them head on, like a man, that my Mum had always very loudly wondered if there had been a mix up at the maternity unit. I don’t know how run-down the national hospitals were at that time, but I found it hard to imagine human and small rodent babies sharing a ward. For someone who so enjoyed using sarcasm, I had to admit that I wasn’t always the best at spotting it.

“Yes.”

Logic again, I hated it.

“But if we find out that Cam killed his girlfriend, cut her up, drained the blood into the bath, smashed the bones into shards with a hammer, shredded the flesh and slowly disposed of it in different places, what does that get us?” I asked.

Lou looked at me like I was crazy. “Nobody said anything about draining blood, smashing up her bones or shredding the flesh,” she said softly, slowly and with a methodical and thoughtful tone. “Paul, is there something wrong with you?”

I found myself nodding and wondered how much I had deliberately chosen not to remember from my terrible childhood. Was this connected to the reason I chose not to eat meat? I wondered about this briefly but was certain it was purely for reasons of feeling smugly superior to everyone else.

But was it?

“We’re doing this!” she told me and I didn’t feel that I had a choice. I knew she was going to make me do the right thing. I hated doing the right thing—the wrong thing almost always paid better.

I pushed my eggs aside. They tasted weird anyway, as if they had been cooked in a bath of vinegar and served on a plate made from a dead rat. Everything tasted a little like that here. I had actually started to quite like it.

“Alright!” I said. “I’ll do what has to be done. I’ll do the smart, appropriate and proper thing!”

I explained all this to Del and he gave me an incredulous look before taking a long, hard drag on a cigarette. He puffed out an acrid plume of smoke and said, “And the only smart, appropriate and proper thing you could think of to do was to come and ask me about it?”

I leant back against a haphazard red-brick wall that looked as if it might fall down if I pushed too hard. We were down an alley beside my school where people took their breaks, away from the eyes of the students.

“Yes,” I said. “Now that you put it like that, I guess it does slightly cheapen my efforts.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” Del told me. “When you thought of smart, appropriate and proper, not only did you think of me, but I was literally the only thing that you did manage to think of. It speaks volumes about both of us.”

“Right...” I grumbled. “But Lou does have a point. I wondered if you’d heard anything?”

“He’s your best friend!” Del told me in no uncertain terms, one of his slightly superior smiles on his face, as if I was doing something quite simple in an inexplicably stupid way, and he was trying to work out why I was struggling with it. “I don’t know that much about him.”

“Well, nor do I, if I’m honest,” I admitted. “I respect his privacy. Mostly, we just play video games, drink beer and fail to impress our students.”

“Well,” Del began with a shrug. “It looks like you’re about to find a whole lot more out about your best friend, such as ‘does he go around killing his old girlfriend?’”

I nodded and frowned back at him. I wasn’t in a huge rush to make that discovery. “Well, that does stretch the boundaries of normal friendships a little bit,” I said haughtily. “Most people don’t go around murdering their partners, Del!”

Del shook his head at my stupidity. “Don’t they?” he said.

I thought that such a question barely needed asking. I said, my voice rising in pitch, “Of course not. I never killed any of my ex-girlfriends. Did you murder your previous partners, Del?”

“Sure,” he said nonchalantly as if it was nothing at all. “Of course.”

I stared at him in silence and my mind went blank. I went through various stages quite quickly, at first assuming he was joking and then seeing the serious expression on his face and thinking that maybe he wasn’t. “What?” I said incredulously.

“I killed a lot of girls over the years,” he explained as he slowly pulled out another cigarette. “The trick is to never do it the same way twice so that the police never realise they have a serial killer to deal with. Sometimes you cave in their head with a lump of metal: other times you poison them. It’s actually part of the fun to come up with new and interesting methods each time. I’m the sort of man who enjoys a challenge, you see?”

“You’re joking?” I asked. I literally had no idea. He fixed me with his eyes and seemed utterly, deadly serious.

He lit his cigarette and took a long, casual draw on it. He said to me, “It’s one of the reasons I’m here. I was getting too old for all that and I knew it couldn’t last forever. English police are very persistent, so it was only a question of time before I got myself caught.”

“I needed a change so I came out here to semi-retire. Working around schools is a great way to learn about the behaviour of the local population and you meet loads of people. Teachers come and go all the time: nobody misses them when they move on. It’s so much easier to have fun here and the police don’t have a clue how to catch a methodical serial murderer.”

All the time he was speaking, he was utterly convincing. I had no doubts in my mind that he was simply explaining the truth to me.

“Bloody hell...” I muttered.

“The only tricky bit is getting to the girls before the Chinese organ-harvesters get there first,” he explained casually. “There’s a big trade in that here but the plus side is that they know all the best places to hide the bodies.” Del blew out a curling ring of acrid grey smoke.

Finally, he commented, looking at his glowing cigarette, “These things will kill you. I need to think about quitting.”

“I don’t...” I said, struggling to find the words.

“I’m messing with you, Paul,” he said, his face still straight, not a smile, not a flutter that suggested anything less than absolute sincerity. Then he grinned at me.

I gasped a sigh of relief. “Thank god,” I said.

“Or am I?” he added. His grin vanished so quickly I wasn’t sure it had ever been there at all and then his face never flickered. He said, “You never know about anyone, do you? Cam is your best friend and I’ll bet you never even asked him the name of his ex-girlfriend. You need to get more interested in other people, Paul. It’s the real reason you’re so alone.”

I pretended to ignore the last comment. “So you’re joking?” I said.

“I will tell you what I’m not joking about,” he said. “You need to change. Since you got here, you’ve been drinking more, you sleep with prostitutes all the time, you miss work, you keep getting sacked, and you

really don't care about anything. You need to wake up to things before you let yourself fall completely apart. I've seen hundreds of young men like you come and go. It's not too late yet but you're burning out. You need to take a good, long, hard look at yourself."

I gave him a dirty glare out the corner of my eye. I knew he was right and I didn't want to hear it. Instead of talking about this, I just said, "Well, let's deal with Cam first, shall we?"

Del nodded. "If I had heard anything, I would keep it to myself. The right person to talk to is your friend, Cam. But, if you want my advice, Don and his friends are probably a good place to start looking. Ask around and find out what they think they know."

"So I told him that was exactly what I was going to do!"

Me and Lou were in a bar. It wasn't our usual one, but it might as well have been. The longer I lived there, the more it all started to look the same, one place blurring into another, the faces merging into an endless tapestry of banal similarity and the days melting into one long, endless slog.

Del was right about me, and the more I thought about it, the more right he seemed to be. That pissed me off.

It was as if I was driving along a long, dark, straight road. There were no signs, no markings, just endlessly the same thing, mile after mile after mile. I needed something to break up the journey, something to stop the endless beers, the jobs I didn't care about and the girls I didn't even remember the next day.

What was I becoming?

"Right," she said in agreement. "So what exactly did you do?"

"I did this!" I gestured around the place. It was occupied by the usual smattering of half-dead drunks, drowning their misery in cheap beer. "I invited you to join me in this place. I heard that Don and Raj

hang out here. We're going to meet them and we're going to find out exactly what it is they think they know!"

"Right!" she said and rolled her eyes. "Except that Don wouldn't tell us before. I also work with him and he hasn't mentioned anything else about it. In fact, when you asked him he just grinned and walked away, laughing at you."

I will admit, I hadn't thought of that. "Yeah, but Raj will tell us. He doesn't care about anything, and he hates Cam. Raj never paid the rent and they fell out over it. Raj said it was racist of him to keep asking for money."

Lou nodded. "Is Cam racist as well as a murderer?"

"No!" I told her, frowning at her stupidity. "Raj is just crazy ever since he got on the drugs. I think he was a little bit crazy before, if I remember rightly."

"Cam's ex-girlfriend was a local girl, wasn't she? How can he be racist?"

"Exactly!" I agreed. "Well, he could just be racist and desperate, I guess."

"Why don't you date a local girl?" she asked.

The thought had certainly occurred to me but there was just one minor problem with all that. "I want a girl who's good-looking, intelligent, motivated and honest," I said. "And I haven't managed to find a girl has all those qualities, and who would actually date me, local or otherwise. Anyway, most of them can't speak English."

Lou laughed but there was a pointed quality to it, as if she was finding it way more funny than she should. I sipped on my beer and did what I did best, tried to ignore her. Nobody was very good at that.

"So how do you know these guys are coming here?" she asked when she had finished mocking me.

“They always come here,” I said with a shrug. “Anyway, I’m not just leaving it to chance. I did text Raj and Don and tell them we were going to meet them.”

Lou glared at me. “Maybe they are no more interested in you than the kind of girls you like?” she said sarcastically.

I huffed to myself and narrowed my eyes. “Yeah!” I agreed. “I might not be able to find an attractive, intelligent, capable and honest girl but, at least, until I do it’s nice to know I still have you.”

“Bitch!” she said with a smirk. “You know I could kill you with one lick from the back of my hand.”

I nodded. Bravely, I said, “I can’t imagine that licking you anywhere would be good for my health.”

I laughed at my own joke but Don just stared at me, slowly shaking his head. He just didn’t understand good humour, I suppose.

“OK,” he said with a sigh, looking fed up and baffled. “Thanks for telling me all about how you waited for us. Now, here I am.” He dug his balled fists into his sides and stared at me. I had to say, he didn’t look good. There were thick black rings under his eyes and his skin looked oddly transparent, as if all the blood that used to flow through it just couldn’t be bothered with the whole business of trying anymore.

His eyes themselves just looked hollow and empty, the white parts were yellow and dull and the cool, dark irises seemed oddly lifeless.

“Lou and me are worried about Cam,” I explained. “We want to ask you what you meant a few weeks ago when you told us about his girlfriend.”

“What?” he said, screwing up his face. “Is that what all this is about? I was half drunk and half on drugs, I don’t even remember what I said.”

Lou was standing behind me and had a stern look of resolve set onto her hard features. She wasn't someone to mess with and even Don would think twice before doing so. She said, before I could reply to him, "You told us that Cam's girlfriend didn't just vanish. You said there was more to it than that. You're going to tell us what you meant!"

"Oh..." he rubbed his temples. He looked around, weighing up his options, I presumed. But this wasn't school; this wasn't a professional place where people would have to politely accept him. Here, in the bar, I could take him by the throat and choke him to death, or punch him to the ground without anyone caring. Of course, by all that I meant that Lou could...

"Yeah, I heard stories. The man you want to ask is Raj. He fucking hates him and was asking all sorts of people around town trying to dig up dirt on him."

"But what did you hear?" I said.

He shrugged and held up his hands. "I really don't know anything," he said. "Raj said that he had something on Cam. He said to watch over the new few weeks. He was going to do something to really mess him up and it was going to be funny to watch."

Lou said what we were both thinking. "Shit."

"I don't know!" Don admitted. "Raj is crazy. He's using way too much gear. No matter how much he gets, he just wants more. Half the things that come out of his head now make no sense whatsoever."

I held out my phone and looked down to the screen. There had been nothing from him. There were no messages from anyone showing. "I texted him earlier: he still hasn't replied," I said with a sigh. "Are you seeing him later?"

Don looked at us and seemed to be trying to decide if he was going to tell us or if he wanted Lou to punch him in the testicles.

Lou broke his silence for him and said, "I know where you live, Don."

He began to nod to himself and said, with a heavy exhale, “Yeah, Mac and Raj are coming over to my place. They won’t be round till late, though.”

“We’re going to need to talk to him,” Lou said with a deep, angry voice reverberating in the back of her throat.

I was a little intimidated myself.

Don nodded. “They usually come round about midnight. Raj is basically working with Mac now and they don’t finish their rounds till then. They’ll drop round, we’ll have a bump or two and then we’ll go out and hit a club,” he told us. “We do it most weekends.”

Lou and I looked at one another. She nodded and grinned. “We’ll be there,” she told him.

“And here we are.”

Lou rolled her eyes at me. “Yes, I know we’re here. I’m not that drunk. You don’t have to remind me about everything that we ever said to each other all the time.”

I scratched my head thoughtfully. “I feel like I do,” I told her.

We watched the taxi drive off, the shimmering frame of the uneven rickshaw rattling around behind a worn-out and beaten-up engine that was clattering noisily and spewing out clouds of blackened soot. The red tail lights glowed dimly until they vanished around the last corner.

It was quiet then and we were alone. The street was silent and dark, like something out of a zombie apocalypse story, only without the apocalypse... or the zombies. There was oddly no noise, no sounds of engines, no people, and nothing blowing in on the breeze. We just stood there under the dull, flickering glow of an orange street-light. It all felt a little unnerving.

“Well, here we are.” I was nervous and I don’t mind admitting it. Even though we were doing nothing we hadn’t done countless times

before, this was different. To keep things nicely sociable, I was carrying a plastic bag full of cheap local lager and the ice-cold cans clinked away as I swung the bag beside me.

All we were really doing was talking to old friends about a different friend. Why was I so scared?

“Come on,” Lou said.

We made our way to the front door of his apartment building. It wasn't a luxurious, or even a friendly place. It was more like a dingy alley with a grim alcove set into the side of a brick wall. The stairs led up into darkness and were made of bare, unfinished and dirty concrete. There were no lights or bannisters to lead the way.

“Don lives here?” I said. Lou didn't answer.

As foreboding as it looked, it somehow fitted with Don so very well. He was a facade, thinly stretched over a gaping hole in his own psyche. Below all that was a featureless abyss that he had long ago fallen into.

In daylight, it might look fairly normal but, at night, it was an intimidating sight. Bolstering myself and swallowing my apprehension, I said, trying to sound as brave as I could, “Come on then!”

Lou looked at me. If she was rattled, she showed no sign of it. “You first!” she said.

I stepped into the opening and only took a single step forwards before I encountered a metal door. It was made from twisted wire mesh, welded into a shoddy, home-made frame. It hung on a pair of gigantic hinges and was bolted from the inside.

“Well, that complicates things,” I grumbled. I peered inside the endless, unlit gloom but it was all just darkness and I couldn't make out any detail. I reached out to try the door.

Suddenly, a gnarled face appeared on the other side, melting out from the shadows. A growling, miserable face of a local man peered at me with hollow, piercing eyes. The light from outside caught his face: it

was aged, with deeply engraved lines, so it looked as if his head was carved from a gnarled lump of old, hard wood.

My heart skipped and then raced in my chest. I recoiled back away from the door, clutching my chest in near-panic. I might have made a nervous squealing noise, or it might have come from Lou. Someone did it, and I would much rather think it was her.

The guard, dressed in a dark blue uniform that looked exactly like the local police except with more badges and medals pinned to it, grumbled wearily as the bolt pulled back with a loud clunk. He swung open the door on its rusty hinges and impatiently gestured for us to go inside and leave him to his night.

I looked at Lou and, honestly, she looked as nervous as me.

“Go on then,” she said.

We made our way up the stairs, shallow and uneven and they ran through a much narrower corridor than I had expected. I said conversationally, “What’s the point of even having security if they just let anyone in without checking anything?”

“I don’t care,” she told me. It seemed fair enough. I didn’t care either, really. I just preferred to fill the silence with something other than my own trepidation.

“Don’s is number 9, just up there on the left,” she said, pointing to a thin wooden door.

I wasn’t looking forward to this. My beers touched my leg, clinking slightly as they swung around in the thin plastic bag. It felt so normal, so natural, simply to be taking a few beers to the house of a work colleague—but something about this felt equally abnormal and not natural at all.

I reached forward and balled my fist to gingerly rap on the door. Why was I so worried? We were invited: he knew we were coming. Was I just afraid to find out what Cam had really done? What was so wrong

about all of this? Why could I feel a cold knot of dread tightening in my stomach?

“Come on,” Lou grumbled at me. “Get on with it.” She sounded impatient. I sensed that she was feeling just as awkward as I was.

“Alright, alright,” I snapped back at her. I knocked softly but, to my surprise, the door wasn’t closed and came open just a crack. I raised an eyebrow. “It’s not locked.”

I must have stood staring for longer than I realised as muted red light from inside gently pulsed through the tiny opening.

I heard Lou’s voice in my head saying, “Come on. What are you waiting for?” She tutted at me and pushed past, her low, powerful grumbling voice cried out, “Don! We’re here and we’ve brought beer!” She pushed her way inside and I followed.

We both stopped and stared.

My mouth gaped open and my mind did several weird things all at once. Inside my head, I was silently screaming. I could actually hear the roaring sound of my own voice crying out but, at the same time, my mind was oddly silent. My body was numb. I wasn’t even aware of it and the first thing I noticed was the metallic ringing of the cans, as the beer slipped from my fingers and fell to the filthy, yellowing tiled floor.

The scene was like something from a horror movie: at least, it was horrific enough for me.

Mac was in the corner, perched on top of a black beanbag. He had a horrified look on his face and was sobbing silently, like the tears had now all run out but the emotion driving them hadn’t. Don was lying half on a sofa but the front end of him was sliding off to the ground. A thick river of vomit was tracing from his mouth and a thin trail of blood from his nose. He was gurgling to himself and his breathing was shallow.

His body twitched slightly.

Raj was lying in the middle of the floor, gazing up emptily at the roof. His eyes were wide open and stared glassily into nothing. His

mouth was gaping wide and his chest was still. I didn't need to be a doctor to diagnose that it was too late to call an ambulance.

"Jesus... fucking... Christ..." Lou muttered, covering her mouth with her hand.

I couldn't find words, blasphemous or otherwise.

The scene was just too real, too awful for my brain to deal with. It was all lit with the swirling red lights from a slowly bubbling lava-lamp, adding a surreal, peaceful quality to a picture that was slowly burning itself into my mind forever.

"He's dead..." I heard Mac sob. "He's dead..." There was dried blood all over his mouth, where it had run from his nose. There was more at the corner of his eyes. Thick, grey vomit was caked around his gaping-wide mouth and it was clear he had enthusiastically soiled himself on his way out of the mortal world. The smell was vile, as if someone had emptied a chemical toilet into my mouth, a mixture of faeces, old urine and bile.

I said nothing. Perhaps there were no words for me to find.

What was there left to say?

Chapter 18

“So why do you want this job?” a local with a nasty little glint in his eye said to me.

I shifted awkwardly in my seat. I was seated opposite the principal of the school, a man of such gigantic proportions that his suit looked like two suits had been stitched together, probably around a third suit. He was panting breathlessly from the effort of looking at me and beads of sweat were running down his forehead, even though an air-conditioner was basting down directly on him. He smelt like someone was deep-frying a cat.

“Ummm,” I mumbled thoughtfully. “I don’t want the job. Please, I actually don’t want the job. I really don’t want the job.”

“Yes,” he said with a happy smile and horribly broken English as he nodded back to me. “You want the job.”

“No!” I said firmly and shook my head. I was nervous now. Why wasn’t he listening to me? I didn’t want this. I wanted to run free and wild and then collapse, gasping for air in a seat along the river with a beer in my hand. Was that so much to ask?

He ignored me and grinned absently to himself.

“Why you think you are qualified for job?” he said, mincing the English language behind an accent that was thicker than his chubby fingers.

I shrugged. “I’m barely qualified for the job I have,” I told him. “I think there are better people for this position.”

“You are a good people,” he said with a ferocious grin. “You say you are best for the job?”

“No,” I assured him with feverish enthusiasm. “I don’t want this job.”

He nodded to himself.

“This is a very fine job,” he said. “Lots of responsibility for you.”

I felt sick to my stomach. “Yes, that’s why I don’t want it.”

“You are my most qualified teacher.”

“I know,” I sighed.

It spoke horribly of the education system in this country that I was even being considered for this. My entire reason for existing was to turn money into urine and hangovers. Why were people thinking of putting me in charge of the people who were in charge of children? Why was I even allowed to be in charge of children, come to that?

“But I think the ‘head of English’ role is something that would suit an older, more mature and seasoned person.”

“You look very old!” he said cuttingly. I suppose I had looked better. “You have some grey hair now.” He pointed to my head, even though most of the grey hairs were in other, more secret, places.

“I’m happy where I am,” I told him. Even that wasn’t absolutely true. I would have been happier still if I was on the riverfront and my job was testing the after-effects of huge quantities of beer, or making sure that chairs didn’t float off into the sky.

A man can dream.

“But think of the responsibility,” he told me as if this was a selling point.

“I really don’t think I’m looking for responsibility,” I said. Thinking quickly, I added, “At this point in my career, I’m really only interested in developing my skills in the classroom.”

“Yes, yes,” he said, clearly not understanding much, or anything, of what I was saying. “You have classroom skill. I like.”

“I can’t do this,” I told him firmly. “I can’t be the new Head of English, no matter how much of a pay-rise it is.”

“No pay-rise,” he told me with a happy smile. “Just more responsibility. Also, you work Saturday now.”

“No, no, no!” I persisted, my voice creeping up to a squeaking, shrill scream. “Saturdays is when I wake up late. It’s my one chance to shine.”

I couldn’t believe I had said that out loud.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I’m not ready.”

He frowned and curiously ruffled his chubby brow. “You not like responsibility?” he said, seeming very confused. “It’s power. People respect you if you have responsibility. You not like respect?”

I was dressed in a shirt I had got for one dollar on the market. It had a rip in back and was printed with a floral pattern over faded sky blue. Clearly earning respect was very low on my list of priorities.

“Not really,” I told him. “I really just like being a teacher.” I wasn’t as convincing a liar as I would have liked. Perhaps that was why so many girlfriends left me? But by girlfriends, I meant women I had met and by left me, I meant had never got with me in the first place.

“But...” He looked so very sad. “Responsibility!”

“No!” I said finally. “I’m very honoured that you considered me but I’m not ready for this.”

“Good for your career,” he told me. “Good for your future.”

I shook my head vigorously.

“But...” he said.

I excused myself and left.

Chapter 19

It was a dark time. It was a time of panic, a time of frustration, a time when the most sober, upright and steadfast of us would face being broken by the terrible obstacles we must face.

It was time for the exams.

Exams turned a school into a place of torture. The mood shifted from playful resistance, where the cool kids wallow in their stupidity, desperately trying to force themselves to believe their lack of intelligence is a benefit, to a mood of desperation. It's a period in the lives of the students where they are tested, and then the results show the truth that they have so fought to hide from themselves.

Nothing reveals the fact of who you really are more than a vigorous round of probing examinations. You can't tell the world you're not good at maths because your brain works a different way when you know you're about to be shown that your brain doesn't work at all.

If you're lazy, you're about to be found out. If you aren't as smart as you pretend to be, then soon, everyone is going to know about it.

I felt that I should have a grin on my face while I thought all of this, since I was a teacher and had joined the rank of the torturers, but a casual smugness wasn't so easy for me to find these days.

"How are you?" Lou asked. That was an excellent question and I was still working on it.

"It's been three weeks and I still don't know how to answer that," I told her with a smile. It was a hollow smile and it seemed more like an apology. "I don't know. I really don't know."

Lou and I had become closer over the past few weeks. Sharing that dreadful sight had created a bond between us. We now met every morning for breakfast and spent most evenings together as well. I had noticed a change in her and I'm sure that she could see one in me too.

“I know!” she said. Her voice was as unsure as mine but there was more strength to it. She had bottomless resolve, a self-reliance that I had to admit I slightly envied. “But, we have to forget about it.”

“I know...” She was right, of course. “I mean, it’s not like we had anything to do with it. We just walked in and found one of our friends dead and another in the middle of an accidental drug overdose.”

Lou looked around and said, “Keep your voice down.” She narrowed her eyes and looked quite furtive. “We walked away. Nobody knows we were there. There was no need for us to get involved so we didn’t. There was nothing we could have done for them. There’s no ambulance here for us to call, no proper police to help pick up the pieces.

“We’re alone out here and we only have each other to rely on. What those arseholes did, they did to themselves. It wasn’t our business and we didn’t make it our business.”

“Right,” I said. We had already agreed on all of this. “You know, I did hear something.”

“About Mac?”

I shook my head. “About Don. He is out of the hospital. I heard someone saw him around the guesthouse. I went past it yesterday and I saw his bike outside, so I think maybe he’s staying there.”

She nodded to herself. “Alright.”

“Nobody has seen or heard of Mac,” I said with a shrug. I sipped my coffee and looked for a moment out of the large, dirt-smudged windows to the side of our usual table. I watched as a bird flew past and landed on a table outside. It was a sparrow, a dirty little brown bird with flecks of black in its feathers.

It was the same exact bird we saw back home and they were just as common here. It seemed very strange to see something so familiar in a place so far removed from where I was from. It made one wonder what the differences really are, and if those differences really matter at all?

“I don’t care,” she said, clearly meaning it. She followed my lead and took a slow sip on her frothy latte. “I like Mac, but he was always his own worst enemy.”

I heard what she said but it didn’t really register on my brain. I heard the last few words and it just made me think about Raj. I saw the face of my friend with his greying, stretched-back skin and his cold, empty eyes sucking in all of the warmth in the room, leaving me feeling cold and hollow. I dreamed about it some nights.

“I don’t blame Mac,” I said. “Raj did it to himself. We were all worried about him for a long time. You know, he and I were friends while we worked on the course; we hung out all the time.”

“I’m sorry about your friend.” It was the first time she had said that.

I nodded and gave her a weak little smile—a little hesitantly and without much enthusiasm. “He really was a good friend at first. He was different before he started working here. He had problems at home after his Dad died, he told me once. At first, he tried to get more hours so he could pay off the mortgage but he ended up losing the house. His family moved back home and he just couldn’t face it anymore. He wanted a new start and thought he’d give this a go.

“I guess it didn’t work out so well for him.” Lou looked at me, a little sympathy in her cold, strong, steely eyes.

Changing the subject, or getting things back to the point, she said, “Have you spoken to Cam about all this yet?”

“Sure. I told him what we saw. I didn’t mention what Raj was saying. I thought it best to keep that little detail to ourselves. There’s no point dredging all that up, is there?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“No.”

This whole ordeal had certainly put things in perspective for both of us. All the stupid little things, the everyday annoyances had come to nothing now. Only the reality of our lives was left.

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes,” Rob agreed.

He was a teacher at my latest school. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of him. Del had suggested a lampshade might be good. He was quite literally the stupidest person I had ever met, and that was really saying something.

He was American, and was endlessly impressed with everything. He constantly blundered around commenting on how smart the kids were when everyone else was grumbling about the very opposite. He had no clue about what he was teaching, no idea about classroom management, and made no effort to do anything to change that. As a consequence, his students seemed to love him. He gave them free periods to do what they wanted. He brought in a guitar to sing songs with them and watched endless movies.

He was so laid back and so utterly ineffective that he even annoyed me. Mind you, everything annoyed me lately.

What really got to me was how we had a totally useless, vapid and hopeless member of the team and how that was all totally my own fault.

I glanced up to the clock and the time was ticking away. In only a few minutes, I would have to go to the first class and give them their exam. I would then watch while they toiled away in silence.

“I went to ‘Arctic Yogurt’ yesterday, an ice-cream place where they don’t sell ice-cream,” Rob said, his thoughts coming from some faraway place where the bright light of reality rarely cast a shadow.

“What?” I said in surprise. I had been thinking about anything but frozen dessert, for reasons that barely need explaining.

“Yeah!” he said thoughtfully. He rubbed his stubbled chin and grinned slyly. “Have you ever been? It’s like ice-cream, only it’s yogurt. It tastes the same as ice-cream, only it tastes like yogurt.”

“I haven’t been,” I told him flatly. This was a situation that would be likely to continue.

“It’s good! It’s got less fat than ice-cream but it’s cold, like ice-cream. It’s so clever, they found a way to freeze yogurt!”

“Did they? Truly we live in a time of miracles. Whatever next?”

He grinned at me, his face splitting into a wide, smug smirk. “You see?” he said. “I was thinking the exact same thing.”

“I doubt you were thinking the exact same thing!” I told him with a smug little smirk of my own. I was thinking about how Del had said that that he was about as much use as a concrete tampon. He had only met him once and had said that to his face after three minutes of letting him speak. At least he never said that to me: he only said I had ‘limited applications.’

“Lots of people are doing arctic yogurt,” he explained. His smugness intensified. “I looked it up, it’s actually pretty common.”

“Who would have thought?” I said. What bearing this had on anything was beyond me.

“But I have come up with something better!” he told me. “I’ve come up with the next big thing.”

For a moment, I suspected it might actually be a concrete tampon. When you got right down to it, you could make a lot of useless things from concrete; ‘cheese’ definitely wouldn’t work as well.

“What’s the problem with frozen yogurt?” he said rhetorically, trying to drag me into his enthusiasm for, what I was sure, was going to be a terrible idea.

I shook my head. I didn’t know, or care. As a grown man, I considered the consumption of puddings to be a useless distraction from the importance of beer.

“Yes, that’s right,” he said, misjudging his audience somewhat. “It’s too sweet.”

“Puddings are meant to be sweet,” I said with a curious frown.

“People like savoury too,” he told me. “Yogurt only comes in sweet things. That’s why we get it from strawberries and mangoes and tea!”

I found myself frowning in confusion. “I don’t think any of that is actually correct.”

“But I have come up with an answer…” he said, trying to lead me into whatever terrible solution he had found to a problem that didn’t exist. With a theatrical flourish, he announced his genius idea: “Arctic potato!”

I paused, gazing at him in silence as the seconds ticked by. No matter what I had expected, it absolutely had not been that. “Arctic…” I said, my voice trailing off into nothing.

“Yeah!” he said triumphantly. “We can have frozen mashed potato in cones for the people who like savoury instead of sweet.”

“What?”

“Instead of sweet sauces, like chocolate and red, we can have gravy and cheese,” he said with a wider grin than I have ever seen before on a human face.

“What?”

“Yeah, and we can have different flavours,” he explained, giving me a chilling insight into the mind of an idiot. “We can have ‘minced beef and onion flavour,’ ‘curry flavour’ and, for the vegetarians, we can have ‘gay flavour.’” He chuckled at his own brilliance. “What do you think?”

After a lengthy pause, I said, “I’m not sure I know what to think.” I hadn’t been this stunned since I found my dead friend gazing up at the ceiling, his lifeless face caked in vomit and blood. Of course, all this talk

of frozen potatoes in a cone with cheese dripping off the sides put all that silliness in perspective now.

I didn't know where to start. "Gay flavour???" That seemed as good a place as any.

"Sure," he said, with a very serious expression. "We're not going to be homophobic. We will have something for everyone, even the homosexuals."

"You know not all vegetarians are gay, right?" I said with a concerned frown. "Also, not all gay people are vegetarian. I actually don't eat meat myself, in fact."

He looked confused and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were one of them. Maybe we can cure you with minced beef and onion arctic-potato-cones?"

"Cure what, exactly?" I raised an eyebrow. I was sure I couldn't be hearing what I thought I was hearing. Could anyone be this stupid?

"Both!" he said with a proud flourish. "Wow, this could be bigger than I thought."

"Or smaller, perhaps?"

I treated people all the same, gay, straight, male, female, Black, White, Asian, I didn't discriminate; I didn't care about any of them. I was a person who was quite proud of my own self-serving arrogance, but this was beginning to offend even me.

"We might need to go even stronger," he said thoughtfully, contemplating who-knew-what. "Minced beef and onion might not be enough. We might have to have steak and carrots? But I think this is going to work."

I looked at the clock. "I would love to stay and discuss your complete disconnect with reality but I have to be invigilating an exam."

I was shaking my head as I left the room. With all the terrible, horrible, and outright offensive, ideas flying around the room, a truly great one hit me. I turned to him and said, "I have a few friends you

need to meet, called Sam and Sue. Let's go out for a beer: they would love to hear about your work."

"Great!" he said with a smile. "They won't steal my ideas, will they?"

I was fairly sure he was on safe ground with that one.

I sipped at a beer and grinned at Cam. He shook his head and had an amused frown on his face.

"Yeah, pretty safe ground," he said.

We both chuckled, him so reservedly that you could barely tell his lips had moved.

"Where do these people come from? Why are most of the teachers you meet here not normal people?"

"I don't know," I said with a shrug. "I guess it takes a certain kind of person to give up the stability of their life, the warm embrace of Western culture, and just come out and do something totally insane like this."

"Yeah!" he said. "It takes a different kind of people, that's for sure."

I managed a smile. Lou was on her way and we were meeting at the usual bar for dinner and a few beers. I had personally given up all pretence by now. I was a drinker and I was at peace with it. I drank socially, until drinking made me anti-social, then I usually drank just a few more. At weekends, my casual alcoholism could become quite bad.

There were plastic-laminated menus in front of us, but we knew the selection well enough not to need to look at them. There was 'Quattro Formaggio pizza,' a four-cheese topped pizza that was served on a partially defrosted bread circle smeared in ketchup with plastic-tasting mozzarella, a light dusting of parmesan and a torn-up cheese slice dropped on the top.

They had a vegetarian soup with bacon. They had a ‘Full English’ breakfast that came with hotdogs and eggs cooked the local way (smashed forcefully onto a hot plate and served with at least a third of the shell intact.) They had steak—but it looked more like the bottom of a shoe and smelled like an unlucky dog that wasn’t able to outrun a man with a net.

There wasn’t much fine-dining to be had, especially at the prices we were willing to pay. Consequently, we had fallen headlong, and willingly, into a rut where we simply made do, compensating the lack of quality for a quantity of beer.

I looked at Cam for a moment, just really looked at him. What had brought him here? What had really driven him out of his home and into the embrace of a foreign world? He wasn’t like the rest of us. He was quiet and reserved, thoughtful and cautious. He wasn’t a man to give up and try something new, just because he could. What was it, I wondered, that could make a man like him end up in a place like this?

Lou arrived and gave a slightly angry and bewildered glare as she peered at me from behind Cam. She pointed to him and shrugged a question. I gazed back at her and didn’t know what I was supposed to say.

“Lou is here,” I said to Cam. Quickly, I found the solution and downed the remains of my beer. I passed him the glass and said, “Why don’t you get us another round?”

Cam took the glass, shrugged and made his way to the bar, pausing only to nod a greeting to Lou as he went quietly and unassumingly about his task.

She leant in and said, shouting under her breath, “What is he doing here?”

“Who?” I said sarcastically. “My best friend and housemate that wanted to come out for a drink tonight? Do you mean why is he here?”

“You know what I mean!” she snapped at me. “We’re meant to be looking for Don. We can’t drag Cam along, can we?”

I sighed wearily. I was so fed up with it all. The whole rotten business was like a filthy black cloud hanging over my head. “I was thinking about this,” I told her sadly. “I decided that I just don’t care anymore. I don’t care about Don and Raj and Mac. I don’t give a shit about any of it.”

She looked as if she was about to say something but no words came out of her, for a change.

I continued instead. “I’m just glad we didn’t get dragged into it. I’m glad the police never came looking for us. I’m glad nobody blamed us for anything and I’m glad it’s over. I just don’t want to get involved, I just want to drink beer and get back to not making my parents proud of me, my Dad, at least.”

She rolled her eyes. “At least you’ve got parents to be ashamed of you,” she grumbled. “Mine disowned me!”

I frowned as I tried to work that one out.

She continued: “I don’t care about this whole nonsense about Cam.” She glanced over to check on him but she needn’t have worried. He hadn’t yet managed to get himself noticed at the bar. The local woman who was working there was playing on her phone, smiling to herself and Cam was standing beside her, scratching his head awkwardly. There was a small, but not insignificant, chance we might die of dehydration.

“I just want to talk to Don, if we can find him. I just want to know what he’s got to say.”

I shrugged. To be honest, I was worried too. I said, mostly for my peace of mind, “If anything was going to happen, it would have happened by now.”

“But we found the body!”

“Yeah, but we had nothing to do with what made Raj dead. You could take us out of the narrative and it wouldn’t make any difference to the way the story unfolded.”

That was true, and made me question a lot of the choices in my life.

“...I’m questioning a lot of the choices in my life,” I told Cam, slightly editing the conversation I had had with Lou while he was at the bar.

“Seeing Raj like that, I still can’t get the picture out of my head.”

Lou was nodding along. I knew she felt the same.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about,” Cam said. He sipped his beer with the same nonchalant apathy that he applied to everything else in his life. For just a fleeting moment I wondered if it was because he had seen something so much darker.

On the training course, I had met Kal, a man from Sudan. It had been a bad day and the trainer was trying to squeeze some English grammar points into minds that had no more space for them. There was quite a considerable amount of shouting involved and I walked out of the class grumbling and making impotent threats about the trainer, who was twice my size.

I noticed Kal was laughing as if none of this was bothering him in the slightest. His laughter was infectious and I soon found my own mood lifted. I casually asked how come none of this was getting to him.

“Oh, you don’t understand. In my country there was a bad time and people were dying. I was lined up with my friends and family and they made us drop to our knees.” My face must have slumped upon hearing this because he smiled even wider. “They had guns and they went down the line. I closed my eyes and looked up to the sun. I could feel the light on my face and I knew my God was smiling down on me that day.

“But in the darkness behind my eyelids I heard a bang. It was so loud, it scattered my thoughts and made my darkness seem even darker.”

His own smile vanished then, but just for a moment. “There was another bang and another. Between the gunshots I could hear the groans of my friends as they slumped to the floor in death. I could hear them thrashing around as more shots rung out, emptying the brains from their skulls and riddling their soft bodies with big, empty holes. I could only wait for my turn.”

“Shit...” I muttered.

“I heard an even bigger crash,” he said. “I opened my eyes and a bomb had exploded in the trees. It was like hell itself was opening up behind me. The soldiers were gazing and I didn’t know what else to do.

“I didn’t need to think, I just reacted. My legs were pumping, my chest was heaving and I was running. I didn’t stop running until I collapsed.

“My friend, after I saw that, I cannot get mad when a little man raises his voice to me. I cannot get mad about such little things ever again. I just feel sad that little men have such little lives that they raise their voice to me at all. I am nothing and I mean nobody any harm. When you are mad at me, you are just showing what a weak, little person you truly are.”

The story of Kal telling me all that played out so clearly in my mind that it was as if I was back there again. I almost remembered that this terrible, unimaginable horror had happened to me, but it was just my imagination, painting in the details of the shocking, terrifying reality of another man’s life.

What about Cam? Had he seen something that had made him give up? Had he done something truly awful?

“I wouldn’t be worried,” Cam said. “The police here don’t do anything. Nobody does anything. Nobody cares what happens, especially to a couple of foreigners.”

None of this was terribly reassuring.

“Anyway,” Lou said. “I’ve got people watching out for him. If Don turns up, we’ll find him. I have eyes in every corner of the city. He can’t possibly get past us.”

Cam looked at her blankly. He cocked his head very slightly to one side and said, “Oh, are you looking for Don?”

She glared at him accusingly. Even she couldn’t get mad at Cam; nobody could. She seemed to deflate and her expression softened. “Of course we’re looking for him!” she said sarcastically. “In case your ‘best friend’ didn’t mention, we’ve heard he’s around and we need to find out what he’s got to say.”

“Right...” he said, frowning incredulously. “And you are looking for him?”

“Bloody hell!” she exclaimed. “Yes! We’re looking for him!”

“Right...” he said with a strange little smile painted on his face. “It’s just that, well, you know...”

“Know what?” Lou snapped at him angrily, her patience reaching its limits.

“Well,” Cam pointed behind her. “It’s just that... Don is sitting right there!”

“Yeah, I was sitting right here!” Don said.

It was a different Don to the man I knew. The arrogant, almost aggressive front had been stripped away, pared back to reveal a frightened little man underneath. He was huddled and withdrawn, cowering slightly and leaning forwards across his table with his elbows pulled in while he cradled the sides of his neck with his hands.

He looked awful, pale and haggard with heavy dark rings beneath his eyes.

Lou didn’t seem to notice, or she wasn’t bothered by this in the slightest. It seemed that, to her, he was just a means to an end and she

never faltered in her pursuit of the goal. She and I had excused ourselves, ordered something terrible and gone off to speak with him. Cam seemed content to play on his phone until we got back. At the very least, if he had any complaints, he certainly never voiced them.

“What happened, Don?” she said. Her voice was low and hostile, much more so than the situation demanded.

Even I knew she was pushing too hard. I said, “We haven’t heard from you since we found you. We don’t know anything about what happened.”

He sighed and the effort seemed to hurt him. He groaned to himself and shifted his weight in his seat. “I don’t remember much myself,” he admitted, his voice low and coarse. It sounded like his throat had been burned. “It was just another night. Mac turned up, maybe a little earlier than usual. He had sold out and kept some gear back for us to party on.

“He let Raj cut it, so we sat around with a couple of beers while Raj got it ready. He told me he had picked up a new batch and it had sold well, well enough to make some extra cash, and keep back a bit more than usual. He said it was going to be a good night.”

“That worked out well,” said Lou.

I shot her an angry look, which meant nothing coming from me.

I said to Don, “We came in and found you. It was a mess, you were already out of it and Raj was dead. It looked like he had been for a while.”

“Yeah, I know he was dead,” he said. His mood darkened and he wasn’t looking at either of us anymore. We didn’t have to ask him questions or prompt him to get this out of him. These words just needed to be said and he didn’t seem like he wanted to hold them back any longer.

“I woke up at Mac’s,” he began. “Mac bundled me into the back of a cab. It had been a couple of days. He’d had me on a home-made

drip and dosed me up with his own stuff. Lucky for me, he knew what he was doing.

“My old place was pretty grim. I hadn’t given an ID when I moved in, just some cash up-front. They didn’t know my name, so Mac said I was out free and easy. He told me that someone would find the body once the rent was due and that was the end of that.

“I was a mess. I don’t know how I didn’t die.” Don sighed to himself and looked away, towards Lou but not at her. He was looking ahead, gazing emptily right through her.

“Mac was panicking by the time I was awake,” he said. “He had sold a load of that gear to at least seven of his best customers, and he told me that those guys shared it. He moved quantities too, not small amounts. These people were not nice. They weren’t guys that were going to be happy with being sold poison.

“Mac was scared. I don’t know how long it was, but suddenly he was gone. He left me in his guest-house and vanished. I was too weak to go out but I read the news. I watched and I read everything, just waiting to find out about it.”

“Jesus!” Lou said, rubbing her temples. “How many died?”

Don shrugged. “None. Nobody died. That’s just it, nothing happened at all.

“Mac left his phone behind. It took me a while but I soon realised he’d left me in his place with his phone so that if there were any problems, I’d get caught for it instead of him. Eventually, I read his messages and there was nothing. He was getting orders for more stuff from the same people, nobody else had any problems.”

“I don’t understand...” I said, frowning. “Then what happened?”

“I never found out,” Don said and shrugged, very weakly. He had lost weight. I noticed the bones in his shoulders imprinted against his pale shirt. “My guess is that this was Raj. He was always so out of it. He

cut the gear; he must have made a mistake and that's what caused the overdose."

I shook my head and muttered, "Bloody hell."

"Bloody hell," Don agreed.

"What about the police? What about Raj?" Lou asked.

He huffed and shook his head. "They found Raj!" he said with a wry smile. "It made the news, just barely. They say it was a heart-attack. No suspicious circumstances.

"They found him over two weeks ago. I never heard anything since. I had his phone for a while, it never even rang."

He looked up and these weren't the eyes of the man I knew. He was broken: his spirit had been through more than it could handle and had snapped under the weight of it. "Nobody even missed him."

Lou began to smile. "So that's it?" she said. She clapped her hands together. "It's really all over..."

"Yeah," I said darkly. "That's it. A friend died and nobody cared. He fell off the rails and paid for it with his life and nobody even really noticed." I looked over to Cam and couldn't help but wonder about him. What was it that Raj had found?

Don looked over, his face hard and haggard. He said softly, "I bloody noticed."

Chapter 20

I sat at a blue plastic chair with a grey metal frame. It creaked under my slender, almost perfectly proportioned physique that was topped off with an expensive, and quite recent, haircut.

I peered at my interview subject as she looked back at me nervously. The room was small, a little office that usually belonged to the academic organiser, whatever that job–title actually meant. I had never seen an academic establishment so disorganised.

The atmosphere was just right. It had the perfect blend of anticipation and nervousness. My subject was sitting with a rigid posture in her chair, leaning forwards awkwardly, just waiting in polite silence.

I read her notes a bit more and relished my position, the authority, the power I had over her. I had never really had any power over anyone before, especially women.

It had all started with my mother and had only got worse since then.

“Welcome to this interview,” I said, politely, yet with a hint of professional detachment.

“Thank you,” the young, local girl said in excellent English followed by a nervous little giggle.

“Tell me about yourself.”

She rolled her eyes, thinking about the question. “I used to study at ‘Giant Golden Sparkling Elephant School of International Amazingness’ but I left a year ago. I dream of one day being a businesswoman and making my family very rich. I want to marry someone with so much money that he doesn’t know how to spend it all.” She giggled and I felt that she might be trying to fish without the proper bait.

I rolled my eyes. They all wanted to be rich, but never had any idea why, or even what they would spend the money on. Somehow, I doubted she wanted to help many poor people.

“That’s great. What was your strongest subject in school?”

She rolled her eyes and hummed to herself. “I liked physics.”

“Sciences?” I said in surprise. Judging from my notes, her academic achievements were lacklustre, at best. “Why was that?”

She giggled to herself, “Our physics teacher was hot.”

“OK,” I said, wrenching the interview back on track. “So you’re applying for a position with this company.”

“Am I?” she asked and giggled again.

I rolled my eyes again. This was the seventy-third interview that day and each one felt worse than the last. “So what experience do you have?”

“What kind of experience?” she asked. “You mean, with my physics teacher?”

“No!” I said suddenly. “What?”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes widening. “I got quite a lot.”

“No!” I insisted. “I don’t want to hear that. Why don’t you tell me about different jobs you’ve had?”

“With my physics teacher?” she asked innocently.

“No!” I snapped. “No, no, no.”

This wasn’t going well. I closed my eyes and shook my head. I resorted to the time-honoured interview questions I had written down in front of me.

“Tell me a joke!” That was always a good way to tell if someone could think on their feet.

“I heard there was a joke about impotency going around,” she said. “But I’ve never known it to come up.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. That was actually funny, unless she heard it from the physics teacher. That would be quite creepy. “If you could be any crayon, what colour would you be?”

“Pink and purple,” she said with a flirtatious smile.

I was afraid to ask why so I just said, “Good answer.”

“Do you know if the physics teacher is married?” she asked.

“No, I don’t know or care,” I told her. Enough was enough. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Fifteen,” she said and giggled. “Almost fifteen.”

“Wow!” I mumbled. “Well, you’ve done very well on your spoken English interview test. You can go now.”

“Yay!” she said enthusiastically. “I never passed a test before, not in the traditional way.”

“I’m sure,” I said sarcastically. “Please get out.”

Chapter 21

I was invigilating my final exam and the room was quiet, except for all the noise.

The students were lined up and spread out to minimise the possibility of cheating. It didn't really help because cheating was such an endemic part of the society that the prevailing attitude was that it should be expected.

If a student was found cheating during an exam, they were penalised by losing half of their score, but would be allowed to continue nonetheless. During the exams, toilet breaks were no longer allowed—the bathroom stalls were crammed with notes and they were not hidden with any subtlety. They were crammed in everywhere, piles of papers jutting out from behind the cistern, tucked in behind the pipes and secreted behind the poster on the door that told them the correct way to sit on a toilet.

Smartphones were banned, even for teachers. Many of the local teachers had been caught photographing the exams and sending them to students in exchange for a few dollars.

It was all endlessly chaotic.

Maz, a teacher I once had to endure working with, said that the previous year he had been watching a maths exam. A local teacher had been handing out note-paper for the students to work on. When he briefly left the room, he had been asked for some, and handed out a sheet himself. He found one with marks all over it and it turned out to be the answers. He told me there had been no investigation, no repercussions and no actions taken. The principal just screwed up the evidence and told him angrily that the teacher must have had made a mistake.

In fact, cheating was such a part of life that I had asked the students if they had done it and couldn't find one single student who

wasn't happy to admit to my face that they did. There was no shame to it, and no realisation that what they were doing was undermining their own education. I quickly realised it was pointless trying to labour the point. They were going to cheat no matter what I said to them.

Lying and dishonesty was a huge part of life. Paying bribes, scamming, doing favours behind the scenes and being generally untrustworthy and two-faced was the normal thing. My Western sensibilities were ripped apart, shattered, shredded and trampled into the dirt.

All this made invigilating less fun than dipping my testicles into a bucket of electric-eels. There was only one thing that could make the experience worse.

"Morning," Rob whispered. He was close enough to my ear to fill it with little droplets of his hot, foul breath. It smelt like mint and rotting pork.

I recoiled suddenly in surprise and frowned at him. I realised he meant no harm: he just lacked an understanding of social behaviour. In fact, I had met dogs that had a better grasp of the rules than he had.

I replied, "Morning," without sticking my tongue in his ear.

He grinned at me and I prayed to the gods of burned-out foreign language teachers that he wasn't going to ramble on about frozen vegetables on sticks while I watched two dozen students fail biology.

The gods must have smiled on me because he said, "You'll never guess what happened to me last night?"

My mind filled with possibilities. The town was a playground for idiots with money in their pockets and they rarely come more idiotic than him.

"I met this girl in a bar," he told me with lashings of enthusiasm. "We've been chatting on the internet for ages and I finally got her to agree to come out with me."

“Right!” I muttered with a polite smile. I wished he would just stop talking, but the gods only answer one prayer a day, it seemed.

“We met in a nice restaurant,” he told me, whispering a little too loudly at the front of the class while the students were writing down their answers. “I wanted to show off and make it all special for her.”

“Burger King?” I joked.

He frowned curiously at me. “How did you know?”

I sighed to myself. I wonder if I prayed really hard for him to be struck by lightning and killed, the gods would consider one other little favour for me.

“So we met and she’s not too bad,” he said. “I’ve had better, when I’ve paid for it, but she looked pretty clean and seemed up for it.”

“Well, of course,” I said sarcastically. “You took her to Burger King. I bet her knickers just fell right off, didn’t they?”

I kept my voice low but I noticed a little ripple of interest in our conversation from the students. I couldn’t help feeling they were about to get a crash-course in the kind of biology that nobody wanted to hear about.

“They did later,” he said. “Funny story about that. They weren’t actually knickers and I’m not sure she was actually a girl.”

“I see,” I said. Why was I not in the least surprised? “And just when I was thinking that this story couldn’t get any more romantic.”

“But I had put in the work, you see?” he said, whispering his hot, foul breath into my ear. One of the students at the front looked up from her work and glared at him. “I had been chatting with her for days so I figured I should see this out.”

“Her?” I said with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, women can have penises now. Gender isn’t just defined by our genes. I heard that on the internet.”

The girl at the front looked up from her biology paper and frowned curiously to herself.

“Science doesn’t agree with that, nor does the entire rest of the world.”

“Well,” he began with a shrug. “I actually kind of liked it. I wasn’t sure I would at first but it wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

I said nothing, which did seem like exactly the right thing to say and that was precisely the right time to say it.

“I wonder why they’re born like that?” he said so loudly that several other students looked up to see what was happening.

I held my finger up to my mouth and shushed him. “What do you mean?” I whispered.

“I wonder why women are born with penises,” he said, looking like there wasn’t a sane and reasonable thought in his entire head. After a moment of silence, I realised that he was actually waiting for an answer. This wasn’t a joke and he was actually serious.

“What?” I said, and probably sounded about twice as condescending as I intended. “Women aren’t born with penises!”

It all seemed terribly confusing for him. “But she had a penis!” he said, reasoning this all out in horrifyingly slow motion.

“Men are born with penises: women are born with vaginas,” I explained, keeping my voice low.

A hand went up around the middle of the class. “Teacher,” a young boy called out. “Are you discussing question 7? Is there a mistake on the test?”

“No!” I told him grumpily. “Probably yes, but no, we’re not discussing it.”

Rob crossed his arms and looked at me suspiciously. “So if only men are born with penises, how come my girlfriend has one and she’s a girl?”

I looked at him with one of my sternest, most serious looks. “Work it out, Rob!”

“I don’t...” He frowned to himself as his brain chewed over the problem. “Oh...” he said, looking a little disgusted with himself.

“Oh...”

“Yes, Rob,” I said. It would have been kinder to have had him strangled at birth. Nobody should have to go through life like this, I thought.

At almost full volume, he said to himself: “That explains a lot, such as why she didn’t have any breasts and why she could beat me at arm-wrestling.”

“Oh, dear god!” I muttered to myself. It seemed that this wasn’t going to stop.

“Paul,” he said, very seriously. “Paul, am I gay now?”

I looked at him and actually felt a little sad. People have explained this emotion to me and, apparently, it’s called sympathy. After experiencing it, I decided that I didn’t really enjoy it.

I don’t know why people bother with it.

Taking a little pity on him, I said, “No, Rob, you’re not gay. You just need to eat a frozen potato cone with steak and carrots. You’ll be fine by the end of the week.”

“Thank god! I had forgotten about that. You’re a life-saver, Paul.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Just one problem,” he said softly. “Where do I find frozen potato cones with steak and carrots?”

I sighed loudly and then turned to look at him. Somewhere deep in his unconscious mind, in the part of his brain that managed, somehow, to keep the lights on, he must know that he was a complete idiot. He must know that people would rather eat their own faeces than talk to him.

“Luckily for everyone, I don’t think you can find them,” I told him. “I’m pretty sure plenty of regular steak will have the same results.”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “My uncle Ned is a farmer and he says they inject so much growth hormones and chemistry into those cows that it’s a wonder everyone isn’t coming out a little bit fruity now.”

I looked at him incredulously. “Chicken, then?”

“No! They walk funny. I need a more manly animal.”

“Pork?” I suggested. “I hear most men are pigs so that should work.”

“Brilliant!” he said. “I owe you two beers.”

“I passed on the beer,” I told Lou. “I have never met someone that I more strongly suspect of being a result of foetal alcohol syndrome.”

“I only met one person,” she said.

I rolled my eyes and grumbled, “Nice, thanks.”

“I did actually have a reason for inviting you for lunch.”

I suspected as much. Very few people simply enjoyed my company. I worked hard at making sure of it. “Go on!”

“I don’t know if you heard, but Don left,” she said. “He sent me a message. He said he was just bugging out, leaving to cross over the border and he wasn’t coming back.”

I wasn’t surprised. It was something Lou and I had talked about and it was more surprising that he hadn’t done it earlier. “I can’t say I’m sorry to see him go,” I said. “Did he go off to join Mac somewhere?”

“I don’t know. He said Raj’s parents were coming to collect his things. He couldn’t handle it so he’s moving on. That’s all he said.”

“I don’t blame him, I guess,” I said and took a bite out of a sandwich made from oddly sweet bread and surprisingly full-flavoured salad. “For all he knows, this could all have been his fault. Who knows what really happened in that room? Someone could have mixed up the drugs he took. It could just as easily have been him.”

Lou took a bite of something and, just for a moment, I was convinced I heard a little squeak. She said darkly, her voice lowered to just over a whisper, "It could have been deliberate, you know."

"No!" I said firmly. Admittedly, the thought had occurred to me. "No, we're not talking about that."

"OK," she said. I suspected we hadn't yet heard the end of it. "All I'm saying is that somehow, an experienced drug-user with a vendetta against Cam ends up dead and then the witnesses all start to disappear."

"I'm sure Cam didn't kill anyone," I snapped. "Cam doesn't have a dramatic bone in his body. A man walked into him and knocked a beer out of his hand last week. He apologised and offered to buy him a pair of new shoes. He's not capable of doing anything interesting, let alone dangerous."

"But..."

"No!" I said sternly. "Enough. Cam is my best friend. Leave him alone."

"But," she said with a smug grin. "You don't really know anything about him. How can he be your best friend?"

"That's the way I like it," I told her with a wry smile. Maybe that wasn't just a silly joke. Was I really such a vapid, empty shell of a person that I actually preferred my friends to be dull and hollow like myself? What did it really say about me that I distanced myself from people like Del and chose friends like Cam instead?

It was probably fine.

"Did he leave the key to his bike?" I said with a raised eyebrow. "His was much nicer than mine. I wouldn't say no to a free upgrade."

"I knew you were going to say that!" she said. "Actually, I wouldn't mind going through his stuff too. There must be some good things there."

"Well, he was at the guesthouse," I shrugged. "I bet they'll let us in if we ask nicely."

“I bet they will if we ask with a few dollars. Meet you there at 7?”

“Deal, I told her,” I said to Cam.

He had insisted on coming out for a beer after work. I was running out of excuses, so I didn’t bother trying to make one. I was worried he might become suspicious about things, if he wasn’t already.

“So we’re going to root through Don’s stuff and see if there’s anything worth having?” he said.

“Well, Lou and I are,” I said, correcting him. “We had to find him half-dead so I think it’s fair if we get first pick. I think Raj’s stuff is all there, too, so you’re welcome to have a look and see about getting back some of the money he owes you.”

Cam seemed happy enough with that, or miserable about it. It was honestly impossible to tell. I wondered if anything brought him pleasure, other than murdering ex-girlfriends and burying them in the woods. To be fair, I thought to myself, rather unfairly, I didn’t know for sure if he buried his victims in the woods. I then realised there was nothing to actually suggest he had done anything wrong at all.

While I was absently lost in my thoughts, I looked around the guesthouse. I had been staying at the place now for nearly a year. During that time not much had changed. A few old, battered faces had been replaced with some new, and slightly less battered ones, the smells had been covered up with fresher, more interesting odours, and there were couple of extra chips in the peeling plaster.

The staff were the same and had the same dead-eyed glassy stares as always. They sat perched on the available stools playing on their phones until someone barked loudly enough across the bar at them.

The people hadn’t changed. It was a sea of familiarity and it was safe, easy and comfortable. Going to the guesthouse was like putting on a favourite pair of shoes or eating a meal your Mum had cooked for you. It was comfortable but it was a little too easy. Had I really come all this

way and put through myself through all this just to end up stuck in a very slightly different rut?

“What are you thinking about?” Cam asked, his voice rudely cutting into my thoughts, as they wandered away to their own quiet place.

“I don’t know,” I said. Perhaps I really didn’t. Perhaps all the beer, the apathetic half-arsed teaching and the constant flow of complete idiots I worked with had numbed my brain to the point where I just didn’t notice it anymore.

Cam might not know anything, for all I knew. He certainly never expressed very much of anything that made me suspect that he might. He said, “Del is coming later.”

I cringed. I was in no mood to deal with him. I hated the way I always felt he was looking down on me, even though I knew he wasn’t actually looking down on me at all. When I actually thought about it, I hated a lot of things.

“Mentors are all arseholes!” I grumbled.

“You’re an arsehole,” she pointed out unfairly. “Sam and Sue are coming too,” he added.

I cringed at least another two times.

“They make me cringe, too, sometimes,” Lou said, as we waited by the bar. “I think you take them too seriously, though. I just think they’re funny. It also annoys them more if you laugh at them than if you take them seriously.”

“Maybe!” I cast a glance back to the table where our group had swelled to include Del and the Americans. There were at least two others that I hadn’t met before, and another was standing over them chatting. He might end up joining us for the night—people often did. “I invited Rob from work,” I said with a grin. “He’s getting some very odd ideas

about homosexuality and gender and I can't wait to see what Sam and Sue make of him."

"Paul," she said. She bit her bottom lip and looked at me with a very serious face. "Paul, I still dream of him. I still wake up some nights and I see his face staring up at me with his cold, dead eyes."

"Sam?" I said in surprise.

"Raj!" she grumbled at me. "Why would I see Sam's cold, dead eyes staring up at me?"

I shrugged and smiled to myself. "Because you're a slut?"

She smiled back and looked out towards the Americans. "Nobody is that much of a slut!"

I looked at her, and felt my own face had darkened. "Some nights I have to leave the lights on. When it's dark, I see his face in my mind. It's all I can see: the picture fills my whole head.

"I feel like the memory is screaming at me."

Lou nodded, and I felt the weight of her hand on my shoulder. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. We just waited for the girl who worked behind the bar to get back to us. I looked over to the table, to where life was happening, where everything was carrying on as usual.

I said, mostly to myself, "I try to remember that Raj did this to himself. He got into the drugs. That was nobody else's fault. We couldn't have done anything to help him. It's not our fault, is it?"

"Nobody is saying it's our fault," she said firmly.

"I mean, we tried to help, really. We let his rent slide, we paid his bar-tab, we helped him out at work. What more could we do?"

Could we have done more? I honestly didn't know anymore.

"We're not to blame," she said. Hearing those words was a welcome relief indeed. I didn't want to be blamed for the death of a friend.

How could someone ever live with something like that? What would that do to a person?

After another long pause, I said, "I guess it will get better."

She nodded back to me.

At that moment, the girl came around from the offices around the back. She held out the key to Don's room and smiled. I grinned at Lou as she reached out and snatched it up greedily. I sighed and handed over the agreed amount of money.

"Let's do this!"

"And so here we are," I said, as we stood outside the room. The door was a scratched, beaten old thing but it was so much more than a door. To us, to me and Lou, it was a way to bury the past. It was a chance to put some of our demons to rest and to put this whole sorry incident behind us.

"Here we are," said Cam. He had been quite keen to join us—although he had never shown any selfishness before, or much generosity. He seemed motivated to see if there were any of Raj's things that were worth selling. I didn't know how much rent he owed him, but when I thought about it, it must have been a fair amount. He had every right to snatch as much of it back as he could.

"We're doing this?" Lou said with a little grin. She had the key in her hand but she hesitated. Did she need my permission, or just a last little push to get her started?

I stepped forward, closer to the door and put my hand on it. "Don told you he's leaving," I said. "He told you he's gone. We're actually being good friends by clearing out the stuff he left behind."

The words certainly made sense, not that I was sure I meant any of them. In any case, if the staff got into the room, they would clean out his things more thoroughly than we possibly could.

"OK," she said with a sigh. "Let's do this!" She reached out and put the heavy key into a well-worn hole. She twisted it and the loud clank of a significant lock snapped back.

We took one more look at one another before we pushed inside.

Although we had never said as much to one another, there were more than just the ethical concerns keeping us out of that room. It certainly brought back memories for me and I know Lou had hesitated for the same reason. I didn't know what we were going to find inside that room: it could be just as bad as the last time we had gone into a place Don was living.

Could it even be worse?

I invited Cam to join us, not so much so he could check for any belongings of Raj, but mostly for moral support. Even Lou hadn't objected.

Inside the room, there was a refreshing lack of dead bodies, but it was a grim, depressing little place. There were no windows and no natural light. The plaster-covered walls were unevenly finished and jarringly crooked. Don's belongings were strewn around, the bed was left unmade and the air smelt stale.

We closed the door behind us. I can't even remember which one of us it was—I just remember the sound of the bolt clicking back into place as we locked ourselves inside.

"Don was a weird guy!" Lou said, gazing raptly at the mess he had left behind in his stead. "On the surface he seemed so together, so confident, but then you see this..."

I nodded. I had always known he was all front and no substance, and now I was literally standing in the very same lack of substance. Beside the bed was a dustbin overflowing with rubbish where the lid had fallen to the side and the trash was crammed down hard unevenly where he had clearly been stomping on it with his foot. Somehow, this spoke volumes about him.

"Where do we start?" Cam said.

Lou, never a person to employ subtlety, said, "Dive in, boys. Shout out when you find something interesting."

“And did you find anything interesting?”

Del was as laid back as ever, sipping on a beer and looking as if he was in command of every tiny aspect of the things going on in his life.

“Not really,” I was forced to admit. I would have loved to have told him about something that would have shattered his world, blown his mind and wrenched him into a whole new, wider realm of existence. “We mostly found a lot of old garbage.”

“I always thought Don was a bit of a loser,” he said. “I guess this finally proves it. What can you say about a highly materialistic man whose entire life can be reduced to the contents of a bin–liner?”

“Hey,” a voice called out to us. I looked round. A short, dark, bald man was staring angrily at us. “Do any of you guys know the man who owns the bar round the corner?”

Del and I looked at one another and shrugged. Del took the lead, which surprised nobody. He said, in a friendly, measured tone that still managed to convey authority, “No. Is there a problem, mate?”

“Yeah,” he grumbled and pushed past our table, rudely pressing himself against Sam and Sue’s chairs as they pretended not to notice. “He’s a bloody racist.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Del told him and turned to leave him to it. He looked to me and shook his head and then shrugged. Sipping on his beer, he seemed to notice Sam and Sue. They were flustering, angrily trying to explain to Rob why his views about everything were horribly wrong. I didn’t much like them, and disagreed with almost everything that came out of their mouths, but Rob’s views about everything were horribly wrong, so they did have a point there.

I took a moment to enjoy watching them all bluster about uncomfortably, secure in the knowledge that I had made that happen.

Del turned his attention back to me. “So what did you find?”

Cam sipped on his beer next to me and quietly joined the conversation by saying nothing.

“We found his laptop and two mobile phones,” I began. “The hard-drive was missing out of the laptop and one of the phones had been smashed. I don’t know if it was deliberate but they were both tucked down behind the bed so I’m guessing it was.”

“Well, it’s cheap enough to fix the laptop,” Del said, looking like he was pleased for me.

I nodded. “There was a bag stuffed with Raj’s things, too,” I said. “Cam took that because Raj owed him a lot of money. It had his laptop, phone and even his wallet. Don hadn’t touched any of it. I think he was worried about getting involved with the police after Raj died.”

“Makes sense,” he agreed. “To be fair, I think that he did the right thing to get out of here.”

“You would have run, too?”

“I didn’t say that,” he said with a smile. “What I mean is that this place is very easy. You can buy prescription drugs over the counter; you can get whatever you want at a fraction of the price you would expect to pay in other places. Beer is cheaper than bottled water and good booze is virtually tax-free. This kind of freedom is just too much for some people. We grow up in the West with the government regulating everything, with the police watching us, with controls on everything we do, think and say.

“It’s like when you think about a puppy. If a puppy becomes a pet it never really grows up. It stays a baby all its life. It just gets bigger while it does it. It never achieves true adulthood. It is always reliant on its owner to feed it, shelter it and look after it.

“It’s the same with people. Government should just be there to keep the trains running and get the bins collected, but we left it in the hands of crazy, narcissistic, grasping people and they took more and more power from us. Now, most people are just babies in big bodies.

They can't really take care of themselves and never really grow into proper, fully-realised adults.

"People come here and they go wild. They aren't used to not having someone telling them they're not allowed to do things. This is what happens when you let people, who have never really been adults, loose on the world."

"Wow..." Cam said and sipped on his beer. "You're right."

I just sat there frowning. It had never occurred to me before, but it all made perfect sense. I just wished it didn't make perfect sense about me.

A loud and angry voice shouted, "Hey, you guys need to come and beat up this racist!"

I turned, and it was the same angry drunk as before. Behind him was a tall, friendly-looking man with long dreadlocks tracing down his neck. He was mouthing the word 'sorry' and trying to get his friend back under control.

He shouted, "My mate here is a musician and they wouldn't let him play. We should go round there and beat the shit out of him."

"I'll pass," Del said, taking the lead once again. Even Sam and Sue had stopped to listen. They both looked nervous. "My friends and I are just out for a quiet drink. I don't know you and I feel bad for you, but we're not going to be able to help you, I'm afraid. You're welcome to join us for a drink if you want to take the time to calm down."

I was impressed at the masterful way Del dealt with things. I would never have admitted it, of course.

Several drinks later and things were not taking the time to calm down.

His friend had given up and the man was alone, drinking shots of something dark brown while he was seething to himself.

At our table, things had settled into a more or less friendly argument about gender equality. Sue insisted that Lou needed feminism

and Lou insisted that she was more than capable of standing up for herself and didn't want anyone telling her what she needed.

Del said to me, a little glint in his eye. "You see what I mean?"

I wasn't sure I did.

"Look at them argue," he said. "What they're saying doesn't matter, not really. All you need to remember is that everyone is different and it's not your job to change them. People try to change other people to be like them because they don't really like who they are. Think about that!"

I frowned and wondered what exactly that meant. The beer wasn't helping with the thinking, not at the volume I had already consumed.

"Nobody argues that the sun will come up in the sky tomorrow morning. We all know it will. People argue about religion, whose car is better, or which idiot to vote for. People argue about the things they don't really know, or things they're not sure about. They need people to agree with them so they feel safer in their choices."

The angry drunk said loudly, cutting into our conversation, "Maybe you're all racists too?" He turned to glare at us threateningly.

Del put down his beer and huffed to himself. I didn't think he was going to even dignify that with a comment but he did. "Do we look like racists?" he said. He gestured around the table and laughed. "Is that what we look like?"

"Yeah!" he said with a snarl.

Del chuckled and tried to ignore him.

The man sneered. "You're probably all racists."

Against my better judgement, not that judgement was really my strong suit, I found myself intervening. "How are we racists, by any stretch of the imagination? I'm half-Irish, Cam here is a Filipino, Del is..." I frowned and turned to him curiously. "Sorry, what are you?"

Del laughed. "What do you mean, what am I? I'm black, you idiot."

“Yeah, I know you’re black!” I said with a shrug. “But where are you from?”

“South London, originally,” he said. “My father was Jamaican, if that’s what you mean.”

Cam said, “I’m only half Filipino: my Dad was Spanish.”

“Right!” I said. Turning back to the angry man, I said, “And I’ve slept with more local prostitutes than I can remember. What could be less racist than that?”

“Almost anything, actually,” Del told me evenly.

That was a fair point. Stupid beer!

Sam blinked his white eyelids incredulously, puffed out his chest and said proudly, “I’m one sixteenth Cherokee on my mother’s side.”

“And I’m not racist, I’m Jewish,” Sue said indignantly. She shrugged and added, “Partly, I think. My grandfather was a jeweller.”

I felt I had more or less proved my point, in the clumsiest way imaginable.

The angry man just scowled at us. He grumbled to himself and said, “He looks gay!”

I presumed he was talking about Sam, who certainly looked that way to me, too. I wasn’t sure what point he was trying to make, though.

“So?”

“I hate gays.”

Sam looked shockingly offended, but he also had the exact same expression when I held the door open once for Sue. It was hard to know what might be going through his mind but I could imagine that he had been waiting for this all of his life.

He could now spew all of his pent-up irritations with the world, a world that had made him annoying, chubby and unattractive, onto someone who might actually deserve it.

Instead, he crossed his arms and pouted. Presumably, people who deserved it would only be verbally assaulted if they weren't larger than he was.

Del smiled and shook his head. "Ignore him. If he really hates gay people, it says more about him than it does about anyone else. It's not your problem."

"Yeah," I agreed. I tried unsuccessfully to help by half-drunkenly adding, "I mean it's not like he knows you well enough to hate you personally, like the rest of us."

Sam raised an eyebrow and pouted some more.

"And you, fatty..." he said to me.

"Me?" I was annoyed now, I could feel the blood rising. "I'm not fat."

"Ignore him," Del warned.

"You piece of shit!" I growled, standing up and clenching my fists. The red mist was descending over me, my temper was flaring, and I was going to do something ridiculous.

"Leave it, Paul," said Del, but I ignored him. I found myself pushing through the crowd directly at him. The angry man wasn't laughing anymore. He looked a bit shocked, even though he must have known he had this coming.

I balled my fist and drew back my arm to punch him. I had never punched anyone before, and I was wondering how this was going to go. Was it going to be like in the movies where he would helplessly gaze up at me after I vanquished him with a single blow? I suspected not. More likely I would break every bone in my hand and get the shit kicked out of me for doing it.

Suddenly, I stopped moving. It took me just a moment, but I realised that someone had a firm grip on my arm and had wrapped their other arm around my chest. I was lifted bodily off the floor for a moment and heard Del's growling voice in my ear, "No, Paul. He's not worth it."

I was back on my feet as the world whizzed around my head. It seemed, oddly, as if it happened in that order, landing first, spinning before landing second.

The angry man was still on his feet and didn't seem quite so angry anymore. Suddenly, his face contorted into a snarl and he grinned smugly. "Arseholes!" he sneered at us. "You're just a bunch of arseholes."

I agreed in principal.

Del rolled his eyes at me and sighed. "I never normally do this," he said to me with a grumble. He inhaled deeply, turned and punched the man quite hard in the face.

There was a sickening slapping sound of knuckles against cheek and a weak, whimpering groan as the man buckled at the knees and tumbled over backwards. He slipped, crumbled to the floor and lay there, reeling for a moment, whimpering and moaning.

"They may be arseholes," Del said, not even sounding very angry about things. "But these arseholes are my friends and that's just how it is."

It was strange the different things that push us over the edge.

I looked at the man lying on the floor, holding his cheek and gazing up at us with fear in his eyes. It wasn't as satisfying as I thought. He was just another guy who had had a bad day. It could have been any one of us at any other time. Any one of us except Cam, perhaps.

Del looked at me and sighed. "I'm a teacher. That lesson had to be taught. I think I'm going to get us another beer."

With that, he went off to the bar as if nothing had ever happened. I reached down and helped the angry man up. He looked at me quizzically, but took my hand as I helped him to his feet.

"Beer?" I asked and flashed him a weary, friendly smile.

Chapter 22

The ‘Human Resource’ manager was a woman who looked as if she had stepped out of a swim-wear catalogue. She wore a skirt that was way too short and it showed off the length of her near-perfect thighs.

Her blouse was left open at the top, revealing a teasing glimpse of a lacy bra, white and worn tight enough that it forcefully pushed her cleavage up towards the bottom of her neck.

She gently ran her finger up and down her neck seductively. If she had not had a face that looked as if it had been used as a motorcycle braking system, that would have made her look quite attractive.

“So how did you enjoy working here?” she said.

I blinked incredulously and sat back in my chair. “I’m leaving?” I asked in surprise.

Her face shifted to a frown. “This is an exit interview. Weren’t you told?”

From my expression, it must have been fairly obvious that I hadn’t been. To really nail the point home, I told her, “No. Nobody said anything.”

“Typical,” she said. “Nobody but me seems to know what they’re doing in this place.”

It didn’t seem to be worth pointing out that she was in charge of humans and I was one of their resources, so she really didn’t seem to have any idea what she was doing either.

“Why am I leaving?” I asked, curious and a little disappointed. I had been enjoying the very refreshing working environment where almost no effort was required. The last thing I wanted to do was have to find a whole new job and start over yet again.

“It’s this time of year,” she explained, looking sultry, in an incompetent sort of way. “All of our contracts end at this time of year. New contracts start in the new academic year.”

“Isn’t that only two weeks away?”

She nodded, then shook her head. “I’d have to check the calendar.”

All this seemed needlessly complicated and jarringly inconvenient. “So do I have to reapply for my own job?”

“Maybe,” she said.

No further explanation appeared to be forthcoming. “Well, what do I do if I want to stay here?”

“You want to stay here?” she said with a smile. “That’s great. You should have said.”

“I feel like you should have asked.”

She began tapping away at the keys of her computer. “I’ll just check to see if there are any vacancies.”

“Well, you just ended the contract on my job, so I’m sure there’s at least one.”

“Ah,” she said, raising a finger. “But someone might have already applied for that position.”

“But I’m still in it, aren’t I?”

“Technically yes, but actually no. It’s our policy.”

“Oh, this is your policy,” I said, pretending that it all suddenly made sense.

She glared at me for a moment and then her angry face melted into a smile that was more fake than my last girlfriend’s orgasms.

“We have this policy to protect our staff, you see.”

“How does this protect your staff?”

“By protecting them,” she told me.

I ran my fingers through my hair and huffed in frustration.

“Good news,” she said suddenly in a sing-song voice. “Your old job is available. It doesn’t look like you have been replaced yet. You’re so lucky.”

“Well, I’m still doing the job. You literally asked me to leave the staff–room to come here about three minutes ago.”

“Yes,” she said with a beaming smile. “I’m going to recommend you for the position. You’ll know at the end of next week if you’ve successfully applied for the job.”

“My job?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“So I’ll be unemployed for two weeks before the next semester starts?” I grumbled.

“Technically no, but actually yes. I’m sure you’ll get the job—people always do.”

“So, is this just a way to get out of paying us for two weeks of leave?”

“We’re protecting you from getting paid,” she said and scowled at me.

At least that actually made some kind of sense.

“Thank you.”

Chapter 23

“To him, maybe it was nothing at all,” Lou said to me over breakfast.

For once, even I knew I was talking too much. Seeing the angry man beaten to the ground by Del, who dealt with the entire matter with the casual disregard of a man who had done nothing whatsoever of consequence, had certainly struck a chord with me.

“Maybe,” I agreed.

Cam said nothing. I looked at him and smiled but he didn’t even smile back. He held his morning coffee in both hands and just seemed to sit there, silently staring forwards. I wondered what might be going through his mind. If he was plotting a murder, I would certainly rather not feature in it.

The coffee shop wasn’t one of our usual ones. In fact, we had to travel quite a long way out of our way to get there. It had been nearly an hour’s ride with the three of us crammed uncomfortably into a local taxi.

I sipped a hot, smooth cappuccino. It had a soft and foamy head with a little sprinkling of dark chocolate and the sharp, vicious smell of the coffee was blended perfectly with the frothy milk. Still, it was just a cappuccino. As good as it was, I had had coffees just as good within a few meters of our apartment.

I wasn’t a connoisseur, besides. If it was hot and wet, my hangover welcomed anything that would help to usher it on its way. A roadside mug of ground-up batteries would do me just as well. I had even developed a taste for it.

“Why did you want to come here?” I asked, a little curious. I was interested as to why Cam would drag us to such a spot when there were plenty of other choices.

“It’s meant to be good,” he said without looking over. His expression remained fixed towards the counter at the far end of the shop.

We were hidden away in a dark and dingy corner and he had insisted he be allowed to sit in a certain seat, with his back to the wall.

Where we sat meant absolutely nothing to me. If there was a way to care even less than that, it might sum up Lou perfectly.

“It’s really over, isn’t it?” Lou sipped on an overly-sweet caramel concoction that looked as if it had been designed to promote diabetes. She smiled to herself, a self-satisfied little smirk. Even though Cam was there, she didn’t restrain herself. “I didn’t dream about Raj last night.”

“Me neither,” I said. To be fair, we had downed so much beer, I wasn’t entirely sure how we managed to get home.

“I found a journal among Don’s things,” she said with a grin. “He actually seemed to quite like you, Paul. He called you a ‘fat little shit with a mouth he can’t control’ but otherwise seems like a solid dude.”

“I take what compliments I can get.”

“Yeah!” she said with a smirk. “He described me as ‘scary, bordering on horrifying, and someone he wouldn’t want to mess with.’ Sounds like he had a good handle on things.”

It sounded about right to me, too. “Anything good in the journal?”

“I haven’t read all of it and he stopped filling it in months ago,” she said. “He did say a few things about Raj. He said he was worried about him: he was losing it and didn’t always make sense. He said that when he was on the gear, he was just a party-animal, but when he was drunk he changed.

“He wrote about a night where Raj just talked about his past and almost broke down.”

“Our past can destroy us,” Cam said. Lou and I glanced at one another in surprise and then gazed at him raptly as he continued talking. “Sometimes it isn’t our fault. Things happen that change our lives and we just can’t recover from them. We don’t know it at the time but those

things make us who we are. They set us on our path to the future and there's no way to change it."

I didn't know quite what to say. Maybe he had a deeper insight into things than we thought?

I said dubiously, "Did you find something in Raj's things?"

Cam nodded but stared forwards. His eyes never moved. "His phone. I know he had a new laptop but it wasn't there, just an old one that was really beaten-up. It looks like he sold it a while back because he needed money."

Lou looked at me. I knew she was thinking what I was thinking. Suddenly, I realised we hadn't thought this through.

"But his phone is locked right? You can't get into it?"

Cam looked to his own coffee and stared into that for a moment. "I know the pin. I used to have to top it up for him because he couldn't do it. I didn't realise at the time, but now I see that he was struggling to press the keys. He was shaking all the time."

"Right!" I said, nodding to myself. Lou winced and looked at me expectantly.

What the hell did she want me to do about it now?

I hadn't thought for a moment that Cam would know how to get into Raj's phone. Whatever Raj knew about him might be on there somewhere. Cam might now have his hands on the evidence of what happened, whatever that was. He might need to get the pair of us out of the way, for all we knew.

"I want to tell you something," Cam said. He looked forwards once more and then a weird, out of place little smile fluttered over his lips. He looked at me, and then at Lou. He looked back to me and said, "You two are my best friends."

That felt a little ridiculous. "Well, yeah," I said. "You're my best friend too, Cam. I don't even hate Lou sometimes."

“I mean it,” he said. “Raj is dead and gone and he’s better off. I don’t want anything to happen without me telling the pair of you that you are my friends.”

“Thanks,” Lou said with a shrug. “You’re my friend too. For what it’s worth, I like you better than Paul.”

I added, “That isn’t saying much.”

“Yeah,” Cam agreed. “I know.”

I thought that I might have just been insulted. I didn’t dwell on it. I was insulted a lot, although it was a first from Cam. Was this the beginning of a whole new era? Had the death of Raj changed something in all of us? I hoped it had, and then maybe some good would come out of all of this.

For a moment the future looked more positive than it had in a long time.

Cam smiled once more, but this time it was just to himself as he stared back out into his own little world.

“Maybe this is a whole new Cam?” Del suggested.

We met that night at the guesthouse, as we often/usually/always did. Del and I arrived first, Lou was busy on a date. She was meeting a man who she had met on the internet, so we knew she wouldn’t be far behind us since her internet dating rarely worked out terribly well.

We were on leave from work now, and there was nothing much to do beyond drinking socially and punching angry men in the face. Del seemed that he was up for either.

I had ordered myself a beer and just sat back and let the world go by.

“I didn’t know you had it in you, you know?” Del told me.

I wasn’t sure what he meant at first. “What do you mean? Last night? I didn’t do anything!”

“No, you didn’t,” he agreed. He sipped casually on a beer himself and seemed at ease with the world. “You were up for it, though. You didn’t just sit back and take it, like some people. It took a bit to hold you back, too. Well done, mate!”

Inwardly, I beamed to myself. I was a tough guy, it seemed. With Del behind me, I was a tough guy!

I grinned back and said, “You hit him hard.”

“Just a tap,” he said with a smirk. “His mate came over later to apologise. We had a few beers together and a chat, no harm done.”

“I’m not sure he felt that there was no harm done.”

“He didn’t know what he was feeling,” Del told me with a sigh. “This place is full of people like him, trying to outrun their past by starting over. They’re bringing their problems with them and they come to the surface with a few drinks sloshing around their brain. He’s probably not a bad guy, just angry and looking for someone to lash out at.”

“Probably,” I shrugged. “But calling us racists was pretty stupid.”

Del shrugged and looked at me. “You know, people like to be with their own sort of people and there’s nothing wrong with that. We’re naturally drawn to the same thing as ourselves.”

“But we all hang out together and we’re all different.”

“We’re not really different,” he told me. “We’re not different in the ways that matter. People get angry about the colour of skin, religion, beliefs. The truth is we’re all more alike than we are different.”

“I’m like everyone else. I like to be around my own kind. The difference is that I don’t see myself as a race or a place of birth, a creed or a colour. I see myself as the person I am inside and I look to be around people who are the same way.”

I realised I had listened intently to every word. “I get you,” I said. Of course, how I was anything like Del was open to debate.

“People like Sam and Sue will never get it, but the only real and fair way to get equality isn’t to treat everyone the same, because we’re really not all the same. The right way to do it is treat everyone as an individual. You guys all do that.”

I looked back at him with a blank stare as my brain tried to make sense of all that. It was a compliment, and it was a real one.

“Before the others get here, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about!” he said.

I leant forwards expectantly.

“You’re a screw-up Paul,” he said. “I was wondering if you knew that?”

I shrugged and sat back in my creaking rattan chair. “Of course I know that,” I told him. “My Dad reminds me of it every week by emailing me pictures of my brother. He’s married with a couple of kids now. He’s got his own business, a nice house, flash car and he works out.”

Del smiled at me knowingly. “And you?”

“I have a beer that I only paid fifty cents for! I might even have another afterwards.”

“And no job,” he reminded me.

“And no job,” I agreed. It didn’t seem all that big a problem anymore. I knew all too well just how easy jobs were to get for qualified English teachers. I was one of those, even if I wasn’t a very good one.

Considering I wasn’t a drug-addled, suicidally depressed, alcoholic maniac, someone with illegal sexual predilections and wasn’t so incredibly stupid that I thought women were born with penises, I actually wasn’t the totally worst one around, either.

“I mean, it’s the end of the year now so I finished my contract,” I said. “They’ll probably take me back on next semester. I’ll hear soon.”

“I might have some thoughts about that,” he said to me.

“You’re going to offer me a job?” I said with a smile. I felt that we were almost friends somehow, so I risked a little joke. “I’m a bit of an asshole, but I don’t know if I could sink to your level.”

Del grinned at me as my beer arrived. I reached forwards and we clinked our glasses together like mates, not just colleagues or people who annoyed each other over a beer. Were we mates? “I know you’re paddling in the shallow end of the gene-pool, but I think there’s still a bit lower you could sink.”

I wasn’t sure if he was just joking with me. “I’m always interested in finding new ways to sink lower,” I said. “And, as a bonus, it’s always fun to find inventive ways to disappoint my family.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I think they might have suffered enough.”

I laughed. He didn’t know them as I did. They deserved a little disappointment now and again.

“Let me think about it,” I told him.

“Sure!” he agreed and another word on the subject wasn’t spoken that night. “Who’s coming? The usual crowd?”

“Sure!” I said. “We’ve done a year out here now. I’m up for staying, but I’m not sure about Lou. She was talking about moving on somewhere better. She said she’ll be here later, depending on her date.”

“Good for her,” he said. “It is sometimes hard to believe it, but there are worse places.”

“Very hard to believe. I haven’t seen Cam all day. We went out for a coffee this morning to this local place halfway across town. After that, he was quiet, as usual. He went to his bedroom and said he had things to do. I’ve not heard from him since.”

“What coffee shop was that?” He sipped at his beer and noticed a very attractive girl walk past. She noticed him back and completely, utterly and totally failed to notice me.

“I don’t remember the name,” I said. “I think it was something like ‘Several Brands Brew’ or ‘Seven Shades of Brown’ but I’m not totally sure.”

Del frowned and put his beer heavily down on the table. He leaned forwards and looked concerned. “Seven Beans Brewers,” he said. For once, he did look concerned and, most unlike him, he had lost interest in the pretty girl who was smiling at him.

I shrugged, “Maybe.” Del’s reaction was making me nervous.

“Be sure!” he told me grimly.

“Why is it so important? I mean, it was alright, but I have had better coffee.”

Del sighed and rubbed his temples vigorously. “Paul, was it ‘Seven Beans Brewers,’ and please make absolutely sure you remember properly?”

I pulled out my phone and sighed. Inside, I was very worried. This wasn’t like Del at all. We had taken a pre-booked cab so I quickly checked the records. Luckily, it was me that had booked it—I distinctly remembered grumbling about that since it meant I would most likely be paying for it too. “Yes,” I said, “It’s the one you said. So what?”

“Shit!” Del grumbled. “This isn’t good, mate! How the hell did Cam find out about that place?”

“It’s just another coffee shop. It’s not a big deal! What the hell is going on?”

“We’ve got to find Cam,” he said. “Come on.”

Del got up just as Lou was arriving. She looked angry, glared at the two of us and pointed to her mouth. She said simply, “He had bad teeth. No wonder he never smiled in any of his pictures.”

“No time to hear about your date,” Del told her. “Come on, we need to find Cam.”

“So now we’re looking for Cam!” Del told her, after filling her on the details. I somehow felt that something was wrong.

We were riding along in a cab back to our shared apartment, because Del didn’t do bikes. When I had asked him about it, he had replied that ‘motorcycles were one of the dumbest ways white people had invented to kill themselves and he was sticking to alcohol and greasy food so he could enjoy the experience over as long a period as possible, as nature intended.’

Lou asked the only perfectly reasonably question there was to ask. “But what the hell is going on?”

“Yeah, Del!” I said. “You’ve got to tell us what all this is about.”

Del looked out the side of the crumbling rickshaw we were all crammed into. He sighed to himself and looked more worried than I’d ever seen him.

“I was Cam’s mentor when he first got here,” he explained. Lou and I waited for him to say something that actually explained anything. “Cam’s a weird guy and was always a bit quiet. I wasn’t sure what to make of him at all. He hung around with me at first. He even took up smoking like I do. It was a bit surreal, maybe a little hero-worship on his part. I was a bit flattered, to be honest.”

Del smiled to himself. We just waited in silence as the vehicle shook about on the cracked, pot-holed and uneven roads.

“I got to know him pretty well and introduced him to some people. He ended up dating a teaching-assistant, a girl from the school he was in. I had to invite her out for a beer with us so Cam could build up the confidence to even talk to her but it worked and they ended up together.”

Lou and I looked at each other. A cold knot of dread began to trace up my spine.

“Cam was happy and they ended up living together. Suddenly, she vanished and that was the end of that. Nobody ever knew where she had gone—but I found out.”

Lou bit her bottom lip. My mind filled with thoughts of what terrible things Cam might have done to her.

“I found her,” Del said. “There was a problem with her family. They basically sold her into an arranged marriage. She couldn’t get out of it—the culture was pretty strong and reprisals against her family were serious business.

“She decided to go along with it, but she was adamant I wasn’t to tell Cam. She was right. It would have destroyed him to know that the woman he loved was marrying someone else. So, she just disappeared—she said it would be easier on him than knowing the truth.”

Lou hung her head into her hands. “Oh my god, is that what all this was about?”

“Poor Cam!” I said. “I had no idea it was even that serious.”

“Yeah!” Del said, sighing and nodding in agreement. “We all thought it would blow over but Cam just didn’t get over her. He went looking all around town, asking her friends, her sisters, everything. They all covered for her and eventually he stopped searching. He just seemed to give up.”

“Bloody hell!” I shook my head. How could I have thought that Cam would have hurt anyone? What kind of a friend was I?

“How did he find out about the coffee shop?” Del asked. “Who told him?”

Lou frowned curiously. “What about the coffee shop?”

Del huffed to himself. He must have realised we actually didn’t know. “She works there. She’s been there since she got married. He must have gone to see for himself.”

“Shit!” Lou mumbled under her breath.

“Raj!” I said, shaking my head. “Raj told Don that he had something on Cam. He was going to tell everyone what he knew.”

Lou shut her eyes and sighed to herself. “It must have been on Raj’s phone. Cam must have found out.”

Del, ever the eminently reasonable man that he was, said, “Cam was always going to find out one day. Right now, he needs his friends around him, so that’s what we’re going to focus on, right?”

“Right!” I said, without even thinking about it.

Within minutes, we were back at my apartment. A less lazy man would simply have walked but I was not a less lazy man and I never liked to walk anywhere.

I let us all in and we made our way up to the third floor, in the elevator, of course. Del seemed tense, Lou seemed close to panic. I could only wonder how they thought I looked.

I felt oddly calm. I hadn’t been the best friend to Cam. I had suspected him of doing terrible things. I had talked about him behind his back with Lou and I had let him down.

Del was right. I didn’t know the name of his girlfriend: I had never bothered to ask. I had never sat down and talked to him, asked him what was on his mind, although I frequently told him what was on mine.

But now, I was resolved to do better. I was going to do better about a lot of things.

We stepped into my apartment and it was exactly how I had left it, not a thing seemed to have moved.

Del looked around. The apartment could have been tidier. The rubbish in the kitchen was over-flowing and there were clothes strewn across the larger of the two sofas, which, I had to admit, were mine. I felt that he was judging me a little bit.

“Which one is Cam’s room?” he asked.

I pointed to the second door along. “The smaller of them,” I said. I winced as I realised that, of course, his was the smaller. I had taken the bigger and better one for myself.

Del took the lead and went straight to the door. He hammered on it with his fist, and sounded all business. “Cam,” he shouted. “I know you’re in there, mate. We’re worried about you and we’re here to help.”

I looked at Lou. I wondered if she felt as guilty as I did.

“Cam!” he yelled. There was no noise from inside the room, no sound of anyone moving.

“Maybe he’s not here?” I suggested.

Del sighed to himself and reached down for the door handle. He began to twist it and called out in his low, grave voice, “Cam, we’re coming in, mate!”

He twisted the handle all the way and it clicked back against the latch. He gently pushed but the lock stopped the door from moving.

Del took a deep breath and looked back at us. “It’s locked,” he said, “That means he’s inside.”

Lou looked close to panic. “Break the fucking door down, Del!” she said.

Del looked at me and I nodded back. Fixing a broken door was the least of my problems right now.

Del put his shoulder to it and the slender brass bolt gave way in an instant. He called out one last time, “Cam, we’re coming in, mate. It’s just your friends.”

He stepped inside and we followed him in.

I just felt numb and my brain didn’t really want to register what it was seeing. It was the sound of Lou screaming that snapped me awake.

Cam was hanging from the ceiling fan. A studded ladies leather belt was tied to the hub that was mounted to the roof. The other end had been looped round his neck and his body was hanging limply from it, his

feet a few inches from the floor, and a chair was collapsed over to the side next to him.

I ran forwards to help but Del's hand was slapped hard against my chest. I stopped in surprise, gazing at him. He looked at me with infinite sadness in his eyes. He was shaking his head and said to me softly.

"He's gone, mate. He's gone."

I looked back. Cam's head was purple and his swollen tongue was sticking out through his gaping mouth. His neck below the strap was still the normal colour of his skin and it seemed impossibly thin, stretched and constricted by the belt. His body swung very gently and the stench of his bodily waste filled the room.

As I realised what the smell was, I covered my mouth. Behind me, Lou was sobbing and she ran out to the hall.

"Cam," I whispered but it was too late.

It was all too late now.

"I knew it was far too late," Lou said, shaking her head.

I shook my head, too, but I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that something was very wrong with my whole, entire life. It was all coming apart. All I could think about was that I wanted a drink. I wanted to blot my brain out with beer and whiskey, tequila and rum. I wanted it to all sink into a fog of apathy until there was nothing left I cared about again.

The apartment door slammed shut for the last time. For the whole night, and well into the morning, it had been filled with police. They had done more damage to the fridge than anything else and had been no use in the investigation. There had been laughter from the bedroom, and Lou had seen at least one of them taking a selfie with the body.

They told us they would get a translator but Del shocked us all by revealing he spoke the local language fluently enough to converse freely with them.

Now the place was oddly empty, hollow and dead, exactly the way I felt inside. The three of us sat next to one another on the sofa, none of speaking, just sitting there staring into space.

“I’d offer you a beer, but...” I said gesturing to the fridge. The door was swinging open and the thing had been picked clean.

“Shame!” Del said gravely. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in the mood for one more.”

“I could drink,” said Lou, surprising nobody.

We were in silence once again.

The police were calling it a suicide, which it undoubtedly was. They had found a suicide note that I was sure he hadn’t written. It wasn’t his handwriting and didn’t sound anything like him. They had shown it to us, and Del had stopped me protesting, telling them he was sure it was his. I frowned at him angrily, but he told me it didn’t make any difference. They did it so they could quickly close up the investigation. It wasn’t going to bring him back and it wasn’t going to change anything.

“I hate this place!” Lou said. “I hate these people. I hate how nothing works properly. I hate how a girl can be sold into marriage and how nobody cares when it ruins people’s lives. I hate how our wages are wrong every month. I hate how the locals strut around like they’re special but can’t do anything the right way. I hate how everyone is poor but wears fake chunky gold jewellery, even the beggars on the street. I hate everything about this damn awful, terrible place.”

Del shrugged. “It’s not for everyone.”

“What keeps you here, Del?” I managed to say.

“I do!” he told me. “I don’t stay here for the locals; their lives are none of my business. I don’t care about the crazy, self-destructive foreigners drinking themselves half to death in bars. It’s not my job to save the world. I’m here because I have a comfortable lifestyle, a job I

enjoy and sometimes, just sometimes, the things I do make a difference to people who are worth helping.

“I stay here because I have a life here.”

“We didn’t make a difference with Cam, did we?” I said, angry at myself.

“No,” he agreed. “I didn’t make a difference with Cam. But I think I can make a difference with you.”

“Me?”

“You’re a dick, Paul. You’re selfish, you’re arrogant, you think you’re a lot smarter than you really are, you look down on the locals as if you’re better than them, you drink way too much and you don’t care about your job.”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically.

“And you know what that makes you, Paul?” he asked.

I really had no idea. “The kind of man that Lou normally dates?” I suggested.

Del ignored that, but Lou didn’t look too happy.

“It makes you exactly the kind of man I was when I got here,” he said. “I see potential in you, mate, and I think I can help you find it if you make the effort to sort yourself out.”

I frowned at him curiously.

“How?”

Epilogue

“And that, in a nutshell, is my teaching experience for the first year!”

Around the bar, a number of people were staring in utter horror.

“So when do I start?” I said to the interviewer.

Derick was sitting next to him with a smirk on his face. He was shaking his head and trying not to laugh.

The interviewer looked at me with a frown and checked his watch. “We’ll be in touch...” he said.

I got up, shook their hands and stepped back from the seat.

Now it was Derick’s turn to step up. He said to the audience, in a low and commanding voice, “Alright everyone. For those of you who were training at our other branch, my name is Derick. I’ll be your training mentor. I’m here to help you throughout your time teaching here. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.”

People looked too scared to ask questions. Wide eyes stared back at him in rapt silence.

Derick continued, “My colleague just demonstrated how to conduct yourself during an interview. Paul is also a mentor from ‘Borderline English’ and will be available to help you all throughout the recruitment process.”

“I would probably skip the terrifying, long stories though,” I added.

Derick laughed and slapped me on the back. “The very, very, very long stories,” he said in agreement. He gestured with his hand to the interviewer. “This gentleman will be conducting interviews all morning in the guesthouse lounge. Please make sure you check the list and take your turn.

“We’ll be right here if there are any problems.”

There was a nervous rumble as we all headed off to the bar, where we perched ourselves on a pair of bar-stools and ordered a drink.

“Water, please,” I said. “Something pink and frothy for my friend.”

“Just two waters!” Derick said with his low, grave voice. He smiled and turned to me. “You know, Paul,” he began. “You really do talk too much.”

“I know,” I said. “I should write a book. A lot of people tell me that.”

“Good idea,” he said. “You can piss off a lot more people with your boring, half made-up stories if you publish it. I don’t think anyone would ever read it, though.”

“Yeah, but they’re only half made-up and only very slightly boring.”

“I noticed,” Derick said. “And well done at changing the names to protect the innocent. Nobody could have figured out who you were really talking about! I mean, who could ‘Del’ possibly be?”

I thanked the waitress with a nod as she handed over two plastic bottles of water, likely tap-water with the lids glued down to the tops of the bottle. I had developed a taste for it these past months.

“I have to admit though,” Derick continued. “Louise’s story just gets more and more entertaining every time you tell it. When you mentioned the ducks, it was hard to keep a straight face.”

“I was only telling them what she told us,” I huffed. “Anyway, I think congratulations are in order. That was my first demonstration interview with a real school recruiter. I think I did pretty well. I thought it was a good idea to let the recruits know what they had in store for them so I tried to play it up a bit.”

“He’s an idiot!” said Derick. “He looks like someone drew a face on a baked bean.”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.”

Derick slapped me on the back again. “You’ve done well, Paul. You’ve done really well this year.”

I smiled and flushed with pride. “I’ve worked hard,” I said. “My first year might have been a total disaster, but, thanks to you, this last year has been much better. I’ve lost weight, got myself together, and I feel that my life is back on some kind of track.”

“And you’re not as offensive to be around,” Derick added sarcastically. “Not quite...”

“Yeah, a lot fewer of my friends killed themselves this year. That’s progress,” I said.

I must have looked a little more melancholy than I thought, because Derick said, with a supportive tone, “I miss him too, mate.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Derick nodded. “How’s your wife doing?”

“Still grumpy and pregnant,” I said with a smile. “Yesterday, she threatened to cut my balls off with a kitchen knife because I left my old trousers on the bed. She’s a lovely girl, really. I was lucky to find her.”

“Marriage sounds great,” he laughed. “Who’d have thought you would have ended up with a local girl?”

“I had a message from Louise last night,” I told him. “You know she’s getting married now? And before you ask, I checked—she isn’t pregnant.”

“Poor bastard,” Derick said wryly. “I don’t envy that man.”

“Agreed!” I said. “She’s not that bad, though, and when it gets right down to it, we’re all arseholes.”

Derick held up his bottle and clinked it against mine. “I’ll drink to that,” he said. “The only difference is that we know it. That poor lot over there are about to find it out for themselves.”