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**Six Weeks, and Turning the Page on Childhood Trauma:
The Role of Tragedy in Reading the Addict Parent in
Autobiographical Texts**



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Own Work Declaration

I, William Francis Cowan, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: 

Date: 23/04/2025

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Six Weeks

By William Francis Cowan

PhD Candidate

Chapter One

‘I swear on my baby’s life. Listen to me, no you fucking listen to me.’

Kieran stared at his bedroom ceiling and tried to keep listening to the documentary playing on the living room TV. It was about the Ancient Egyptians and was at a part where it described what the Pharaohs wore. He imagined the cool metal of their bracelets on his wrists and ankles, the soft cloth on his skin, much cooler than the stuffy blanket which made him all sticky and uncomfortable in the summer heat.

‘You’re so naïve, you don’t think I know the real reason you work late all the time.’

His dad’s accent was getting thicker. It was hardly there normally but the Northerner in him got stronger as the Vodka bottle got emptier. He could see him now in the front room, his finger pointing, face frowning, lips wet.

‘Give it a rest Craig, we’ve been snowed under at the office.’

‘Bollocks. How could you be so naïve to think I wouldn’t find out? You’re fucking that... greasy... prick in the office, aren’t you? Lil’ promotion in it for you is there?’

The documentary was now describing how the Pharaohs became mummies. Kieran tried to imagine how a whole brain could come out of a nose, or why they wanted to lock their slaves in with them when they weren’t even dead. It seemed a little selfish to him.

‘Is that what you are now, office bike? Shag anything in a designer shirt?’

‘No, Craig. I can’t afford to lose this contract. Also, with you being short on the workshop rent in the last few months I’ve needed to cover-‘

‘Don’t you dare turn this on me! I’m grafting my arse off *and* looking after our baby while he’s off school. While you sit there fannyng about on your computer getting fatter and lazier, I’m in that sweatbox getting shite under my nails and in my hair and fuck knows where else just to earn a crust. And this is the thanks I get? Fucking ungrateful cow.’

Kieran couldn’t really hear the documentary anymore. He tried to imagine being in Egypt, in the desert at night. The cool breeze would run across his skin, and he would have complete peace

apart from the whooshing of the sand blowing around in the wind. He turned onto his side and tried to go to sleep. His eyes refused to close, drawn onto the faint light in the hallway. It was pointless. The documentary would end soon, his parents would go to bed, and then everything would get much worse. It was better to be awake and prepare for it than to be woken by it.

He heard his dad pause the TV and go for another drink, the click of the bottle cap twisting off and the glug of a glass filling. It filled for a while before the bottle thudded down on the kitchen surface. Next was the lemonade, fizzing as the top came off and then the quick higher-pitched glug as it filled the rest of the glass.

Kieran heard him flop back into his chair and the TV begin again. After a little while his mum got up and got ready for bed, leaving his dad alone. Kieran heard the crinkling of paper as he rolled himself a cigarette, the old wooden board he used as a rolling tray knocking against the chair as he put it back. That gave him hope that his dad may be up late, maybe he might even be too tired to kick off.

The documentary ended and the music for the credits came on. Kieran heard the roll-up settle in the ashtray and the TV switch off. He felt stupid for hoping for peace, why hope for something that never happens. As his dad made his way into the bathroom Kieran's stomach began to tie its usual knot. He turned over onto his back again and kicked his blanket off. He lay staring at the ceiling, tracing the damp stain spreading from a crack in the plasterboard through the darkness.

After his dad pulled the bedroom door shut it never seemed to take long, tonight was just the same. He and his mum's voices started out quiet, too quiet to make anything out. But he could always hear the fear in his mum's voice and the anger in his dad's. Then came the banging. It boomed through the wall of their bedroom and all around the dark flat. The shouting followed, his mum's louder and louder pleas to stop cut off by his dad's snarling as the banging got harder.

Kieran always knew what was coming but still couldn't help freezing in his bed every time, his limbs glued to the mattress. He could do nothing but listen.

After a little while he was able to move again, and he threw himself out of bed. Then began the walk to the kitchen. It was important to make sure that he slapped his bare feet down onto the wooden floors as hard as he could with each step. Once in the kitchen he got himself a glass of water, making sure he ran the tap too hard and slammed his glass down in the sink.

If done right, like tonight, there would be a pause in the banging, both voices going quiet. Kieran padded slowly back to his room and got back into bed. His stupid hope snuck up on him again, that tonight that might be enough for once to make his dad stop, knowing that he was always awake, that he always knew. As he laid his head back on the pillow the banging started again.

Kieran laid stiff in his bed and waited for it to be over. He felt every bang and cry from his mum, and he had long ago learnt he could do nothing to block it out. When he was younger, he used to try and cover his head with a pillow, holding it tight over his ears until his arms were on fire. It didn't help, every time he put his arms down for a rest it was still there, waiting for him. All he could do was bear it.

Eventually, the worst part came, and the door flew open. He heard his mum run crying into the front room, his dad barking insults at her before slamming the bedroom door shut. Now in the front room, his mum started to fight back.

'You fucking bastard, you pig! Fuck you!'

This was the worst part. Some nights she would swear like a trooper and his dad stayed in the bedroom, other times he would burst out and attack her all over again in the living room, her hoarse, tired voice breaking out into sobs which cut through Kieran like a butcher's knife. As always, Kieran silently begged her to stop, to save herself, to rest now she had escaped his dad's hands.

Tonight, they were lucky. His dad stayed in his room, and she eventually stopped swearing at him. The flat was quiet again.

Kieran's ears started to ring. They always did once it was over. Once the ringing began to go away his eyes finally went heavy and sleep settled upon him, a weak light beginning to shine through his blinds as the sun began to rise.

Kieran woke to the silence of the morning. It was Saturday and the world had settled into a lull, broken only by a few birds and passing cars. He rolled out of bed, tiptoed down the hall and into the living room. Signs of last night were still there but his mum wasn't. A blanket was still thrown over the couch where she had gone back into the bedroom once his dad's snoring ensured it was safe.

He made his way into the kitchen and poured himself a bowl of cereal. He drank down some of the milk to stop it spilling and walked back to the couch, making himself comfortable on the blankets. They were still warm.

Kieran turned the TV on. His parents had finally got a Digibox so now he wasn't just stuck watching the kids shows on CBBC and CITV anymore. They still didn't have the Disney Channel or Sky like his mates' but there was loads of other stuff to watch in the "On Demand" section. He'd been looking forward to school ending so he could get up early and have a proper look. Amongst the expensive new movies to rent and restricted films for adults Kieran had found some car documentaries and popped one on.

Kieran spent the next hour learning about racing Porsches, with a slow talking man with a deep voice telling him all about how the Porsche 917 could do 230mph on the Mulsanne Straight, how the 935 broke the Nürburgring lap record, and how the 959 raced at both the Pari-Dakar rally and Le Mans 24 Hours. If he could just do well for the rest of the in-kart season one day he could be like the men in the old video footage, grinning from ear to ear as they were handed wreathes, sprayed champagne and lifted trophies. He just needed to race better, make fewer mistakes. Maybe he would try the new go-karting mode on Gran Turismo later to get some practice in.

As the credits rolled on the documentary Kieran heard stirring from the bedroom. It was time to move. For the next few hours, the house would be quiet and uncomfortable as everyone tried to pretend last night didn't happen. Kieran put his bowl in the sink to soak and went to brush his teeth. Coming into his bedroom with his face still damp, he knocked his racing suit off the door, swearing under his breath as he tried to get it to hang back up without it sliding off the hanger. He bet the rich kids with their own karts and fancy storage sheds didn't have to put up with this. He walked up to his chest of draws and began to rummage, grabbing his favourite outfit consisting of a 2008 McLaren F1 Team t-shirt and super comfy navy Rebook trackies. His bottom drawer had jammed again, and his arm had a big red mark on it once he had pulled them out through the little gap.

Kieran shoved a pile of coins in one pocket and his phone in the other. He then tried to slip into his trainers, but he had done the laces up too tight last time and had to fiddle with pulling the back over his heel.

By the time he had them on and wheeled his bike into the hallway, his mum was already out of her bedroom.

She looked especially tired this morning. Her skin was paper white aside from the dark bags under her eyes. Kieran noticed that she was leaning slightly forward as if something hurt. He hoped it wasn't her ribs again, they'd taken months to heal last time. Her voice came out low and croaky.

'Morning mate. Where you off to?'

'Just Harry's, he's got a new game we wanted to play.'

'Will you be back for dinner?'

'Erm... dunno. Can I text you later?'

'Just make sure you remember yeah? I know you've got a brain like a sieve sometimes.'

'Will do.'

Kieran stood and looked at his mum. She always looked bad in the mornings, but in the summer light coming through the front door glass she looked like she'd aged twenty years overnight. Kieran felt a pang in his chest about leaving her alone all day.

'So mum, what are you up to today?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Oh nothing, just can't remember if you need me back for anything.'

'Well, no, not really. I'm going to pop up and have a quick cuppa with Ethel and then do some bits outside. If you're back early enough you can help me do some weeding if you like.'

'Yeah, okay. I'll let you know when I'm coming back.'

'Yeah, yeah, we'll see. I know what you two are like once you start killing zombies or whatever you do together. I'll probably see you tomorrow.'

'No, I'll be back, promise.'

'Look, I'm sure I'll live without my resident pest in the house for the day. Now bugger off and see your mate. Oh, and while you're at it make sure to say hello to Roger and Diane for me.'

'No worries mum I will, see ya' later.'

Kieran wheeled his bike down the hall and out the front door. He stepped out into the gully which led up to the front gate, catching the door behind him to stop it from slamming. He lifted the

bike up the steps to the street, trying not to scrape the pedals on the slimy mason work which no amount of sun ever seemed to dry out.

Closing the gate behind him, he stopped to take a breath. The flat was to his back now, hidden away from him and the rest of the street by a thick hedge. Mum often said that they were lucky to get that flat as it gave them “the privacy of their own front door”. Kieran was never quite sure he agreed.

Kieran peeked back through the gate towards the flat one final time. He could see his mum head through the front room into the kitchen, to put the kettle on no doubt. Maybe dad wouldn’t be so bad today. He could be alright during the afternoons sometimes, especially if he’d had a quiet day down the garage and got off early. He’d be back later anyway, hopefully.

Turning back to face the street, he kicked off up Endelsham Road. The morning was nice and calm, and a warm breeze blew through his hair as he picked up speed and put his arms down to his sides. He passed the row of quiet houses at the end of the road and swung onto Chestnut Grove by the school, left eerily silent with students off for the holidays.

As he began the drop down Ravenslea Road his phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling over, he took it out to take a look:

Hazza: Should b done w paper round by 11. Come mine?

Kieran already knew this. It had only just gone 10 o’clock but he needed to be out the house.

Kee: K c u their

Putting his phone back into his pocket, he kicked off once again. The road twisted between the houses as it dropped down by the school and rose back up to pop out by the common. A near miss with a Lexus the other day meant Kieran was wary as he rounded the blind turn where the road rose again. Today a Nissan Micra was just the other side, its elderly driver craning his head over the steering wheel as he slowed for the bend. Kieran gave him a wide berth. His parents were always trying to make him wear a helmet and he would definitely be forced to if he got hit.

Coming out by the common Kieran saw it was still quite empty, the dry grass shining yellow under the beating sun. He only passed a few joggers and a dog walker before he approached Train Man’s bridge. He dropped his bike down to first gear as he weaved between the bike barriers and

climbed up to the crest of the bridge. Train Man was there as usual, leaning over the wall and chanting at the trains as they went by.

‘Oi, mate! Hey! Hey!’

He leant back from the bridge with the same old disappointment when the train disappeared towards Wandsworth Common Station. Kieran often wondered if he had lost someone in a train accident and his sadness gave him the need to keep talking to trains. Sometimes there would be a lady there watching over him on the bridge. He was alone today.

Weaving through the other bike barriers on the opposite side of the bridge Kieran rode past the kiddie’s playground and rounded the corner to the little Café which stood at the centre of the park. It was a posh looking place next to a bowls lawn and some tennis courts which sold expensive ice cream scoops and coffee to the poshos in the area. It was also very quiet and smelt of nice pastries this time in the morning.

Kieran rested his bike on a picnic table, where he could keep an eye on it, and walked into the conservatory-like bit where the counter was. A young, dark-haired lady with kind eyes and a Polish accent was there waiting.

‘Hello young man, what can I get for you?’

‘Can I have a croissant please? And-and a tap water too.’

‘Croissant and tap water... £1.20 please.’

Kieran dug in his pockets for the right amount of shrapnel and tipped it into the lady’s open hand. She put it in the till and brought his croissant in a little paper bag with his water, served in a takeaway pint glass.

Kieran thanked the lady at the till and went back out to the picnic table. He knew he could get the same croissant for 50p in the bakery bit at Sainsbury’s, less if there were no security guards about, but he didn’t mind spending the extra to sit and enjoy it outside the café. The common always began to come to life at this time and he could hear the distant shouts of a few little kids at the playground. Across the green he could see some older boys playing football, they and the ball moving up and down between two goals made from jumpers and t-shirts. He didn’t know any of them, but he felt part of their fun and happiness, like he was absorbing it through his skin. He tucked into his croissant and

watched some adults speed past on their sporty bikes. They looked like funny little space people with their colourful Lycra, helmets, and sunglasses, but their bikes were awesome. Thin wheels, lightweight frames, and smooth gears. He'd seen them for sale in Halfords where they went for more than his parent's car. He'd still kill for one though, he'd smoke all the kids at school for sure.

He did love his old mountain bike as it was his first proper *big* kid's bike, but it had seen better days. The disk brakes were now bent and didn't work, all the reflectors had either cracked or fallen off, and he hated arriving at school with greasy hands from fixing the chain again.

He knew better than to complain though. It would just make his mum worry about needing to pay for a new one and cause him to take a bollocking from his dad for not looking after it properly. Besides, he knew he could always borrow Harry's old bike and "forget" to pick his bike back up from Harry's downstairs hall if worse came to worst.

Finishing his second breakfast, Kieran dumped his rubbish into the bin and set off once again. The back end of the common led out onto a fancy private estate. Everything here was new – the buildings were new, the cars were new, even the tarmac was new. Kieran was always relieved to fill the smooth tarmac under his arse after the lumpy dirt and concrete paths around the common. Once over the bridge which separated the estate from the noise and grime of the rest of London, Kieran cycled up to the edge of the dual carriageway which separated him from Harry's. Too lazy to snake his bike through the small underpass under the carriageway, Kieran waited for a gap and pedalled as hard as he could to the island in the middle. His heart always began to pound a little when he got here, cars speeding past either side of him. It was a little exciting though. Cars were stopped at the junction further up the road so Kieran made his move, clearing the three lanes on the other side and cutting across the undergrowth to pop out across the road from Harry's.

Arriving at Harry's front door, Kieran pressed the doorbell and heard its familiar chime echo through the building, followed shortly by the sound of Harry's feet thumping down the staircase. Kieran began to wheel his bike back onto the street as Harry shoved his new BMX through the front door. Harry was a similar stocky build to Kieran, only with lighter hair and blue eyes. They were mistaken for brothers sometimes. The two spudded before coming up with a plan of action.

'Roundabout again today?'

‘Sure.’

‘Fancy staying over tonight? Got COD in yesterday.’

Kieran went to say yes before remembering what he had said to his mum. He looked down slightly, avoiding Harry’s eyes. The choice made his stomach feel tight.

‘Um could I tell you later? Might have to go somewhere tomorrow.’

‘Like where?’

‘Just some shitty family thing but I don’t know if it’s still happening. Let me check later yeah?’

‘Alright, underpass then Maccies in a bit?’

‘Sounds good.’

With that they set off, Harry trying and failing to pop a wheelie as they weaved up the street.

‘So, if you’ve got COD that means your Xbox’s back, right?’ Shouted Kieran as they dropped down the hilly side streets between Harry’s and the Wandsworth Roundabout.

‘Yeah, I got it back after a few days, I think it was because my dad wanted to play Halo again.’

‘My dad is like that too. When I want to play and he’s on my PlayStation he just tells me to go away and do my homework, even when I’ve already done it.’

‘Sounds like a pain in the arse.’

‘It’s not too bad because he’ll usually come off it in the evenings, or I play split screen against him sometimes. I’m still better than him though.’

‘Same. All they play is like two games, but they’re still dogshit.’

‘I know right? Must be the arthritis in their fingers or something.’

Arriving at the roundabout, they dropped down one of the ramps which led under the roadway. Kieran followed Harry through the barrier chicane and cycled into the huge open space of the underpass. It was a wide sunken space which filled out the entire centre of the roundabout, banked towards the edges like a giant concrete bowl with little raised sections at the rim overrun with weeds and brittle trees.

‘Watch this!’

Kieran watched Harry as he pumped down on the pedals of his BMX to pick up speed. Lifting himself off the seat and onto one of the pedals, he hopped off the bike and tried to run alongside. He made it a few steps before losing his footing, tumbling head over heels and landing in a heap on the grimy floor.

‘You alright?’

Harry twisted his face, poking the new graze on his arm.

‘Yeah, I’ll be cool. Anyways, when are you going to stop being a pussy and drop that bank?’

‘I dunno man, my brakes don’t work anymore...’

‘Pussy.’

‘There’s not enough space for me to slow down before...’

‘Puuuusy.’

‘Okay. Fine. Watch this then.’

Kieran began to haul his bike to the top of the bank. His mountain bike was heavier than Harry’s BMX and he had built up a sweat by the time he had reached the top. Looking down he could see Harry far below, separated from him by a large slab of sandy coloured concrete. It sloped off like the edge of the dunes he’d seen in nature documentaries. Behind him he could feel the rushing wind from the cars passing by on the roundabout. Adrenaline, the exciting kind instead of the fear he felt indoors, charged through his body.

He heard Harry shout up from below.

‘C’mon then!’

Kieran mounted his bike, took a breath, and kicked off. The bike began to pick up speed and soon the pedals were moving too fast to keep his feet on them. The wind blasted against his face, and his eyes began to widen. He was heading right towards the concrete foundations for the advertising structure which sat high above the centre of the underpass. Not wanting to show himself up by trying to slow down, Kieran waited for the wheels of his bike to leave the incline before turning hard right.

Pulling with all his might, the edge of his handlebars scraped against the foundation as he made the turn and stuck his feet out, the underpass echoing with the sound of rubber soles on rough concrete. Turning around, he cycled back up to Harry, a triumphant smile etched onto his face.

‘Who’s the pussy now?’

Harry made a face.

‘Who’s the pussy noooow? You should’ve seen your face coming down there, thought you was going to shit your pants.’

‘Didn’t fall off though, did I?’

‘Bro I’ll nail that ghostie, you’ll see. And you’re one to talk anyway, I’ve still got that pedal your fat ass broke in my room.’

Kieran remembered that fall. The pedal smashed against his ankle and it swelled all the way up. Took a battle to stop his mum dragging him to A&E.

‘Not cool man, that drop really hurt.’

‘But it was funny though. It was the fastest I’ve ever seen you move and it was on your arse cheeks.’

Kieran went to argue, but let a laugh slip out. He aimed a kick at Harry’s shins but barely made contact.

‘Fuck you man, but that is true. Could I maybe grab a go on the BMX though? Always wanted to try one.’

‘Yeah ‘course. Fancy riding up to Maccies for some tokens?’

‘Cool.’

Kieran and Harry swapped bikes and kicked off towards the exit on the far edge of the underpass.

Kieran wobbled along on the BMX’s small wheels, each bump shaking through his body. Harry huffed and puffed behind.

‘How do you ride this thing? It weighs a tonne.’

‘Stop being a little bitch and just change down a gear. This bike’s weird though, I feel like I’m riding a wheely chair.’

Climbing out of the underpass, they cycled across to the McDonalds restaurant and drive thru just off the Wandsworth exit of the roundabout. It was quiet aside from a couple of staff members

refilling tissue and ketchup dispensers before the afternoon rush. They leaned the bikes against the glass and leant in to talk tactics.

‘You got your tokens?’ asked Harry.

‘Shit. Sorry man, was in a hurry and stuff.’

‘Fuck’s sake man I didn’t bring mine because I thought you had some. Wait, hold on, how was you in a rush if you replied to my message earlier about meeting me after the paper round?’

Kieran looked away at the car park, focusing on a Corsa with an L plate jerking its way into one of the bays.

‘Oh, no, I was still in bed.’

‘Fell back to sleep again?’

‘Yeah, a bit.’

‘Bro, I swear you can sleep through anything, you’re like a hibernating bear, smell like one too.’

‘That would be all the time I spend with your sister, her scent rubs off on me.’

‘You don’t even want to know what your mum smells like.’

Kieran tried to screw up his face to pretend Harry had pissed him off, but let a grin slip out again despite himself.

‘Anyway, how are we going to get more tokens? Ice water strat?’

‘Who’s going first?’

‘Can you go again?’

‘Again? God, I swear you’re such a vagina sometimes.’

‘Sorry man, promise I’ll go first next time.’

‘Okay, sure. I’m holding you to that though.’

Kieran watched as Harry went inside the restaurant, approaching the chubby middle-aged man sat by the left-hand side cash register. He could hear their voices faintly through the open double doors.

‘Hello, could I get two tap waters with ice please?’

‘Would you like anything else?’

‘No thank you, just thirsty.’

The man on the till stared back at Harry, Kieran could imagine the innocent little smile on Harry’s face.

‘Certainly. I’ll be one moment.’

Kieran saw the server step away from the till through the restaurant windows. Harry swivelled around and gave him a thumbs up. Shortly after he saw the server return from the kitchen with two small sized takeaway cups.

Taking the cups, Harry grabbed two straws from the dispenser before heading outside. Kieran reached out and took one of the cups, already beginning to sweat in the summer heat. Harry stood over him, eager to find out what loot they’d got.

‘Right, do you want to go first?’

‘Okay’ replied Kieran, digging the token off the side of the cup. ‘I got Old Kent Road which is... medium fries, nice! Your turn.’

Harry peeled off his token. ‘I got Mayfair. Oh, it’s one of the “chance to win a car” ones. That sucks.’

‘Don’t worry about it. We can share my fries.’

‘Thanks. You’re up bitch boy.’

Kieran got to his feet and headed inside. He went to the right-hand till manned by a young woman wearing a hairnet. He placed his token down on the counter.

‘H-hi, could I claim this Monopoly token please?’

‘Sure thing. This is for... medium fries yeah?’

‘Yes please, thank you.’

As the server took his token and went to call out for a portion of fries to be prepared, she was taken aside by the man on the other till.

Kieran saw the two have a short but heated conversation, which ended with the woman shrugging her shoulders and the man returning to his till in a huff. Shortly after, the woman returned with Kieran’s fries.

‘There you go. Enjoy.’

As she handed Kieran his fries, she leant in closer, dropping her voice.

‘Don’t use any more Monopoly tokens today. Management is getting on our arses about us giving out too much free food, we’ll have to refuse to serve you next time.’

Kieran nodded and mumbled thanks, taking the fries and making straight for the exit. Harry peeled himself away from the window as he came outside.

‘No ketchup?’

‘They’re onto us man. They might not serve us next time.’

‘It’ll be fine. They’ll probably forget by tomorrow when they’ve got different people on shift. I’ve asked my parents to save me any tokens they get anyway.’

‘But what if they don’t? Won’t they, like, call the police or something?’

‘Bro *chill out*, nobody is calling the Police because we got some free fries. It’s not like we’re actually doing anything to anyone, right?’

‘That’s true, I guess. You want these fries actually? I’m not really that hungry.’

‘Fuck yeah.’

Harry shoved the fries into his face three or four at a time before throwing the empty carton at the bin, the greasy cardboard hitting the rim and falling to the ground. Kieran and Harry swapped back to their own bikes and headed out. Kieran began to feel a bit lazy in the afternoon heat, the pedals on his bike taking more effort to turn.

‘What’s the plan now? We heading back to the underpass or?’

‘Um nah. Fancy a go on the new COD?’

Thank God, Kieran thought. He didn’t know if he had anymore underpass climbs in him.

‘Yeah, sure man.’

The two boys rode back to Harry’s. Leaving their bikes in the communal hallway, they climbed the stairs to the flat above.

‘Hi I’m home!’

He was met with silence.

‘Free house still, nice.’

The two took their usual positions in front of the television, Harry lounging on the sofa and Kieran hunched over on an office chair pulled away from the family desktop in the corner of the living room. Soon the room was filled with the sound of gunfire and dying Russians.

‘So, how’s school going Kee?’

‘Alright thanks. You?’

‘Pretty crappy at the minute. You remember I told you about that dickhead Mr. Collins?’

‘Yeah, think so?’

‘The one with the triple chin?’

‘Oh yeah I remember, the one that sent you out for writing in green pen.’

‘Yeah that’s the one. So, I got a level six on my last assessment and for some bullshit reason he still moved me down to set two.’

‘What the hell? I haven’t got above a level five in maths all year and my teacher has never mentioned moving me down.’

‘I know right? I think it’s because I’m *disruptive*. I’m shitting it over parent’s evening now because they’re going to see I’ve been moved down and ask why.’

‘But you’re still getting good grades though, right?’

‘Yeah, but they’re really hot on what I do at school since they found out I’m on report. I don’t even try and make trouble; I just get caught up in shit.’

‘It’s why I tend to stay quiet. I just don’t like the aggro... It’s annoying though.’

‘How come?’

‘Because they keep sending me to this school acclimatisation programme to “develop my social skills” like I don’t know how to speak to people. They don’t get that I just want to just chill on my own sometimes y’know? Doesn’t mean I’m a neek or special needs or whatever.’

‘Well, you are a bit of a neek.’

Harry started giggling so Kieran threw a grenade at his character in retaliation.

‘No, but seriously I get that. Your parents give you any shit about it?’

‘Don’t think my dad cares. Mum’s busy so I don’t really bother telling her.’

‘That’s smart, I wish my parents knew less about my shit. It’s like... oh, fuck! I’m down! Can you revive me bro?’

‘Give me a sec. There you go. I’ll hold them off while you call in the predator missile.’

‘Thanks bro. We’re both shit at school but at least we’re good at COD.’

‘Amen. Maybe we can call the people who make these and become testers.’

‘Yes! I’ve got bare ideas on how to make the game better. We’d double their sales easily.’

‘No doubt.’

Just then, the sound of a key turning in a lock echoed up from the downstairs landing. Two sets of footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs. Harry looked around the room for any misdemeanours before returning to his game. Diane appeared through the living room door.

‘Afternoon boys. How are your parents Kieran?’

‘They’re good thanks. They said to say hi.’

‘Lovely.’

She turned her attention to Harry.

‘You finished your chores today young man?’

‘Not yet mum, going to do them once Kieran goes home.’

‘Well, you better. Otherwise you know what happens to your Xbox privileges.’

‘Yes mum.’

‘You boys want something to drink?’

‘Coke please’ they said in unison.

‘Okay coming up. You should both remember to stay hydrated and drink water when you play out though.’

‘We will.’

Harry’s mum left the room to join her husband in the kitchen/dining space, returning a few moments later with two glasses of sticky, slightly flat cola.

‘Here you go guys. Let us know when you’re hungry and we’ll put some food on.’

‘Thank you, Diane’ replied Kieran.

‘You’re welcome love. Nice to know some people in this house have manners.’

With that Diane returned to watch television in the kitchen diner with her husband. Kieran sat a little further back in the computer chair and dropped his shoulders. The sun was beginning to set, and it gave the unlit living room a warm glow. The dim sound of videogame violence was familiar and relaxing.

Kieran's concentration on the game slipped.

'Ah crap man, I'm down. Can you revive me?'

Harry looked down at Kieran's half of the screen and did his best to come to the rescue, only to be cornered and taken out with the butt of an AK47.

'Ah shit, they got me too, sorry man.'

'Never mind bro. What's the plan now?'

'Not sure man... Did you still want me to Bluetooth you those Eminem tunes today?'

'Oh yeah please bro. If it's cool could you do it now? Battery's pretty low.'

Harry took Kieran's phone and placed it against his to begin the Bluetooth transfer. Kieran's phone began to vibrate.

'Your mother's calling.'

'Very funny, asshole.'

'No really, she is.'

Harry handed Kieran back his phone for him to pick up.

'Alright mum.'

'Hi mate, you never texted. You coming home for dinner?'

Kieran's words from that morning ran back through his head. From the tone in his mum's voice, she already knew his answer in the way that mums seemed to know everything. He'd pussied out, and they both knew it. He knew she wouldn't hold it against him, she never did. He wished he could get her away for the night too, the flat was no place for anyone after 8pm.

'Erm, actually, would I be okay to stay at Harry's tonight? It's just we're playing through his new game in two player.'

'Don't you patter me. I know you think you're too cool to spend time with your old mum.'

Kieran knew she was joking but still felt the pang in his chest.

‘No, no mum it’s not that...’

‘I know that you sausage. Have fun and I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Will do, night mum.’

Kieran ended the call and placed his phone down on the arm of the sofa.

‘So, you staying bro?’

‘Yeah dude.’

Harry held out his knuckles for a spud. Kieran met it, a smile coming to his face.

‘Good, good. I’ll ask mum if we can get a takeaway.’

Kieran woke on the living room couch. The air in the room was still and heavy despite the open window. He’d slept in his trackies and they were stuck to his legs. He looked down at his phone. 10:54am. Fuck.

Harry and his family had probably been awake for hours, unable to use their living room. Kieran jumped to his feet and began tidying. He rolled the bedding up and piled it by the couch for Harry’s mum to collect and started collecting up the rubbish. Cans of drink, Styrofoam boxes from last night’s burgers, sweet wrappers. He shoved them all into the *Artemis Kebab and Burger Bar* carrier bag and opened the front room door.

Harry’s dad Roger was emerging from the kitchen. He was a tall, burly man with an ever-growing bald patch in the middle of his wispy brown hair. He initially frowned at Kieran before quickly pasting on a thin smile.

‘Good morning, Kieran... sleep well?’

‘Yeah, I did thanks Roger.’

‘Are you all *done* in there? I just need to use the computer for something.’

He wanted to apologise over and over for being a lazy bastard and wasting his morning. But he knew what’s done is done. He needed to stop taking the piss.

‘Oh, yeah, yeah. Just need to chuck this rubbish away.’

‘Good man.’

Rodger brushed past Kieran on his way to the living room as Harry came up the stairs from the bathroom, hair still wet.

‘Fuck me you’re awake. Thought you’d died in there.’

‘Yeah, sorry bro was hella tired.’

‘Well, you could at least have a shower then to wake yourself up.’

Harry walked closer to Kieran and began shaking his head from side to side, flicking Kieran with water.

‘Ah you dickhead!’

Kieran tried to bat away the water while swinging his bag of rubbish, whacking Harry in the face.

‘Bastard!’

Kieran eventually ducked away and threw the rubbish in the bin. He returned to Harry who was now in his bedroom, spraying a concoction of hair and body sprays. He was heading out soon no doubt. Kieran thought about fucking home off and staying out another day but the thought of leaving his mum alone stopped his brain thinking about anything else. He had to know if she was still okay.

‘So, you coming out with me today man.’

‘Nah, I’ve got help my mum with some shit.’

Harry looked back. Kieran saw his shoulders drop ever so slightly.

‘Ah, okay, fair. When will you be out next?’

‘Maybe next Sunday? Gotta help my dad with work next week and I got karting Saturday.’

‘Oh shit forgot about that. You better fucking win bro, I want a free Ferrari when you race for them in F1.’

‘Nah I’m going to join Renault on purpose, so they give you a shitty Clio.’

Harry made a face and sprayed Kieran with some deodorant.

‘You want me to chill with you on the way home though? I’ve not got much on anyways.’

‘Sure dude.’

Together they collected their trainers and made their way outside. They walked to the Garrett Lane bus stop and hopped on a 270 heading towards Tooting.

Kieran and Harry tapped their oysters and the bus began to crawl its way along, its passengers slowly stewing as the late-morning sun shone in through the smudged windows. Harry and Kieran stood by the rear door, trying to catch some of the air that entered the bus when they opened.

Behind them a man sat slumped in one of the bus's back row seats. His red, puffy face was shiny with sweat, and he swayed slightly as he tried to reach for the bell. Grasping the pole before him, he began repeatedly stabbing the bell button, with a low collective groan emitting from the passengers. The man continued stabbing the bell button until a young man in a supermarket uniform finally reached the end of his tether:

‘Excuse me mate can you pack that in? We’re not even near the bus stop yet.’

‘Y-yeah but the driver mi-miss-stop innit?’

‘He won’t because other people need to get off too. Just give it a rest yeah?’

‘Y-you give ‘it rest, bloody prick.’

The two men began to argue. Threats and expletives flew back and forth across the bus as the young man went just as red as the man he was arguing with. As their voices rose the passengers turned to face onto them. Kieran stood with his head down and eyes closed.

With the driver stopping the bus and the growing threat of violence from the younger man, the red-faced man conceded defeat and rose to his feet to exit the bus. In a final act of defiance, he theatrically swung his walking stick and smacked it against the pole. Kieran jolted. He tried to act natural but saw Harry look over at him.

‘You good bro?’

‘Yeah, it’s just, I don’t know how to describe it, loud noises just make my stomach tight, y’know?’

‘You need water or anything?’

‘Nah, nah, don’t worry about it.’

Kieran waited for Harry to push him on it but felt a wave of relief when he didn’t. The bus began to move again.

Chapter Two

Craig woke to the sound of his phone alarm pounding in his skull. He reached for it with clumsy fingers and silenced it, flipping his phone shut with a snap. Rolling out of bed, he made his way across the room to get dressed, fishing underwear and an old t-shirt out of his drawer and putting on a pair of patched work jeans. The pounding had now been joined by a dryness in his throat and an uncomfortable shiver, despite the morning sun shining in through the window.

Kieran was already in the living room when he wandered through enroute to the kitchen, watching a recording of one of *The Fast and the Furious* movies on the Digibox. Craig barely broke stride as he made his way for the kettle.

‘Tea?’

‘Uh, yeah, cheers dad.’

Craig flicked the kettle on and dropped a tea bag and sugar into each of their cups, two teaspoons each now Kieran was older. He caught sight of his right hand, the knuckles bruised. He felt a pang of guilt amongst his shaking innards. The pangs used to be much stronger, so intense he’d entertain the idea of swerving into oncoming traffic on his way to the workshop. Nowadays there were just a mild discomfort, lost in the white noise of his hangover.

Teas ready, he took a long, grateful slug and brought them into the living room, a little of Kieran’s spilling over the side of his mug. She could deal with later. He sunk into his armchair and watched the brightly coloured cars whiz by on the telly, smoke pouring from their tyres.

‘You know I used to have a Jap motor like that once, a Corolla Twin Cam. Went like shit off a shovel.’

‘Yeah, you’ve said. White one, right?’

‘White with black wheels, was the dog’s bollocks. I used to race the bredrins in their Beemers up Wandsworth Road, couldn’t catch me for love nor money.’

‘Got rid of it for a Mini, wasn’t it?’

‘A red Clubman 1275GT. Worth money nowadays. Probably because the wallies who couldn’t drive ‘em kept wrapping them around trees.’

They continued to watch the movie in silence. He watched Kieran sip his tea while lying on the couch like lady of the manor. In his day he’d have been booted out the house by his mum to go and entertain himself by now, or maybe so she could entertain herself with the bottle of vodka she hid under the sink.

Craig shook the thought from his head and continued watching the film, silently pledging to himself to get up and get ready as 9:15, 9:30 and then 9:45 rolled past on the DVD display panel.

Finally, as the credits of the movie rolled at 9:51 he got up and made his way to the bathroom. Before brushing his teeth, he went to take a piss. Staring down into the bowl he could see hair, tufts of it, like it had been yanked out by the root. The familiar low pang returned, and he stood and stared at the wall while doing his business until flushing the chain.

He made his way back into the bedroom to grab his shoes and keys. As he sat on the bed to do his laces something caught his eye, a dent on the edge of the wooden headboard. Strange. Must’ve been there a while and he somehow hadn’t noticed it. It was a weak lie but he forced himself to believe it.

Coming back into the hall, he looked down into the living room and could see Kieran still watching TV. Part of him was tempted to leave him behind but Jess would throw a fit if she found out. He was more than old enough to look after himself, but she still insisted that he take him to work to *keep him busy* and *teach him things*, as if he had time to be fucking mother hen when he had jobs on. But it was pointless trying to lie, she always had a way of finding things out in the end.

‘Oi square eyes. Get your shoes, we’re going.’

He watched Kieran get up and trudge to his room. Seeing his lack of enthusiasm caused a surge of jealous anger to run through him, momentarily energising him. Didn’t the ungrateful little shit know he didn’t want to be there as much as he did? At least he got to sit on his pimply arse and look at his phone whilst he slaved away to bring money in.

‘For crying out loud Kee, I haven’t got all day for you to mope. Move your arse!’

A panicked, stammering voice came back to him from Kieran’s room.

‘Ye-yeah sorry dad, just getting my shoes on.’

Together, they made their way out the flat and up the gully to the street. Craig felt the sun scorching his back as they emerged out the front gate, he was starting to sweat already. He thought of the baking hot concrete floor of the workshop, the heat amplified by all the metal and glass parked outside the open doors. He’d be a soggy, panting mess by lunchtime for sure.

They made their way up the street to the car, a C reg Nissan Bluebird he’d got off Rich from the shop across the way for fifty quid. He hated it. It was a 1.6 and didn’t have the power to pull a greased stick out of a pig’s arse. Still, it was in decent enough nick that he could probably resell it for a few hundred quid if need be.

The two of them got in and Craig started the engine, only to be hit with the blaring bass of a house track on the radio. Jess must’ve used the car last for that shite to be on the stereo. Like his missus Craig had done his fair share of raving, but the music had never really appealed to him, at least not as much as what he sniffed or swallowed back then. He turned the volume down and retuned the radio to the familiar 80’s hits of HEART 106.2.

Craig found that one of the advantages of his morning procrastination was that the rush hour traffic was mostly gone by the time he hit the road. With Balham Highroad mostly clear of traffic, he tried to make time by gunning the Bluebird along the run between Balham and Tooting Bec station, its little engine screaming as he ran it up through the revs. It used to be fun doing this when Kieran was little, he’d scream and laugh and ask him to overtake the cars ahead. Now he just sat there being moody and looking at that bloody phone. His impromptu rally stage was ended by traffic lights on the edge of Tooting, the Bluebird’s worn brake pads squeaking as it came to a stop.

As he waited at the lights, he spotted a young woman making her way to the crossing pushing a kid’s pushbike. She was very pretty, with thick, silky blonde hair and a long blue dress hanging off her petite, sun kissed body. Craig leaned his chunky, tattooed forearm out of the Bluebird’s open window and tried to get her attention.

‘You alright darlin’, how you doing today?’

The woman kept walking. Craig raised his voice to make himself heard over the noise of the street.

‘Oi babe, come over and talk with me a minute yeah?’

The woman was nearly across to the other side of the Highroad now and had upped her pace, the pedals on the little bike spinning faster and faster.

Craig put his arm back into the car and rested it on the steering wheel. He saw that Kieran had sunken down in his seat. Why the fuck was he getting judgey for? He didn’t even have hair on his bollocks yet.

‘Kee, sit up in your seat yeah? You’re not a baby for god’s sake.’

As the lights changed, he shoved the car into first gear and screeched away. Turning into the backstreets near the workshop Craig sped between the parked cars, forcing anything coming the other way into a gap to avoid a head-on crash.

Arriving at work, Craig swung the Bluebird down an alleyway between two shops, bouncing along the rutted, potholed concrete until he arrived at a small square surrounded by rows of low, metal roofed garages. Most of them had their doors open, showing little workshops with one or two men in each pouring over an engine bay or looking underneath a motor on jacks. Leaving the car in the middle of the square, he undid the weighty padlock on his garage doors and swung them open, before parking the Bluebird at the entrance.

Walking in, the heat was already intense. Craig felt the sheet of sweat on his forehead spreading down to his neck. He went to put the kettle on but saw that his milk had turned to cheese as the tub of water he stored it in had gone warm. He summoned Kieran over with his finger and fished a couple of pound coins out of his pocket.

‘Why don’t you make yourself useful and get me some milk? Get yourself something to drink while you’re at it.’

‘Okay dad, be back in a sec.’

‘You better be, if I find you’ve gone gallivanting, I’ll biff you.’

He meant it as a joke, but he saw Kieran begin speed walking back up the alley.

‘Oi, slow down Linford, I was only joking!’

Fuck’s sake. Can’t anyone take a joke these days? You’d think he was a miserable humourless bastard the way Kee and Jess treated him sometimes.

Craig turned his attention to the car he had in, a 52-plate BMW 5-Series owned by one of the office halfwits Jess worked with. He'd reported the car was noisy and used more fuel than usual, classic signs of a blowing exhaust. Closer inspection had shown the centre box had a hole in it the size of Blackwall Tunnel. It had probably been there a while, and he'd only brought it up to show Jess the type of shiny motor she could ride in if she rode him. He felt that from him when he arrived in it, dropping Jess off as they were both coming from work. The poncy shirt and tight trousers, the stench of some expensive cologne, the Beemer with the leather seats and climate control. Bet he thinks he's got my missus ready to get under his desk.

The car looked out of place in his scruffy workshop, like it had been nicked and hidden away there. Craig had always imagined he'd run his business out of a place that was befitting of cars like these, but years of bad business partnerships and worse landlords had led him here. He'd promised himself a thousand times he'd renovate the place, fix the sagging plasterboard on the ceiling, fit proper work surfaces to finally replace the slabs of chipboard over an assortment of old chest freezers and dishwashers left over from his brother's long-dead refrigeration business. But time and money never seemed to be on his side.

Flicking the kettle on in anticipation of Kieran's return, Craig got to removing the new exhaust section from its box. As he was sliding it out of its wrapping, he heard his mobile begin to vibrate on the chipboard. Looking at the screen it was the customer, never good news. Craig flipped his phone up and answered:

'Hello Mitcham Lane Motors.'

'Oh hey, its Brian, with the BMW?'

'Hi Brian, what can I do for you?'

'Oh, it's nothing really, I was just wondering if I could get a quick service done along with the exhaust fix?'

Craig mouthed curses to himself. Now he'd need to go out and pick up extra parts, bring them back, and fit them after fitting the exhaust. So much for an easy day.

'Okay I can do that for you, but I'll need to charge you for the parts and extra labour yeah?'

'How much more?'

‘Filters and oil will come to about £50, it will be an hour’s labour to fit so you’re looking at an extra hundred quid on top of the original quote.’

‘A hundred pounds, seriously?’

‘Yeah mate, hundred quid extra all in.’

‘Sorry my man but I could’ve taken it to BMW for that money. I thought a local chap like you would sort me out, y’know?’

Oh, Craig would sort him out alright if he continued to try his patience.

‘Look mate, that’s the best I can do, I’m charging you cost price for the materials and only an hour’s labour. You can take it to BMW if you like but they’ll charge you double.’

‘Don’t try to fleece me here matey. I’ve already put down £100 for this exhaust job and now you’re rounding up the bill for a glorified tidy up? I’ll pay the remaining £100 for my exhaust plus £80 for the service. If you don’t like it, I’ll collect my car after work today and you get nothing.’

Craig dug his nails into the soft wooden surface under his hand. He had no jobs booked after this one, so he needed a pay out to tide him over. He was also near his credit limit at Euro Car Parts, so he didn’t want to take the piss by returning a half-unpacked centre box. Not to mention he couldn’t trust himself to not rearrange the smug prick’s face when he came back for his car.

‘Look, I’ll charge £80 as a gesture of good faith, but please understand that I cannot and will not discount my work again, understand?’

‘Thanks so much mate, I knew you’d be fair enough! Let me know when she’s ready to go and I’ll come and pick her up.’

‘Will do, goodbye now.’

Craig ended the call and slammed his phone down on the surface. The back popped off and the battery slid across the chipboard, clattering on the floor. He bent down to collect it, muttering to himself as Kieran arrived back with the milk. He stopped fiddling with the battery to see him staring gormlessly back at him.

‘Well don’t stand there on ceremony. Put the fucking kettle on, you’ve been gone ages.’

He saw Kieran go to dispute him and think better of it, as he should. He didn’t need any more argumentative shitbags in his way today. Kieran made him a tea and Craig snatched it as soon as the

milk was poured, ignoring the burn in his throat as the liquid soothed insides shaking for drink and something to pummel.

Unable to put it off any longer, Craig got to work on the Beemer. Jacking the car up, he began to unbolt the old exhaust. The concrete floor was roasting hot and Craig's only protection from it was an improvised mat made from taping bits of old cardboard together. It did little to protect him from the floor and he'd occasionally get a twinge of pain as his back touched a part where the cardboard had worn through. He grunted and strained as he battled to untighten the bolts under the car, which had been fused stiff by the road grime of travelling back and forward to whatever suburban shithole its owner lived in. Everything was stiff, filthy, and rough to the touch, easily tearing through his rubber gloves causing all the filth to sink into the lines in his hands and under his fingernails. With one final stud yet to come out, Craig steadied the hanging exhaust section on his shoulder and went to untighten it with his wrench. The stud snapped, leaving what remained stuck in the exhaust. Craig threw his wrench out from under the car, with it whacking off one of the workshop's support beams with a clang.

'Kee, get me my grinder.'

Craig knew his angle grinder was on a wooden top balanced on an old dishwasher, left behind a toolbox and an orbital sander. He could hear Kieran scurrying around looking for it. His shoulder was beginning to ache, and he stuck his hand out from underneath the car in anticipation.

'It is on the surface, behind the sander. You *can't* miss it.'

'What surface dad, I can't see it.'

'What do you mean?! How can you not see a big fuck-off sander and angle grinder?'

By the sound of Kieran's footsteps, he could hear he was checking the sideboard with the sandpaper and buffing attachment on it, nowhere near the sander. With a grunt he began to shimmy out from underneath the car.

'Oi, shit-for-brains, come here and hold this exhaust, I'll get it.'

He watched Kieran come over, his face flushed and breath heavy from pulling his workshop apart. Without a word, Craig waited for him to get down under the car and yanked him into position,

dropping the exhaust onto his shoulder. He walked over and grabbed the grinder, making a point of holding it high in mock celebration.

‘There that was so bloody difficult, wasn’t it? Fuck me Kieran if you don’t get your brain into gear soon, you’ll be flipping burgers in McDonald’s with all the other halfwits. Is that what you want?’

‘No, sorry dad.’

‘Sorry’s not good enough, use your brain or get the fuck out of my workshop.’

As he slid back under the car, he watched Kieran skulk off into a corner of the workshop, face down in his phone as he tippy tapped away. Maybe he’d be better off as a secretary.

Craig set to work with the angle grinder and cut the exhaust section free around the snapped stud. He couldn’t be bothered finding his welding helmet so squinted as the sparks flew around under the car, occasionally checking to see if any had caught the cardboard. Old exhaust free, he threw it out to join his wrench and fitted the new part, a mercifully much easier task, using some old bolts he had laying around to secure it instead of the brittle studs that came from the manufacturer.

Sliding out from under the car he felt a rumble in his belly. Kieran was still hunched in the corner, face buried in his phone. Craig wondered over to him and touched him lightly on the shoulder. He felt an involuntary jolt and took a step back.

‘What time is it?’

‘Just after twelve.’

‘Lunch?’

‘Yeah, okay.’

Craig made his way to the old sink in the corner, little more than a basin bolted to the wall with exposed pipes running into a drain. He turned it on and began scrubbing away at his hands, trying to shift the gunk and shite from his skin. The thought of doing what the other boys did and holding a sandwich in greasy hands brought a wave of sickness up from deep within.

Having scrubbed his hands until they were red, he made Kieran wash his and they made their way out of the workshop to the car. Craig rolled the car back and pulled the doors over. The boys in the other garages always kept an eye so there was never any need to lock up during the day. Stevie

from the corner workshop stuck his head up from under the bonnet of an old Escort and raised a friendly hand.

‘Oi, you two clocking off early?’

‘I fucking wish mate, off for lunch.’

‘Fair dos. So how are you doing little fella, keeping your old man honest?’

Craig looked at Kieran, who looked at his feet.

‘I’m okay thanks and yeah trying.’

‘Good to hear son. Maybe one day you can take over from your pops and show him how it’s done.’

‘Nah, nah, he’s got brains this boy Stevie, gets good grades. He’ll be up the mile suited and booted, no grot under his fingernails or filler dust in his hair.’

Craig let a grin of genuine pride slip out. He may be a clumsy bastard, but his boy always did well at school. Jess would be glowing like a streetlamp whenever she came back from a parent’s evening. For all his sins, at least he knew Kee would work out alright. He saw Stevie scratch his chin, as if Kieran had changed in his estimation.

‘Ah so he’s destined to go beyond our ilk then? A word of advice young man, never forget your old tail when you get a new one, these are your roots and always will be.’

‘Oh, he knows that, and if he forgets his old man will always be here to remind him.’

‘Yeah, spot on, spot on. Nothing wrong with a bit of honest graft, all the suits can lord it over us but at the end of the day who do they come to when their motors go kaput eh? Anyway, I’ll let you boys grab your lunch.’

‘Ta Stevie, see you in a bit.’

‘See you, Stevie.’

They climbed into the car and hit the road. Craig knew a Café in Brixton where they could grab some grub and then walk around the corner to a local parts shop and grab the servicing bits for the Beemer. The sun was high in the sky and Craig had no choice but to crawl along Brixton streets clogged with traffic. It was so hot in the interior that Craig’s eyes began to get heavy, and he almost didn’t notice two men crossing the street, jamming on the brakes to avoid hitting them. They swore

and threw up their hands but Craig was too dozy to get animated, turning up the radio to block them out.

Arriving at their destination, Craig dumped the Bluebird in a nearby supermarket carpark and made his way across the street to the café, proudly announcing itself as the *Golden Café* in big, bold, yellow letters. Inside were white and red tiled walls, vinegary red and brown source on the tables, and the lingering smell of cooking oil. As a semi-regular, the large moustached man behind the counter clocked Craig immediately.

‘Ah, Mr Craig and his apprentice, how are you both doing today?’

‘Not too bad Kyri, not too bad. Yourself?’

‘Still kicking so can’t complain. What can I get for you?’

‘I’ll take a sausage sandwich and a tea. What do you want Kee?’

‘Um... Could I have a tuna mayo sandwich and a coke?’

‘Coming up.’

Kyri turned and barked the order back to a young man in the kitchen who began preparing the sandwiches. Turning back around he put his elbows on the counter, clearly looking for a conversation to act as an excuse to put off working for the minute. Maybe he justifies it as being *front of house*.

‘So, how’s the grease monkey game these days?’

‘Pain in the arse as usual, you know what it’s like. Customers want extras on the cheap, I’m getting newer motors in now which are full of all that electronic shite...’

‘The GPS and stuff?’

‘Yeah, but also the sensors and all that. You know you now need a special computer programme just to turn a service light off? I don’t really do computers so I can’t make heads nor tails of it to tell the truth.’

‘Maybe the young man here is good with computers?’

‘Better be with the amount of PlayStation he plays.’

‘Oh no please don’t get me started about the PlayStations and the Xboxes. Barely see my boy these days, just spends all day playing soldiers with his friends in his room. I keep telling him he won’t find a nice girl unless he goes outside and gets some sun on his skin, but he won’t listen.’

‘Not even sure if this one likes girls yet, maybe I’ve let him spend too much time around his mum.’

The two men exchanged a laugh while he glanced at Kieran looking about himself, not knowing where to put his red face. God that boy has thin skin, needs to learn to take a joke if he’s going to get on in life. He followed Craig over to a booth, where they took a seat below a reproduced painting of a Mediterranean beach scene. Shortly after the young man appeared with the sandwiches and drinks on a tray. The sandwiches were made from thick white bread and packed with filling, towering off the plates like doughy doorstops. It was just what the doctor ordered for Craig. He wolfed it down, feeling it calm the remnants of booze-induced discontent in his stomach.

Whilst waiting for Kieran to finish his sandwich he put in a quick call to the nearby parts shop, making sure they had the parts available for collection. Fortunately for him they were, and once Kieran had finally defeated his brick of tuna and bread Craig went to the till and paid, making sure to drop a pound into the tip jar with a loud clang.

‘You’re too kind my good man, I’ll see you both soon!’

‘See ya’ around Kiri.’

The two made their way up the street to the parts shop. The sun was still high in the sky and Craig felt his clothes begin to stick to his body again away from the shade of the café. Stepping into the parts shop, he and Kieran stood in the cramped customer area and waited to be served. Over the counter Craig could see the rows of various parts laid out on shelves and tried to spot his servicing parts, concluding they must be tucked away somewhere.

After a few minutes, a bored looking man with spiky hair made his way slowly to the counter. Aware that his time was running out in the supermarket car park, Craig decided to skip the small talk.

‘Alright mate, you got some filters for a BMW 530, I called in about ten minutes ago?’

‘Yeah, got them in the back, give me a minute.’

The young man sauntered off, running his fingers through his greasy hair. A minute passed, then two, then five. Craig fidgeted and repeatedly checked his phone. After almost ten minutes had gone by he tried to get Kieran’s attention, who had his head buried in a parts brochure he’d taken from the counter.

‘Oi, this little shit’s taking forever and a day. Go start the car in case they try and give me a ticket.’

‘What if anyone comes?’

‘Just stall ‘em and say I’m on the way, I shouldn’t be that much longer.’

He watched Kieran scamper off with the keys, leaving him alone in the shop.

The corporate branded clock on the wall continued its march towards the next hour, and Craig was on the verge of leaning over the counter and shouting into the storage area behind when the man appeared back with the parts. Craig could smell fresh cigarette smoke on his breath.

‘Here you go mate, sorry for the wait.’

Craig silently took the parts and made his way out the shop, letting the door slam shut behind him. He didn’t brake stride to check for cars before crossing over and marching into the supermarket car park. That greasy little shit stain had cost him nearly half an hour. He’d probably be last man standing in the workshop complex now and would need to fiddle with the stiff old padlock on the outside gate before he could go home.

Approaching the Bluebird, he could see a supermarket employee hand Kieran something through the passenger window and walk off.

He really hoped it wasn’t what he thought it was. Kee better *pray* that isn’t what it looks like. He marched up to the window and snatched it out of Kieran’s hand. It had to be, didn’t it?

The little fucker had just cost him fifty quid.

‘What is this?’

Kieran looked at him, gormless again. Some of the colour had gone from his cheeks.

‘Well?’

‘Ticket.’

‘And what was the one bloody thing I sent you back to the car to stop me getting?’

‘A ticket.’

‘Well conratu-fucking-lations because you’ve just made this entire day fucking pointless because now I’ve got to spend what I earn paying off these wankers.’

The little bastard still wasn't looking at him. He wanted to grab his stupid face and make it face his. His hand went out but slammed into the roof of the car.

'Why the fuck do I even bother asking you for help? You'd be more use to me if I put you in the boot every morning and left you there.'

Kieran started to shake slightly, more colour draining from him.

'But dad I tried to stop him, he wanted to speak to the driver and wouldn't wait any longer.'

'But you didn't try hard enough, did you? In future I'm leaving you at the workshop and you can feed yourself.'

Craig jammed the Bluebird into gear and spun out of the carpark, shooting straight out onto the road without looking. The lunchtime traffic had thinned, and Craig kept his foot down whenever he could, leaving gear changes until the car was screaming for mercy.

Arriving back at the workshop, he opened up and immediately got to work under the BMW, draining its oil. In his rush he didn't line the collection bucket up properly with the sump plug, causing the falling oil to splash off the bucket's rim and all over his side, soaking his t-shirt and matting the hairs on his arms.

'Ah fuck it, fuck it fuck it fuck it!'

Hearing the commotion, he could hear Kieran creeping towards him.

'You alright dad?'

'Do I sound alright? Get me some bloody tissue before I take a sledgehammer to this piece of shit car.'

Kieran walked off and mercifully returned quickly with the roll of industrial blue tissue paper. Craig did his best to dry off, but it was pointless. With a sigh he got up from under the car and popped the bonnet to change the filters. The job was fiddly, and Craig aggressively yanked them free, no longer caring if he damaged any of the clips or attachments needed to fit the new ones. He threw the old filters across the workshop and slotted in the new ones, securing them in place by bashing them in with the palm of his hand.

He then plugged the offending sump and poured in the oil. He used Halfords oil to fill the Beemer up but would be sure to bill this customer for Castrol GTX. With the oil filters replaced, the

Beemer was finally ready to be released from the workshop and back into the hand of its tight-fisted owner. Job done.

Craig took a deep breath and put his hands on his knees. Sweat had pooled in every orifice of his body and his mind was clouded by fatigue. The prospect of pootling home in the slow, unairconditioned Bluebird filled him with misery. Fuck it, after the day he had he deserved a treat. He walked out to the Bluebird and started the engine, reversing it out of the way. He then lowered the Beemer off the jack, threw an old towel over the driver's seat and climbed in. Starting the engine, he threw the car into gear and sped out of the workshop, his inspection mat fired backwards into the wall by the spinning rear tyres. He then drove the Bluebird into the empty garage and locked up. Fuck the customer, he can get the bus home tonight and collect his car tomorrow.

He stared over at Kieran admiring the car, a bit of colour coming back into his gaunt face at the prospect of a journey home in luxury.

'Oi Kee, in with 'ya.'

Kieran climbed in and they set off. The owner was kind enough to leave them with half a tank, so Craig decided to take the scenic route home, looping around by Streatham Common where he could give the big girl a bit of a bomb. He crept down the alley before swinging the car onto the main road and burying his foot. He and Kieran were pinned back in their seats as they picked up speed.

'You feel that Kee?'

'Yeah, bloody hell. Its squashing me back into my seat.'

'Yeah, it is, but pay attention again this time.'

Craig dropped the Beemer from fourth to second and planted his foot again. The revs rose all the way to the redline before backing off as they closed in on the traffic ahead.

'Did you feel how it pushed you back in the seat more as the revs rose?'

'Yeah, I think so.'

'That's because the car is getting into its powerband.'

He looked over at Kieran, to see if the boy knew what that meant. It made a nice change to see something like understanding on his dopey dip.

'So, when you accelerate in the Bluebird, why don't you feel it as much?'

‘Ah, well, aside from that thing being a gutless pig, this motor has something called variable valve timing. You know what that is?’

The boy’s face went blank again, and he shook his head.

‘So every engine’s got these things called valves, these control the air coming into the combustion chamber and the exhaust gases coming out. You following?’

Craig saw Kieran nod his head, leaning his arm on the armrest. Thank fuck.

‘Right, so what variable valve timing does is open the valves a little bit when the revs are low, saving fuel. But, when you put your foot down the valves start to open more at higher revs, which puts more air into the combustion chamber and makes a bigger bang, giving you more power.’

‘Ah nice, it’s pretty smart innit? You think that would work in a kart? Like there’s normally only one gear and the revs are high a lot.’

‘Yeah, would do I reckon, good thinking. See you’ve got a decent brain Kee, when you decide to use it.’

Traffic slowing ahead, Craig jammed on the indicator and threw the car down the backstreets, the roar of the engine echoing off the houses around them. Emerging onto Streatham Highroad, Craig coasted to a stop at a set of traffic lights, pulse raised.

Alongside him a couple of young guys pulled up in a souped-up hatchback, its sound system rattling its windows. The driver glanced over and then began to creep forward, goading Craig into a race.

Craig slotted the Beemer into gear and watched the lights intently. An elderly couple were crossing the street as the pedestrian crossing lights went red. Craig waited for them to reach the kerb on the other side, he didn’t want to knock a wrinkly up in the air in his customer’s car.

As they reached the other side of the street the lights went from red to amber. The hatchback got the jump on him and began to move, its tyres squealing. Craig dumped the clutch and set off after them, the sound system of the little car getting louder as they closed in.

Although they’d caught him napping, Craig knew that the little shopping trolley those boys were driving was no match for the Beemer. Ahead the road narrowed from two lanes to one. Craig

was almost alongside them and kept his foot in it, they'd have to back down and let him ahead if they valued their motor.

The Beemer had just gotten ahead of the hatchback as the road narrowed, the other driver forced to tuck in behind. Craig put his arm out the window, feeling a grin slide across his face. It got wider as he heard Kieran giggle from the passenger seat.

'They thought they had us, dad!'

'Nah never in a month of Sundays. That's the thing Kee, if you're in a motor, any motor, you need to be committed once you've made a decision. Even when you're on that kart track, once you've decided to overtake you got to make the move, you're more likely to hit someone if you wuss out at the last minute when its too late. You understand?'

He saw Kee nod out the corner of his eye. It was good to be listened to, for once. He lowered his window and rested his arm on the door, feeling the soft early evening breeze against his arm.

As he reached the edge of Balham, he saw the off-licence coming up on his left, his usual next stop. His foot hovered over the brake and his finger rested on the indicator stalk. He passed it. Home was just around the corner. Her. That fucking flat.

He needed to get her to do that invoice, and then check through it as he was charging this prick below the normal rate. Fucker. And then she'd probably get on at him about that wonky shelf again, and the washing machine playing up, and then she'd most likely whinge about taking a customers car, even after the day he'd had...

He felt his finger flick the indicator stalk upwards as the car swung across the highroad. He parked the car across the street on a red route, mounting the kerb. In a daze he got out the car, leaving Kieran inside as he crossed the road and entered the shop. His brain intuitively calculated what was in his wallet and the word "Glen's" left his mouth without thought. He stared at the counter as the shopkeeper slid the bottle one way and his hands slid cash the other.

He tipped some of the loose change into the charity box (coppers only, the rest would be needed tomorrow) and walked back to the car. He wordlessly dropped the bottle into the passenger footwell. Out the corner of his eye he could see the boy look at the bottle at his feet.

He turned the Beemer back on and dropped it down off the kerb. The liquid in the bottle sloshed around as it rolled against the centre console. He waited a moment before asking what needed to be asked. As he stopped at the next set of lights, he gestured to the passenger footwell, keeping his eyes on the road.

‘Kee, pick that up. Can’t have that spilling in a customer’s car.’

Kee did as he was asked, cradling the bottle like a little glass baby. It would almost be funny if it didn’t make him want to vomit all over the leather-covered steering wheel in front of him.

Chapter Three

The family arrived at the old bus depot. The front entrance had been converted into a small carpark, beyond which was a ring of old tyres surrounding a layer of tarmac which had been crudely laid over the lumpy concrete floor in the shape of a go-kart track. As they drove through the large front door, the sticky heat trapped by the glass roof seeped into the Bluebird's open windows, followed shortly by the tappet sounds of two-stroke engines and the smell of fuel.

Kieran got out of the car and felt the adrenaline running riot in his chest, his heart already beginning to beat faster. He followed his parents to the reception area, his mum rummaging around in her handbag for her purse whilst his dad strode forward, his head high and his hands tucked into the pockets of his best jeans.

He stood behind them both at the reception kiosk, watching as his mum pulled a neat pile of notes from her purse and handed them over to the receptionist. In return she was passed his race number on a little plastic board. Numbers were given out in the order drivers arrived, and as Kieran was almost always late his number was almost always high. Today he was number thirty-one. As his mum passed him his number, a voice came over the tannoy calling for all drivers to attend the safety briefing.

Without looking back, Kieran made his way through the café and seating area and then through a gate onto the track. There the other drivers had crowded around one of the marshals, a twenty-something man with short, heavily gelled hair. He stood over a number of flags laid out on the track. Kieran took his usual spot towards the edge of the crowd, peering between the shoulders of the taller boys in front of him.

'Morning boys and girls, you know the drill, this is your safety briefing ahead of today's event. Has anyone never been here before?'

Kieran looked around and saw drivers dressed in borrowed overalls raise nervous hands, as well as one other driver dressed in the expensive, logo-covered overalls outdoor karters usually wore.

‘Right, for the benefit of you guys, can someone run me through the flags?’

There was a tense silence as each driver waited for another to speak. Eventually Josh, an older boy whose overalls exposed his wrists and ankles raised his hand.

‘Yes, Joshua?’

‘Yellow means slow down, red means come to a stop by the start line, black and orange means your kart’s broke, black and white means you’ve been a bit of a twat, black means you’ve been a massive twat.’

Kieran felt a giggle slip out as a few drivers gave a jeering applause.

‘Very good Josh, even if you’re a bit of a twat yourself. So, when you see a yellow flag half racing speed, when you see a red come to a full stop by the start line, if you see a black and orange flag waved at your kart you must pull into the mechanics bay by the start/finish line, a black and white flag is a warning, full black means you must park your kart in the pits as you are disqualified from that heat. Any questions?’

Kieran thought about jokingly asking what the chequered flag was for, but the eager silence from the other drivers kept him quiet.

‘Right, in that case everybody get their gloves on, helmets on, and we’ll get this show on the road.’

Immediately the bus garage burst into life as the drivers piled through the gate and grabbed their equipment which was strewn around the café, carpark and raised hut which overlooked the track. Kieran ran back to the car and pulled out an old motorcycle helmet inherited from an uncle. It saved valuable time but only newbies wore their helmets to the briefing. As he pulled on his gloves he heard his dad’s voice, muffled through the helmet’s lining.

‘Go give ‘em hell boy, don’t let us down.’

Kieran knew it always started with half-hearted encouragement. The less pleasant stuff would come later when he inevitably fucked up. Ready to go, he picked his race number up and walked back to the pits, where the drivers were jostling to get to the front so they could get on track first. Kieran shuffled in and was squeezed towards the front by the momentum of the crowd. Result.

The marshal pointed him to his kart and he jumped in, sliding into the narrow seat and clipping his number onto the plastic housing that ran down in front of the steering wheel. He could feel the engine vibrating his seat, and through his helmet he could hear it ticking away like a mechanical heartbeat. With everyone in their karts, the marshal waved them onto the circuit for practice. Kieran took to the track and felt a wave of relief surge over him. In practice he didn't have to race anyone, which meant he couldn't be beaten, which meant he couldn't possibly disappoint his dad. Being first out on track his kart's tyres were cold, and he skated across the bus garage's pockmarked surface, sliding through each corner like he was driving on the ice rink up the street. After a couple of laps another kart appeared ahead, one of the older boys wearing a reflective silver helmet. Over the next lap Kieran began to close in, the rear of his kart getting nearer and nearer until they were almost bumper to bumper. He then set to work trying to find a way past, weaving one way then the other to find a gap. Coming into the final hairpin turn the boy ahead slid out wide. Kieran pounced, drawing alongside. They remained side by side as they raced for the start finish line where the marshal was signalling the end of the session. Although it was only practice Kieran couldn't help leaning forward and trying to squeeze the last bit of speed from his kart. He had just enough momentum to squeeze ahead by the time they crossed the line.

Parking back up in the pits, Kieran was about to lever himself out of the kart when he felt a large hand thump onto his shoulder. Turning around he could see the boy he overtook standing over him, hand held out and shouting over the roar of the engines.

'Good driving mate, you're quick!'

'Thank you!'

'No worries, catch you out there again in a bit.'

Kieran jumped out of the kart and headed back to the car. As he passed the edge of the circuit facing the carpark, his mum came over from where she had been watching and hugged him.

'Well done mate, good start.'

'Thanks mum.'

The air blowing in through his helmet had made Kieran's throat dry, and he longingly eyed the vending machine near the entrance to the seating area. He knew how much his mum had already

paid to get him here, it was like all the crumpled notes he got in all his birthday cards combined each month. He couldn't take the piss and ask for an overpriced bottle of drink. That and it would be more money spent than his dad could have a go at him over.

'You want something to drink, mate?'

'I'm alright thanks mum.'

'Sure? You shouldn't be going out there dehydrated you know.'

'Is there any water in the car?'

'A bit, I think. You sure you don't want a coke or something?'

'No, water please.'

Kieran saw his mum reach into the Bluebird's glove box and pull out a half-empty bottle of supermarket brand mineral water.

Kieran took the bottle and drank; the water was warm and bitter but it at least wetted his tacky mouth and throat. As he set the bottle on the Bluebird's roof a voice boomed over the track's tannoy:

'Could driver's thirty-one, eleven, twenty, nine, and four make their way to the pits for heat one. For those who can't count that should be Kieran Roberts, Josh McGowan, Ed Reily, Jeremiah Smith, and Karim Brahimi.'

It was race time. His number was read first so he would be on pole, meaning he could only go backwards. Josh and Karim were both championship contenders and would be all over him from the get-go, he was a mobile chicane for those guys. He didn't stand a chance.

He took a deep breath and tried to forget about the outcome of the race. He hadn't lost yet. His mum gave him a tap on the helmet as he made his way towards the pits. As he approached the doors to the seating area he spotted his dad standing alone at the edge of the parking area, viewing the final hairpin. He turned and looked back at Kieran, his face motionless and eyes cold. Kieran picked his head up and tried to look confident, ignoring the churning in his stomach.

Arriving at the edge of the pit area the other boys gave him welcoming nods and let him come to the front. The marshal pointed him to the kart at the front of the queue. He clipped his number on and lowered himself in. Kieran could recognise most of the karts by their steering wheels, knowing how they would drive. On this kart the logo on the steering wheel was beginning to crack and flake

apart, with a small chunk of the rubber on the wheel itself missing at the 8 o'clock position. Kieran knew this kart was slow off the line, he'd have the race lost by the first turn. He'd have to try and hope he got better karts later on or he was in deep shit. He just wished they kept the good karts for the race meetings and left the turds like this one for people coming here to fuck about with their mates.

His heart was beating so fast he could barely breathe. He gripped the steering wheel and tried to kill the shaking in his hands.

The marshal waved him out onto the circuit, and he drove around to the start line. The kart felt a little loose on the track's surface, so he aggressively weaved like he'd seen Formula 1 drivers do to try and make his tyres warmer and stickier.

Pulling up to the start line he angled his kart inwards to try and stop Josh from getting by. He could see the front of his kart facing almost straight out the corner of his eye. With all karts lined up, a marshal ran to the front and signalled to the drivers to watch the overhead light bar before jumping over the tyres lining the edge of the track.

Kieran watched the lights through wide eyes, not daring to blink. The lights lit up red, he could see Josh's kart inch forward in anticipation.

The lights went green.

Kieran stood on his kart's throttle and its roar joined the four others as they filled the bus garage with noise. As he had feared, the kart only crept forward for the first few feet before finally picking up speed, but it was too late. Josh was already a length ahead and Ed muscled through at the first turn, his bulky frame hunched over in his kart.

Kieran sped around behind Ed for a couple of laps, desperately trying to get by. Ahead he could see Josh speeding away in the distance, and the muffled roars from behind told him he was under pressure from the other drivers too.

On the third lap of four Kieran saw some daylight on the inside of Ed's kart and made a desperate lunge into a tight switchback turn. His kart thudded against the side of Ed's and lost precious speed. Kieran jiggled around in his seat trying to will himself ahead but stayed behind out of the turn and was powerless to stop Karim overtaking as he got back up to speed.

Coming around again and the marshal by the start line held out a “Final Lap” board. Kieran tried to drive harder to make up for his mistakes, sliding the kart into corners and running as close to the tire walls as he dared. It was no use.

Speeding up to the final hairpin for the last time he caught a glimpse of his dad still standing the other side of the tyres, his face still gaunt and unmoving aside from a frown sketched onto his brow. Momentarily, Kieran considered not breaking for the bend, wondering if he was going fast enough to crash through the tyres and remove that stony look from his face for good. By the time he had caught himself he had nearly overshot the turn, sliding wide and letting Jeremiah demote him to last place.

Crossing the line Kieran had to bite his lip to hold back the tears. He had made an utter prick of himself in front of everyone. He thought about not driving back to the pits, just going around and around until his kart died. Before he could entertain it, the marshal had already waved him in. If he had to get out, he sure as hell wasn’t going back to the car.

Climbing out of the kart, he dumped his helmet and gloves near the pits and stood to watch the next race before convincing himself he needed to go to the toilet. The Kart track’s bathrooms were up two flights of stairs and through a network of empty rooms which Kieran thought might have been offices or storerooms when it was still a bus depot. After using the bathroom Kieran paced one of the empty rooms trying to calm the panic which seemed to grip every inch of his body. The longer he waited the less time there would be before the next race, meaning the less flack his dad could give him. However, he knew he couldn’t stay up here too long as he’d risk missing his next race which would mean even more flack, as well as wasting the money his mum had spent to take him here.

Hearing another race begin downstairs, Kieran decided now was the time he needed to go back and face his dad. He trotted down the stairs as casually as he could and made his way into the carpark. As he neared the Bluebird his dad moved away from his spot by the tyres and surged towards him, blocking his path. The scowl had deepened now. He stood inches away from Kieran, trying to lock onto his eyes. Kieran remained focused on a piece of dried gum on the ground.

‘So, what’s the excuse this time?’

Kieran stayed silent.

‘Well? Is there *any* good reason for that shite?’

‘It was the kart dad, couldn’t get it off the line.’

‘Then why did you let them all past you in the corners then? Or was that the kart too?’

Kieran felt the sun beating down on his face through the windows above. He felt like an ant under a magnifying glass.

‘No.’

‘Thought as much.’

He put a heavy hand on Kieran’s shoulder.

‘Why do you fucking bother Kee? You just come here, have mediocre race after mediocre race, and waste your mother’s money and my time. What are you playing at?’

Kieran swallowed hard and looked over at the track. He remembered when he first started karting, how much he looked forward to the last Saturday of each month. Screaming in his helmet when he won his first heat race. Crying in frustration when he got his first (and only) black flag. Then his dad started to come and watch, and now he couldn’t leave this fucking sweatbox fast enough. He looked back up at his dad and tried his best to keep his voice level and confident.

‘I’ll make it up next race, I promise.’

His dad looked at him with a smirk on his face, somewhere between disbelief and disgust.

‘Don’t bullshit me boy, you know how much I hate liars. Now fuck off and make your excuses to your mother.’

Kieran kept staring at the floor as he heard his dad storm off, followed shortly after by the slam of the door leading up to the toilets. He still had two more heats and the final to go. The thought of racing in them made him want to vomit.

He needed some excuses. He could pretend to be ill? Nah, then his dad would complain even harder about him wasting money. Maybe he could complain if he got a bad kart? But then he’d be a whining bitch. After all, everyone else just put up with what they were given so why couldn’t he?

He didn’t know where his mum was but he was too scared of her seeing him all panicky and making a fuss to find her. Instead, he went back through to the seating area to where his helmet, gloves and number were.

He exchanged glances and smiled at the other drivers milling around until Karim wandered over, his little sister in tow with a dolly in her hand.

‘Alright man, unlucky with that first heat.’

‘Yeah, got a shit kart and went backwards from there.’

‘It sucks man, tired of the crappy karts here. Every round I have at least one heat ruined by one. Remember that one where the wheel fell off?’

‘Oh yeah, was that ‘Collin’ guy driving it right?’

‘Yeah, think he left afterwards. Thinking of doing the same to be honest. Apparently, Daytona has waaay better karts, plus their tracks are outside.’

Kieran had never even thought of leaving Streatham, racing on outdoor tracks would probably be too expensive. Still, maybe one day he’d do it with his own money, his own car, and no dad in sight to give him shit.

‘Nice, sounds decent, do you think that...’

‘Sorry bro, think I heard your name come up for the next heat.’

Fuck.

‘Thanks man, catch you about?’

‘For sure, good luck Kee.’

Karim spudded him and left him to get ready for the next heat. Suited up he shuffled to the pits and was pointed to the kart at the back, at least he was pretty sure that it at least wasn’t the same turd from the first heat. Flopping down in the seat Kieran closed his eyes, willing the heat to be over quickly. Maybe someone would have a big crash and they’ll stop the race, or maybe his kart would catch fire and he would need to jump to safety. Maybe his dad would hurt himself in the car park. Nothing serious, just a sprained ankle or broken finger, anything that needed him to be taken to A&E would be enough. As the train of karts left the pits ahead of him, Kieran decided that it didn’t really matter what he did so he might as well keep going. At least then he’d feel he had not completely wasted his parents’ time and money.

He rolled around to the start line and took his place at the rear. This kart felt better than the last, more responsive and grippier in the turns. As the lights went green, Kieran shoved the accelerator

pedal down with all his might. He shot between the two karts ahead, entering the first turn a clear third. From there, he shadowed the two drivers ahead for the next couple of laps. The kart felt reassuring underneath him, giving him the confidence to brake less and carry more speed through the turns. Coming into the final turn on the penultimate lap, Kieran saw the leader slip into a spin, his body jolting slightly as his kart contacted with the tyre wall. He was now second, thank fuck. Fifth to second, there was no way his dad could bollock him for that.

The new leader was just a few kart lengths ahead, more than catchable. Sod it, in for a penny, as his mum always said. He chased after the leader on the final lap, closing a little corner-by-corner. Going into the final hairpin he saw a gap. He hesitated momentarily before remembering his dad's advice about committing to the move, it was now or never.

Going into the hairpin Kieran dived inside the leader and they left the final corner side by side. Kieran lowered his head to try and squeeze out some extra speed, the two karts only inches apart. A small part of him had the sudden urge to move over and squeeze the other kart towards the outside tyre wall. It wasn't worth risking a guaranteed good result through a penalty. The finish line drew closer with the bumper of the other driver remaining just ahead. Kieran was almost laid flat against his steering wheel, but it wasn't quite enough. He crossed the line in second place. Kieran drew alongside the other kart and put out his hand, the driver shaking it as they drove back around to the pits. For the first time in what felt like forever, the post-race adrenaline running through Kieran felt light and giddy instead of sick and heavy. He could stay in the kart and do another race, and then another. Bring it on.

Climbing out, he walked back to the carpark with a grin etched onto his face. He made a beeline for his dad, once again standing alone by the final turn.

'Alright dad. How was that?'

'Better.'

Kieran scanned his face for a flicker of happiness, or encouragement, or anything. It remained blank.

'The kart was much nicer this time, was much easier to fight at the front. And I took your advice and committed to the move at the last corner, nearly had him too.'

‘Yeah, yeah, decent job Kee, decent job.’

Kieran went to turn away and walk back to the car when his dad called out behind him.

‘But what I don’t understand, is how the *fuck* you can race like that one minute and race like complete shite the next.’

Kieran stopped and turned back, his shoulders dropping.

‘What do you mean dad?’

‘You know what I mean. What was that all about in the first race?’

‘But dad the kart...’

‘But nothing, Kee. I don’t give a shit if the kart is good, bad, broken or on three wheels, you get out there and drive the thing. I’m sick of wasting my mornings off watching you half-arse it.’

The words left Kieran’s mouth before he could stop himself.

‘You don’t have to watch if you don’t want to dad.’

‘Sorry?’

‘No, I mean that, you, you don’t have to come, if you don’t want, you can stay home.’

Kieran watched his dad step towards him, his face contorted in pure disgust, his eyes locked onto him. For a moment the worry in the pit of Kieran’s stomach dissipated, he’d accepted his fate. He looked down again and momentarily prepared for the sting of his dad’s open hand. Instead, his dad laid a hand on his face, his thumb pressing against this cheek.

‘Well, why didn’t you say earlier? If you don’t want me here I’ll just fuck off, shall I?’

‘No dad only if you want...’

‘No no, you’ve made yourself clear. Clearly you can’t even be grateful for the support of your parents. At least I don’t have to waste my time watching you play-pretend being a racing driver anymore.’

Kieran stood stunned as he watched his dad walk to the Bluebird, get in, and start the engine. As he watched his dad swing the car around and roar back out of the bus depot his mum appeared next to him.

‘Alright, where’s your dad going?’

‘Don’t know. I said that he didn’t need to watch me, not in a rude way but like that he could stay in bed and have a lay in, and he just left.’

‘Fuck’s sake.’

Kieran saw his mum pull out her phone and hit the speed dial for his dad.

‘Hello, where have you gone? Don’t be silly, he just knows how hard you work during the week...’

Kieran felt a small tinge of anger grow inside him. It wasn’t enough that his dad made him feel like shit doing something he’d begged his parents for years to do, but the second he suggested he save himself the effort of coming he’d had a tantrum and stormed off. If he’d done that to his mum, he was sure she wouldn’t be so bloody understanding.

‘You know he didn’t mean it that way... Please don’t talk about our son that way please... Look, just come back yeah? I’ve not got my house keys on me... Okay, fine. I’ll call you back later.’

Kieran watched his mum slide her phone back into her pocket and let out a sigh. Kieran knew that sigh well. It spelt trouble.

‘Your dad’s going around Elroy’s for a cuppa and he’ll collect us when you’ve finished racing.’

His mum was trying to force a smile, but he could see it straining on her face, the real expression hiding just behind.

‘Please be careful how you talk to him yeah? You know what he’s like.’

‘Yeah, sorry mum.’

Craig drove along Streatham High Road, the radio up loud enough to drown out the world.

How *dare* that ungrateful little shit talk to him like that? After all those early mornings he’d dragged himself out of bed after a long week’s work to watch him race. After all the advice he’d tried to give him over and over and over again, he had just spat it back in his face.

Maybe he just wasn’t cut out to be a dad of this generation. He couldn’t coddle and be the soft touch that Jess was, it just wasn’t in him. She had probably ruined him by acting like that, raising him in this soft, squashy little world without responsibilities and discipline. He would probably leech off

them forever now, wanting money and his car fixed and fuck knows what else while other parents get their peace and homes back.

Turning off the High Road he drove down a side street, parking outside a terraced house with an exterior freshly repainted in a light blue.

Craig could still remember how rough this place looked when Elroy first bought it, a run-down squat with boarded windows and floors rotted through. He thought he was mad to buy it, but for once he'd been proven wrong. Now, all done up, it was perfect.

He rang the doorbell and heard heavy feet come down the hallway. The door opened revealing Elroy, slightly stooped in the doorway. He was a tall, gangly man with an almost impossibly shiny bald head. Craig had often made the joke when they first met that he must spend ages looking for the right shoe polish to match his dark skin tone.

‘Alright you lanky bastard.’

‘Charming as always Craig, charming as always. You coming in or want to give the neighbours something to talk about?’

Craig followed Elroy through his hallway into the living room. The hall was welcoming, with soft carpet, a wall lined with family pictures, and a table full of little trinkets. He thought back to their own hallway, bare and drafty with spiteful skirting boards ready to catch your feet.

He took a seat on Elroy's couch as he peeled off into the kitchen.

‘Tea, coffee? beer?’

Craig thought about the beer. He wasn't usually a fan of it, it was too heavy and gassy. Fuck it, he needed something to take the edge off.

‘Uh, yeah, sod it. Gimme a beer please.’

Elroy arrived back into the living room with two cans of Heineken. He passed one to Craig before flopping down in an armchair and cracking his can open.

‘You sir are a bad influence. How am I going to explain to the missus that I've started cracking cans in the middle of the day?’

‘Well that's easy, you don't. Take the rubbish out and eat a couple of mints and she'll be none the wiser.’

‘I am sure as shit Jess does not let you away with that. I know who wears the trousers between you two.’

Craig painted on a smile and stared at his can.

‘So, how’s the family, the young man still training to be a Formula 1 driver?’

‘Oh, please, don’t get me started. I’ve got to go back and pick him up in a bit.’

Out the corner of his eye he saw Elroy tilt his head and lean forward. He cracked his can and took a gulp.

‘You not go and watch him then?’

‘I was, but he said he didn’t want me there.’

‘Bloody hell, that’s a nice thing for him to say to his old man. Kids these days, eh?’

‘Well... He didn’t quite say it in that way, it was something along the lines of *you don’t have to come and watch me, you can have a lay in and chill* sort of thing. Y’know?’

‘But what he really meant was get lost, right?’

Craig shrugged and took another gulp from his can. It was heavy and yeasty but he could feel his insides settle.

‘So do you know what this is all about then? I thought you and your boy got on well?’

‘Yeah, we do normally I reckon. I think it’s because of the way I talk to him sometimes. You know me I can’t do the whole sugar-coating thing, I say it how it is. Sometimes the boy needs a harsh word or two to set him straight, but he just can’t take it... not like a man, but like we used to, right? How many bollockings did you take as a kid from your parents, or worse?’

He saw Elroy recline back, a knowing grin on his face.

‘Ah, but what you forget sunshine is what we were doing to get those digs and bollockings. We were little shits, because being a little shit was all we had to do. Our parents had to come down on us to try and keep us on the straight and narrow. Things have changed, our kids have so much more to occupy them these days.’

Craig smiled and shook his head. The comfy life had taken his pal’s eye off the ball.

‘C’mon El, the world’s not changed that much, has it? There’s still thieving, drugs, every kids got a fucking knife now, it’s not exactly peace and love out there. And *that* is why I come down on the

boy, he's got to be awake. Whether that's awake to the boy behind him trying to overtake him at the kart track or the boy behind him trying to mug him, the principle is the same.'

Elroy leant forward again, sipping from his can.

'That may be so, but its not the bloody *Warriors* out there either. My kids are out and about all the time round here and no harm comes to them. Of course you dot their card, tell them to keep an eye out for danger, but what else can you do?'

'Yeah, yeah... I guess. But you've also got to let them know that nothing comes for free, right? That is a reason that I get onto him about the karting specifically, we pay good money for him to do that and I'll be damned if he goes there every month and makes an arse of himself.'

He could see Elroy leaning back into his chair, arms out.

'But he does enjoy it though, yeah? It's his thing?'

'Yeah, he does...'

'Well that's all that matters, surely? I took my eldest to street-dance class for over five years before she gave it up. Was she the best dancer in her class? Nope. Did she fall on her backside attempting new moves? Yep. Was her instructor's voice like nails on a chalk board? You better believe it.'

Craig took another big gulp of beer. He got Elroy, it was nice he got to enjoy *his thing*. But not everything in life is going to be some little hobby he could pick up and drop. Things were going to get hard for him – School would be hard, college would be hard, his first shitty minimum wage job would be hard. He would need to toughen up if he wanted to push through all that and make something of himself. Elroy's girls would always have the bank of mum and dad, a bank that never runs dry. It wasn't the same for them.

'Yeah, I get what you mean. I just want to make sure he's got the minerals to kick on in life, to achieve more than we did.'

'That's fair mate, that's fair.'

Craig began to think about a second beer when he felt his phone vibrate. It was a text from Jess, saying Kieran was about to start the main final. Maybe the boy would show some bollocks and do himself proud for once.

‘Alright El, I better make myself scarce.’

‘Leaving me so soon? You’ll have to stop treating me like your bit on the side one day.’

The two men exchanged a laugh and Craig made his way back up the hall.

Kieran watched as a marshal jogged into the car park, looking for someone. He spotted Kieran and ran over.

‘Kieran, thirty-one? You’re up mate, we’re waiting for you.’

Shit, he didn’t expect to be called so soon.

Kieran ran with the marshal into the seating area, spinning around wildly as he tried to spot his helmet, gloves, and number.

‘Do your gloves mate, I’ve got the helmet.’

Kieran pulled his gloves on, fiddling to get his fingers in the right holes as the marshal shoved his helmet on and tilted his head up to fasten the clip.

Kieran jogged over to the pits, clipped his number in, and flung himself into his Kart which was third in the queue. Just as he felt his arse touch the seat the marshal released the drivers onto the grid, Kieran still trying to compose himself as he rolled around. He felt a guilty relief that he had driven his dad away but couldn’t escape the lingering sense that it would catch up to him and his mum later. He’d have to find an exit strategy for himself, his dad’s molten rage might cool off if he was out of sight.

Lining up on the grid, he could see the two drivers ahead were in the manky green overalls and plain black helmets given out by the track. Newbies. New drivers were always unpredictable, either jumping out of the way of the regulars or holding them up, sometimes doing both in the same race. The one in second was a tall, bulky kid who would likely weigh his kart down on the straights. The one in first was tiny, his helmet only just visible above the seat. He’d probably fly on the straights and be harder to catch. Despite this, Kieran felt a rare tinge of excitement as he eyed the starting lights above. If he could win this race, he might have a shot of a trophy in the final. Maybe that would take a bit of dairy off him and his mum when they got back.

Green lights flashing, Kieran hit the throttle and jumped ahead of the larger newbie as his kart laboured off the line. Kieran moved across to cover him and headed off in pursuit of the other newbie in the lead. Because of his small, light frame, the newbie was very quick down the straights but struggled through the corners, the jerky inputs on the steering reminding Kieran of his early days as a kid in the cadet category. As they approached the final hairpin on lap two, Kieran was right on his bumper, almost running into the back of him as they went into the bend.

As they exited the corner, the newbie slid wide, bumping off the wall. Kieran steered his kart through on the inside and took the lead down the main straight. Kieran kept an eye over his shoulder for the next half a lap to ensure he was safe. As he settled into the lead he felt a grin creep across his face as he raced down the empty track ahead, hearing the screeches from the newbie's kart behind begin to fade away as he put another lap on the board. Coming around one final time he saw the checkered flag waving for him. Fucking finally. Crossing the line Kieran screamed at the top of his lungs, his helmet filling with noise. He banged on the kart's steering wheel and drove back around to the pits, sliding the kart into the corners and only winding it in when a marshal jabbed a disapproving finger at him from the side of the track.

Coming around into the pits, he was out the kart before it had fully stopped and shook the hands of the four other drivers with a firm shake, congratulating or consoling them all for their own finishes. As he shook the hand of the bulkier newbie, he felt a tap on the back of his helmet. He turned around and saw the outstretched hand of the marshal who had done up his helmet.

'You forgot your number mate.'

'Oh, sorry.'

'Well done by the way, you've driven well today Kee. That should put you near the front for the A final I reckon.'

Kieran tried to add together the points he had gotten from his three races, but the adrenaline made any mental addition fall apart in his head.

'Really, you sure?'

'Yeah, nobody's had a good run across all three heats today, so I think you're in with a shout.'

Kieran smiled back at the marshal and went back into the seating area. As he came through the door he was ambushed by his mum with a rib-crushing hug.

‘Well done mate! I *knew* you could do it.’

‘I can’t believe it, I’ve been rubbish today as well.’

‘Don’t be so bloody harsh on yourself, you’ve done well.’

She reached over to the nearby table and handed Kieran a can of coke.

‘Here, a little prize. And don’t lie to me and say you want to drink warm scummy water from the car again yeah?’

‘Yeah, okay. The marshal said I might qualify near the front for the A Final you know.’

‘See, not gone too bad, has it? Never know, you might get me a little trophy.’

Kieran stood and sipped his coke, enjoying the cool liquid sliding down his throat. He thought about how he could avoid his dad once he arrived home. His best bet would be Harry, although he couldn’t remember if he was busy today. If not he’d have a root around in his contacts list and find someone else he could stay with. He didn’t want to be home tonight.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the lady from reception walk up to the notice board and pin some sheets of paper to them. As always, these sheets drew a growing crowd of drivers, all eager to see where they qualified. Kieran decided to wait for them all to leave before walking over to look himself. His adrenaline started to rise as he scanned up through the E, D, C, and B finals without seeing his name. Finally, he found his name on the A final sheet:

1. Josh McGowen / 30 points
2. Kieran Roberts / 27 points
3. Hugo Bertrand / 26 points

Kieran stood in shock before the board, he couldn’t remember the last time his name had been so high up. He checked the board again to see if his name had been printed elsewhere in the correct place, but it was nowhere to be seen. As he went to tell his mum, he bumped into Josh making his way to the vending machine.

‘Well done on starting second mate, you’ve been mega fast today.’

‘Thanks man, and congrats on pole.’

‘Cheers.’

Josh then stood closer to Kieran and lowered his voice.

‘Look, if we come out of the first turn one and two let’s not fight too hard in the early laps, yeah? If we break away, we can secure the one-two and then tussle for the win then.’

Kieran went to answer but hesitated. He’d never been asked such a question before. Was it a way to stop him trying to go for first until it was too late? Was he trying to get in his head? All he really wanted was a trophy to get his dad off his back. Following Josh could help him get that.

‘Yeah, okay, cool. So like once we’ve broke away from the karts behind, we race from there?’

‘Exactly. Good luck and I’ll see you out there.’

Kieran shook his head and went over to his mum.

‘I’m starting second.’

‘Oh my gosh well done! Now go and get me that trophy.’

Kieran smiled at his mum and wondered outside to watch the first few finals. He watched the nervous newbies and underperformers in the E and D final. Sometimes he’d find himself amongst them on a particularly bad day, facing the embarrassment of sitting alone in his expensive name brand kit amongst a sea of newbies in their uniform green race suits. Following these were the C and B finals where he’d usually wind up. This is where he and the other “mediocre” drivers would fight it out. Kieran could usually fight his way out of the C final but would then get stuck in the B, not able to do enough to get the top three finish needed to make it onto the back of the A Final. He watched drivers he’d lost out to in the previous round fall themselves as the finals rolled on. He was a long way above his level today and he knew it.

Finally, the B final concluded, with seven disappointed drivers parking in the pits and climbing out, while the top three remained in their karts. On his better days this was Kieran’s usual route to the A Final, and he felt a little giddy when he stepped out into a fresh kart at the front of the queue.

The A final drivers got to do a lap of the track in formation to warm up. Kieran felt a panic well up inside of him as he cruised around, but this time it was blended with a kick of excitement. He was here, at the *front* of the A Final. He was a contender; he was in the mix.

Stopping in the second starting spot he shut his eyes and took a deep breath, attempting to suck some calmness from the muggy air of the bus garage around him. Behind him, he could hear the engine of his kart ticking away. Kieran listened carefully to make sure there was no dip in tone. He could not deal with a kart with idle issues cutting out on the start line, not fucking now.

Once the drivers behind were in place, the marshal signalled for them to watch the lights. Kieran glared at the gantry above, afraid to blink and miss the switching of the lights from red to green. Beads of sweat ran down his cheek, tickling his face. His foot was beginning to ache as it hovered over the throttle pedal. Change, you bastard.

The lights went green.

Kieran shot away, trying to get around Josh by the first turn, not wanting to have to sit behind him until they broke clear. To his surprise Josh suddenly moved across to block him, and Kieran found himself trapped on his outside into turn one.

As they approached the end of the turn Kieran realised that Josh was squeezing him towards the outside wall. With no time to slow down and squeeze in behind him, Kieran watched with increasing terror as the wall got closer and closer, with Josh still not moving over to give them both enough room to pass through.

Kieran tried to gesture to Josh to move over but it was too late. He smacked into the tire wall on the outside of turn one, his kart embedding itself in the tyres. Kieran smacked the steering wheel until his palms hurt and let out a howl of frustration. He could hear the sound of the pack getting quieter, leaving him behind. That scheming arsehole had fucked his final and ruined any chance of a trophy. A marshal jogged over to his kart and pulled it out of the tire wall, giving Kieran a cautious thumbs up to check he was okay. Kieran gave him a single nod and stamped on the throttle to get himself back going.

The rest of the race was lonely. Too far back to catch any of the other drivers, Kieran weighed up slowing down enough to let Josh catch him and then taking him out, ultimately deciding it wasn't worth getting a black flag. He'd deal with him after the race. Kieran used the final laps as a test session, trying some lines and braking points that would be too risky when close to other drivers. On

the last lap he approached the final hairpin and saw his dad watching on, stony faced. He'd must've returned while he was racing. Oh, good.

Kieran felt the panic rising in him again, mixed with anger towards Josh for putting him in this position. After being shown the checkered flag, he drove quickly around to the pits and jumped out of his kart. He scanned the pit area for Josh, trying to pick him out in the cluster of drivers and marshals. As he began marching towards the exit, visor still down, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

'Excuse me mate.'

He turned and faced Josh, who had already removed his helmet. He was shouting over the noise of the idling karts.

'I'm really sorry about that mate. I thought I could stay ahead of you out of turn one.'

'You put me in the wall man, what the fuck is wrong with you?'

'I know, I know. Look, they gave me a penalty so I finished nowhere as well. Just wanted to say sorry anyway.'

Kieran wanted to keep arguing, ranting and raving at him about the chaos he had created for him and his mum when they arrived home.

He took half a step towards Josh, trying to remember how Harry had taught him to make a good fist. The thought of his fist slamming into Josh's face flashed across his mind. He opened his hand. He didn't want to do it. Anyway, his parents had always taught him not to air his dirty laundry in public.

'Alright, whatever man. Just don't do that to me again, you understand?'

'Fine, don't want another penalty anyway.'

Kieran tried to wander off and avoid his parents but was funnelled by the crowd of drivers and parents towards the podium area located between the seating area and carpark.

He tried to hide away amongst the crowd, but almost immediately saw two figures making their way through the crowd towards him. His mum gave him a quick hug and ruffled his hair. His dad stood motionless. Kieran could see the outburst building in his eyes, ready to be released when he had privacy. As the trophies were presented, he could feel his dad's eyes burrowing into the side of his head, sense his hands going into and out of his pockets and his feet fidgeting on the concrete. Kieran

considered making a break for it in his boots and overalls. It was a fair distance, but he could probably walk to Harry's from here. Nah, not yet, running away at this point would just make things worse for him and his mum. He stood still, head towards the ground. The trophy presentation was still wrapping up when he felt his dad's hand on his back, guiding him towards the car.

He got into the back of the Bluebird, sitting directly behind the driver's seat to avoid his dad's gaze. His dad flopped down into the driver's seat, slamming the door behind him. The warm air in the car stood still and Kieran felt his sweaty body melting into the seat. He waited for the inevitable, but the strained silence held as his dad started the engine.

For a short, hopeful moment Kieran thought his dad was going to leave him be, let him simmer in the disappointment of missing out on a trophy without ripping into him. Then, his dad jammed the car into gear and lurched forward towards the entrance of the bus garage. He could feel the eyes of those in the car park looking at him, surely thinking he was a sore loser for storming off without a word. It wasn't even him throwing the fucking wobbly. As the car shot out into the street it ran over a traffic cone which had been placed by the entrance of the parking area. Kieran heard it go under the car and become wedged, causing a horrible scraping sound as his dad continued up the street.

Kieran looked over at his mum in the passenger seat to see if she was going to say something, but she stayed silent, sitting upright in her seat and holding her handbag. His dad also remained silent, everything he wanted to say coming to Kieran through the screeching of plastic on tarmac. Taking a sharp turn towards Tooting Bec Common Kieran saw the cone come loose, bouncing across the tarmac. He was relieved to see it thud against the curb and not any of the pedestrians trying to cross the street.

The family remained in silence as they arrived home and split up into their spaces. Kieran made straight for his room, sitting in the old office chair by his desk. He sat facing the door, hoping that nobody would appear around the bend in the hallway. He just wanted to be alone now, today, tomorrow, forever. Thinking back on the racing made him want to be sick again, another round fucked up. He collected the edge of the rug below his feet and rolled it back and forth, recalling every little mistake he could've avoided, everything he could've done better.

He decided that he'd never get peace and he'd never achieve anything there. Just continue to fuck it up until he finally threw in the towel and his dad can give him even more shit about the time and money he'd wasted, only to give it all up. He felt a tiny bit of relief when he heard his mum flick the kettle on, and his dad squelch into his armchair and switch on the TV. He took a deep breath and made his way for the bathroom.

He closed the bathroom door softly and pulled the lock tight across. He lowered the toilet seat and sat down, hunching over as his shoulders shook. He felt the warmth of his tears as they rolled down his face, the nasty saltiness of them as they ran into his mouth. He felt an aching from deep inside, he just wanted it to stop. All of it. He took the towel hanging over the side of the bath, placed it over his thighs and laid half a dozen punches into them as hard as he could. Once he was done he sat there, focusing on the soreness and then numbness where his fists had landed.

Once he was sure the tears had stopped, he got up, took another deep breath and put the tap on. He took a flannel, soaked it, and dabbed at his face, calming the redness. Leaving the bathroom, he went straight back into his bedroom. He had about five minutes to get his life together before his mum came into check on him, so he switched on his PlayStation and tried to convince himself he was having a regular Saturday afternoon.

Sure enough, as the opening credits for his game began to roll his mum entered the room, approaching him from behind. He felt the familiar gentle heat of her hands on his shoulders.

'You alright mate?'

'Yeah, I'll be alright. Sorry it didn't go well today.'

'Don't be so silly. It wasn't your fault that horrible boy crashed you off. Just take today as a learning experience and it will work out better next time, trust me.'

'Yeah, I know it will.'

Kieran was on the main menu of a racing game, the icons calling to him to jump into a race on a circuit he'd never visited but knew every inch of, somewhere familiar yet far away.

He then felt her hands get a little tighter, and her hair tickle the lobe of his ear.

'And... don't listen to your dad, okay? You're a good driver and you'll get *even* better, just keep believing in yourself, okay?'

Kieran hadn't believed in himself for quite some time. He briefly considered blurting out that he wanted to quit but bit his tongue. If he outed himself as a quitter it would only make his and his mum's lives worse. For now, he just wanted to disappear into his game and forget today even happened.

'Don't worry mum, I won't give in just yet.'

His mum's grip loosened on his shoulders and she took a step back, the usual mumsy tone returning to her voice.

'Righto, so can I get you a cup of tea my little racing driver?'

Kieran heard his dad pass his bedroom and flick on the bathroom light.

'No thanks mum, I'm okay for the minute.'

He heard his mum leave his room and make her way back into the kitchen as his dad left the bathroom. Kieran flinched in his seat as he slammed the door behind him.

Kieran tried to stay focused on the game, but his concentration kept shifting to his parents elsewhere in the flat. He could hear his mum busying herself in the kitchen, the clanging of pots and pans. He could hear the clack of his dad's wooden tobacco box on the old rolling tray. He knew the two would cross paths eventually, his dad wanting another tea or his mum running out of busywork, and things would begin to flare again.

He waited until his car was safely on a straight before unlocking his phone and trying to reach Harry:

Kee: Sup bro fancy hanging out at yours?

The message sent but he didn't get a reply, he was probably busy. He went back to his game and tried to relax. To draw his ears away from his parents he turned the TV up, filling his room with the sounds of revving engines and screeching tyres. He liked to play racing games after a bad race meeting as it eased the pain to beat something, even if it was just the computer in a videogame.

As he raced, he kept eyeing his phone, waiting for the little notification light above the screen to begin flashing. After a few races it went off and Kieran snatched his phone, only to find it was a broadcasted message from a school friend asking people to add his mate on BBM. Kieran placed the phone back down and went back to racing, Harry would reply eventually.

Over the sound of the TV he heard heavy footsteps in the hallway, each thud on the wooden floor getting closer to his room. Instinctively he turned the TV down and put his phone out of sight behind some school textbooks.

He heard his dad cross the threshold of his bedroom doorway and arrive behind him, his breaths deep and heavy. Kieran's pulse began to rise but he kept his head straight and eyes on the game.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Just playing PlayStation. You want a go?’

His dad ignored him and walked closer. He could now smell the tobacco and the faint tinge of booze on his breath. Kieran knew he was looking for an opportunity to dig at him for something.

‘I’ve finished my chores too, so thought I’d just play.’

His dad continued to ignore him, standing directly over his right shoulder. Kieran tried to keep concentrating on the game, to stay in its world.

His hands began to sweat. His greasy fingers started to slip on the controller, the car on the screen now sliding wide on corners and running over the grass. Soon, one of the computer-controlled cars caught him up, its headlights ablaze in the game's rear-view mirror. In a state of pure panic Kieran tried to drive harder to keep it behind but broke too late into a hairpin turn, slamming into the wall. As he tried to reverse back onto the track, his dad wrenched the controller from his hands and quit the game back to the main menu.

‘Look at the fucking state of you. If you can’t even keep it together racing some computer cars, what chance have you got in the real world? This is why you never finish anywhere on race days.’

He slammed the controller down on Kieran's desk, the R1 trigger popping out of its slot as the controller hit the wooden surface. His dad then poked his finger into the side of Kieran's head, Kieran clenching his teeth slightly as his long fingernail bit into his temple.

‘They’ve all got you in here boy. And as long as you panic and fanny like a big girl's blouse whenever you’ve got to stand up and be counted, they always will.’

Kieran sat there, frozen to his chair. The videogame's menu music was playing on loop and his controller laid broken on his desk. He tried to work out what he needed to say to make this end, for his dad to leave him alone. Any kind of apology or promise to be better was never good enough, and he didn't dare contest him again. Not knowing what else to do, he took the controller and tried to pop the trigger back in. To his relief it clipped back in easily.

'Do you know what, just play your fucking game Kieran, it's all your good for anyway. Just don't come crying to me when you're still living in this bedroom and stacking shelves when you're thirty.'

Kieran heard his dad turn and leave the room, but any relief quickly melted away when he heard him walk into the kitchen. He couldn't make out what was said, but on days like these it was usually along the lines of his mum asking his dad to lay off, and his dad then insisting the bollocking was for his own good. The tone was clear enough though, short and heated but not yet breaking out into a full row. That would come later when the vodka arrived.

Kieran once again returned to his game but had now gone off it, taking the disc out and putting in another. This was a cheery platforming game a school mate had got him into. Kieran's character stood at the beginning of the level he had gotten up to. The character stood there unmoving, lost amongst the bright colours, cheery music, and cartoony visuals. Kieran watched the screen for a while without playing, trying to immerse himself in this whimsical world.

Still, outside the screen Kieran's ears were still drawn to the uneasy quiet from the living room, amplifying all other noises in the flat.

Kieran's phone rattled on his desk again. Unlocking the screen, he could see the message *was* from Harry this time.

Hazza: Sorry bro got fam over so can't today or tomorro

In a panic, Kieran began flicking through his contacts, messaging anyone he knew well enough to hang out with outside of school. Each reply made his stomach sink further:

Cenk: Hi busy today sorry man

Alishahh: Heyyy soz Im out with my sister so cant meet today 😞

Pav: Yo dude Im on holiday, chill next wk?

Elio-t: Hey I'm grounded lol

Kieran put his phone down and looked around his room. The mould wasn't as bad this time of year, but he still saw little clusters of black in the corners of the ceiling, waiting to come back. His mum tried to clean it off every week, but it never really went away. The damp, musty smell of it always returned no matter how much bleach she used.

On days like these Kieran wondered if the flat was haunted. He thought that maybe the mould, his dad, all of it was a punishment from some Victorian kid who died from cholera or scurvy or any of those other rank diseases he'd read about in *Horrible Histories*.

Turning back to his TV, Kieran turned the volume up a little and resumed his game.

Chapter Four

Tonight was strange. Kieran lied in bed and listened for the nightly movie or documentary playing in the living room.

Tonight, there was a true-crime documentary on, telling the story of how two kids kidnapped a toddler and killed him after playing too many violent videogames and watching too many horror films. The narrator's voice was low and gravelly, the soundtrack in the background booming and dramatic. They were really hamming it up. Personally, Kieran couldn't imagine killing anything, even after a thousand-plus kill zombies session.

That wasn't strange, but the lack of drama from within the living room was. Kieran was able to clearly listen to the entire documentary without it once being drowned out by raised voices or objects slammed down on the coffee table. His parents' voices were soft and quiet, the only changes in volume coming when the telly was paused as one of his parents went into the kitchen.

Kieran tried to remember the last evening like this, but his mind came up blank. Maybe something had happened that he hadn't seen. Maybe his dad had seen what he was doing was wrong? Nah, can't be that simple. Maybe his parents were splitting up? Fuck, he didn't know how to feel about that. Maybe it was just a quiet night, nothing more, nothing less.

He fought the urge to get out of bed and go into the living room to investigate. To see what had put a cork in his dad's rage, what had exorcised the demon which lived within him. In the end he decided to stay put, to not risk derailing such a precious evening of peace for him and his mum.

Sleep crept up on Kieran without him needing to try. The animated voices and laughter from the late-night talk show began to fade and mingle with his parents.

Kieran woke to the bangs. He sat bolt upright, the room appearing to spin around him. He felt so stupid for allowing himself to switch off. Why was his dad doing this tonight after those hours of peace? What had happened? It had to be the karting, the fucking karting.

Sliding out of bed, he stomped up the hallway to draw his dad's attention and give his mum a break. As he passed his parent's bedroom, he waited for the banging and hissing voices to stop. This time they didn't stop, if anything they were getting louder. Kieran could make out the noises in the room clearer close up, the usual tidal wave of abuse.

'Fuck you... come here you whore... stay *down*.'

But this time he couldn't hear a word from his mum. Not a scream, not a shout, not a groan, nothing.

Kieran reached for the door handle but drew himself away. Sickness rose in his chest and he swallowed hard. He turned to skulk back to his bedroom, but his mum's silence drew him back. He rested his hand lightly against the cool wood for a moment before running it down to the handle.

The handle turned slowly in his hand, and he opened the door ever so slightly and peered through the crack.

He saw his parents on their bed. His mum was lying, noiselessly jiggling and kicking like a fish on a line. Her arms slapped hopelessly against his dad who laid over her, pressing something down onto her face as his exposed arse rose and fell, caught in the faint glow of the streetlamp shining in from the street. His father's drunken gibberish echoed around the room like a chant.

'Choke you bitch, choke. That's it, this is what you deserve. I'm going to fuck you until you die.'

Kieran stood completely still, his eyes unblinking through the crack. For a moment he felt nothing, the scene in front of him not even seeming real. The bed squeaked in a funny rhythm, a higher squeak and then a lower. It was getting faster. As the squeaking got faster still, his mum's arms began to go limp. As a satisfied grunt left his father's mouth Kieran felt himself slam back to earth, and before he could think of what to do a scream left his mouth. He swung the door open and stood in the threshold, caught between running at his father, running away, and throwing up all over the floor. His father pulled the pillow away from his mum's face and she gasped for air.

She wriggled out from underneath his frozen father and fell off the bed. Grabbing the bedside table, she pulled herself up and staggered towards Kieran out of the dark, naked and coughing. She knocked him aside as she made for the bathroom. His father climbed off the bed and aimlessly paced

the bedroom, not even trying to find some clothes to put on. After watching his hairy, sweaty, naked body turn several laps of the bedroom, Kieran saw him step into some briefs and wordlessly close the door in his face.

This action snapped Kieran back to life, and he turned around and ran towards the bathroom. The door was locked but he could hear his mum heaving on the other side, followed by the sound of vomit landing in the toilet bowl. Kieran knocked on the door.

‘Mum, you alright in there? Its, it’s okay, I’m here now.’

‘Yeah...fine darling, don’t worry.’

‘You sure?’

Kieran thought for a moment about what he had to say next. The thought of doing it to his dad made him feel dirty, but it had to be done.

‘Should I ring the Police?’

The toilet flushed and the bathroom fell silent for a moment.

‘No, no you don’t need to do that. Just go back to bed, okay?’

‘You sure we shouldn’t go somewhere? Maybe see if aunty Pam can take us in for a bit?’

His mum’s voice came back a bit louder, now telling him instead of asking him.

‘Bed, Kieran.’

Kieran went back to his room and opened his drawers. At first, he did it without thinking before pausing to realise he was doing this for his *fucking* mum. A mum who he just saw naked and nearly dead. What did he do to end up here?

He was in hell. Maybe he’d been a terrible person in his past life and now he was going to be made to live this forever, as punishment. Fuck, shit, come on, he needed to get clothes for his mum.

He took out a t-shirt, shorts, underwear, and socks, leaving them by the still closed bathroom door. He could hear sobbing coming from inside. It took all he had to get back into bed, but he did as he was told.

Kieran got into bed and stared at the ceiling. He wanted to scream again, and then keep screaming until no sound came from his mouth. He stayed quiet.

He wasn't sure when he finally fell asleep, but he woke to a warm, muggy house, his sticky limbs glued to the bedsheets. He tried to pick out any signs of life around the flat. He couldn't hear his dad's snoring. He must be awake.

Lying a little longer he could hear the rustle of cigarette papers along with the footsteps of someone else. His mum. She hadn't gone to work this morning.

Kieran made several attempts to get out of bed but the prospect of leaving his room filled him with panic. He'd sit up, feel it rising inside him and then flop back down, taking deep breaths. On his fourth or fifth try he managed to sit up straight, and after a few more deep breaths he levered himself out of bed and walked to the living room.

Rounding the corner of the hallway he saw his mum sat on the sofa, reading the TV guide. His dad was rolling cigarettes. He had already rolled three, all sat on the little table beside his chair. Kieran sat down and stared at the floor, feeling the sweat begin to form at his temples. It was close and humid outside, but the windows remained shut and the blinds down. Kieran could almost taste the sweat from his parents and the mustiness from the damp inside the walls.

He sat and twiddled his thumbs for a moment before deciding he needed to leave. He was going to have a wash, get on his bike and disappear, maybe for a day, maybe for longer. He couldn't face this anymore, anything he tried to make things better made things worse. He just wanted to be able to breathe again.

As he got up from his chair, he heard his mum put her magazine down.

'Are you coming to the shop with me Kee?'

Her voice was low and hoarse, the question sounding more like an order. Kieran knew it was in his best interests to obey.

'Yeah, just need to have a wash.'

Kieran splashed water on his face, gargled some mouthwash and threw on whatever clothes were closest to hand. By the time he left the bathroom his mum was already waiting by the door. Kieran followed her up the gully and onto the street where she unlocked the Bluebird and got in. Kieran stood on the roadside as she leant across the interior and unlocked his door. He could see the

usual strain in her face as she leant across, her other hand carefully clutching whatever part of her was damaged the night before. This time she held her neck.

Kieran got in and they drove off. His mum took a right and then a left, heading towards Wandsworth Common and away from any of the local shops. As they drove alongside the common his mum began to pick up speed. Kieran watched as the speedo climbed above twenty, thirty, forty and then fifty miles per hour. Out of his window, Kieran saw the pedestrians on the pavement flash by in a colourful blur of summer clothing. Ahead the road curved to the right and narrowed to accommodate a line of parked cars. Kieran waited for his mum to slow down but the speedo was not retreating. They sped past side turnings with cars waiting to come out, Kieran praying to not see a car come across the front of them.

The bend was getting closer, they were going far too fast to make it round. Kieran began to think that may be the plan.

‘Mum, slow down please.’

His mum ignored him. His stomach went light as they dropped down a dip in the road before the bend.

‘Mum, please, you’re going to kill us!’

Suddenly, Kieran felt the car slow down. He felt a judder under his feet as the tyres locked up, and his seatbelt strain against his chest as the speed came off. His mum flicked on the indicator and rolled into a side street, stopping in a parking bay. The car jolted forward as it stalled.

Kieran watched his mum stare vacantly down the street for a moment, wetness pooling in her eyes. She laid her head on the steering wheel, her shoulders shaking as unseen tears poured into the footwell. Kieran undone his seatbelt and held her shoulders, feeling her body shudder through his hands. He tried his best to keep his body relaxed, breaths steady, to try and pass some peace from his body into hers. She stayed there for what felt like ages.

Kieran watched an elderly postman up the street slowly make his way from house to house. He walked with a slight limp, his irregular rhythm carrying him out of one front gate and into another where he would disappear. Kieran felt weirdly responsible for him, unable to take his eyes off the gate

he had gone into to make sure he came out safe. The postman had nearly made it to the end of the street by the time his mum's shoulders stopped shaking.

Kieran watched his mum raise her head, and turn to him, eyes bloodshot and face red. Kieran swallowed as hard as he could to keep his own eyes dry. He forced his eyes to meet hers and took her hand in his.

'I'm leaving your dad Kee. I've got to. He's going to kill me if I don't.'

Kieran felt the breath leave his lungs. A burst of contrasting emotions rushed through his head, including a faint trace of excitement. It felt gross and unnatural. He tried to shove it to the back of his mind.

'I, I get it if you want to stay with your dad, I don't want to keep you away from him.'

The other emotions faded, and fear remained. He couldn't be left with his dad, especially if his mum wasn't around to try and keep him at bay anymore.

'No, no, it's okay, I'll come with you. Dad is too much now, he scares me.'

Kieran saw his mum stare back at him, red eyes slightly narrowing.

'Kee, your dad, he's never done anything to you has he?'

'No, no, nothing like that, promise.'

'Okay, it's just I've seen him come out of the bedroom some mornings and it's worried me what he gets up to in there. It's why I tend to try and distract him when he's on the warpath.'

Kieran nodded before opening his mouth and closing it again. He looked out the windscreen at the side street ahead of him. It sloped down towards Northcote Road at the bottom. He could just about see the crowds of people wandering towards the shops in Clapham Junction. Slightly further up the street were some workmen crowded around a van, the cackling from their banter just heard over the plane flying overhead, coming in from somewhere far away.

The summer sun beat down from a cloudless sky, and tunes blasted from a car as it passed by. He turned back to his mum.

'So, where are we going?'

Kieran's mum didn't answer straight away, staring down the street at the men who were unloading tools from their van.

‘Not sure Kee, but far. I think we’ve got to take this old girl, tank her up and see where we land. Your dad will come and look for us though, so we’ll have to move around for a bit before he loses our scent.’

‘Will I be able to contact my mates?’

‘No.’

Kieran felt silly for asking such a question. Running away felt so much bigger now, stepping away from everything he knew. He’d never really considered these things on the days he’d cycle past Wandsworth Common Station, hoping for all the world that he could buy a ticket, dump his bike on the platform and disappear.

‘We’ll have to leave everyone we know behind mate. I’ll be able to box up your PlayStation and Karting bits, some clothes, our ID stuff, and that will be about it. I’ll be starting again, so things will be tough for a while.’

Kieran nodded, both to his mum and himself. He didn’t have much time in London left, so he was going to make the most of it. He only had so many more times to ride with Harry, to play PlayStation, to try the things he wanted to try. He wanted to get everything he could out of it, to leave nothing on the table. Maybe that would make starting again a bit easier.

Out the corner of his eye he watched his mum put the car back into gear and turn on the engine. Slowly, she rolled out of the parking space and drove off down the street. She drove the short journey from the far side of Wandsworth Common to Clapham Junction, never once going above twenty miles per hour.

Arriving in the Junction she parked the car outside the nearby ASDA. As she walked off to buy a parking ticket, Kieran wondered why they had come so far to get some bits from the shop. There was a corner shop two minutes from the flat and a Sainsbury’s another two minutes away from that. Arriving back, she slapped the ticket on the windscreen and slammed the door behind her. Kieran climbed out the car to see her walking away from the ASDA, shouting back at him. Kieran thought she seemed strangely joyful.

‘You hungry Kee?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘Good. Lock your door and I’ll buy you breakfast.’

Kieran did as he was told, and together they wandered around the Junction searching for breakfast. Kieran watched his mum stare around the shops, bars and posh restaurants that made up the heart of the junction like she was seeing them for the first time.

‘Gosh this place has changed so much since my day. It’s gone all, what’s that word they use, *gentrified*.’

‘Yeah, me and Harry don’t come Junction much except for the second-hand games shop.’

‘Um, could’ve sworn there was a builders café around here somewhere.’

Kieran scanned both sides of the street looking for this greasy spoon. Out the corner of his eye he spotted an American-style Diner. It was a special occasion place, somewhere you went for a birthday or after earning a good school report. Still, today all bets were off, it was worth a shout.

‘What about this place mum?’

Kieran watched his mum size the place up, staring at the giant advert for waffles and maple syrup in the window.

‘Oh, go on then. If they can make me a strong coffee and something that looks a bit like a fry up, I’m happy.’

Kieran followed his mum into the diner where they were greeted by a young woman wearing a white dress and red apron, her blonde hair curled to look a bit like an old timey diner waitress.

‘Good morning guys! Table for two?’

The waitress led them over to a booth and gave them both a breakfast menu. The menu had large images of the various dishes and it awoke a dormant hunger in Kieran’s stomach. He instinctively looked over the cheaper items on the menu, but nothing looked like it would satisfy him. He began working his way down until he found something that looked more filling. He looked over to his mum, who was still scanning the menu.

‘Found anything you want mum?’

‘Not too sure. What are you fancying?’

‘I think I want the eggs, bacon and pancakes with hashbrowns.’

‘Oh, where’s that?’

‘Towards the bottom. It’s a tenner though.’

‘Well we only live once, don’t we? I’ll join you.’

The waitress came back over and took their orders. His mum ordered a black coffee and insisted on Kieran having a milkshake.

‘No, no mum I’m alright.’

‘Shut up, we’re celebrating. *One chocolate milkshake for my son please.*’

Kieran went to argue back but was already embarrassed enough. The waitress scrawled down their orders and left their table. A thought was now rolling around his mind.

‘Mum, what you mean this is a celebration?’

Kieran’s mum took his hands from across the table. He could see the life in her eyes, like a weight had been lifted off her.

‘Well, it is, isn’t it? We’re getting out of this fucking nightmare one way or another.’

Kieran nodded. He stared over his mum’s shoulder and tried to imagine a different scene out of the diner window, a new home. Maybe there would be pebbly beaches and seagulls, or earthy forests and muddy fields. Maybe it would be another city, a city where he would meet new friends and cycle through new parks. He wanted to lose himself in the fantasy, but the longer he thought about it the more nagging questions popped into his mind.

‘So mum, will I need to tell my school I’m not coming back? And will I need to get some money to help us move?’

Kieran watched his mum look over his shoulder, avoiding his eyes in the way she always did when she couldn’t give a straight answer.

‘Well, hopefully we’ll be settled by September so it should just be a case of moving you over to a new school, I think. Once we’ve settled on a new place, we’ll scout out some new schools and see which one looks best to us. And no, we’ll manage. I’ve got a couple of credit cards I can rinse until I’m settled into a new job but let me worry about that.’

The waitress returned with their food and placed it down on the table. It was only once Kieran tucked in that he realised how tired and hungry he truly was. He munched through some of his bacon, eggs and hashbrowns, its warm stodginess seeming to suffocate some of the anxiety in his stomach.

He then put what remained between his pancakes and ate it like a sandwich, sucking on his milkshake to stop himself hiccupping between bites. Finishing off he sat there and took a breath, wiping the remnants of grease off his chin.

‘You’re a clatty little sod you know. I hope when you start taking girls on dates you don’t eat like that, they won’t be keeping your number if you do.’

Kieran smiled to himself, happy to take a break from the events of the morning.

‘Sorry, was hungry. Thanks for this mum.’

‘You’re welcome, let me catch up and we’ll get the bill.’

Kieran waited for his mum to finish eating and ask for the bill. He briefly caught eye of the fee on the bill and was shocked somewhere could charge over twenty-five quid for breakfast. He knew better than to hurt his mum’s pride by asking to put in, so offered to put the loose change in his pocket towards the tip instead.

Walking back to the car Kieran felt his mum tap on his shoulder. Her voice was low and secretive.

‘Right let’s nip into ASDA and get some bits like we said we would, yeah? When we get back, mum’s-the-word okay?’

‘It’s okay mum you can trust me. I’m going out to knock for Harry anyway.’

Kieran knew with something like that to hide he wouldn’t survive indoors, he needed to get away for a little while.

Chapter Five

Kieran followed Harry, Joe, and Alisha up a small flight of concrete stairs to a windowless wooden door, its dark green paint peeling and revealing patches of a bright fire engine red underneath. Joe took his phone out and began tapping away to someone. Kieran had only met him a couple of times through Harry, but he always seemed to act older than them, even though his birthday didn't come around until April.

‘Just gimme a sec, yeah?’

Alisha tried to look over his shoulder at his screen. She'd known him and Harry since primary school, but she was changing. Her body now filled her clothes like it didn't before, and he couldn't remember the last time he had seen her face without a layer of makeup pasted over the top of it. He couldn't believe she was the same person he and Harry used to wrestle with on Harry's front room floor.

‘How do you know this boy?’

‘He used to be my neighbour, but his parents were dickheads so he lives here now. He's a cool guy, always used to lend me the games my mum wouldn't buy me.’

After a moment, an older boy opened the door. He stood over them and scratched his patchy beard, his bloodshot, distant eyes scanning them until he saw Joe.

‘What you saying bro?’

‘Nothing much. You alright with these guys coming in?’

The older boy scanned over them again. Kieran felt his eyes wash over his body, weighing him up. His clothes, his face, his stance. He took his hands out of his pockets and tried to look more casual. He didn't want to be the one that made them too lame to come in. The older boy nodded to himself, looking like he'd made a decision. He stood back slightly into the threshold and gestured into the building.

‘Yeah, yeah, no worries. What's your names?’

‘Kieran.’

‘Harry.’

‘Alisha.’

‘Cool, I’m Connor. Follow me.’

Conner let them into the building before leading them up another flight of stairs to a narrow hallway of yellowing, cream-coloured doors.

The air felt stale and heavy with some kind of disinfectant, and the royal blue walls were covered in safety notices and ripped posters, the faces of the smiling children on them either graffitied on or bleached with age. It reminded Kieran of the old English corridor at school, and it felt strange to him that someone could see a place like this as home.

Arriving at the second furthest door down the hallway, Conner pulled a key out of his pocket and began shaking it around in the lock.

‘Sorry, I’ve asked the staff a hundred times to fix it, not that they give a shit.’

Harry looked up and down the corridor.

‘So, are they like your landlords?’

‘Yeah, basically. They’re also meant to keep an eye on us, but they just sit up in their office all day. If anything pops off they just call the feds.’

‘Have you ever had the Police called on you?’

‘Nah, not yet. Needed to bang some kid who tried to steal my PlayStation once but obviously he didn’t snitch.’

After a few moments of jiggling his key, it finally slid in and he shoved the door open.

‘Oi, shoes off by the door.’

As they made their way through the doorway, everyone removed their shoes and stacked them in the corner closest to the door, before taking seats on Connor’s bed and his sagging sofa.

Kieran looked around the darkened bedsit. A towel with the Arsenal logo covered the lone, barred window. The walls were bare magnolia and there was little furniture apart from the bed, sofa, an old glass coffee table with a crack on the surface, and a chest of draws with missing handles, on

which there was the TV and PlayStation. As basic as it was, Kieran did feel a bit jealous. He couldn't wait to have a space of his own.

Kieran tried to catch Harry's eye, but he was looking over at Alisha who was staring back, the sort of hungry stare school couples gave each other in the corridors between lessons. He then looked back over at Connor and Joe, who were both eyeing Alisha's rucksack.

'You get the beers Al?'

'Yeah Joe I told you, 'member? Nicked them off my dad. He's got boxes of them so he'll never notice.'

Alisha rummaged in her rucksack, lifting out a dozen Budweisers in a white plastic bag. She placed them all down on the coffee table, taking care to avoid the crack in the middle.

One by one Kieran watched everyone take a bottle, the room filling with the hiss of caps being popped off by Connor, who used a bottle opener attached to his keys. Kieran reached out and took one for himself, lifting the bottle to his lips and taking a swig. It tasted bitter, like a coke with the sweetness removed. Still, it didn't taste as poisonous as the vodka in his own cupboards.

Across the room he saw Connor standing by his window, looking to address the room like a teacher.

'Any of you smoke weed before?'

'Of course man, I smoked with you last week.'

'No not you Joseph. Idiot. Any of *you* lot?'

Kieran looked at Harry to see if he was going to bluff. He shook his head and Kieran did the same. Alisha shyly nodded, tucking in her lips.

'Cool, I'll roll us a zoot for the two newbies then.'

Kieran watched Connor reach for a battered metal tin on the arm of his sofa. He quickly constructed the joint, his hands moving unreadably quickly under the chink of light leaking in from the window edge not covered by the towel. Kieran peered across at Harry and Joe, sipping from their beers rhythmically. Alisha took several large gulps and pulled herself to her feet.

'Shall I put some music on?'

'Yeah, go for it. If you turn on my PlayStation, you can get YouTube on.'

Alisha made her way across the room and switched the TV and PlayStation on. She grabbed the controller and navigated through the menus to locate YouTube. Uncertain, she selected a random suggested song on the homepage and returned to her seat.

‘Oh, so you play yeah?’

‘Oh, no. I’m just used to having to turn my brother’s PlayStation off in the living room so I can watch TV.’

Connor licked the rolling paper and applied the finishing touches to his joint.

Joe pulled out a red clipper and threw it to Connor.

‘Safe. So traffic lights yeah?’

Joe nodded while everyone else stared back at Connor blankly. Kieran thought about what a traffic light could be. Multi-coloured joints, smoking while a traffic light was green? He hoped somebody would say something that would allow him to work it out. Alisha eventually broke the silence.

‘Sorry, but what exactly is traffic lights? I’ve heard my brother talk about it but I’ve never asked.’

‘Tell em’ Joe.’

‘So, basically, when you get the joint, you inhale but hold it in. You don’t exhale until the joint comes back around. It gets you proper buzzed.’

‘Yeah, that’s it. Also, usually you’re meant to inhale two or three times per hit but as you lot are lightweights, no offence, I’d stick to one for the minute. I can’t have you lot whiteying on me.’

Connor sparked the clipper and went to hold it to the joint, the flame dancing around the tip. It was about to catch when Joe tapped his knee and pointed to the ceiling.’

‘Smoke alarm bro.’

‘Oh yeah, shit.’

Connor pulled a sock off his foot and rose to his feet. Walking over to the smoke alarm he placed the sock over it and held it there. He nodded to Joe who grabbed a waiting pack of cling film from under his coffee table and passed it to him. He then wrapped the cling film around the sock, holding it in place.

‘Doubt it works but these are “strictly no smoking premises” apparently so you can never be too careful. You lot ready?’

The group nodded and soon the joint began to be passed around the room. It arrived at Kieran following Connor, Joe, and Alisha. He took it in his hand and held it to his lips. The smoke from the end nipped at his eyes as it wisped upwards. Connor looked over at him expectantly.

‘Inhale and hold it at the back of your throat.’

Kieran sucked in and felt the smoke reach the back of his throat and tickle his lungs, causing him to start coughing. He held the joint away from him as he gasped for air.

‘Nice one mate, that means you did it properly.’

‘Thanks, will I always cough?’

‘Nah just on your first few tokes. It will get easier eventually as your lungs get used to it. We’ll turn you into a stoner bro, don’t worry.’

Kieran passed the joint to Harry and was relieved when he did the same, sputtering his way through the first toke with watery eyes.

The joint then did a few more laps of the room, and Kieran began to feel himself drift away from those around him. Their conversations became more muffled and harder to follow. He would only zone back in when the joint arrived back into his hands, where Joe or Connor would adjust his fingers to fix his grip before taking a hit. The smoke was still tickling his lungs when he inhaled, but he was now coughing a little less each time.

After a while the joint stopped arriving into Kieran’s hands, and he heard the rustling papers of another being built. He sat staring vacantly at the music video playing on Connor’s TV, enjoying the coolness of the beer bottle as he twisted it in his hands. After an unknown length of time, he felt someone slump down next to him on the sofa and touch his leg.

‘You okay bro?’

Kieran turned his head lazily to face Harry, his eyes narrowed and his cheeks a rosy red.

‘Oh my days, your eyes are *so* red.’

‘Are they?’

Kieran tried to look around the room for something to see his face in. He spotted the glass on top of the coffee table, but it was just too far away. Moving his head made the room spin and he wasn't ready to try getting up.

'Shit. Yours are, like, super narrow as well.'

'Are they? I mean I feel okay, I've seen my brother high before but he never let me try it, but, I think I like it actually.'

'I think I like it too. But it makes me feel a bit weird.'

'Weird how?'

'It's just the room's a bit spinney at the minute.'

'Just chill bro I'm sure it will go away, we'll figure it out. You going to drink your beer?'

'Yeah. Maybe. You want some?'

'Yeah please. Finished mine already.'

Harry took a big gulp from the bottle, spotted by Alisha and Joe, who began to cheer him on:

'Go on Ha-rry, go on Ha-rry!'

Connor turned his head and put a finger to his lips, his voice a low hiss.

'Noise!'

The two stopped for a moment, before continuing in a lower tone.

Harry took the bottle and downed it, waving the empty bottle around triumphantly. Joe now turned to Kieran with a lopsided smile.

'Go on Kee, you and me now, I'll race you.'

'Nah I'm alright thanks, still feel a bit weird.'

'Come on it was one joint bro. I'll hold your hair back if you need to go to the bathroom after.'

'Fine.'

Joe grabbed two bottles and levered them open with Connor's bottle opener. Sucking the foam off the fizzing top of one bottle, he passed the other to Kieran. Joe then clinked his bottle against Kieran's.

'Cheers.'

The others in the room began to cheer again, with even Connor joining in as he was swept up in the moment. Kieran held the bottle to his lips and tipped, feeling the cool liquid slide down his throat and chill his insides. Beyond his bottle he could see Joe, his red eyes eerily vacant as his bottle drained, some drops escaping and dripping into his lap.

Kieran tried to focus on the job in hand, but the coldness and lack of breath was horrible. As he kept chugging, he was suddenly reminded of Craig, lips damp with Vodka, his breath vinegary, and it turned him off even more. He didn't want to do this.

He held out until he saw the remaining beer was above the label on the upside-down bottle before pulling it from his lips. He placed the bottle down on the floor next to him and sat hunched over, panting. He peered up to see Joe finish his bottle and slam it down on the coffee table.

'Loser!'

'Yeah, yeah whatever, you pisshead.'

'Rather be a pisshead than a pussy though.'

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

Alisha breathed out a plume of smoke from Connor's fresh joint.

'Hey, hey, chill out guys.'

She passed the joint back to Connor, who put it in between his lips and leant forward.

'Exactly. It's a bit of fun, yeah? Anyways, I'm hungry. I've got a pizza in the kitchen if someone would put it on. I'd do it myself but none of you lot know how to roll joints properly, so I'm clearly needed here.'

'Hey! I can roll a joint properly.'

'No, you really can't Joseph. The last one of yours I smoked had so much chip in it I nearly caught cancer. So, who wants to do the pizza?'

Kieran pulled himself up from the sofa and leant against the arm.

'I'll do it. Need to get some water anyway.'

'Alright, cool. It's a Lidl one in cellophane in the bottom freezer box, should take ten minutes in the oven on two-hundred. Cutlery's in the top left cupboard.'

'Cool, on it.'

‘Thanks bro appreciate it, even if you can’t chug for crap.’

Kieran scowled at Connor but saw the playful grin on his face. He shrugged and turned towards the door.

‘Alright alright. Keep running your mouth and I’ll eat all the pizza.’

‘Whatever, I’m gonna finish rolling this in a sec so hurry up or you’ll miss out.’

Kieran exited Connor’s room and went out into the hallway. The door at the end of the hallway was slightly open, and he could see the kitchen space beyond.

Pushing the door fully open, he walked to the fridge-freezer and pulled it open. The pizza had been squashed at the top of the drawer and his hands struggled to prise it out. As he sat on the floor trying to jiggle it free, he heard footsteps on the lino behind him.

‘Oi, can I help you mate?’

Kieran looked around to see a boy standing over him. Tall and deep voiced like Connor, he was standing so close to him that he could feel the ends of his sliders poking his backside.

‘Nah, sorry, just grabbing a pizza for a mate.’

‘Haven’t seen you in here before. Who are you? Where you from?’

‘Just a mate of Connors? Live in Wandsworth at the minute.’

‘Mate of Connor’s yeah? Alright. He got any other mates over?’

‘Just a few friends.’

‘Okay, cool. You don’t happen to have a phone on you at the moment, do you? Need to call a mate.’

‘Nah it’s in Connor’s room, sorry.’

‘You mind going to get it? its important innit.’

Kieran thought about making the journey back to Connor’s room to get the phone, but with the room still spinning a bit it felt too far away. Also, where was this boy’s phone?

‘Oh, no, sorry. I’m running low on minutes too actually. I need to call my mum in a bit.’

‘Okay no worries little man. If one of your mates has minutes just knock on my door yeah? I’m in the first room on the left down the hall. Just get them to come in.’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Okay cool. You mind budging out the way a sec?’

Kieran yanked the pizza free and shuffled back. The other boy opened the fridge, grabbed a carton of drink and left the room.

Kieran dug at the cellophane on top of the pizza, getting it free before turning on the oven and popping it in. He stood alone in the dingy, windowless kitchen, lit only by a single bulb hanging down from the ceiling.

Now alone, the effects of the alcohol and weed were taking hold, smudging his vision and heating his cheeks. Aside from his growing hunger Kieran felt nothing, a comfy emptiness inside. He knew he’d been arguing about something with someone a moment ago, but he couldn’t remember or care about what it was. He stared longingly at the pizza through the glass on the oven door, it’s pale cheese congealing and tomato sauce melting.

A dryness in his throat finally reminded him that he originally also came in here for water. He grabbed a grubby looking cup from the cupboard and filled it up, gulping the water greedily until the cup was drained.

The spins were starting to make him feel wobbly on his feet and he staggered back against the kitchen worktop. He flopped down at a seat next to a small table in the corner of the room, laying with his face down in his arms. He had begun to zone out again with his face stuck to the sticky tabletop when the hum of the oven caught his attention.

He pulled himself to his feet to take the pizza out. Lowering it slowly onto a plate, he turned to leave the kitchen when his uncoordinated feet caught a piece of loose lino and he stumbled, the pizza falling from the plate onto the floor. He tried desperately to grab it, burning his fingers on the hot topping as he attempted to paw it back onto the plate.

‘Bro you are so fucked.’

Kieran looked up from the plate to see Harry there, a grin on his rosy face.

‘Let me take that bro.’

‘Nah’ll be alright.’

‘Seriously pass me the plate dude, don’t think the guys back there want floor pizza. And sorry about earlier man. I know Joe can be a dick sometimes, but he’s a calm guy mostly.’

‘Don’t, don’t... worry, it’s cool now.’

‘Damn dude, you need to sleep this off. Come with me.’

Taking the pizza in one hand and Kieran’s hand lightly in another, Harry led him back to Connor’s room. He placed the pizza down on the coffee table and lowered Kieran onto the sofa. Joe looked at them through the smoke from the joint.

‘You two gay for each other now?’

‘Allow him yeah? He’s had too much.’

Connor stood up and peered over him.

‘He alright?’

‘Yeah he’ll sleep it off. He cool to crash here for a few hours?’

‘Yeah, yeah, as long as he doesn’t chunder everywhere he’s alright. If he does best believe I’m making him clean it and he can sleep the rest off on the bus home though.’

The next few hours passed Kieran by as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Every now and then the joint would come his way out of politeness, but he waved it away. He also would gather more and more gifts and creature comforts, like he was a patient in a hospital. This began with a slice of pizza, followed by a glass of water, a cushion for his head and a blanket for the rest of him.

He awoke one final time to find the room had stopped spinning and was back in focus. It wasn’t all good news however; his throat was sandpaper dry and his head thumped like his dad’s hammer when dollying out a dented panel. Alisha and Connor looked over at him as he came back to life.

‘Hey guys, sorry about that, think I had too much.’

‘Oh yeah, we could tell.’

Alisha took a sip from one of the beers.

‘Glad you’re back with us now.’

‘Where’s Joe and Harry?’

‘Think Joe overdid it as well. Harry’s taken him to get a bit of fresh air.’

‘Never takes it easy that kid. Even when we were yutes I’d lend him a game and he’d end up playing it so much his mum would take his PS2 away. Always been a little madman that one.’

‘Is that how you know Joe? He mentioned something like that before we came in.’

‘Pretty much. He was my next-door neighbour, so we used to play a lot and became broskis. Even when my parents kicked me out he started coming here to see me. I sort of feel like his big brother sometimes but I don’t think I’m exactly the best role model. But fuck it, I guess. How’d you know him?’

‘Through Harry, they’re mates at school.’

‘Yeah, Harry’s a cool guy. His brother used to go to my primary school. What’s his name again?’

‘Jamie?’

‘That’s the one. Was always one of the brainy kids. He’s at Uni now, right?’

‘Yeah, yeah. So what do you do?’

‘Just working at the minute. Hoping to go back to college in September and do something in IT, can’t be earning minimum wage forever. I know I’m sounding like an old man by saying this but stay in school guys, the real-world sucks ass at this age.’

‘I’ll try man, Jamie made Uni sound lit so I’m mainly sticking around for that.’

‘Oh yeah, I heard Uni slaps. You should go for it bro, stop hanging around with us slackers. You too Alisha, you look like the brains of this little gang.’

Kieran saw Alisha’s cheeks light up red.

‘Aw thanks.’

Kieran felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out to take a look:

Hazza: Joes gone bro so taking him home

Dnt think Im going to come back sorry g

Kee: No worries m8 catch u later

‘Joe and Harry are going home. Think I might make a move too.’

‘Yeah, same. I’ll text my sister and she can pick me up from the high road,’ said Alisha. She pulled her phone out and began tapping away.

‘You sure? You can both always crash here if you want, can be a bit sketchy getting home from here this time of night, dodgy fuckers always come in and out at these times.’

‘Thanks bro but I think I’ll be alright. I only live about fifteen minutes away.’

‘How ‘bout you, Alisha?’

‘I’ll be fine too. My sister’s coming to pick me up soon.’

‘Fair enough, as long as you’re both sure. Cheers for coming anyways.’

‘Thanks for having us, catch you around another time maybe?’

‘Course, don’t be a stranger, either of you.’

‘Thanks, nice to meet you Connor. Laters Kieran, get home safe yeah?’

‘Will do, will do. See you both about.’

Kieran slipped into his shoes and left Connor’s bedsit, closing the door quietly behind him.

Leaving the hostel, the summer evening breeze hit him and reminded him that the booze and weed wasn’t fully out of his system. He crossed the road outside the hostel and made his way down Bedford Hill towards the railway bridge at the bottom. He felt conscious of his movements, trying to keep his head up and his strides straight. He didn’t want an adult to notice he was still a bit fucked.

As he continued walking, he felt a presence behind him. He thought his mind was playing tricks on him until he heard footsteps, two sets of them. Kieran tried to up his pace, but they were getting closer. Passing a shopfront, he glanced into the illuminated window and saw two figures behind him, hoods up. He considered turning back and trying to hide out in the shop, but his foggy brain didn’t settle on the idea until the shop was a way back up the road.

Kieran started to panic.

Deciding he needed to lose the hooded figures as fast as possible, he slipped down the next side street and broke into a jog. He made it as far as the fourth house on the street before a voice shouted out.

‘Oi, Oi, you, stop!’

Kieran stopped. He wanted to keep moving but his legs rooted him in place, refusing to take him another step. He heard one set of footsteps approach him, and with effort he turned himself around. The boy from the hostel was in front of him, another boy standing back by the entrance of the side street.

‘Sorry mate. You alright?’

‘Yeah bro fine. What’s up?’

‘Nothing really. It’s just I wondered if you have the time?’

‘The time?’

‘Yeah. You’ve got your phone on you, right?’

Kieran desperately tried to search for excuses for why he wouldn’t have his phone on him, but his mind drew a blank. He considered just running away but drew to his full height he was only up to the boy’s chest. He’d never be able to get away. Slowly, he pulled the phone out of his pocket.

‘Yeah. It’s 7:41 bro.’

‘Cool. Cool. Look, can I borrow your phone to text someone? I know you’re out of minutes and stuff but it’s really important.’

‘Sorry mate but I’m out of texts as well.’

‘Can I at least message them on BBM or something? I won’t take much data or anything.’

‘No, sorry, don’t have BBM.’

‘Don’t lie to me bro you’ve got a BB, it comes with BBM. Pass me your phone.’

Kieran’s heart sank. He knew this boy wasn’t going to take no for an answer, they never did. Maybe if he argued with him long enough, someone would see them in the side street and he’d get a chance to slip away.

‘Honestly I don’t.’

‘Stop bullshitting me and give me the phone. I’m not going to ask nicely again.’

‘Please bro I can’t.’

‘Yes, you fucking can and you fucking will. If you don’t pass your phone right now, I’m going to bring my bro over here. He’s got a blade.’

Kieran saw the other boy at the end of the street. His hood was still up, and his hands were in his pockets.

‘Bro, mate, I can’t give you this phone, I’m broke. Anyway, its old and doesn’t charge properly. Just, just please man.’

Kieran heard his voice crack and clenched his jaw to stop it trembling. The other boy took a step closer and dropped his voice.

‘This is it, last chance. You pass that phone, or my boy shanks you. What’s it gonna be?’

Kieran looked back at the street. The other boy was starting to walk over. His hands were still in his pockets. He was also much taller than he was. The street was quiet apart from the odd car passing by on the main road.

Kieran reached into his pocket and offered out his phone with a shaking hand. The older boy snatched it from his grip.

‘Safe. Now fuck off.’

Kieran turned back and continued to walk back up the side street, blinking quickly to stop the tears from falling. Once he was around a bend near the end of the side street he broke into a run, tears flying from his face as he ran out onto the high road. He didn’t stop running all the way up Balham High Road, slowing back to a jog on Chestnut Grove. Finally, with Endlesham Road in sight he stopped, panting and shaking as he bent down and held his knees.

Feeling a little safer now he was close to home, another thought barged into Kieran’s mind. What was he going to tell his parents? The lost phone, the boy who had taken it, where he had been coming home from. Each detail would condemn him even further. He’d be grounded for sure, but how would his dad react? It must be nearly eight now, and he’d probably be drinking. Would he hurt him, or hurt his mum worse over this? He needed a story, a story that made him as innocent as possible. But he couldn’t tell it now, they would know he was lying because of how he looked, the smells on his clothes.

He needed to get home, get clean, get to bed. He’d figure it out tomorrow. Straightening himself up, he took a deep breath, wiped away his tears and began walking up his road.

Chapter Six

Craig made his way into the living room, the sticky liquid from his glass sloshing slightly over the brim and running down onto his fingers. Placing the glass down onto his side table, he went over and grabbed the remote off the couch beside Jess. At least her soppy bollocks soaps would be finished soon, and he'd get his telly back. A bit of *Ice Road Truckers* was the least he deserved after grafting in that sweatbox all day. He put the glass to his lips, relishing the cool burn of the first gulp sliding down his throat when the front door went. Kieran.

Jess said hello to him, "what time do you call this", and he ignored her. Moody little shit as usual. As the boy shuffled across the hallway floor past the front room doorway, he saw Jess catch sight of him and follow him to his room. Weird. He paused the telly to hear what was being said.

She said he'd been crying, and then boy said he hadn't been able to stop them. Them? She asked if he'd been hurt...

A knot began to tighten in Craig's stomach. Who'd want to hurt Kieran? What'd he been up to?

He said he'd handed something over but was fine, Jess said he did the right thing. Handed what over? Why?

Robbed, he'd been robbed! How dare some little wankers rob *my* son?!

Craig pulled himself to his feet and marched out the living room, barely flinching when he caught his toe rounding the corner on the way to Kieran's bedroom. He was going to find out details from him, heights, skin colours, clothing. He'd make them regret ever robbing his family or his property.

Coming into the bedroom he saw Kieran in his chair and froze. His face was all gaunt and pale, eyes red with tears. One of his arms shook. Jess kneeled beside him, her hand on his shoulder. Craig stood and leant against the wall, trying to find the right thing to say. The concern sat on top of the rage inside him like oil on water, but it was still there. The fuckers that did this need to suffer.

Slowly, he made his way towards Kieran. He placed his hand on his back, and felt the muscles tense in his hand.

‘You alright mate?’

‘Yeah, fine.’

‘What did they take?’

‘Phone.’

Of course. By the time they hit the streets it’ll probably already have changed hands. His family’s hard earned in the pocket of some junkie or spotty little oik who thinks it’s funny to pick on his boy.

‘We’ll find those scumbags mate... We’ll get your cousins, dig them out and get you money for a new phone, yeah?’

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jess snap her head up towards him.

‘What?’

‘Let it go, Craig.’

Let it go? Some little shit is swanning around with his boy’s phone, and she wants him to let it go? He looked over at Kieran; he could see the cold sweat on his forehead. It was no use asking him what these boys looked like, his world was upside down. What the fuck were they going to do?

‘Well, what do you want me to do Jess? They’ve got the boy’s phone.’

‘Don’t worry about it, we’ll sort something out when he gets back to school.’

‘That’s not the point Jess. Those little shits need taught a lesson, that they don’t mess with me or my family.’

How to get those little fuckers? Maybe he could ask Bobby’s boy and his mates if anyone around here is snatching phones, maybe he’d gather a few quid and sling it their way to sort ‘em out. He saw Kieran now tilt his head up towards him.

‘You alright dad? I’m sorry... about this.’

‘Craig, if you want to do something we could report it to the Police?’

Craig was about to launch into a lecture about how the Police do fuck all, and even if they do the stolen contraband ends up back on the street more than it does back in the hands of its owner. And

that being around them made him uncomfortable, even though he hadn't gotten himself into trouble in years.

He looked over at Jess. Her arms were crossed, and her eyes were trained on him. God she could be a stubborn cow sometimes... But she was right, he supposed. The phone was gone. Going to the Police would probably make Kee feel a bit better at least.

'Yeah, I guess that would be best. Someone could always hand it in. Right Jess?'

'Absolutely, hear that Kee?'

'Yeah, guess we could go.'

Together, Craig and Jess got some clean clothes for Kieran, the ones he had were wet through. Wordlessly they reached into different drawers and stacked them on his bed in a neat pile. They went to their own room and got themselves ready, Jess reaching under the bed for their shoes while Craig grabbed jumpers and cardigans for the chill caused by the setting sun. They then sat in the front room waiting for Kieran, eyes fixed on the hallway, waiting for him to appear.

Craig's leg bounced up and down. Shit, how did Kee allow himself to be mugged? He thought he and his mum had taught him better, where to go and not to go if he knew what was good for him. Didn't matter now, he'd learnt his lesson the hard way.

'Jess, do you think we should get Kee some Maccies on the way home? Get something warm and stodgy in him?'

'Could do, it'll probably be late by the time we get home anyway.'

Craig nodded, his tapping foot making the floor creak underneath him.

'Craig, you feeling alright?'

'What?'

'No, I mean, with Kieran and everything, he is your son after all.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm alright. But I thought we'd taught Kee better than to set himself up to be mugged.'

'Craig, those boys were much older than him *and* had a knife. You know what London is like these days, on the news there's always some kid who didn't make it home. At least we've got Kee back safe.'

Craig wanted to tell her that it has always been this way, that kids have been stabbed up since time eternal. But that little shit *was* in one piece, it could've been worse and then he would've had to put those little thugs in the ground.

He briefly glanced over at Jess who gave him a little smile and squeezed his hand, before going off to see to Kieran. She was always good at that, checking up on people. Could see you weren't right before you even knew yourself.

Jess came back with Kieran, and they set off for Earlsfield Police Station. Craig drove slowly and carefully, eyes constantly moving between the road and Kieran in the back seat. Nearing the Police Station, Craig pulled down a side street and parked up.

On top of his concern for Kieran he felt a sickness bubble up in his stomach. He'd seen the inside of this place before, not much older than Kee was now. Dragged here for some petty bollocks that someone else had done, didn't matter to them. All that mattered was that someone admitted fault, however much kicking was needed for that to happen. He'd always been one of the tougher boys, he needed to be being a scruffy little Northern kid in the smoke. They never got shit out of him.

He'd been a good boy for some years now, but he still looked over his shoulder when he heard sirens on the street, rolled down his window to dump evidence he no longer had when he saw blue lights in his rear-view mirror. The ones who knew his name and face were retired now no doubt, but old habits die hard.

The side street was weirdly quiet for a cop shop though, no police cars parked up or coppers on smoke breaks. Rounding the corner the building stood there, as cold and imposing as he remembered it, but all the Police signage was missing. The door was closed, and inky darkness was all that could be seen through the frosted glass.

He looked around, there were no police cars outside the station either. Where the fuck was everyone? Out of the corner of his eye he saw an elderly lady making her way up the street. He stepped towards her to flag her down, Kee and Jess in tow.

'Excuse me, do you know when the Police station opens? I'm just trying to report a stolen phone for my son.'

The woman stared back at him in confusion, her wrinkled brow furrowed.

‘Sorry love, this Police Station has been closed for a good few years now. Not sure where the nearest one is these days.’

Craig thanked the woman, and she shuffled off. Well now what? When he was younger you couldn’t go twenty feet without some nosy bobby wanting to know your business, and now they’ve fucked off. Is this what he paid tax on his fuel and fags and drink for?

Alright, what was he going to do now... He couldn’t let the bastards get away with it. If the bacon wasn’t going to help him, he’d find them himself, their comeuppance coming at his hand for trying to take the piss with his boy. They walked back to the car and got ready to set off for home. He glanced around at Kieran in the back seat.

‘Sorry about that Kee, trust the rozzers not to be there when you need them ‘ay? Tell you what, do you remember where they took the phone from you? We could ask the local shop keepers, see if they’ve seen them around, and then call into the Police. Nothing ventured nothing gained, yeah?’

He could feel Jess’s eyes burning into the side of his head, but he didn’t care. He’d tried her way, now it was time for his. He started the Bluebird and shot off down the side street, the tyres making a little chirp on the tarmac.

‘Erm, it was the last side street off Bedford Hill, the one after the sweet shop. I tried to go in the shop to get away but they were too close behind me.’

‘You weren’t clever to leave the main drag there boy. If you’re ever being followed like that stick to the main roads in future.’

He saw Kee sit up in his seat, like he was going to rip him a new one or something. What the hell did he think his dad was? Christ.

‘For God’s sake Kee I’m not fucking lecturing you so there’s no need to snap to attention like that. I’m just trying to keep you safe. Look, do you remember what any of them looked like that robbed you?’

‘Craig, don’t you think we should just take Kee home? He’s been through the ringer today and we could just call the Police to report the phone stolen.’

‘Kee, what did these boys look like?’

‘Well one was quite tall, thin, dark hair. Sort of tanned skin? Dunno, hard to remember him.’

‘What was he wearing?’

‘I think a black hoodie, grey trackies.’

‘Craig you’re not going to find him, let’s just go home, okay?’

‘Don’t try and fucking undermine me Jess, I’m going to find that little cunt and get that phone back, or they’re forking over whatever they got for it.’

‘What if he’s underage Craig, we can’t have you getting nicked for battering a kid.’

‘Who said I’m battering anyone? I’m coming for what we’re owed and if I have to put the frighteners on some little hoodie to do it, so be it.’

‘Look, Craig, just don’t do anything silly, okay? Not with Kee in the car.’

He saw Jess turn her head away from him and out of the window, and knew he had won. She knew better than to go against him at times like these.

As he approached Bedford Hill, Craig looked around for the boy, scanning the pavements, driveways, takeaway windows. As they reached the base of the hill a boy came out of the shop and walked towards his bike. Fairly tall, thin, black jacket, and tanned skin illuminated by the Bluebird’s headlights.

‘Kee, that him?’

‘Who?’

‘That boy there.’

‘Dunno dad, can’t really see.’

‘Fuck’s sake Kee he’s right there. Hoodie, bike, sort of araby looking.’

‘Not sure, I think so.’

‘Do you think or do you know Kee? Tell me!’

‘Yeah, yeah, sorry, pretty sure it’s him.’

Craig jammed on the brakes and spun the car around, setting off in pursuit of the boy on the bike. Speeding up alongside him Craig wound down his window.

‘Oi, you thieving prick, pull over!’

The boy glanced over, and then looked back at the road ahead.

‘Pull the fuck over!’

The boy stared at him, Jess and Kieran, confusion painted on his gormless face. Craig would teach him to play stupid.

‘Who are you? I don’t know you mate.’

Craig leaned out the window slightly, shouting above the noise of the street.

‘You nicked my son’s phone you little shit, he told me. Now pull over and tell me where it’s gone.’

‘I didn’t steal anything. Leave me alone man.’

The boy began to pedal faster. Craig set off after him, no way was he going to let that little thieving bastard away with Kee’s phone. The boy turned off Bedford Hill, heading the wrong way up a one-way street. Craig stayed on his tail as the Bluebird crunched over the speedbumps. The boy kept peering over his shoulder, eyes wider than ever. Swerving off onto an estate he shot through two bollards, far too close together for the Bluebird to fit through. Coming in at speed Craig jammed on the brakes and screeched to a halt, mounting the curb before the bollards.

Craig looked over at Jess, her chest rising and falling as she sat motionless in the front seat. Kieran was sitting low in the backseat, peeking out of the window at the pedestrians staring at the car.

‘D-dad, I don’t think that was him y’know.’

‘The fuck do you mean?’

‘The one that took the phone wasn’t wearing a coat or had a bike, I’m not sure.’

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘I dunno, it all happened so fast. I couldn’t tell if he was or wasn’t the guy.’

‘Well in future open your fucking mouth Kee. Now I’m going to have to get us out of here in case someone calls the Police on us.’

Craig put the Bluebird into reverse and turned around, now driving the correct way up the street. Arriving home, he got out of the car and noticed that the number plate had fallen off and the front bumper had been scuffed up from mounting the curb. Fucking typical, there goes any profit he could make on the motor in a pinch. Walking back around the car, he aimed a kick at the front wing,

the steel denting to the shape of his trainer. He saw Jess look back at him, opening her mouth to say something before thinking better of it. Good, he could do without her mouth tonight.

Coming back into the flat, Craig made his way straight for the living room. He flopped down in his chair, draining the glass of vodka lemonade he had left on the table before undoing his trainers.

What a waste of an evening. He hadn't got the phone, he'd damaged his car, and now he had to deal with his family treating him like he was some kind of embarrassment. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Chuckling his trainers down the side of the couch, he went into the kitchen and poured himself another drink, vodka climbing the glass until it was as stiff as he could handle. He then added a splash of lemonade and went back to his chair.

He was alone in the living room, Kieran having gone straight to his room and Jess following him. He could hear her talking softly to him, coddling him after his mean, nasty father had scared him by trying to do the right thing and get his phone back for him.

He slumped down further in his chair, and turned the TV up so he didn't have to listen to their shite.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone had coddled him, or shown him any softness at all. Kieran gave him a wide berth whenever possible, like he had something he didn't want to catch, and Jess just looked at him like he was a stranger.

He'd almost forgotten what it felt like to have her hands around his neck, the warm sweetness of her breath, how her hair tickled his face...

He took a big gulp from his glass.

He wanted to tell her that he was still him, the man she gave her heart to, regardless to what he said on the drink... or done. But he couldn't escape the feeling that she'd locked him out, probably for good.

As for all his mates, the boys down the yard, they had their own problems to worry about. He didn't nose into their business and they didn't nose into his, as it should be.

He flicked on the telly and switched over to Dave, at least he'd made it back for the end of *Ice Road Truckers*. He watched as the big machines rumbled through the tundra, battered by wind and snow and crashed and repaired and put to work again. True workhorses.

That's what men like him where, he decided. Built to be put to work, ran into the ground, and eventually chucked away without a second thought.

Chapter Seven

‘Okay, it’s a two bed, inner city, newly renovated with good access to local amenities. Oh, the rent’s a bit steep compared to the other ones though... What do you think Kee, you keen on this one?’

His mum had taken to listing out flats like an auctioneer, like Kieran was on his own private episode of *Homes Under the Hammer*. He looked at the flat on the computer screen, shuffling his chair a little closer to his mum’s. It was very square and featureless, with none of the odd-shaped rooms of the flat they had now. It also seemed much cleaner. No dark stains, or spores collecting in ugly masses in the corners where the walls met the ceilings. There was a picture of the balcony, a metal railing with a view of the other strange blocks in this strange place he’d never been. He tried to imagine living there. It was difficult, but he had to try, one of these places was going to be their new home after all.

‘Yeah mum, looks alright.’

‘You’ve said that about every flat we’ve looked at so far, there’s got to have been one you thought was more than *alright*.’

‘I liked that Devon one, near the beach.’

‘That one’s no good mate, there’s sod all work out there. We looked on Totaljobs remember? Unless you plan to become a fisherman that is.’

‘I might, think of all the fish fingers we could make?’

‘I wouldn’t try me boy, or I *will* buy you some waders and a rod and put you to work with Captain Birdseye. What about the city ones? Which place looked more, what’s the word, appealing to you?’

‘I guess that Manchester one, it would be nice to have our own little house I guess.’

‘That one wasn’t too bad actually, area seemed tidy enough too. We’ll pop a bookmark on it.’

Kieran then watched his mum flick through the mountain of tabs containing housing trusts, private landlords, council bidding pages, and posh private developments until she found the house. She then added it to the almost equally long line of bookmarks containing options for their new home.

‘You reckon they’ll find our accent weird in Manchester mum? Because it won’t be the normal one there like it is here.’

‘Well, you go to school with kids with different accents here, does it bother you? Your mates?’

‘Nah, not really.’

‘Exactly.’

‘What about your work. Are the offices different outside London or?’

‘Not really, it’s the same rubbish everywhere at the moment. The pay will be a bit worse and the commutes a bit longer, but I’ll live. You never know, you might have to make me dinner for once.’

‘Can do. Toast counts as dinner, right?’

‘Not unless you want me to make you live with the family from *Shameless*.’

Kieran smiled and rested his head on his mum’s arm. The fear of leaving behind everything he knew had stuck with him since that breakfast, but the memories he was constantly trying to block out from the night before removed all doubt. Anything to keep his mum safe.

They sat and looked at homes in Northampton, Dagenham, Milton-Keynes, Derby, Norwich. All were identical little flats in identical-looking blocks on identical little estates in identical little suburbs. They were all nice, but Kieran found it hard to tell them apart, so boxy and sleepy and plain and boring. He’d settled for judging them by what his mum said about jobs and shops and such in the area.

Kieran began to feel his eyes get heavy when he heard the front gate close. Heavy footsteps echoed down the slope, getting closer to the front door. Kieran looked at the clock on the monitor – 11:58am. Why was he back so early?

Kieran looked over at his mum and saw his terror reflected in her eyes. Words escaped her mouth in a low bark.

‘Shit Kee, forgot he was just dumping off a car. Make yourself scarce.’

She began clicking furiously, closing tabs and darting a shaking cursor towards the off button. Kieran could hear keys clanging in his dad's hands.

In a panic, Kieran rolled his chair as fast as he could back into his room, not even stopping to grunt when he accidentally ran over his foot manoeuvring it through his bedroom door. He stabbed the on button on his PlayStation and put on his TV, praying it would finish its start-up sequence so he could convincingly pretend he'd been on it all day. In the living room he heard his mum switch the TV on, no doubt hoping the same.

A key turned in the lock, followed by the clop of steel toe cap boots on the wooden hallway floor. Kieran heard them walk a few paces before stopping near the computer.

'Who left the computer on?'

Kieran froze. He hurriedly ran through a few excuses in his head, each less convincing than the last. As panic began to set in, he heard the shuffle of his mum's slippers in the hallway.

'Oh, I was just on there a while ago looking at some new school shoes for Kee. Must've forgot to switch it off.'

'Well pay attention, yeah? Can't be wasting leccy when we're tight like this.'

Kieran thought about the plastic bag that usually hung from his dad's finger when he arrived home, straining under the weight of booze and cigarettes. What difference did a few pennies in electric make when crisp £20 notes slid over the counter at the off license each afternoon? Still, he'd taken the lie, they had gotten away with it.

PlayStation now logged in and games convincingly laid out on the side, Kieran walked from his room to the kitchen and put the kettle on for his parents. Spotting him coming past, his dad's attention now turned to him.

'Oi, you. You done your summer holiday homework today?'

'Yeah, did some Maths and a bit of English after I got up.'

'Good lad. Get up to anything else?'

'Nah, not really, played some PlayStation and helped mum, with the shoes and that.'

His dad paused a moment, his face twisting as the bile in his mind bubbled to the surface.

'You're a lucky boy you know.'

Kieran felt a lecture coming on. He tried to prepare some more bullshit about these imaginary shoes in case he was in for a grilling.

‘When I was a kid, your grandad would give me your uncle Andy’s shoes and would keep gluing them back together until they split in two. I didn’t get a pair of my own until I was thirteen and started fixing my mate’s bikes for extra pocket money.’

Kieran stayed silent. It was pointless adding anything because he’d set him off again. He didn’t dare mention that he had been wearing the same school uniform for two years, that he rationed his Air Forces for special occasions and ran around in his old Reebok Classics with smooth tread on the soles most days.

‘And you can forget about any of that Nike or Adidas bollocks. If I got new clothes, they were usually hand-me-downs or jumble sale gear. Your generation don’t know how good you get it.’

Kieran stayed silent again, staring away down the hallway. Suddenly, he jumped as his dad raised his voice.

‘You fucking listening?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah, I know I’m lucky to have new stuff.’

‘Christ it’s like I’m talking to myself sometimes. You better learn to open your ears boy when you get out into that big bad world, don’t expect people to be as patient with you as I am.’

Kieran heard the kettle click and made his escape into the kitchen. Pouring the kettle he misaimed, the scolding water splashing off the edge of the mug and onto the back of his hand. Kieran bit down on his lip to stop himself from shouting out, water streaming from his eyes. He put the tap on and ran his bright red hand underneath it, his teeth clenched tight as the stinging stabbed away at him.

Once it had subsided slightly, he finished the teas and brought his dad’s cup into the living room, his bad hand tucked uncomfortably in his pocket.

‘Here you go dad.’

‘Cheers. Why’ve you got your hand in your pocket?’

‘Oh, nothing, just a bit burnt.’

‘Burnt? How’d you manage that?’

‘Just got a bit of kettle water on it. It’s not too bad, just a bit sore.’

Kieran’s saw his mum suddenly get up.

‘Let’s go into the kitchen and I’ll run it under the tap.’

‘No it’s fine Jess, I’ll do it. C’mon you clumsy sod.’

Kieran followed his dad back into the kitchen. His mum’s tea was still sat cooling on the sideboard. He went to go and take it into the living room, but his dad lightly pushed his hand away.

‘Don’t worry, that can wait. Let me see your hand.’

Kieran took his hand out of his pocket. The back of his hand was still bright red, with some of the scolded skin beginning to peel a little. But the pain was beginning to fade.

‘Yeah, that’s not too bad, you’ll live. Give me a sec.’

He opened one of the kitchen cupboards and rummaged around until he found a cloth. He then took it and ran it under some cold water, before ringing it out with a clamp-like grip Kieran had seen many times over at the garage.

As he wrapped it around Kieran’s hand his dad dropped his voice, speaking in a low grumble. He pulled on the cloth, bringing Kieran a bit closer to him. Kieran could feel his breath on his face, his eyes analysing every twitch of his body.

‘Kee, anything about mum seem off recently?’

Kieran felt his pulse speed up in his chest. He stared out the kitchen window, avoiding his dad’s gaze.

‘Nah, not really dad, why?’

‘I dunno... she just seems away with the cuckoos most days. She’s always been a bit of an airhead but there something rattling around in there and I don’t know what it is.’

He glanced back at his dad, who immediately locked eyes with him. Kieran knew he could sense his fear.

‘Erm, maybe she’s just worried about work?’

‘Nah, she can do that poncey office shit in her sleep. We’re all well as far as I’m aware, I’m assuming the bills aren’t any more sore than usual. What the fuck could it be?’

Kieran could feel his heart beating hard in his chest, his breaths beginning to get shorter. He left his dad's eyes and kept his focus out the window to stop himself from panicking. He took a moment to pretend to think about it, building an excuse in his mind.

'Not sure dad, she seemed a bit worried about buying those shoes, but I asked for the cheaper ones. I would probably be okay with the ones I got but you know she has that thing about us being warm when winter comes.'

'I'm not being funny mate but I'm sure there's more to it than buying you some of those stupid shoes with the coloured stitching. But maybe she's just worried about money, we have been tight... I'll talk to her, being a moody cow isn't going to make us any less broke.'

Kieran felt a little rush of relief that his dad took the bluff but also felt a pang of guilt over leading her into a lecture over his bullshit. It had to be better than him finding out the truth.

'Okay dad. And, um, sorry about the hand.'

'Oh fuck off, accidents happen. Just please be careful yeah? I won't be there to kiss it better when you move out.'

Kieran then felt his dad plant a big, wet kiss on the side of his head.

'Aww dad that was manky.'

'Only kiss you're getting any time soon my son.'

Kieran shook his head and followed his dad back out the kitchen, before peeling off into his room. Once he was alone his mum came to find him, hot on his heels. Walking up behind his chair she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

'You alright mate?'

'Yeah, just burnt my hand making tea.'

Kieran's mum seized his hand, turning it over while examining it.

'It's alright mum, dad put a wet cloth on it. I'm alright, promise.'

'Okay, good to see he's got a healing hand when he wants to. But you feel okay, yeah?'

Kieran thought about the conversation he'd just had, he had to be sure to warn her, just in case his dad used his lie to get nasty later once the drink came in. He lowered his voice and leant close to his mum's ear.

‘Yeah, but he tried to talk to me about you. He thinks something is up so I had to make up some lie about shoes. Sorry mum, I didn’t know what else to say.’

‘What lie about shoes? What are you talking about?’

‘It’s just he wanted to know why you’d been off, and I didn’t know how to answer, so I made up that when you were looking at shoes online for me you were worried about affording new ones. But he said he was going to talk to you about it, so I might have messed it up for you mum. I promise I didn’t mean to.’

Kieran saw her look away for a second, letting out a breath before putting a hand on his shoulder.

‘Look, Kee, your dad is going to do what he’s going to do regardless of what you say to him. That’s why we’ve decided to go ahead with the flit, yeah? None of this is your fault, it was all going to happen whether you were here or not, do you understand?’

Kieran wasn’t sure if he believed that. He’d seen his dad go off on his mum so many times over things he did, or didn’t do, or did wrong. But he also knew that if he showed his mum any sadness or fear it always hurt her, and it was best to play along to keep the peace.

‘Yeah, I know mum. Oh yeah, your tea’s in the kitchen.’

As he felt his mum slip away from him and make for the kitchen, Kieran pulled out his phone. To his relief there was a message from Harry, an excuse to escape.

Hazza: Yo man meeting Joe in a bit at the roundabout, u down?

Kee: Yh yh heading out. Meet at yours?

Hazza: Kl meet me by Maguires?

Kee: Sick omw

Kieran slipped into his trainers and headed towards the living room. Both of his parents stared back at him as he entered.

‘I’m just off to Harry’s.’

He saw his mum do the straight-faced, tight-lipped thing she did when she pretended to not be disappointed.

‘So, I’m assuming you’re not going to be in for tea? That I should put that mince in the fridge away?’

Kieran knew it wasn’t just about the mince. He’d fucked it for her tonight, and he knew it. He just didn’t want to face it. He wanted to be far away, hopefully he could stay at Joe’s mates tonight or at least crash at Harry’s.

‘Yeah, I’ll eat at Harrys. Will it freeze?’

‘Yeah, just wish you’d told me earlier as you asked me to get the ingredients for a spagbol this week. Could’ve done with an easier meal today considering I’ve got to go out in a minute and help aunty Pam with that bank paperwork.’

His dad now chimed in, probably a clue of what was to come.

‘For crying out loud Jess don’t start. We throw good money after bad at shite all the time in this house and you’re whingeing about a pack of mince and some veg. Get lost you little oik and I’ll see you whenever.’

‘Okay, see you guys later.’

Chapter Eight

Maguire's Food and Wine appeared towards Kieran in its usual grimy glory. The originally red awning above the doorway had faded to pink with age, and the windows were covered in advertisements for snacks, clubs, jobs, budget phone service providers and everything in between.

He spudded Harry and they made their way inside. The electronic bell chimed upon their entry and Kieran saw Harry make for the confectionaries and grab his usual payday feast – A bottle of Fanta Fruit Twist, a pack of BBQ Walkers, and a packet of Maryland Chocolate Chip cookies. Kieran remained standing by the doorway next to the ice creams.

Harry was halfway to the counter before noticing he hadn't moved.

'You not getting anything? Thought you were hungry?'

'Yeah, I guess. Just a bit low on P's for the minute.'

'Oh, alright, give me a sec.'

Harry went over and paid. He slid a £10 note out of his lime-coloured Adidas wallet and shoved the shrapnel the shopkeeper gave back into his pocket. Walking past Kieran to the door, he slipped him a £5 note.

'Don't worry about the change bro. Add it to the new phone fund or something.'

Harry left the shop with Kieran standing with the £5 rolled between his fingers. He felt a warmth inside that was more than the summer heat, that someone just had his back like that without a word being said was amazing to him. He felt like running outside and hugging him but didn't want to make it gay.

With the £5 in his back pocket and an empty stomach, Kieran filled his boots. He grabbed a can of gloopy strawberry Nourishment, chicken mayo sandwich, a bag of beef McCoy's, and a giant flapjack slab topped with white chocolate.

Kieran eyed his haul hungrily as the shop keeper tilted up and bagged his swag. He shoved the £5 into his hand and almost forgot his change in his eagerness to leave the store.

He made his way out of Maguire's and re-joined Harry outside, now shovelling multiple crisps into his mouth.

'Hey bro, thanks for that. You didn't need to give me so much.'

'It's cool. I only would've spent it on more food anyway. Have to watch my waistline.'

Kieran snickered and reached into the plastic bag for his sandwich.

'You got a corner shop sandwich? Brave move man, brave move.'

'How come?'

'You do realise it's probably been in his fridge for like six months, right?'

Kieran look congealed mass of mayonnaise and pale chicken inside the thin bread and took a small bite. It was predictably tasteless but felt reassuringly stodgy as it travelled down his throat.

'I mean it tastes all right, I think.'

'As long as you're sure, don't blame me if you're stuck in the shitter all afternoon.'

'To be fair the magazines your dad leaves in there are proper interesting. Model Aeroplane Weekly is a straight banger.'

Kieran heard a phone buzz. He was about to reach into his pocket to check if it was him before realising his stupidity, bringing an involuntary smile to his face. He saw Harry unlock his phone and scan the message, typing a quick reply. The phone buzzed again immediately.

'It's from Joe. He's says he's got something cool to show us by the roundabout if we're still coming.'

'Okay.'

'So, you on it?'

'Not sure man, was just hoping for a chill one today.'

'C'mon dude, if it's cool than it must be better than playing games to cheer you up.'

'True, I guess. Could you at least ask him if it's to do with drink or smoke because my insides cannot handle that today.'

Harry typed away again.

'It's not... says it's something to do with his older cousin and his car.'

‘Okay then bro, just remind me to borrow your phone to text my parents if we’re out late yeah?’

‘Will do bro, let’s go.’

Kieran and Harry made their way to the nearby bus stop for the journey to the roundabout. The bus ride was mostly up a dual carriageway where few passengers boarded, meaning it was usually a peaceful ride. Kieran rested his head on the window and felt the summer heat toast his face. He could hear Harry tapping away beside him, and wondered what Joe had prepared for them that required so many messages to explain.

The bus rumbled to a stop outside the underpass. The boys crossed the concrete desert and began up the ramp on the other side. As they climbed the sound of revving engines could be heard above. The noise and vibration sent a shiver up Kieran’s spine.

‘That sounds like more than one car.’

‘Yeah. Joe said his cousin’s mates are there too.’

‘Are they, like, street racers or something?’

‘What like Fast and the Furious?’

‘Yeah, Fast and the Furious: Wandsworth Drift.’

Kieran and Harry shared a laugh as they exited the underpass and walked onto the McDonald’s car park. There was a group of young men stood around several modified cars. Kieran stared in awe at the machines, each brightly coloured and hunkered down low on big rims which glinted in the sunlight. One of the cars was revving repeatedly, its large exhaust pipe firing out a mean sound. Another had its boot open, the whole rear of the car rattling under the bass of the subwoofer inside.

Joe was stood next to two men peering under one of the car bonnets, nodding along to their conversation knowingly as if the car was his. Seeing Kieran and Harry approaching, he ducked out from under the bonnet and jogged over to them.

‘What’s up guys? Pretty cool cars huh?’

Kieran stared at the gleaming machines and nodded in agreement.

‘The Purple Silvia is my cousin’s. It’s got Tein coilovers, Wilwood discs and EBC pads, a HKS turbo timer, a remap, eighteen-inch P45R’s, and a Mongoose cat-back exhaust.’

Kieran nodded again like he understood, he'd seen some of those brands when he was playing Need for Speed but didn't fully understand what all the parts did. At least he could see the exhaust. He looked over at Harry, who also looked reassuringly confused. Kieran hung his mouth slightly open as he searched for a question which didn't make him look stupid.

'What are you guys doing with them? Just sort of cruising around or do you race and stuff?'

'We're going to a meet at the Ace Café. It's going to be proper sick. Cool cars, motorbikes, piff girls. It's all there. I could ask if you guys can come along if you want.'

Harry jumped in.

'Yeah bro sure. Might meet someone who can give my BMX nitro or something.'

'Sick. I'll ask my cousin.'

Joe wondered off to speak to his cousin. Kieran thought about a carpark full of screaming engines and thumping music. Hundreds of strangers around him and nowhere to run if anything went wrong. A sense of unease stuck to him, and he thought of the predictable chaos of home.

'Hey bro not sure if I'm up for this. I'm still feeling a little rough after the mugging and just feeling a quiet one to be honest.'

'C'mon man it'll be fun. You never know, there might be someone there into peds you can get to know for when you turn sixteen.'

'Yeah, it's just... after the other day I'm not feeling too comfortable in places I don't know, that's all.'

'Don't worry man you'll be safe, we've got Joe and his cousin to look out for us.'

'I'm just not sure man.'

Kieran looked at his feet. He could feel Harry's desire to throw himself into this world of noise, bass, and adult fun. He tried absorbing some of that enthusiasm for himself but all he felt inside was tightness. Home and the comfort of his room called for him.

'Nah, I think I'll give this one a miss.'

'Suit yourself man, I'll send you some pictures from it later.'

The two shared an uncomfortable silence while they waited for Joe to return. Kieran knew Harry had said that to be thoughtful, but he still felt left out. The shadow of being robbed still hung

over him, and he was desperately looking forward to getting back into the normal summer routine. Things we're already strange enough with knowing that he'd be gone soon. He didn't need to meet any more new people or experiences or dumb situations right now.

Joe made his way back over to them, his face red with excitement.

'Alright lads I'm going in my cousin's mate's car, and you two can go in the back of my cousin's. It's a bit tight back there though so watch your legs.'

'Thanks bro for sorting that out. By the way, Kieran's just told me he's not coming so maybe we can both go with your cousin if that makes it easier?'

Joe's face darkened slightly.

'What do you mean you're not coming bro?'

'I'm just, like, not really up to it today man, sorry.'

'C'mon man don't be so boring. Forget the mugging and have some fun.'

Kieran looked over at Harry who was nodding in agreement. Maybe if he did this today, they could all chill tomorrow. It was worth a go.

'Fuck it, I'll come then.'

Joe's thin lips twisted into a smile.

'Good. Knew you wasn't going to pussy out on us.'

Joe led Kieran and Harry to his cousin's car. Its driver sat on the bonnet puffing on a dying joint. When the boys approached him, he arose to his full gangly stature, wiping where he had sat with a towel which was hung over his bare shoulder. The way he admired the joint in his hand reminded Kieran of how gangsters admire a fine cigar in the movies.

'Alright boys. You want a bit of this?'

The other boys muttered something to decline the offer.

Kieran shook his head. It was a bit too much, he could feel the pressure on his temples as his head swung from side to side. Joe's cousin exhaled and turned towards him, blowing sticky smoke into his face.

'You straight edge little man? Can't be having squares riding in the whip you know.'

He let out a small laugh, continuing to look directly at him as he took another pull. Kieran could tell he was only half joking. He went to protest his innocence before Joe cut across him.

‘Nah not this guy, was faded on zoots and booze with me and my boy Connor the other day.’

‘That true little man?’

Kieran nodded, trying not to think about that evening.

‘Say no more then. You two jump in the back and I’ll take you down to the Café.’

Joe’s cousin opened the passenger door and Kieran bundled in first, squashing into the narrow rear seat as best he could. After a few moments’ fidgeting he was the closest to comfortable he thought he could get, although the hard back of the aftermarket driver’s seat was chafing on his knees. He watched Harry struggle into the seat beside him, a small bubble of resentment growing in him as he saw his knees rest on the soft leather back of the still-normal passenger seat.

Through the small side windows, he could see the people wandering around the carpark with their takeaways glancing over at them. He felt exposed, like he was making a scene just by sitting there. Joe’s cousin lowered himself into the seat ahead of him, pushing the seat back slightly further into his already uncomfortable knees. He dropped his towel on the passenger seat and started the engine. Slowly, they began to creep out of the carpark.

It quickly dawned on Kieran that he agreed to be shoved into this sporty cubby hole without any idea of where he was going.

‘So where is Ace Café?’

‘It’s over Wembley way mate.’

‘Is that a long drive or, like, not too far?’

‘About an hour for your average twat in his shopping trolley. Forty-five minutes for me in this. You know what type of car this is?’

‘Yeah, Silvia right?’

Joe’s cousin rolled out onto the main road, steering around some potholes. Once on a straight bit of road he stabbed on the throttle, the car shooting forward and pushing Kieran back into his seat. His corner shop lunch sloshed around uncomfortably in his stomach. He looked over at Harry, an excited grin plastered on his face. Kieran noticed that he’d not bothered to put on a seatbelt.

‘Holy shit bro that’s fast. Can you race people in this?’

‘Oh yeah. I fucked up this posh twat in his 911 on the A3 the other day.’

‘Is this faster than a Ferrari then?’

‘Yeah, yeah, probably. I’m buying an upgraded turbo kit when I get paid anyways. This is going to be a rocket ship, trust.’

Despite Joe’s cousin’s love of his throttle pedal, the ride to Ace Café felt like it took forever. The car’s hard suspension meant every bump rattled Kieran’s teeth and thumped his knees against the seat in front, and the loud growl from the exhaust below him made his head hurt. He did like it when Joe’s cousin pulled off from traffic lights and junctions though, he needed to have a go of a kart that pinned him to his seat like this for sure.

Although he expected it, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of dread when he arrived at the Café, surrounded by cars much like Joe’s cousins. The afternoon air was heavy with exhaust fumes, screaming engines and thumping bass from endless subwoofers. People wandered around from car to car, hot dogs and burgers in hand while youngsters sucked on ice creams and lollies.

With difficulty, he half crawled out of the passenger side door and he and Harry went to find Joe. As they weaved through the cars and crowds towards the car Joe arrived in, Kieran could see Harry walking alongside him out the corner of his eye. His eyes were wide and childlike, drinking in the sights with a smile stuck to his face.

Kieran’s eyes kept being drawn to so many different cars himself. Cars he’d only ever seen in Gran Turismo or Top Gear. Impreza’s, Evos, Supras, Skylines. All of them with big rims, body kits, gleaming engine bays on display. Fuck it, it had been worth the journey to see these wheels.

When they approached Joe, he immediately gestured towards the crowded street outside the café car park and began weaving towards it. Kieran saw Harry hesitate before following him, his smile becoming a scowl at being forced away from the main attraction.

‘Where are we going man? The car show is back there.’

‘Trust me bro, the show isn’t the best part of coming to Ace Café.’

‘How though? There were some proper sick looking cars there that I wanted to look at.’

‘Yeah, but they’re just show cars that guys like to show off. Where we’re going, we get to actually see some cars doing cool shit.’

‘What do you mean?’

Joe leant in a little closer to make himself heard over the engines and sound systems.

‘Drifts, burnouts, proper outlaw shit. My cousin and his mates sometimes get involved too.’

Kieran’s stomach started to knot again.

‘But isn’t that illegal? Won’t the Police come and stuff?’

‘Yeah, probably. It’s no big deal though. We’ll just jump in the cars and get out of here.’

‘What if the Police catch us?’

‘Honestly bro just chill. Even *if* we get pulled up, we’re underage and not driving. They can’t do shit to us. It’s all good.’

Kieran tried to take comfort from Joe’s words but couldn’t shake the feeling this had been a bad idea. He was torn between dreading the threat of Police and hoping they’d show up soon, at least then he’d have an excuse to leave.

Fuck it, he was here now. Might as well take it all in and enjoy some car shit without his dad breathing down his neck.

They walked a short distance to the junction connecting the road the café was on to some side streets. In the middle of the junction was a mini roundabout, its white markings coated in tyre marks. A was crowd beginning to form, young men taking their phones out and kids peering up the street.

Behind them, one of the engines from the car show began to get closer. A car arrived at the junction, stopping at the GIVE-WAY line even though there were no cars coming. A small rumble began to build in the crowd which grew when the driver revved his engine, its roar piercing through Kieran’s head. The driver then put the car in gear and began to spin its wheels, the rumble in the crowd erupting into a roar of approval. The air soon filled with noise and thick, rubbery smoke. Beside him Joe and Harry were cheering and joining in with the crowd’s chants of ‘send it.’

Behind the first car another appeared, its engine already revving. As the first car pulled away it edged its way to the GIVE-WAY line, smoke already pouring from its tyres. Not to be outdone by

the first car, the driver shot into the junction and began spinning around the mini roundabout. The crowd went wild.

As the car kept spinning, the driver stuck one of his arms out the window and gestured for more noise from the crowd who got even rowdier, their cheers almost rising above the screaming engine. One member of the crowd then ran into the middle of the roundabout, phone in hand. The driver spun around him as he filmed, the car rotating inches away from the cameraman's crisp white trainers.

As the mass of smoke, metal and noise spun before him, Kieran felt a rush of anxiety run down into his stomach. He was suddenly very aware of how small the junction was, how fast the car was spinning, the number of people crowded around him on the roadside. He wanted to take a step back but didn't want Joe or Harry to think he was a coward. Eventually, the driver had taken his fill of attention from the crowd and straightened out of his slide to leave the junction at speed. As he did, the car swung one way and snapped the other, the crowd at the edge of the junction opposite to Kieran jumping out of the way moments before the car mounted the kerb and came to a stop on the pavement.

The crowd jeered and Joe began filming the incident on his phone. The driver tried to hurriedly reverse his car and escape, only for his front bumper to be caught on the kerb as the car dropped down, the sound of scraping plastic on concrete earning him more mockery from the crowd. In the chaos Kieran took a couple of steps back from the kerb, relieved that Harry and Joe didn't seem to notice.

Once the second driver left, the junction continued to be a free for all for showing off your car and skills to the crowd. Drivers of all different types of cars lined up at the GIVE-WAY line to spin their wheels and slide around the mini-roundabout. Even some normal drivers passing the junction would beep or rev their engines if goaded enough from the crowd.

However, some weren't so eager. A bus driver beeped and waved and gestured until eventually the crowd cleared enough for him to squeeze his bus around the roundabout. Kieran thought that having to do that every single time there was a car show must be hell. A cyclist didn't even bother to slow, weaving around a spinning car and speeding through a gap in the crowd.

Slightly away from the kerb and feeling a bit safer, Kieran began to relax and enjoy the moment. It was loud, smoky, and unsafe, but Kieran could appreciate the party atmosphere, like a crazy festival for all things with engines. He was watching a Sierra slide around the mini roundabout when he felt someone tap his back. Jolting, he spun around to see Joe's cousin holding three cans of KA.

'Right lads I've got black grape, Caribbean cola and pineapple. Who wants what?'

The sweet sugary goodness of black grape was calling his name. He knew Harry would take pineapple, so he acted fast.

'Black grape please mate.'

'Pineapple please.'

'Guess I'll take Caribbean cola.'

'You've perked up little man. Enjoying the show?'

'Yeah, yeah, it's cool. Sorry for, like, not being enthusiastic and stuff. Just had a long couple of days.'

'Oh. I see. Having a bit of fun with your girl?'

'Yeah, something like that.'

He looked over at Joe and Harry to see if they were going to call his bluff. He caught their eyes and saw that they were going to let it lie. Harry pulled open his can and turned to Joe's cousin.

'So why don't you bring your car here?'

'Nah fuck that. Tyres for mine are a couple hundred quid a corner. Not to mention what you do to your engine by revving the bollocks off it all the time.'

'Oh, okay.'

'If you ask me these geezers have more money than sense. Or, if not, they build some old banger to use and abuse and scrap it when it breaks. Look, here's one.'

Kieran laid his can on the ground while Joe's cousin pointed to a car entering the mini-roundabout, smoke pouring off its tyres. The car had been onto the roundabout before, an old BMW 3 Series. The pained roar of its engine and the various bumps and scrapes along its side made it look like an animal mistreated by its owner, beaten around for the entertainment of others. On this

occasion, the owner took it slightly too far and one of the rear tyres exploded with a bang. After briefly coming to a stop, the driver decided to continue sliding anyway, Kieran jolting as sparks now flew from the bare rim as it grinded against the road. A cheer erupted from the crowd.

‘See what I mean? Halfwit.’

As the driver started to limp his car away, blue lights began to appear through the settling smoke, followed by sirens. The crowd began to jeer as a Police car pulled in front of the driver trying to exit the roundabout, with a bully van squeezing past and speeding towards the café car park. A prang of worry shot up from Kieran’s stomach. He looked over at Harry and Joe, expecting to feel stupid in the face of their chilled demeanours. He was surprised to see they looked just as concerned as he did. They stood dumbstruck for a moment, until Harry asked the question.

‘So, they’re not going to do anything to us right?’

Joe’s cousin hesitated.

‘Yeah, yeah, but with that being said I think we should leave because they might still pull us over. I’ve got stuff in the car I don’t want the Police to see, if you get what I mean.’

The three were carried by the rush of the retreating crowd back to the car park, dads scooping up their kids and people throwing their half-eaten snacks in the rough direction of the bins. The drivers with nothing to hide began carefully loading their cars while those who did were already manoeuvring their way through the forest of bodies, clearing the way with a flurry of beeps and engine revving.

Arriving at Joe’s cousin’s car, he slammed the open bonnet down and threw open the driver’s door.

‘C’mon boys get in. Joe get that seat back.’

Joe fiddled with the seat lever, rocking it back and forth furiously as his cheeks flushed a deep red.

‘I-I can’t get it to move. Its stuck.’

‘What do you mean stuck? Just pull it for god’s sake.’

Joe pulled harder on the lever, the seat still not budging.

‘It’s not doing anything. It won’t move!’

‘Oh, for fucks sake!’

Joe’s cousin climbed out the driver’s seat and jogged around the car. He slammed the seat lever up and pulled the seat forward.

‘There you bloody go. Now c’mon in, in, in.’

Kieran threw himself back behind Joe’s cousin and Harry slipped in alongside him. They hadn’t had time to put their seatbelts on before Joe’s cousin had lurched the car forward towards the carpark exit.

Kieran saw Harry slip his seatbelt in, but as the car crashed over road humps and potholes he couldn’t slip the buckle into the slot. In the end he decided to pull the seatbelt over and hold it by the clip. Luckily, nobody seemed to notice.

Joe’s cousin joined a line of cars speeding away from the Café, dropping down an on-ramp onto a dual carriageway. Out of the small side window Kieran could see they were surrounded by cars from the show, the flashes of bright colours and screaming engines around him making him feel like he was in a Need for Speed game brought to life. A white Skyline caught his eye as it passed, a brief flash from its rear as Kieran saw the tip of a flame shooting from the exhaust as the driver backed off the throttle. Trucks and busses flew by in a flash, grey Greater London becoming a momentary blur. Kieran clutched his unattached seatbelt even harder.

As they came up against a line of houses, Joe’s cousin slowed and indicated into the inside lane filled with slower moving cars from the show. Kieran took a quiet breath to steady himself. He could see the side of Joe’s face in the front passenger seat, still panting slightly from his car park ordeal. Out of the driver’s side window ahead he could see Joe’s cousin lay his arm on the windowsill.

‘Right boys I think we’re in the clear.’

Kieran saw the relief in Joe’s body through his slackening shoulders.

‘Yeah but, won’t the Police still be chasing cars up the South Circular?’

Joe’s cousin slowed slightly and changed up, the growl of the engine becoming a low hum.

‘Yeah, ‘course, but as long as I obey the speed limit like the Sunday driver I am, they’ll have no reason to bug me over those boy racer heathens in the outside lane.’

They continued to trundle along in the outside lane, cars show leavers regularly speeding past in the inside lane or pulling out from behind to overtake. Kieran rested his head beside the window and let himself drift into a much-needed doze. Signs and overpasses drifted by overhead, and the promise of an early night and a lazy morning brought him peace for the first time in what felt like forever.

Joe's cousin began to slow the car down, cars clustering around as traffic built up. Comfortable in his doze, Kieran entertained the idea of getting a little sleep now. The cluster of traffic was quiet aside from a distant show leaver speeding up the carriageway behind them. Kieran waited for him to pass but he only seemed to get louder, and louder, and louder again.

There was then a screeching of tyres, and a crash at the rear of the car. The impact shot Kieran forward in his seat, his face hitting the hard seat back ahead of him.

Kieran's head swam and his ears rung. Through blurred eyes, he saw Joe's cousin climb out and raised voices coming from behind the car. He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Harry staring back at him, his eyes wide.

'Bro you're bleeding.'

'W-what?'

'Your nose, its bleeding everywhere man.'

'Huh?'

'Your nose, look...'

Harry pointed down at Kieran's navy polo shirt which had a large, dark stain down the front of it. Kieran poked it and looked at the crimson on his fingertips.

'Fuck... Need to clean this up.'

'Bro fuck the shirt we need to stop you bleeding. Hold your head back and grab your nose.'

'-Kay.'

Kieran did as Harry asked. He stared up at the grey roof lining and tried to think of where he could go to clean himself up. If he came home like this his dad would lock him in for the rest of the summer. How could he help their escape then?

'Joe, Joe you alright?'

‘Yeah bro. Just cricked my neck, I think. You look like shit though dude. Think we might need to take you A&E or something.’

‘Fuck no. I just need somewhere to go where I can clean myself up. Harry, I need to crash at yours tonight man. I can’t let my dad see me like this or I’m grounded forever.’

‘Sorry bro, I can’t.’

‘Why?’

‘I just can’t yeah?’

‘C’mon bro, what’s the problem?’

‘Because I’m also super close to getting grounded and if I bring you back looking like... *this*, I’m grounded for sure.’

‘But coming out here was your idea though, my face wouldn’t be fucked up in the first place if you just let me go home.’

‘That’s bullshit bro, no one made you come out here. If you wanted to go home, you should’ve fucking gone.’

Kieran felt anger bubble up inside him. All he wanted was to do something normal and now he was caught up in even more bullshit. All he wanted to do was get home, close his bedroom door, and never see these dickheads again. But how was he going to get home? He hoped the others wouldn’t question his watering eyes and assume it’s from his bloodied nose.

‘Alright fine, fucking fine. Joe, can I crash at yours?’

‘No can-do bro. Parents are having people round so no free space.’

‘Okay, great. Guess I’m fucked then. Thanks for nothing.’

Kieran, Harry, and Joe sat in uncomfortable silence for what felt like a while, the only sound that could be heard being the ongoing argument between Joe’s cousin and the other drivers going on behind them. Voices were raised higher and higher, and Kieran was sure he could hear the scraping of trainers on concrete as someone was being dragged back from the scuffle. Eventually some new voices could be heard, and the sound of boots on the tarmac heading towards the car. Joe spotted the Police Officer first.

‘Shit.’

Chapter Nine

Kieran opened the front door and walked towards the living room. The walk felt endless, the slapping on the wooden floor from his trainers seeming to take him nowhere. He felt dizzy and his heart thumped in his throat. He was dead and he knew it.

He rounded the corner of the hallway to see his dad standing in the living room. His arms were crossed, shoulders back, a frown carved into his face. His figure filled the room. Kieran stopped and took a pace back down the hallway.

‘D-dad that wasn’t what it looked like...’

His dad responded in a lowered tone, which was always worse. Kieran could see the rage bubbling up within him, the eruption not far away.

‘Well, what was it then? Because it looked to me that my son thinks it’s fun to bring the old bill to my door. How many times have you been told not to shit on your doorstep?’

‘I was being given a lift; our car crashed. The Police were bringing me home.’

‘Course you were Kee. Go on then, what fucking fourteen-year-old was driving you home?’

‘One of my mate’s cousin’s. He was coming back from a car show.’

‘Ah, I see. So, your thick arse thought it would be a good idea to get in some random boy racer halfwit’s car and have him speed you around until he wrapped it around a tree?’

Kieran tried to search his mind for an excuse, something Joe’s cousin did that would make him seem trustworthy. His mind was empty.

‘I thought we’d be alright, sorry dad.’

He looked over at his dad, waiting for his hands to latch onto his shoulders, or for one to slap across his face. The hit never came. He took half a step towards him before shaking his head and turning away.

‘You know what Kee, do what you want, I don’t care anymore. Fuck off and leave me alone, I’ll deal with your mother later and get her to sort you out.’

Kieran made for his bedroom. Not knowing what to do, he switched the PlayStation on. The sound of the console booting up brought footsteps down the hallway. Before the console had even finished loading up, he heard deep, angry breaths behind him.

‘Actually Kee, I’m not going to wait until your mother gets home. How fucking *dare* you think you have the right to sit on your arse and play PlayStation after doing that to me?’

Before Kieran could apologise, his dad yanked the power cable out the wall and the HDMI cable out of the TV. He then picked the PlayStation up whole, wires scratching against the floor and a charging controller slamming to the ground, The L2 and R2 triggers popping out.

‘Get that fucking telly and follow me. I won’t ask again.’

Kieran grabbed the TV with trembling hands and followed his dad. He went out the flat and up to the Bluebird. His dad unlocked the boot and threw the PlayStation in. He then grabbed the telly out of Kieran’s hands and dropped it beside it.

Kieran stood rigid by the boot, no words formed in his mind. What the fuck was happening?

‘Right, I’m going to see your uncle Andy tomorrow and if he’s got fifty quid, he can have all that. I think his kids deserve it better than some little wanker who thinks it’s funny to ride in the back of Police cars.’

Kieran felt himself shrink, he felt two inches tall. His dad towered above him.

‘But dad...’

His dad looked him in his eyes. Pure, pungent disgust oozed from them.

‘But fucking nothing. And if you think you’re sleeping under my roof tonight you’re gravely mistaken. I’m going to have serious words about you to your mother later and I don’t want to see your face until the morning.’

Pure panic set into Kieran’s mind. Where was he going to stay? What was his dad going to do to his mum while he was away? He also had an urge to find Joe and beat him for what he had dragged him into. But he didn’t want to walk the streets alone all night. He had nothing they could rob from him now, what would they do to him instead if they couldn’t take anything?

‘Dad please, I’ll do anything, just let me stay inside tonight.’

‘You’re not listening, are you? Get away from my home and don’t come back until you’ve got your fucking life together!’

With that his dad shoved him up the street, Kieran grabbing a lamppost to stop himself falling.

His knees felt like jelly. He’d finally fucked it. All those times his dad had lectured and ranted and threatened and now he was finally in for it. He felt a foot slam into the small of his back and knock him onto his knees. He bit back the tears as he heard the gate slam shut.

Kieran looked around to see if anyone saw what had happened and quickly got to his feet. The street was empty. He spun around looking at the windows of the houses. Nobody was watching. He was safe from another visit from the Police.

He started walking, not knowing where he was going. As he got to the end of Chestnut Grove and back amongst the crowd on the high road, he tried to form a plan. He had no money, no phone, and Harry had fucked him off. Fuck.

He needed to find his mum before she got home, both to explain himself and get her help getting back indoors. As he paced up and down Balham High Road, he stopped outside Sainsbury’s and an idea came to him. Maybe he could cut her off there? She’d go through there around seven to get bits for tea, so he could wait for her by the entrance. But it was around five-ish now and he was tired and sore from the accident, he needed somewhere to rest.

He wondered aimlessly for a while looking at walls, bus stops, and benches covered in bird poo and graffiti before walking by the library. He was drawn inside and felt comforted by its silence and stuffy warmth, reminding him of quiet reading time back at Primary School.

He took an engineering book to look smart and took a seat in one of the chairs. He tried to make sense of all the graphs and equations; he didn’t know fuck all about anything. He was going to need to change that, now he could be kicked out at any time. He needed more knowledge, a job, money, something.

His eyes soon began to feel heavy. He tried to fight it but before he knew it sleep had forced itself on him, and the engineering book slid out of his lap onto the floor.

He was woken by a tap on the shoulder. Looking up he saw the librarian, a red cheeked middle-aged woman with big, expressive eyes behind her square glasses.

‘Excuse me young man, you can’t sleep in here. Do you have somewhere to go home to?’

She cocked her head and put a soft hand on his shoulder. Damn, he was a *problem* kid now. Mad.

‘Yeah, yeah sorry, was just reading this book for school.’

‘This is university level, quite advanced. How old are you? And is that blood on your shirt?’

He could see the confusion on the librarian’s face. He tried to find an excuse in his foggy brain.

‘I’m like fourteen but I like to be prepared for later stuff you know? And sorry, I just spilt a drink down myself earlier.’

She wasn’t buying it, he could tell. Staring over her, he spotted a clock on the back wall. It read 7:15. Shit, his mum would be part way round her shop by now.

He needed out of here pronto.

‘Oh God, sorry miss I’ve just noticed the time, I’m late for dinner. Where should I leave this book?’

The librarian gestured to him to pass over the book. He gently put it into her hands, and she walked over to the shelf he got it from. He pulled himself to his feet and jogged for the exit.

‘Thank you miss!’

He ran down the street and into Sainsburys, nearly bumping straight into the security guard at the entrance. Hopefully he didn’t follow him now.

In his mind he tried to trace his mum’s usual shopping route through the vegetable aisle, dairy aisle, and then bakery. Finally, he went around to the tills, scanning up and down for his mum. He felt daft, like a little boy who’d gotten lost during the weekly shop. People were looking at him, he must be a state. He walked quickly, avoiding eye contact with the other shoppers. Finally, he spotted her, bagging up her items at the far checkout.

He made his way towards her, weaving around the other shoppers and cutting through a closed checkout before coming up and tapping her on the shoulder.

‘Alright mum.’

His mum spun around, and took a step back, squinting.

‘Kee? What are you doing here? And what happened to you?’

Kieran squashed himself closer to the till to get out the way of an elderly lady with a packed trolley.

‘There was a car crash and the Police took me home and dad got angry and took my PlayStation and...’

His mum kept shoving groceries into her bag. Without looking at him she moved one of the bags over to him.

‘Okay, okay, enough. Let me pay for this and we’ll talk about it yeah? Bag this bread please.’

Kieran shoved the bread into the carrier bag and lifted it off the counter. His mum took her receipt off the man at the checkout and led him outside, sitting down on an old bench made of cracking wood and covered in graffiti.

‘Right Kee talk to me, what is this about car crashes and Police?’

Kieran felt the truth would work better here; it wouldn’t help his case if his mum found out he was bullshitting once they got indoors.

‘Well, my mate Joe has an older cousin with a cool car who wanted to take us to a car show. We went and everything was fine, but on the way back a car hit us. I promise it wasn’t his fault, but the Police came to check on us and took us all home. Dad saw me get out the Police car and chucked me out.’

‘Okay, and is this Joe character a close friend of yours?’

‘Yeah, sort of. Harry’s known him ages. His brother wasn’t a weirdo or a boy racer or anything, I wouldn’t have gone with them otherwise. I promise.’

He saw his mum look away and sigh. She wasn’t going to rip his head off, which was a good start.

‘Kieran, how many times do I have to tell you to keep yourself out of trouble?’

‘Like, a few.’

‘A bloody few? More than a few, don’t you think?’

Kieran knew she was right. He was going to have to take a bollocking if he had any chance of getting back into the flat tonight.

‘Yeah.’

‘Kee, you’ve got to keep your head down now, yeah? If we’re going to do this, I can’t have you acting up. I’ve got to focus on finding a way out for us and I can’t do that if I’ve got to sort your sorry arse out every five minutes.’

‘Yeah, I know mum. Sorry. Won’t happen again.’

‘It better bloody not Kee, you’re a big boy now and can tell when your mates are going to get you into trouble.’

Kieran wanted to protest that the trouble had nothing to do with him or his mates but didn’t want to push his luck. He would just have to be a boring pussy to his mates from now on in, until they were free.

‘So, what about me coming home tonight?’

‘What? Yeah, shit. Let me call him. If I’m going to catch hell I may as well know it’s coming.’

The familiar guilt bubbled up in Kieran’s stomach. He had to pussy out of everything from now on, he couldn’t keep making this happen, couldn’t keep being at fault for the beatings.

He watched his mum on the phone. The gestures from her free hand and tone of her voice suggested a battle with his dad on the other side. Her voice began to get lower, softer, which was reassuring. Her goodbye sounded promising.

Kieran watched his mum end the call and drop her phone back into her handbag. She put her hands on her hips and stared up the street.

‘Okay Kee you’re allowed back in the house, but your PlayStation is staying in the car for now. I couldn’t talk him out of selling it, so I’ll try and get through to him when we get home.’

‘Thanks mum.’

‘Don’t thank me, please. Appreciate that the only reason I’m trying to save your PlayStation is that it will be your last fancy gizmo for a while, things are going to get really tough for us very quickly. Also, I have to say I don’t entirely disagree with your father here.’

‘Huh?’

‘You’ve got to start using your head Kee. You shouldn’t need me or your dad to keep telling you to stop doing daft things when you *should* know better. You can’t expect to keep getting away with it scot-free, there will be consequences.’

Kieran’s guilt now began to blend with shame. He always thought of himself as a good kid, one that never got in trouble for anything. He could do no right anymore.

‘Okay mum.’

‘Right, take those bags and let’s get home, I’ve had enough of dealing with your dramas for today.’

Chapter Ten

Kieran sat on the couch watching TV. Out the corner of his eye, he could see the living room window which kept drawing his gaze away from the afternoon cartoons. His heart yearned for his mum to trudge across them to the front door, setting him free.

Being stuck in with no PlayStation had been hell. His dad hadn't wanted him at the garage either, too busy apparently. At times even being whinged at by him seemed more fun than being sat on his arse day and night. But today, finally, after a week of reading his chunkiest car history book cover to cover, watching all five of his Top Gear box sets, and clearing the family PC's internet history a few too many times, he'd be free. He just needed his mum to come home and keep her promise.

As the credits rolled on another episode of *Hey Arthur* he saw her blue cardigan flash past, he'd made it. Harry was waiting for him over at his place, his one daily landline call used well. He still sounded a bit off on the phone but he'd sort his moody arse out when he got there. He heard the key turn in the lock, boots clicking on the wooden floor.

'Hiya mum, how was your day?'

'Ah look who's eager to see me all of a sudden? And quite good, actually.'

The answer took Kieran by surprise. When being asked that question, the answer had been some variation on "shit" for as long as he could remember.

'What was so good about it?'

Kieran instinctively lowered his voice slightly.

'You find a flat?'

'Bit more than just a flat, a chance for a completely clean slate.'

Kieran's mind began to race. They might be on the run much sooner than he anticipated. He could feel his heart begin to beat a little faster in his chest.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I got a call from one of the agencies this morning about a job.'

‘But I thought you’d just started this contract?’

‘Yeah, but this job isn’t in London. There’s this firm who need staff to set up some new office in Dubai and they had a vacancy going.’

‘Like, for you?’

‘Oh yes. What’s more they’ll put us up too, so we don’t need to worry about flat hunting. And there’s no tax out there, so anything I earn is all ours.’

Kieran stood still, his brain trying to process what it had just been told. Leaving for a whole new country, what if he never came home? He’d never see anyone he knew again, go anywhere he knew again. The idea of it made his head go light.

‘Okay, so we’re leaving the whole country for good?’

‘Exactly. It will be a big adjustment at first but once we’ve got used to it, we’re free. Truly free. We don’t even need to stay there. I could just do a couple of years, fuck it off, and then we can go and build our lives *anywhere* we want. No more running needed.’

Kieran stared at the floor and studied the grain of the wood. It still didn’t make any sense. He didn’t even know anything about Dubai, aside from the desert and the funny headscarves the men wore. Would he need to wear one too? He felt his mum’s hand on his shoulder.

‘Look, Kee, I haven’t accepted anything yet because it is a big decision we’re going to make. I wanted to weigh up if it is the best choice for both me and you. I wouldn’t take you anywhere you wouldn’t be happy, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I’ve not fully made up my mind yet, but I do think this is really worth considering Kee. It’s a chance at a better life we may never get on this pishy island. Just think about it, okay?’

She must’ve read the confusion on his face as her tone then lightened and her voice raised back to its normal pitch, the moment over.

‘Oh yeah, now we’ve freed you, are you off to Harriets?’

It didn’t matter if Harry was still a bit pissed after the crash, Kieran knew he needed to get out of the flat, away from this, away from the idea of losing everything he had.

‘Oh yeah, I am. I’m eating at his too so I’m going to head off now.’

‘Oh. Okay. Guess I’ll see you later. Oh, and remember I need you in Clapham for twelve tomorrow to get those new school shoes.’

‘Wil do. Bye mum.’

Kieran dragged his bike up the hallway, out the flat and up onto the street. Kicking off he rode as fast as he could to Wandsworth Common, not bothering to check for cars as he shot across the street and onto the pathway. He rode hard and fast, his heart thumping in his chest and his breathing dry and raspy.

Why the fuck did his mum want to travel half-way round the world? He knew his dad was a nightmare but having to run that far surely meant he was still fucking their lives up? What the fuck did he do to deserve this family, couldn’t he just spend his summer breaks on holiday and hanging out like everyone else?

Tears began running down his cheeks, splashing onto his hands. He could see joggers and families and dogs all around him, he didn’t want anyone catching him like this. He was no one’s pity party. He wiped the tears away and slowed down, sitting back and resting his arms by his side.

Fuck it.

He was going to get mashed up, big time. He and Harry we’re going to get wasted and fuck shit up, and if Harry didn’t want to do it, he’d do it himself. What did it matter anymore? Didn’t matter what anyone said now, didn’t matter if he got in trouble. He was out of here soon anyways.

He rode across the common and through Wandsworth. The roads were busy, so he weaved in and out of the cars, feeling the heat from their hot exhausts on his legs. He kept going until he arrived at the big Sainsbury’s opposite the Southside shopping mall. The sky was cloudless and the sun beat down on the concrete, Kieran’s clothes sticking to his skin as he rode and formulated his plan.

Leaving his bike up close to the store entrance, Kieran made his way inside, grateful for the blast of aircon. The shop was decently busy, people milling around and picking up bits for the hot weekend ahead. He hadn’t seen much security, only a sleepy-looking pot bellied middle-aged man slumped in a chair near the entrance. He could see how boys at his school were always able to nick cookies out of the bakery aisle on their way to school, but he was after something much better than that. He walked straight for the drink’s aisle, weaving in between the willowy upper-class women and

musky-smelling young men loading trolleys for their barbeques and parties, finally arriving at the vodkas. He took a quick look around, nobody seemed to notice or care that he was there. He'd planned for concerned elders to start asking him questions. Still, he couldn't muck around if he wanted to get out with what he needed. He looked at the different bottles and brands, what was a good one? His eye caught a bottle with red writing and large, juicy looking raspberries next to the brand name. Maybe that one would taste a little better than his dad's.

Peering around one last time, Kieran took the bottle and carefully tucked it into the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms. The bottle's coolness felt good against his sticky legs, but it quickly slipped under his waistband and down his leg. Kieran frantically fished down the front of his bottoms, trying to seize the bottle. Now he could feel people beginning to stare. He kept getting a grip on the bottle only for it to slip out of his sweaty fingers. He could feel the heat burning on his cheeks and wanted to call out that he *wasn't* some kind of nonce, but it would blow his cover completely.

Finally, his fingers caught the neck of the bottle and he pulled it out of his bottoms. He heard one young girl he'd seen looking at the beers giggle and mutter something to her friend. Time to go.

Walking as fast as he could, he zapped his way through the maze of aisles to the exit, peeping around the end of each one for security, Police or an angry adult. Seeing the exit at last he ran through it, only for the doorway to begin beeping angrily. Shit.

Getting to his bike, he set the bottle down and began fiddling with his chain. Out the corner of his eye he saw the dark mass of the security guard appear from the store.

'Excuse me! Come back here young man.'

Throwing the chain over the handlebars, Kieran got back onto his bike and kicked off, carrying the vodka bottle under his arm. He peddled as hard as his legs could handle, struggling to get up to speed whilst keeping a grip on the bottle. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the security guard had broken into a run.

'Oi!'

Kieran's legs span wildly as he kept pushing on the pedals. Why did he not think to pump his tyres up? He could hear the slap of the security guard's feet behind him on the pavement, the panting of his breath. He didn't dare look over his shoulder again. Coming to a crossing he shot across the

street, narrowly missing a turning van. As he reached the other side he felt a tug on his rear wheel, and then a thud. Braving a quick peak behind, he saw the security guard laying in a heap by the crossing. He was in the clear.

Cycling up to the edge of the Common near Harry's, Kieran hopped off his bike and pushed it into a gap in the shrubbery, a rough path trodden into the dirt by the shoes of those up to no good. Laying his bike down in a little clearing, he sat on an old log and opened the bottle. He gave it a sniff, and was surprised at the sweet, fruity scent it gave off, nothing like the paint thinner bitterness of the bottles at home.

He lifted the bottle to his lips and felt the liquid slide into his mouth and down his throat. The burn was still there, but the sweetness meant it wasn't so bad. He could drink this easily. He took another swig, and then another, before laying the bottle down. His stomach felt warm and the rays of sunlight peeping in through the leaves were pretty.

Why was mum making him leave this place?

He could just about see Harry's block across the street through the shrubbery. Harry, all his other mates, all the places he knew and liked, would soon be gone from his life forever. He turned away and stared into the depths of the shrubbery, silent other than the faint whoosh of the dual carriageway beyond the tree line.

He thought back to the flat, soon to be finally destroyed by his dad in a fit of rage once he realised they'd run away from him. He imagined cutlery flying out of drawers, TVs smashed under his work boots, photo albums set on fire in the front garden. He'd probably find someone else to hurt after his mum left, or maybe he'd just keep drinking and become one of those sad, smelly, slobbery drunks that sat on the benches near Tooting Bec Station.

He stared down into the bottle, swilling the liquid around. Why the fuck did he have to run away from his own dad anyway? What was wrong with him? Sometimes he wished he could go inside his head and find out why he was the way he was. Maybe then he could be the little voice in the back of his mind that would make him put his hands down, and stop the venom being spat from his mouth.

He took another sip and got up to walk around the clearing. He felt his body glow with heat and a warm fuzziness form at the edge of his vision. Why him? Why couldn't he be born into a

normal family, live in a normal flat, and live a normal life where he didn't spend every day scared shitless, a life where he didn't have to run across the world away from his own dad? Why?

He aimed a lazy kick at the log. He then kicked again, harder, and then again. He began repeatedly kicking the log as hard as he could, chunks of dried bark crumbling off as his trainer smashed against it. He ignored the pain in his bruising foot, throbbing under his trainer which was now covered in dirty brown marks from the splintering wood. He then took another swig and made his way across the street to Harry's.

He stabbed at the bell several times. Eventually, he heard the familiar footsteps thudding down the stairs inside and the latch click on the front door. Harry stood in the threshold, looking down at him and squinting in the late afternoon sun. Despite the drink in his system, Kieran shuffled his feet a little, not knowing how he'd react.

'Hey.'

'Sup.'

He looked at Harry eyeing him up and down, before spotting the bottle under his right arm.

'What's that?'

'Raspberry vodka mate. Good shit. You want some?'

Harry shot a look behind him and pulled the door over slightly.

'Fuck's sake man my parents are home. If they catch you with that, they'll ban you from coming in.'

'Oh yeah, forgot I was the *bad influence* friend because I got brained in a car accident.'

Harry stepped down from the threshold and stood in front of him. He was a bit taller than Kieran these days and he had to stare up slightly to meet his eyes.

'You know why I had to do that, don't be a dickhead. It's not like your parents would've let me into yours if that had happened to me.'

'Bro, you do not know the fucking half of what my parents do and don't allow in my yard, trust me.'

'I don't care about your yard, I've got my own shit going on. I was *this* fucking close to being grounded the other week, fucking dad won't get off my ass.'

Kieran thought he had no idea. He'd never get it. His dad was easy against his. "Oh no I didn't do my homework and now I might not be allowed out". It was fucking pathetic.

'Alright, alright, I'll go. Don't want to make your mummy and daddy upset. See you whenever.'

As Kieran turned to leave, he felt the bottle tugged out from underneath his arm.

'Fuck you doing? That's mine.'

Harry barged past him, door slamming behind him. He began walking up the street, examining the bottle.

'Oi!'

Harry took a swig before letting a little pour on the floor like the rappers always mentioned. Kieran chained his bike to the lamppost outside Harry's building and ran after him. Harry slowed to let him catch up.

'You wanted to hang right? We going to drink this shit or are you going to keep being a drunken whiny bitch?'

Kieran snatched the bottle back from him but continued to walk alongside.

'Fuck you man.'

They walked down the hill towards the underpass. The sun was beginning to dip, and it shone in Kieran's glazed eyes.

'So how the hell did you get this man?'

'Oh, got it from the Sainsbury's down by Southside.'

'Fuck off, you did not.'

'Nah promise, security guard legged it after me and everything, it was mad.'

He looked over at Harry, whose smirk suggested he still didn't believe him.

'Swear on my life bro.'

Suddenly he heard Harry's smirk become a giggle.

'You're a madman bro. Can't imagine your ass booking it from a security guard on that fucking heavy-ass bike.'

'I did though, nearly gave myself a heart attack but I did.'

They walked in silence for a little while, passing the bottle between each other until they reached the underpass. Kieran rolled it around in his hands, the glass still cool against his palms.

‘Hey man, how comes we’ve never nicked drinks before? Like if there was two of us, I think it would be pretty easy to get past security right?’

‘What do you mean bro? Since when have you been up for that?’

‘Hmm?’

‘I’ve known you from time and you’ve always been a bit of a pussy with shit like that, no offence. It’s just been your way sort of. Pass me the bottle.’

Kieran paused before handing the bottle over.

‘Nah, nah, I’m not a pussy bro. You wouldn’t get it.’

‘Get what?’

‘Dunno, not sure how to explain it... could I grab a sip?’

He handed the bottle off to Kieran who took a gulp, the sweet, sticky, burning liquid sliding downwards into his belly. They were entering the underpass now, the setting sun casting shadows on the side of the great concrete bowl. Everything around Kieran felt soft and warm, glowing in the still evening heat. He handed the bottle back to Harry before crawling up the concrete slope and laying on his back.

‘It, it feels like the trouble just finds me anyway, you know what I mean? So I thought what’s the point in trying to stay out of trouble, might as well just mess about and try and have fun. Easier that way.’

He felt Harry’s arm brush against his as he laid down beside him. It was weirdly warm and comforting, made him feel safe somehow. Even through the fog of drink he knew he was best keeping that to himself.

Kieran looked up at the dimming sky and listened to the soft whoosh of traffic passing overhead. The concrete was hard against his back, but warm and not uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and thought about where he would be next summer, far from here, from his bros, from his ends, from everything he knew and understood. He could feel a lump forming in his throat and he shoved it back down with a gulp.

‘You good? Going to be sick?’

‘Nah, nah its nothing.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah, sort of, I think. To be honest I just wanted to get fucked up today because I don’t know what to do man.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I think I’m going to be moving soon, somewhere mad far. I thought I wanted to do it but now I’m just scared about it, like I don’t know shit aside from, like, this.’

He felt Harry’s arm brush against him again as he sat up and turned to him.

‘Bro, what the fuck? Why’d you not say anything?’

‘I dunno man it happened really quickly, I still don’t know where I’m going. Mum was talking about fucking Dubai today, skyscrapers and camels and shit.’

‘But, *why*? Why are your parents taking you so far?’

‘Its just going to be me and mum.’

There was a pause. Nothing could be heard other than the cars circling overhead and a crow which had landed at the bottom of the underpass, picking its way through discarded McDonalds wrappers.

‘Oh. So, are things not cool at home and stuff?’

‘Yeah.’

More silence. A moped screamed around the roundabout, music blared from a car stereo. The crow flew off with a chip in its beak.

‘Like, I don’t know if it’s the same thing, but my dad is a wanker sometimes. He just gives me shit for things I do at school which aren’t my fault. He won’t listen. He keeps lecturing me and lecturing me when I got him the first time, y’know? And him and mum just drink mad wine in the evening, even though my grandad has just had his liver transplanted. It just feels like they don’t give a shit about me or themselves sometimes.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I get that. It’s sort of like that for me, but, like...’

‘Like what?’

Kieran kept staring at the sky. It was late evening now, and the sky was beginning to darken as the sun fell below the horizon. Far above him he could see the blinking light of a plane flying overhead. A small part of him still held his tongue in his mouth, keeping the full horror of it all inside, where it had always been. But what did it matter now, he was going anyway. There was no point in keeping up the bullshit anymore.

‘My dad’s a bit like that but *more*, you know what I mean?’

‘More as in?’

‘He’s got a temper and says nasty things a lot, and when he drinks, he gets mad violent.’

‘Has he hit you?’

‘Nah, nah, never me, never. But he does my mum though.’

‘Shit bro.’

‘Yeah, and I try to stop it, I really do. It’s worst late at night when they’re in bed, so I go for a piss and get water really loudly. He doesn’t like doing anything if he knows I can hear.’

There was more silence. Kieran fidgeted on the concrete, suddenly feeling very naked. He took the bottle from Harry and sucked down two mouthfuls, vodka dripping down his chin.

‘But yeah, fuck it. I’m here, I’m with my bro, I’m getting fucked up, it’s all good man.’

Harry held out his fist and Kieran spudded it.

‘Anyways, Maccies?’

Kieran let out a long burp.

‘Nah I’m good for the minute. Could do with some PlayStation though. Your parents sleeping yet you think?’

Harry looked at his phone, the screen glowing in the dusk.

‘Give it ten minutes and we should be good. I’m pretty sure there’s some beer in the kitchen somewhere too if we finish this.’

‘Calm. Going to take a piss.’

Kieran made his way over to the other side of the underpass where a patch of shrubbery had broken through the concrete. He heard Harry call back to him.

‘Don’t forget to shake!’

Kieran made his way up the other side of the bowl and shuffled into the shrubbery. Here the darkness and guardrail kept him just hidden enough, and he took an uncomfortable piss whilst looking out at the cars going past on the roundabout.

After finishing, he pulled up his tracksuit bottoms and stood for a bit looking at the traffic. It was almost fully dark now, and his bleary vision followed the glow of passing taillights, taking in the splotches of light from streetlamps and billboards. He felt hot and numb, and his insides were heavy with sadness.

The tears came before he could stop them, dripping into the yellow pool already formed at his feet. He tried to make sense of the sadness in his head but drink had blended it all into one unbearable feeling. He climbed over the guardrail, the sharp metal biting into his hands and knees as they passed across it. He was now standing on the white line on the inside of the roundabout, cars passing around him at various speeds as they stopped at traffic lights and shot off at exits.

Coming onto the roundabout was a bus, indicating into the inside lane. Kieran saw it stop at the traffic lights through the shrubs and set off again, picking up speed, beginning to turn. Kieran's feet began to inch out into the road, waiting for the bus to come back around. A car passed close by, the driver shouting and gesturing to him out of his window. He saw the bus coming around now, going at a fair speed. It would be over quickly.

Far below him, he heard a little voice call out. He couldn't hear what it was saying but he instinctively drew back slightly onto the white line.

The bus was coming towards him, the driver not yet picking him up in his headlights. Kieran heard the voice again, this time just clear enough to hear what it was saying.

'Oi! Kee! Where the fuck have you gone?'

Kieran took a shaky breath and stood back against the guard rail. The bus blew past him, the driver honking his horn. Kieran pulled himself back over the guardrail and quickly wiped his face. Coming back through the shrubbery he walked back up to Harry who was now also on his feet.

'Jesus bro, you were gone ages. You having a wank or something?'

'Nah, just needed a longer piss that's all. Probably the vodka.'

He saw Harry look at him and got the feeling that he knew that there was more to it than that. After a moment he pointed a limp, drunken arm in the direction of his flat and began to shuffle towards the exit of the underpass.

‘C’mon then, let’s head back to mine. Parents must be sleep by now.’

‘Cool, you got snacks and that?’

‘Course bro, even got Tena Lady for your leaky dick.’

‘Fuck you man, I’m pissing on your carpet when we get back now.’

Harry gave him a loose punch on the shoulder, and they staggered towards home. The vodka was beginning to take its toll, and they held each other up to keep themselves upright. Arriving back at Harry’s flat, he put the key in the lock with a wobbling hand and they made their way inside.

Coming up the stairs Harry began whispering, his voice wet and breathy.

‘Right, when we come up just go straight into my room, yeah?’

Kieran barely heard what he was saying, the dark stairwell spun in front of him.

‘Right, m’kay.’

‘I’ll get the drinks and snacks, and you set up the Xbox.’

‘Sure.’

Making their way into the flat, Harry put a finger to his lips and crept up the stairs. Kieran tried to follow, grappling up the steep stairs like a mountain climber to stop himself losing his balance. Everything was now fuzzy, and his feet didn’t seem to want to go where he asked them to. After a couple of tries he managed to grab onto the bedroom door and stumble in. Feeling his way to Harry’s bed he flopped down onto it, sinking into the soft mattress. So comfortable, no springs in his back like his one at home. A ray of yellow light shone in through the door from the landing, and Kieran’s eyes began to get heavy. His body began to relax, his head flopping to one side, his breathing getting deeper...

Suddenly a voice hissed through the crack in the door, jolting Kieran from the coming rest.

‘Hey, wake up. You’re meant to be setting up the Xbox remember?’

‘Hmm, yeah.’

‘Get on with it, you lightweight.’

Swinging his arms to lift himself off his back, Kieran sat up and began feeling around for the controller. Muscle memory then took over, switching the Xbox on and signing in. As it sat on the dashboard screen it began to heat up in the humid night air, its clogged, aging fan vibrating into life.

Harry then snuck into his room, a pack of beer under one arm and a sharing bag of Doritos in the other.

‘Shut the door Kee, fan’s noisy as fuck.’

Kieran got up and walked towards the door, or at least tried to, his legs taking him one side or the other and bouncing off the walls.

‘You are so fucked bro.’

‘Nah nah nah, all good.’

Kieran pulled the door shut as quiet as his sweaty, numb fingers would allow and made his way back to the bed. He’d show Harry he wasn’t drunk, first by walking straight and then sculling a beer, light work.

Lowering himself back onto the bed he grabbed a beer from the box, pulling the ring pull open with his teeth.

‘Bro, you good to keep drinking?’

‘P-fuck yeah dude.’

Through his blurry vision, Kieran saw what looked like a nod, not that he gave a shit anyway.

‘You get one too?’

He saw another can leave the box. Now it was a party.

‘Yeah boy!’

‘Shhhh, dude, my parents.’

‘Oh yeah, m’bad.’

Harry loaded up a game and dropped another controller into Kieran’s hands. Soon the familiar sight of a pistol pointing at an approaching wave of zombies filled the screen. Harry smacked the mute button on his TV remote.

Kieran tried to concentrate on his shooting but the room was now spinning faster and faster, the TV moving around in front of him. The beer felt heavy on his stomach, and the room suddenly felt very hot. A wave of sickness began to build deep inside him.

By the time the fifth wave of zombies arrived he knew the game was up. Embarrassment made his face even hotter, but he had no choice but to pussy out.

‘H-hey bro?’

‘What?’

‘Don’t feel so good man.’

‘Feeling sick?’

‘Hmm.’

He saw Harry creep out the room, saying something quietly under his breath.

The sickness was beginning to creep up now, the spinning turning his stomach over and over like a washing machine. Kieran closed his eyes and prayed for it all to go away. Maybe he’d fall asleep before it came out. He began to heave, a little vomit dribbling out onto his hand. Fuck. Shit. Where was Harry?

As he felt another heave rise within him, Harry appeared back in the room with something in his hand, yellow and plasticky. A bucket! Kieran snatched it from his hands and all his sins of the day shot out his mouth, leaving a puddle of foul-smelling orangey-brown liquid at the bottom of the bucket. He fell backwards onto his back, breathing deeply. He wiped the remnants on his hand against the open pack of Doritos. Suddenly he heard more heaving and looked up to see Harry’s head also in the bucket. Feeling more nausea on the way, Kieran looked away and covered his ears until he was sure it was done.

Out of the blurry gloom he saw the TV go off and heard the Xbox beep as it powered down. Suddenly, he felt Harry’s warm mass flop down beside him on the bed.

‘We fucked up man.’

‘Yeah, never stealing vodka again, trust.’

‘Fuck this. Like *everything* is spinning now even with the light off.’

Silence fell over the room for a short while. Nothing could be heard apart from the soft whooshes of cars passing by on the dual carriageway. There was no light in the room apart from weak orange glow of the streetlamp outside the open window. Kieran pulled the blanket over himself and Harry, before laying back down to stare at the still-rotating ceiling. After what felt like a while a little voice came out of the blackness.

‘Just make sure you don’t go away for good man. Like, I’d miss you and shit.’

‘Yeah, me too bro.’

The room went quiet again, and as a warm summer breeze ruffled the open curtains Kieran heard a light snore in his right ear. He let his head flop onto Harry’s shoulder, and the spinning room began to slowly fade away.

Chapter Eleven

Kieran woke to a thumping in his head and a nasty churning in his stomach.

Pulling himself up from the mattress, he stared around at the damage from the previous night. There was a half-eaten Doritos share bag on the TV and beer cans by the bed, with a bucket by the door. Smells of grease, sweat, stale beer and vomit hung in the air.

Kieran checked Harry's phone, saw the time, and suddenly his mum's reminder from yesterday came flying back to him, the churning in his stomach momentarily replaced by panic. He began throwing bedding and trash around the room until he uncovered his shoes. Shoving them on, he tried to shake Harry awake.

'Hmm?'

'Hey bro, I-I gotta run, need to meet my mum in Streatham in thirty minutes.'

'Oh, okay. Deal with the bucket before you go, yeah? I'll get the rubbish later.'

Kieran looked over at the bucket. Some of the sick had trickled down the side and gone crusty.

'Alright man I'll do my best. Catch you later?'

Harry rolled back over on his side and closed his eyes.

'Yeah, cool.'

Lifting the bucket, Kieran thudded down the stairs to the bathroom, trying his best not to spill the contents on the carpet. Once by the toilet, Kieran quickly poured the vomit in, gagging as the gunky, foul-smelling mass plopped into the bowl. He then tried to clean the bucket, rubbing it with fistfuls of toilet roll until he realised that some of the staining was not coming out. Still tasting last night in his mouth, Kieran dug through the bathroom cabinet until he found a bottle of mouth wash. He poured from the bottle into his mouth until his cheeks were filled and burning, the liquid hopefully enough to clear any suspicious odours from his breath. He then spat it out and sprayed himself down

in a concoction of Lynx and Right Guard before taking the crusty bucket and leaving it in the bath, hiding it behind the shower curtain. Harry would need to deal with that later.

Thumping down the stairs two at a time, Kieran exited Harry's and crossed the dual carriageway to the bus stop, barely checking for passing traffic. He ran to flag down the 219 before collapsing into a seat at the back. Once settled in his seat, the hangover finally caught up with him, his brain throbbing in his skull and sweaty clothes sticking to the fabric of the bus seat. What didn't help was the bus, rocking back and forward as it stopped and started in traffic. It made Kieran feel queasy after a couple of stops, but by the time the bus had crawled into Lambeth it was unbearable.

With a shaking hand, Kieran hit the bell on the edge of Tooting Bec Common. The bus slowed one final time, pivoting Kieran and his stomach forward. Feeling Doritos, beer, vodka and fuck knows what else rise in his stomach, Kieran squeezed through the opening doors. He made it a few paces onto the common before the vomit came, with him heaving onto the grass. Yellowy brown liquid and lumps of something undigested shot out of his mouth onto the ground, some splashing back onto his trainers and the cuffs of his bottoms. From behind him, he could hear passengers speaking from the still-open bus door. A woman spoke in a hushed, judgemental tone to one of the other passengers, and he could hear a few young men laughing. He was not getting back on that bus.

Kieran waited for the bus to leave before shuffling over to a nearby wooden post. Leaning against it he looked around. The park was quiet, the small stream of dog walkers and joggers too far away to notice the minging puddle he'd left on the grass. Thank fuck. Kieran shut his eyes and took deep breaths, attempting to suck some life into his weakened frame. The arrival of another bus at the stop reminded him that he needed to get moving, he couldn't face his mum tearing him a new one for making her wait too long.

He walked the last few stops onto Streatham High Road, staring down at the pavement and feeling people's eyes move over his soggy, pale body. As he approached St Leonards Church, people were congregated on the street, neat and tidy and formally dressed. Kieran felt the building bear down on him, the people close in, as if they could smell the sin. He reasoned they probably just smelt the sick and sweat, but he upped his pace to clear them regardless.

Arriving in Streatham, he shuffled through the crowds, occasionally catching someone's shoe or getting in their way, to which he mumbled apologies. Arriving at the Clark's on the highroad, he saw his mum there, arms crossed. He must've left her waiting. Before she caught sight of him, he bent down to try and scoot some of the vomit residue off his shoe and unstick his t-shirt from his body. He approached her with his head high and shoulders back, but didn't lean in too close when she hugged him.

'Afternoon you dirty stop out, where have you been?'

'Sorry mum was playing Xbox at Harry's. Lost track of time.'

'Well pay more attention in future yeah? I've been standing around like a twat for nearly half an hour now.'

'Sorry.'

Kieran saw his mum stare at him and begin to notice the state he was in. He knew it was only a matter of time before she put two and two together.

'Kee, you look like crap, you feeling alright?'

'Yeah, fine, was just up late that's all.'

'You're white as a sheet and soaking wet, and you pen and ink a bit too if I'm being honest.'

Kieran stared back at his mum and watched her expression begin to shift.

'You smell weird... I thought I smelt it on you the other day after you got mugged.'

Kieran's heart missed a beat.

'Oh, don't know why mum, I've had a few takeaways with Harry and his parents maybe?'

Kieran watched his mum's face twist even more. Her voice began to rise above the hum of the street.

'Don't you lie to me boy, or I'm taking you home and you can wear those school shoes until your toes are poking out.'

Kieran stood frozen to the spot, his brain coming up with nothing close to an excuse.

'Well?!'

'Well, me and Harry might have tried some alcohol. But don't worry, it was only those couple of times.'

Kieran saw his mum go to say something before pausing, her shoulders dropping. She looked away from Kieran and bit her lip. After taking a quick glance over at the shoe shop, she grabbed him by the arm and led him up Streatham High Road.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Don’t worry about it.’

Once they had reached an estate which faced onto Streatham Common, Kieran felt his mum pull him into a side street and point at a low wall.

‘Squat. We need to talk, and we need to talk now.’

Kieran did as he was told, a little glad to be sat as he felt a bit dizzy.

‘Look, I’m assuming you know what your dad is by now?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t play fucking stupid with me please? Your father is an *alcoholic*.’

Kieran jolted and stared back up at her, a shock running through his body. Nobody had ever referred to his dad as an alcoholic, especially not his mum.

Kieran watched his mum stare into his eyes, pushing a lump down in her throat.

‘And now I’ve got a fourteen-year-old son who thinks it’s funny to rock up in Streatham in the middle of the day pissed as a fart. Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?’

‘Sorry mum.’

‘No, sorry doesn’t cut it I’m afraid. If you want to be a pisshead like your father I will go home, pack my things, and fuck off without you.’

Kieran felt his stomach knotting. She couldn’t leave him, could she? Living alone with his dad would be hell. The sweat running down his forehead began to turn cold.

‘No mum please don’t I really am sorry, I’ll never do it again.’

‘And how can I trust you now? You’ve already done it twice to my knowledge. How long is it until you make friends with some older boys who give you some more great ideas. Drugs, thievery perhaps? Then I’ll be picking you up from Police Stations instead of taking you to them.’

The image of Connor flashed into Kieran's head. He tried to ignore the guilt which panged inside. He knew Connor wasn't like that, or he thought he did. He just wanted to go back to Harry's and pretend this conversation never happened.

'No mum I wouldn't do that. Please, it was just a mistake, Me and Harry will stop doing it I promise.'

'Of course, because you've *always* got to do what Harry does don't you? If he jumped off the White Cliffs of Dover, would you do that too? Tell you what, why don't I phone Harry's parents and tell them what you've been up to? Actually, why don't we tell your father?'

Kieran began to pant, silly tears beginning to sting at his eyes.

'No please don't tell him, I'll stop speaking to Harry if that's what you want.'

'Do you know what, I think I will tell him. Maybe then you will get an idea of how nasty an alcoholic gets when you get on their bad side. At least you would have done something to deserve it.'

Amongst the fear and guilt, Kieran felt a surge of anger bubble up from within. This was the first time he'd ever gotten himself in trouble like this, and his mum was treating him like some problem child. Didn't she know that he knew what his dad did to her, that he had to live the same waking nightmare every night he was home? It wasn't like she lectured him the same for the horrible things he does.

'Mum, why are you being so nasty to me? I've made one mistake, dad messes up all the time and you don't talk to him like this.'

His mum stopped for a second and leant down towards him. For a moment he expected the feel the sting of her palm hitting his face. She spoke in a low, croaky voice.

'Because I can't, Kieran. Because if I try he batters me, Kieran.'

Kieran now saw that his mum was blinking back tears too. He went to try and hug her, but she pushed him away.

'Look, if you want to grow up and become a pisshead waste of space, that's on you. From now on you can buy your own fucking school shoes, your own fucking PlayStation games, and run your own fucking life. I've had enough and I'm going home. Come back later if you feel like it.'

With that Kieran saw his mum turn and walk back down the side street, shoulders shaking. He sat on the wall and buried his face in his hands.

He sat there for a while, listening to the traffic pass by on the High Road. Any attempt to gather his thoughts didn't work, his brain felt sore and heavy in his head.

After what felt like a good while he got to his feet and started walking. He moved without thinking, following the pavement further up Streatham High Road.

Out the corner of his eye he saw the kart track. Kieran stopped to stare at it, just about hearing the sound of the karts squealing around the track over the traffic.

To him, all of his fannying over his racing felt so stupid now. He just felt stupid in general. His mum had offered him a chance to escape, to start again somewhere fresh and clean and new. And he'd fucked it.

All he had needed to do was keep himself out of trouble, that should've been dead easy. How had he become such a waste of space so quickly. What was wrong with him?

He kept walking until he reached the set of lights where the High Road met Greyhound Lane. Crossing over, he passed by the café and row of shops on the corner. There, leaning against the railings by the kerb, were two men. Each was rambling in something like English as they swigged from tall cans of lager. Kieran could drop from the cans splash onto their dirty jeans and trainers peeling apart at the sole. Kieran thought they looked young and ancient at the same time, the smooth skin on their arms mismatched with the dry, weathered skin on their faces, and their lip and nose piercings looking out of place against their yellowy-brown teeth.

As Kieran passed them he was nearly choked by their smell, a combination of body-odour, stale booze, and piss stewing in the summer sun. As he made his way further down Greyhound Lane, he wondered how anyone could let themselves get that way.

As he walked he was staring down at his shoes. Shoes he realised were still caked in mud and dried vomit. He stopped walking and looked over himself, his t-shirt was damp with sweat and his bottoms still had white, dusty marks from the concrete of the underpass. Right now, he was no better.

Was that the future he had to look forward to? Sucking booze and pissing his pants?

And what about dad? How long was it until he stopped washing and started boozing during the day after his mum left?

Kieran decided that he still needed out. It was probably too late to convince his mum that he wanted to sort his act out, but he could still do it for himself and get away. He didn't want to be around to watch his dad booze himself into oblivion.

Chapter Twelve

Kieran pulled the front gate over and walked down the steps to the front door. Turning the key in the lock with a soft click he crept into the flat, making sure to step on the least creaky patches of the wooden floor. He manoeuvred his way up the hallway and into his room, taking care not to catch himself on the piece of wooden trim that stuck out from the wall.

Right, lets grab what we need and go, no need to mess about. We're not wanted here anyway. The thought brought water to Kieran's eyes, but he quickly wiped them away, he had a job to do. His room sat before him, an entire life he'd need to sift through for the stuff he'd need to get away and start again.

He stood and stared at it all for a moment. Could he really leave it *all* behind? Fuck it, it's not like he had a choice anymore. He moved around the room, stepping light to stop his trainer squeaking on the floorboards as he spun around to check draws, shelves, storage boxes. Eventually a plan of action came to mind.

He began by taking the big backpack he used for P.E. and emptying it out onto his bed. He then rummaged through his draws, dropping socks, boxers, t-shirts, and a couple of pairs of trackies inside. He then made for the bathroom, taking his toothpaste, toothbrush, and a can of deodorant. Before leaving the room he also grabbed his can of Lynx body-spray.

Making his way back into the hallway he tried to think if he needed anything else. He'd never packed his own bag before, he'd been too little the last time they'd went on holiday. The silence of the flat caught his attention. It had to be around midnight, but there was no sound of the familiar horror behind the closed bedroom door. Kieran felt his hand begin to go for the handle, but he stopped himself. She doesn't need you anymore, she can run away to that little sandy shithole without you.

He swung his bag onto his back and looked towards the front door at the end of the hall. Once he stepped back over the threshold there was no going back. He'd message Harry so he can sleep at his for a night or two but then he'd have to move on, somewhere. Maybe he'd find an old empty

building to crash in for a bit while he thought of a way to make money. He'd probably eventually end up in one of those hostels like Connor. Oh well, he'd only be there for a few years until he finished school and would be free to go where he wanted.

He felt another lump rising in his throat, but he forced it down again. He supposed he could take something to remember this place by, and his parents. There was a little picture of them in the front room, on the telly stand, he'd take that.

As he made his way into the front room, he thought he could sense someone nearby. It was just his mind playing tricks on him, his mum's got a night off, maybe it's easier when he's out the house. He reached down and lifted the photo off the telly stand. It was a slightly blurry picture of his parents on the couch in their old front room, taken by him when he was little on the family camera. He couldn't make everything in the dark, but he was still surprised by how much younger his mum looked then. Her cheeks were fuller and had colour in them, the bags under her eyes were smaller, her chin less spotty. Dad looked about the same though, his hair thick and dark, his cheeks high and red. The booze must keep him young.

As he lowered the picture into the bag, he heard footsteps coming from the kitchen, followed by the flick of the lighter. Out of the dark came the lit end of a cigarette, followed by the dark outline of his mum.

'What you doing Kee?'

'Nothing, why are you awake?'

'Three guesses.'

Kieran's heart sank.

'Why have you got that bag? Where are you going?'

He couldn't tell her anything, she might follow him. But what was there to tell? Beyond Harry's he didn't have a clue where he was off to. He took a breath. He'd work that out later, he just needed to brush her off and get out of this flat.

'Away.'

'Away from what?'

‘What do you think mum? Here, everything. I can’t go with you, and I can’t stay here with dad so I’m off. Goodbye.’

Before his stupid eyes started to well up again, he turned around and made for the door. After a couple of paces he felt his mum’s hand on his shoulder. However, her normally soft touch had hardened, and he felt himself being yanked back into the living room. Her previous whisper had lowered to a hiss.

‘What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing? Do you have any idea what happens to young boys on the streets?’

Kieran looked at the floor. The last thing he needed right now was a fucking lecture.

‘Did that mugging teach you nothing? There are all kinds of sick bastards just waiting for a silly kid to come their way. To mug you, beat you, or worse.’

‘And what do you want me to do about that mum? I’ve got nowhere to go.’

‘What are you on about? We’re leaving together are we not? Look, if you’re not wanting to do this you can stay with your father...’

‘No, no, today you said you’re going to leave without me. *You* said that, so I’m going off on my own. I don’t care where I go as long as it’s not here.’

He heard his mum sigh in the darkness, the grip on his shoulder loosened.

‘Look, I hope you didn’t actually believe me when I said that, otherwise I’m a pretty shit mum.’

Kieran turned around to face her.

‘I had to put the frighteners on you because you’re out of control Kee. Getting pissed out your brains, hanging around dodgy areas and getting yourself robbed, God knows what else you’ve got yourself involved in.’

‘But mum I didn’t mean...’

‘Doesn’t matter whether you meant it or not, Kee. It just takes you being introduced to the wrong people, getting yourself caught up and you’ll ruin your life. If you want to know what that looks like, take a good look at the thing sleeping through that door.’

They stood in silence in the darkness of the living room. Kieran tried to find a response but one refused to form in his brain.

‘I dunno mum. I don’t try and get into trouble, I just don’t know what to do, everything is so fucked.’

‘But that doesn’t mean it has to fuck *us* up Kee.’

His mum took his face into her hands, staring into his eyes.

‘Look at me. We’ve got a future; I promise you that.’

Kieran tried to run from her gaze but couldn’t. The warm brown of her eyes seemed to shake with life, somehow desperate and reassuring at the same time. They were in it together. They could escape together.

‘Okay. What do we do now?’

His mum drew back. She fidgeted on the spot with the same restless energy she had whenever everyone took too long getting ready and she was ready to leave the house.

‘It’s time to go Kee. I’ll take up the offer, sign the contract and we’ll be on a plane in the next couple of weeks.’

‘What if we don’t like Dubai?’

‘Fuck it Kee, anywhere is better than here right now. Look, we can wait out my contract, and if we’re missing home we can still come back.’

Kieran took a deep breath, suddenly Dubai didn’t seem quite so far away.

‘Really, but what about dad?’

‘When we come back, we’ll move somewhere new, somewhere much nicer than this mouldy armpit. And if your father comes *anywhere* near either of us, I’ll have him arrested faster than he can blink.’

A surge of shock rose up through Kieran’s body. Getting the Police involved had never seriously crossed his mind, even though what went on here was so much worse than the stuff people got nicked for in soaps and dramas and stuff. The fact that they may need to grass on his own dad seemed fucked up, but he’d do it if it made his mum safe once they were away.

‘Okay.’

He felt his mum's hand slide into his and she led him down the hall to his bedroom, her bare feet barely making a sound on the old wooden floor as they now both avoided the squeakiest planks. He could hear his dad snoring through the closed bedroom door. He tried to pay attention to each snore, to hear if there was any sign of a stir. They remained low, regular, and deep for now.

'Okay, let's not put this off any further. Kee, empty your rucksack.'

'Why?'

'Look, just empty it and I'll tell you. And make it quiet yeah?'

Kieran did what he was told, emptying the contents back onto the bed alongside the items he'd taken out to fill it in the first place.

'Ta. Right, I'm going to repack your bag with some essentials, okay? I'll pack some bigger bags when I get the chance, but you can grab this if we need to leave in a hurry.'

Kieran watched her go to work, carefully refolding the clothes he packed and stacking them inside, using the leftover room she made to pack a pair of jeans, a jumper, and an old windbreaker he'd been given one wet day by a cousin. Squashing it all down, she went off to the bathroom and came back with a brand-new toothbrush and tube of toothpaste, laying both on top. Zipping the bag back up she handed it back to him.

The rucksack was now fat with his stuff. He looked around the room and suddenly became aware of how much still wasn't in his bag. PlayStation, TV, model cars, books, posters, certificates, medals. He was going to leave so much behind, even if it might be for something better.

'Right, you've got longer arms than me so put that under your bed, nice and far back so it can't be seen.'

Kieran put the bag down and began pushing it under his bed. It was much heavier than it was when he packed it, and it took a lot of his strength to push it across his floor until it was far enough under his bed to be well-hidden.

Rising back to his feet his mum suddenly grabbed him and drew him into a tight hug, her head on his shoulder. Kieran could feel her shaking as her body clung to his.

'Get some sleep, and please, never, ever try to run away again, or I'll kick your scrawny little ass until its raw. You understand?'

Kieran stood there in the dark and held his mum. He could feel a hot wetness spreading on his shoulder as she continued to shake silently. He knew in that moment that he'd go wherever she'd take him. He had to keep her safe, no matter what it took. It was his responsibility now, and no prick here or camel-humping Sheikh in Dubai would take the piss out of her on his watch.

The moonlight cast shadows over his room, and it suddenly felt very small. He could hear a soft breeze outside rustle the trees, and he tried to picture hot desert air blowing through the leaves of a palm tree in a city on the other side of the world, his new home. He wondered if they'd live in one of those big shiny skyscrapers, or whether the poorer people lived somewhere else. Do they still have buses and trains there or will he have to walk everywhere while his mum was at work? Would he need to become a Muslim? He didn't have a chance to ask Mo and the boys at school how it worked now.

After a while, his mum's shaking began to ease-off and she let go of him. Kieran noticed that she was now avoiding his gaze.

'Night mate... and sorry for getting upset.'

Before he could say that it was fine she had disappeared back to the front room to sleep. Kieran collapsed onto his bed and tried to get some rest. He was shattered, but his mind was running alive with too many thoughts to sleep.

How long did he have until they left? Would he get time to see Harry? How would he stay in touch with him? Could he get minutes in Dubai? He'd have to figure it out, maybe find a way to take his PlayStation with him so they could game at least.

Eventually, as the sky began to lighten, Kieran began to drift off to sleep, thoughts of endless canyons of glass buildings floating through his mind.

Chapter Thirteen

Kieran was awoken by the sound of noise from the kitchen. He squinted and looked down at the digital clock by his bed, it was half-seven. It was a bit early for either of his parents to be awake, but it had to be his mum getting ready for work. Maybe she was starting work earlier to finish some stuff up before they left?

The sticky warmth of the morning had dried his throat out, he needed water. Making his way to the kitchen he was caught off guard to see his dad there through the door, making himself a cup of tea.

‘Oh, morning Kee.’

‘Morning dad.’

Through the foggiest of his half-asleep head Kieran tried to come up with a reason why his dad was up so early. He better not mention it in case it was something important he had forgotten.

‘You want some breakfast?’

‘Huh?’

‘I said you want some breakfast, numbnuts?’

‘Erm, yeah, please dad.’

He took a second cup from the cupboard and a bowl. He poured Kieran an overly large portion of cereal and drowned it in milk, before flicking the kettle back on.

Kieran was staring down into his bowl of cereal when he heard a thud behind him. He looked around to see his dad picking his cup up from the floor. Luckily it hadn’t broken. Kieran didn’t have it in him today to deal with him being in a mood.

His dad looked back at him and shrugged, with a “oops-silly-me” look on his face, but something was wrong. He looked drunk, not in the aggressive, wild way he usually was, but the sloppy, stumbly way a cartoon character is after downing a jug with XXX on it. His eyes looked glazed, and his mouth began to twitch at the edges.

‘You alright dad?’

Kieran waited for a reply, but it didn’t come. His dad looked back at him, confusion in his eyes, holding onto the kitchen sideboard. As Kieran got up from the table to check on him, his dad stumbled past him through the living room, his slippers shuffling on the carpet as he dragged his body along. He didn’t look in control of himself, something else had taken over. His hands reached out ahead of him for something that wasn’t there. Kieran thought it looked like he was drowning. Before he could try and grab him, his dad made his way into the bedroom. He flopped down onto the bed face first, his limp torso crashing onto his mum’s legs.

His mum woke with a jolt, a familiar terror in her face as she wriggled her way free, still half asleep.

‘What the fuck are you doing Craig?!’

His dad didn’t reply, outside of a groan that didn’t sound quite human.

Kieran stood frozen in the threshold of his parent’s bedroom, once again unable to tear his eyes away from the scene unfolding in front of him.

His mum was the first to make sense of the situation, and Kieran felt so stupid when he heard her bark the word “stroke” down the phone. How could he have forgot? He’d seen the advert on TV a thousand times, with the lady on the voiceover booming ‘TIME’ to remind you to call an ambulance as soon as possible. How much time did he waste after his dad dropped the mug? Two minutes, five? His dad was probably going to die now, and it was all his fault. Knowing this, Kieran waited for the guilt to rise inside him as the paramedics wheeled his dad into the ambulance. He was still waiting as he and his mum climbed into the car and set off after it, running red lights and carving up anyone who was stupid enough to get in their way. But it never arrived. Instead, he felt numb.

The numbness continued to hang over him when his dad was rushed through A&E and pushed through to a bit at the back, where the nurses put him on an oxygen mask and clipped little sensors to his skin. As his mum huddled over his dad, a nurse led him into the corridor outside and sat him down on a chair. She put her hands on his shoulders and spoke to him in a soft voice, saying over and over that his dad was going to be okay and that they would take care of him. Kieran felt the numbness be replaced by embarrassment. *Should* he be panicking now, worrying for his dad’s health? Should he be

crying? He felt like trying to force some tears from his eyes but thought it would be weird to cry just to look like a good son. Instead, he told the nurse the truth.

‘Yeah, I’m okay, thanks. Just a bit shocked and worried about my mum.’

The nurse stayed close to him, keeping her tone soft and gentle.

‘As long as you’re sure love. I’ll be back to check on you and your mum soon, okay?’

‘Okay, thanks Miss.’

Kieran took a deep breath and relaxed a little more in his chair. He could hear the nurse talking to his mum through the door and she quickly returned. Kieran tried to paint his best grateful face on. Why won’t she sod off and leave him to think?

‘So Kee, your mum tells me that you’re a little *racing driver*. And she said you might have some magazines to show me.

Oh no.

In the chaos of loading his dad into the ambulance, his mum insisted he take something to read with him to the hospital. He’d been confused but did what he was told, taking a random car magazine off the pile stacked by his desk.

By accident he had picked up a copy of *Max Power*, a magazine with nearly as many topless women as fast cars. He picked it up and began thumbing through it quickly, trying not to stop on any pages long enough for the nurse to see some skin.

He almost wanted to laugh, his dad was fighting for his life in the room next to him and he was trying to avoid looking at tits with the nurse.

He closed the magazine and laid it on his lap.

‘I’m really sorry, but I can’t read right now, my head hurts a bit.’

‘Oh, not to worry. I’m just going to check on your dad and I’ll let you know when he’s going to be moved. If you need anything or have any questions come find me, okay?’

‘Thank you.’

Before long, the nurse returned to say his dad was going to be taken up to the ward. As his dad was being moved, some fear did start to creep into Kieran’s mind. What if his mum doesn’t want to leave now? What if they were going to be stuck with his dad forever? A part of Kieran’s mind got

angry at this thought, thinking about how fucking selfish he had to be to think about himself over his own sick dad, but the feeling wouldn't leave him alone. He was put on a chair next to his dad's bed and he spent the rest of the afternoon staring off into the ward. Every now and then his mum would appear and then disappear, chasing nurses, going outside to take phone calls or huddled off in the corner with the doctor. His dad was asleep for the most part, his chest rising and falling with the beeps of the machines. He looked strange in a hospital gown, lying in bed like an old Victorian man. He was just missing the nightcap and long-johns.

Occasionally, he would open his eyes when the doctors came to check on him. He'd grunt and move his head, but Kieran had the feeling that the person moving his mouth and neck muscles wasn't quite him. There was a strange look in his eyes and a slowness in his movements. It made him nervous; he'd surely snap out of this stroke daze and begin raging about him and his mum taking him to hospital, about being dictated to by doctors, and being made to wear a gown with his arse hanging out. He'd be yanking wires out of himself, barging machines out the way, demanding to be taken home so he can make them pay for embarrassing him. It was coming, it had to be.

As the sun began to sink in the sky out of the window at the end of the ward, Kieran saw his mum drag another chair up to the bed and flop down. Her skin looked pale and greasy under the florescent lights. She looked over at him through tired, red eyes.

'You alright mate? Sorry I've not been here for you today, just wanted to get some answers from the doctors.'

'Yeah, I'm alright Mum, did the doctors tell you anything about dad?'

He saw his mum hesitate, squinting her eyes in the way she normally did when she tried to find a nice way of saying something unpleasant.

'Yeah. Let's pop out for some fresh air and I'll explain it to you.'

Kieran followed his mum out of the ward and down the stairs. The wards, corridors and stairwells were all painted plain white and a heavy, suffocating heat hung over the whole building. Kieran wondered if it was to make the patients too sleepy and disorientated to escape.

They came out of the automatic doors and stood in the dying light. Kieran's mum stopped and lit a cigarette. She stared off towards the carpark, taking long drags. Her voice came to him in a monotone.

'Well, he's definitely had a stroke, and we definitely got him here fast enough to avoid him being really bad. But they say he won't be quite the same when he gets out regardless.'

'Okay, do they mean like him moving about or his brain-'

'Don't know Kee. Could be both.'

Kieran took a deep breath. A hundred different thoughts rushed into his mind. He imagined him and his mum standing around the bed, dabbing his dad's brow and feeding him soup. Wheeling him around in a wheelchair. What would happen if he couldn't go to the bathroom on his own?

'So, would we need to care for him and stuff?'

'Yeah. Someone will need to be there initially to look after him.'

Kieran looked over at his mum. She was still staring off into the distance. Thoughts of caring for a bedbound dad had faded but one question continued to spin around his mind. He shuffled his feet on the tarmac, trying to keep it inside. Before he could stop himself, it slipped out of his mouth.

'So does that mean we're staying for him then?'

His mum didn't reply. He stared at her over the glow of her cigarette, burning bright against the dusk around them. He kept staring for what felt like a lifetime, watching the cigarette burn down further and further until his mum finally dropped the butt on the ground and stubbed it out.

Exhaling the final draw of smoke, she turned to face him. The corners of her eyes were wet. She stepped over and put her arms around him.

'I'm not sure mate, I'm really not sure. I'm a bit muddled at the minute so give me some time to get my head straight, yeah?'

'Okay.'

Kieran stayed huddled against his mum for a little while longer, feeling the breath rise and fall in her chest. Hearing people coming out of the doors behind them, he gave her a little squeeze and let go.

His mum looked back at him, trying to force a smile. She led him back into the hospital, through the maze of corridors and stairwells back to his dad's ward. They stayed a little while longer, Kieran focusing on the beeps of the machines and the puffs his dad made through his mouth as he exhaled, the oxygen mask removed. He looked almost comfortable now, as if all he really needed was a big nap. Throughout the day Kieran had felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, no doubt Harry and whoever looking to see if he was about. He didn't have the energy to explain what had happened to them yet.

As the clock on the far wall of the ward passed eleven, Kieran saw his mum signal to go. He'd hoped his dad would wake from his sleep by the time they'd left, just to see if the glaze was now gone from his eyes, but they stayed shut. As they went to leave Kieran gave him a light hug. His body felt soft and limp, like there was nothing inside holding it together.

He quickly pulled his arm away and followed his mum off the ward.

Exhausted, Kieran and his mum barely spoke for the rest of the night. They half-ate McDonald's hamburgers in the car and headed straight to bed once indoors. Now alone in the dark, Kieran felt tears begin to roll down his cheek. He wasn't sure why he was crying, everything just seemed like too much. His dad sick in the hospital, having to leave behind his friends and start again, or stay trapped in the horror of the life he knew. Thinking about it all made his head want to explode.

The next day Kieran went back to the hospital with his mum, and found his dad to be awake when they arrived on the ward.

What he could say was limited. Kieran watched him lying in bed, struggling to push his words out, words which often were variations of "fuck it". Still, Kieran found himself relieved that he was back amongst the living. As much as it would've helped him and his mum escape, the idea of leaving his dad comatose on machines had made him feel like a piece of shit. He and his mum spent the rest of the day watching TV with him on the little screen above his bed, dad communicating in grunts when he wanted the volume raised or the channel changed. To pass the time when his dad took a nap or the TV got too boring, Kieran sent himself on little errands to entertain himself. He would tell his parents he'd find a café for when his dad was more mobile, or offer to go to the machine at the end of the ward for teas and coffees, his dad just about able to gulp down a tea when put to his lips.

As night began to fall the nurse called for Kieran and his mum to leave the ward, so they hugged dad and headed for home. Climbing into the Bluebird, Kieran waited for the hum of the engine and the drone of the radio as the car was started. The car remained silent.

His mum sat still beside him in the darkened interior, looking away from him out the driver's side window.

'Kee, I think we're going to stay and look after your dad.'

A wave of panic washed over Kieran's body. He stared down into the dark void in the passenger footwell.

'Okay, but what happens to us?'

A sigh came back to him from the driver's seat.

'I know... that you're worried about him coming out and being the same as he was before, but I've never seen your dad like this. He's lost.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's in his eyes. He looks like a lost little boy. I don't think he understands his own body anymore.'

'Yeah but he could come back, what happens if he does?'

'Look, Kee, I don't know. I don't *fucking* know, okay?'

Kieran didn't reply. He shouldn't have opened his mouth. Not now.

'What I do know is I'll never forgive myself, if I leave. I know I won't. I could run a thousand miles but the guilt of knowing how I left him would mean I could never move on.'

Kieran sat in silence for a moment. He felt another question burning away inside of him.

'So, like, would you be staying because you'd feel bad about not looking after him, or do you still love him a bit?'

Now it was his mum's turn to go silent again.

'For a very long time Kee I loved your father very much, and even through all of his shit I think I still do. But, even if he changes his ways now, I don't know if I can ever fully trust him again. He's broken that one too many times.'

'So how will you stay, without that trust?'

‘Because what choice do I have?’

She started the engine and began backing the Bluebird out of the parking bay.

‘Put your belt on Kee. Let’s get home.’

Chapter Fourteen

Craig sat and watched the door to the ward. He could just about see it swing open from his bed, and his breath rose in his chest every time it opened, only for it to drop again when a stranger came through it.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been there. It was burning hot on the ward, and it was hard to stay awake long enough to see day become night and night become day. He did feel himself becoming stronger though. He could finally trust his legs underneath him enough to take himself to the bathroom, a glorious relief after days of peeing in something that looked a bit like the holders you put cups into at the McDonald's drive thru. If only he could now find his fucking voice.

Time and time again doctors, nurses, and patients would try to talk to him, and he'd sit and stare at them like a mute halfwit. Questions, opinions, jokes would all form in his head and get stuck there, refusing to exit his mouth like a fly bashing into an open window. It frustrated him at first, but now it was starting to scare him. What if he could never talk to a stranger again?

How was he going to function in the big bad world if he couldn't use his gob? And if he'd forgotten how to speak properly, what else had he forgotten?

It felt like a thousand years since he last worked on a car. Every time he tried to recall a job he had done, a fog settled over his memories and refused to lift. What if it was all gone?

The only comfort he had is that Kee and Jess understood him, seeming to be able to reach into his brain and shake the words out of him. Until they got him out of here, he was trapped on the ward and inside his own head.

He was staring off at the door when he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was a nurse, armed with a blood pressure machine.

'Good afternoon, Craig. How are you today?'

Craig knew the answer to this one, it was dead simple. He chased it around his mind while the nurse stared at him, the humiliating, non-judgemental stare of someone who would accept him

throwing up on her shoes as an answer. In the end, the best he could do was to waggle his hand as if to say “alright”.

‘Good to hear. Now, could you put your arm out please?’

Pleasantries over, the nurse stuck the pad around his arm. He felt it squeeze into his flesh as a little number appeared on the screen. Craig couldn’t remember what the number said yesterday, nor did he care. He just hoped it said whatever it needed to say so he could go home. He looked over at the nurse, who was scribbling away on a clipboard.

‘One twenty-five over seventy-eight, right... that’s a bit lower than yesterday. It’s still a bit too high but you’re on the right track.’

Craig nodded and forced a smile. The nurse was blocking his view of the door, and he couldn’t see who was coming in. He stared around her until she left.

Shortly after she wheeled her little machine off the ward, the door opened again. Jess, Kee. Thank fuck.

Joy rose up through his body, and he fought the urge to leap off the bed and scoop them up in his arms, squeezing them until they ached.

Jess walked across the ward to his bed and gave him a small peck on the cheek. Kieran leant over and gave him a little half-hug before taking their normal seats, Kee on the end of the bed and Jess on the chair alongside. Amongst the joy inside him Craig felt a familiar pang of guilt. He’d forget about it each day, always being so carried away by his yearning to see them and the joy of their arrival to prepare for it. He could feel a thin sheen of sweat running down his forehead, and his face felt a little numb. He hoped he didn’t look as stupid as he felt.

He saw Jess make herself comfortable in her chair, lifting one leg over the other. She stared over at him, and Craig felt her eyes sizing him up, still trying to work out what he had become. Frankly, he had no idea himself.

‘So, how’ve you been today?’

‘Blood pressure better... But can’t leave.’

Kieran shuffled himself up further onto the bed to make himself more comfortable. Kee seemed to have gotten older since he'd been admitted into hospital, small signs of manhood showing through the hard skin on his hands and the little tache above his top lip.

'You have a read of those car mags we brought over dad?'

'Nah, haven't got around to it... sorry.'

'No worries, just figured you might get a bit bored. Fancy a cup of tea? mum?'

'Yeah, please Kee.'

Craig nodded in agreement and Kieran wandered off towards the café, pulling his phone out once he was a respectable distance from the bed.

Craig felt Jess's eyes on him once more. He tried to bring himself to look back at her, but her eyes were too intense, too full of judgment. He tried to think of something to say to break the ice, to calm things down, make it all feel more normal.

'You and Kee... Alright?'

'Bit all over the place but we've survived. The motor got a puncture yesterday and I taught Kieran how to change the tire.'

Craig had assumed Kieran knew how to change a tire. He felt a bit silly for never bothering to check considering the dozens of wheels he taken on and off cars when they were over the workshop together.

'That's good to know, for him. He back at school yet?'

'Still off until mid-September. They're renovating his school, so they've sent letters to say the younger students are needed back a bit later. It could be a bit of an arse ache now with getting to work really.'

'Once I'm out I could keep an eye on him?'

'Okay, we'll see.'

"We'll see", what did that mean? Surely they wouldn't? But what if they did? They would have every right to leave him after what he'd done after all. Craig looked over at the table by his bed. All he had there was his phone, trainers, and a stack of old car mags. No money, no car keys, not even his key for the flat. They could leave him here so easily, in this place of doctors and nurses and

beeping machines and stifling heat and shit food and death. If he was lucky the social would stand in and put him in some pokey bedsit on JSA, where he would shite his last in front of daytime TV living off Tesco value beans and mouldy toast.

Kieran returned with milky tea poured into paper cups. Craig took a shaky sip, tea dribbling down on his gown. He tried to turn his attention to his son.

‘Not a bad cuppa, actually.’

‘Yeah, cheers dad.’

‘Any karting soon?’

‘I did this weekend but, you know.’

‘No, no, go. You and your mum need, deserve... a break.’

‘Okay. I’ll think about it if I’m feeling up to it.’

He wasn’t committing to karting, why? That boy would normally go racing even if the world was ending. Were they really going to leave him here?

‘Okay think about it. I’ll live... promise.’

‘Okay dad will do, as long as you’re sure.’

‘Oh, that reminds me Craig, do you want me to bring your wallet in and some clothes?

Thought you might need them to take a wander now your more mobile.’

‘Yeah, please.’

The thought of having some cash and clothes gave Craig some relief, although he wasn’t sure if that was just something Jess was doing to calm her conscience before dumping him. At least he wouldn’t be stuck in this white-walled hellhole if worse comes to worse.

Craig searched for some more words to say but his brain was trapping them in again. Both Kieran and Jess took to their phones, tapping away to who knows what. Maybe they’d get bored and leave him soon. He just needed them here to feel some normality for a bit longer, then he could brave another night of moans, groans, and nurses shuffling up and down the wards. He began digging around for the little remote for the TV.

‘Telly anyone?’

‘Alright, have you got credit for it?’

‘Ah, no, not sure.’

‘Give me a minute and I’ll grab my card.’

Craig watched Jess tap through the hospital telly’s menus and bash in her card details using the remote, precious funds for grub, rent, and karting disappearing. He felt like a selfish kid snatching away the last of his mum’s payday pennies for sweeties. Trying to avoid Jess’s gaze he watched the telly buzz into life, showing a nature documentary. The soothing tones of David Attenborough did lift his spirits a little, as silly as he felt. The hospital felt slightly less inhuman with such a familiar voice whispering through the telly’s tinny speakers. He took another mouthful of tea. Kieran had gotten a lot better at making them it seemed, not going mental with the sugar and leaving the bag in long enough to give it some actual taste.

He looked over at Kee, his eyes looking a bit heavy in the stuffy ward. He sat hunched on the end of the bed, elbows resting on his thighs. What else had he learnt now, did he know how to fix the chain on his bike? Could he shave his face?

He took another quick glance at his phone. Was it a girl? Had he kissed her yet? He suddenly had to know the answers to these questions, know the man his son was evolving into before he didn’t recognise him anymore.

He tried to search for a way in, a little gap through which he could get an idea of where his son was on the road to adulthood, outside of his whiskers and the occasional bit of nuisance he caused with his mates. His brain began fogging again, but in front of the telly the words began to fall to him, slowly but surely.

‘Looking forward to going back to school, Kee?’

‘Sort of, I guess. Be nice to see some of my mates again.’

‘Never seen those boys before, they ever been round?’

‘Nah, only became friends with them just before the summer, plus they were all away for a bit anyways.’

‘They go away a lot then?’

‘Nah just for the summer, bit like we used to down the caravan site.’

‘Oh, yeah. So, you looking forward to any... classes, subjects, and that?’

‘Erm, not really. Maths and Science are hard, English and History are alright, R.E.’s decent too as they don’t give you tests.’

‘Nothing there you’d do for college?’

He saw Jess stare back at him out of the corner of his eye.

‘College? He’s fourteen Craig. Give him time yeah?’

‘Oh, yeah, ‘course.’

Idiot.

‘Taking care of that bike?’

‘Yeah, washed it and did the chain oil at Harry’s the other week, he showed me how to do it.’

His dad must’ve taught him. Same way he could suddenly tie knots one day and Jess’s face lit up because she thought he had taught him. He’d lied then, hoping she’d pay him back for it later. The thought turned his stomach.

‘Good to hear you’re taking care of her.’

He wanted to then promise Kee a car if he kept taking care of his bike but the thought of haggling for a motor, let alone teaching Kieran to drive, filled him with terror. He couldn’t trust himself to do anything right now.

He heard squeaking springs from beside him. He turned to see Jess rising from her chair, handbag already on her shoulder.

‘Right Craig we’ve got to make a move so I can feed Kieran. Kee, you ready?’

Out the corner of his eye, Craig saw Kieran rise from the bed, slipping back into his hoodie. Craig wanted to say something, anything, to make them stay. He could get them food, he felt unwell, the doctors were hitting him, didn’t matter. But, as it now loved to do, his brain blocked all these excuses from escaping his head, leaving him stranded on the bed while his family disappeared again.

‘Yeah, good to go. See ‘ya later dad.’

‘Bye, Craig.’

The two both gave Craig light hugs, their strides barely breaking as their arms slid over his back. The doors closed behind them and he was alone once more.

The sun had begun to dip in the late-summer sky through the window at the end of the ward, the warm glow barely penetrating the artificial whiteness of the room before a nurse drew the blinds. Although the sun was going down, the ward still felt uncomfortably warm. He could feel the gown sticking to his skin. He gave himself a little wriggle to try and free himself, but it was no use. He'd just have to simmer.

As the ward began to quieten down, Craig wondered if it was even worth getting out. He'd driven his family away and scrambled his brains, what use was he to anyone?

How could he end it? Throw himself down the stairs? Too risky, might survive. Quit the blood thinners? There's no way the staff would allow that. Stop eating? Too slow.

Maybe he'd just use the thing that brought him in to take himself out. The DTs nearly finished him off anyway. A few bottles would be enough to see him off, it's no less than he deserved.

Before he could plan much further a wave of fatigue washed over him. He put his head down and surrendered himself to the heat of the ward, surely still heated despite the hazy sunset outside. He drifted off to the news on the telly, the reporters announcing cuts, poverty, death and destruction over Parliament toffs scurrying past the press like vermin across a living room floor.

None of it mattered anyway, that was the world's problem now. He was done.

Chapter Fifteen

Over the next few days Kieran witnessed his dad slowly come back to life, first being able to say short sentences, then get out of bed, then talk properly and walk around. Kieran had feared this, expecting anger and abuse to fly around the ward as his dad took days of pent-up aggression and denial of booze out on him, his mum, and anyone else unfortunate enough to get in his way, before carrying that rotten mood home where the terror would begin again. Strangely though, it seemed like the opposite was happening.

It all started with the eyes, which glazed over during his stroke and had stayed that way as he'd gotten better. They made him seem like he was never really there, often not looking at him or his mum when they spoke and instead looking out at the ward at nothing in particular. Also, now he was moving around he seemed smaller than he was before, the world seeming to compact him in as he walked around with his head down and shoulders hunched. He also struggled to talk to people, stumbling over his words when talking to other people on the ward. Kieran was sure he'd seen his hands shake a few times when talking to doctors. Weirdest of all was that he seemed to not really care when he left, with mum being the one pushing to get him home. He just seemed weirdly content to sit on his arse staring into space. Kieran wondered if he would even care if they stopped visiting.

The night before his dad was due to come home, Kieran saw his mum with her head inside her wardrobe through the open bedroom door.

She came out of the wardrobe with a pile of cardboard boxes and a roll of bubble wrap. The top box had a multipack of Sellotape peeking out of the top. She spoke to Kieran without meeting his eyes.

'You mind helping me rip up these boxes? I won't be able to fit them in the bin otherwise.'

Kieran followed his mum to the kitchen and got to ripping. A lump formed in his throat, selfish thoughts of a fresh start somewhere new and clean and free flashed across his mind, each rip of the box taking him further away from it. For fuck's sake his dad was getting out of hospital tomorrow, why couldn't he just to be happy for once?

He looked over at his mum, who just looked utterly exhausted. Big dark bags under her eyes stood out against her pale face. Her hair hadn't been highlighted in ages, and a few greys were beginning to appear amongst the usual light brown. Kieran wanted to promise her it would all work out, that he would find a way to make it better for both of them, but he couldn't. He had no idea how his dad would be once back home, but he knew he'd pull on his mum to get back on his feet, and then what? Would he be violent again?

Over the sound of tearing cardboard, Kieran heard his phone vibrate in his room. He quickly ripped up a few of the smaller boxes and went to check it:

Hazza: Hey bro hows ur dad??

Kee: Yh good, coming home 2moz

Hazza: Ay congrats bro

You coming bk out soon

Kee: Yh yh ill shout you when im coming out again

Hazza: Gd see you soon man

The following morning Kieran and his mum went to collect his dad. The calmness of the ward was shattered as he and his mum ran around collecting his dad's things, while his dad pretended to listen to the doctors and their advice for home. Kieran reckoned that part of him, the refusal to be told what to do, had survived the stroke.

As he emerged from the Hospital for the first time in over a week, Kieran saw his dad shrink even further. He watched his mum guide him by the elbow through the crowds of patients, staff, and visitors milling around the hospital grounds. Everyone seemed to tower over him, if not in height, then in presence. It was fucking weird.

Eventually, they reached the carpark and the Bluebird. Kieran watched his dad lower himself into the passenger seat without protest. He didn't think he'd ever seen his dad in the passenger seat before, especially in his own car. His mum started the engine, and they headed for home, although to Kieran what home would be now was unclear.

Kieran saw the glass set down on the table beside his dad's chair.

For a moment he didn't question it, before realising that this was the first time the glass had made an appearance since he'd got home. Weirder still was that his mum had poured it, fetching herself a glass of wine in the process. Kieran stared at his mum. She avoided his gaze.

A James Bond film played on the TV that had been on at least twice in the last month. Kieran stared down at his new phone for a while, window shopping for used cars and answering messages. It was second-hand and sometimes the screen would freeze if it got too hot, but it was nice to be connected to life beyond the flat again.

After a while he heard his dad ask for another drink and the leather squeak as his mum climbed off the sofa next to him, seeing the empty glass passed over to her out the corner of his eye.

'You'll get sore eyes if you hold that screen any closer to your face y'know? Can I get you anything?'

'Orange juice please.'

He heard his mum go into the kitchen, twisting the caps off the bottles. Kieran felt himself being drawn towards her for answers, he'd ask for a different drink as an excuse for coming in. Entering the kitchen, he saw his mum put his dad's half-full glass under the tap. Upon being caught, she replied with a whisper.

'Oi, what are you doing in here?'

'Sorry, wanted a coke instead. What are you doing?'

Kieran's mum looked away from him again, answering to the floor.

'Your dad's been acting like he's given up already. You've seen that right?'

'I guess, he doesn't do much at the minute.'

'He doesn't do *anything*. It's taken me three days to convince him to have a wash and change his clothes. I've got no idea how I'm going to get him back to work. I just thought, if I give him a little drink, not enough to cause him anymore harm, it might bring him back a bit.'

'But what if he goes back to how he was before?'

Kieran's mum turned to face him now, her eyes intense.

'First sign of that and I'm calling the Police. He will never, ever, do that to me again, understand? This is just to loosen him up enough to get him out the door, nothing more, nothing less.'

Kieran then watched his mum run the glass under the tap and mix the watered down vodka with her finger. She then grabbed a coke from the fridge and passed it to Kieran.

‘His movement is better now. His speech is pretty much back. A few more months and he’ll be allowed to drive again. We’ve got to keep pushing him or he’ll make himself into a bloody hermit. Do you understand?’

Kieran looked back at his mum, who gestured to him to agree with her. He wanted to argue that this was fucking ridiculous, that his dad shouldn’t need to be babied into doing the bare minimum. That he shouldn’t need to be encouraged with the same thing that got him here just to make himself useful.

He looked at the ever-growing bags under her eyes, the gauntness in her cheeks. What choice did he have?

‘Yeah, okay, I guess.’

‘Good, and not a word about this, okay?’

Kieran nodded and took his coke into the living room. As the James Bond movie ended and some eighties action movie took its place, Kieran kept watch over his dad from the corner of his eye. He waited for the booze to bring the wild anger back into his features, the deep scowl over his eyes, and the twisted mouth barking out whatever bile was swirling around his mind.

Instead, something different began to happen. He began to slump down in his chair, his eyes drooping and his bottom lip sticking out like a drunk in a comedy movie. A long overhang of ash fell from his lit roll up, singeing his t-shirt. After draining his glass he got to his feet, swaying slightly in front of the TV.

‘D’you want ‘nother drink Jess?’

‘It’s alright I’ll grab it, just sit back down.’

Before she could get out of her seat, Craig had already gone into the kitchen. Kieran saw the worry darken his mum’s face as she witnessed her little plan fall apart. After much clanging and shuffled footsteps, Craig emerged with two brimmed glasses. Both mixer and white wine dribbled onto the carpet.

Kieran's mum rose to take her glass off him and place the other down by his chair. Kieran watched his dad flop down and slug from his glass, liquid dribbling down his face. Putting the glass down he stared vacantly at the TV, a weird lopsided smile on his face. He looked over at his mum, sipping on her wine. She kept her eyes on his dad before occasionally staring down into her glass, like a scientist observing a specimen before turning away to take notes.

'So Kee, you going to join that engineering club when you start back at school?'

'Er, yeah, need to speak to Ms Richards to see what day it's on.'

'Don't they want you to write a little assessment on a piece of engineering you're interested in?'

'Yeah, I think I'm going to do mine on turbos. Just need to write it up and check I've got everything right.'

'Well, if you need to check anything you've got an encyclopaedia on turbos in this house, ain't that right Craig?'

'Mmm.'

'He could even help you write it up maybe? Put that nugget of his to good use. You can help him with that right, Craig?'

Craig stared over, his eyes wet and empty.

'Yeah I've fix turbos no problem.'

Kieran couldn't think of anything worse than having his dad help him with schoolwork. Lessons from him were usually blurted out randomly in the middle of rages, and the only time he ever took interest in his homework was as an excuse to keep him off the PlayStation so he could play. What was she playing at?

'See? You could talk Kieran through it, and he could write it up for his assignment.'

'But mum, its more about how they work then fixing them-'

Craig pulled himself to his feet and began staggering out of the living room, slurred words falling out of his mouth.

'Yeah, yeah I'll teach you mate no worries.'

Kieran heard the bathroom light go on, followed by the sound of feet shuffling on lino, followed by an almighty crash.

Kieran felt the breath leave his lungs. The ambulance arriving, A&E, the nurses, and the ward all shot through his mind. He looked over at his mum who sat forward in her chair, eyes fixed down the hallway.

‘You alright Craig?’

For a horrible moment the bathroom was silent. Suddenly the weird but unmistakable sound of skin on dry porcelain came from down the hallway.

‘Yeah, lost my foot.’

Kieran watched his mum walk down the hallway and round the corner into the bathroom.

‘What the fuck are you doing in there?’

‘Tripped.’

‘Fuck’s sake, give me your hand.’

Kieran heard his mum grunt before another thud as she failed to pull his dad to his feet. There was a hesitation, before her voice came back up the hallway, low and tired.

‘Kee, get here and help me with your father please.’

Kieran did as he asked and made his way towards the bathroom. The door was wide open, and inside his dad was laying fully clothed in the bath. His t-shirt was riding up his back and his feet hung over the side. One of his slippers was off his feet and left on the bath rug where he had fallen. All signs of life had left his eyes now.

‘Kee, you take his left arm, and I’ll take his right. One, two, three.’

On three Kieran pulled with all his might and got his dad back on his feet. Holding onto an arm each, they dragged him up the hallway towards the bedroom. He now smelled worse than he used to, a thick stench of body odour mixed in with the noxious booze fumes. He smelled like he was rotting alive.

They walked him into the bedroom and lowered him onto the bed, tucking his feet in and laying the duvet over him. He smiled blankly back at them, it wasn’t clear whether it was out of gratefulness or embarrassment. Either way, it made Kieran want to throttle him.

His mum went off to the kitchen, followed by the sound of the tap filling a glass. Kieran watched his dad as he began to drift off into a drunken slumber. Was this going to be his life now until he moved out, being a nurse to a drunken hermit? Fuck that, if his mum wanted to sign herself up to this, that's her choice. He'd crack on with his own life.

His mum returned with the glass of water, placing it down carefully on the bedside table. They then went back to the living room. His mum sat on the arm of the sofa, looking at the floor.

'Sorry mate, don't know why I thought that would work.'

Kieran still didn't really understand why she thought it would.

'So, was you always planning to give him more drink to see what would happen?'

'No, not really. To be honest he's been nudging me since he got home from hospital, and I don't really have the energy to fight him anymore. What harm could it do, right?'

'I guess.'

Kieran went to brush his teeth and got into bed. Laying in the dark, he instinctively waited for the shouting and banging to begin once his mum got into bed but, like the dozen or so nights since his dad left hospital, there was silence. He was still trying to get used to it.

He knew school would be starting again in the next week or so, and he'd be dog tired after a summer of sleeping late. The thought of the routine, other kids, and dealing with whatever homelife was going to be now made him feel sick. At least the nights would be quiet.

Kieran awoke the following morning to his mum putting on breakfast, and he made his way into the kitchen to grab his cereal and toast. His dad was already in the living room drinking tea. Since the stroke he always woke weirdly early every day, even earlier than when he was getting up for work. The thought of sharing the flat with him on a school morning made him feel uncomfortable. Kieran sat and munched through his cereal. It was supermarket brand, usually a sign that they were broke or about to be. Afterwards he went into the front room and tried to watch TV while he waited to see if anyone would text him with plans for the day.

He stared over at his dad, his eyes lazily moving between the TV and the cigarette he was rolling. Kieran felt a question rise within him, one he had always wanted to ask but never dared say

aloud, at least not to his old dad. This new dad was different though, smaller in his chair, slower with his hands, weaker in his voice.

But still a pisshead.

Even the threat of death and the fact he'd almost pushed everyone who gave a shit about him out of his life wasn't enough, he had still come running when a bottle appeared in the kitchen. The fear and confusion that normally went with the big question was now replaced by anger. Why was he doing this to us? To himself?

He spent an entire documentary agonising over the question, running it around and around in his mind. He thought of a hundred ways to bring it up, and another hundred ways to express himself. Some polite, some rude, some angry, some concerned.

'You want a cup of tea Kee?'

'Yeah sure, but can I ask you something first?'

'What?'

'Why did you get drunk last night?'

His dad froze in his chair. Kieran scanned his eyes, looking to see if he'd awoken the old devil. His dad shifted his gaze towards the floor. Kieran's anxiety began to fade into guilt. What if he had made things worse but getting on him about it. Would he drink more now?

After a pause that lasted most of a TV advert, his dad looked back over at him.

'I don't know. I don't really remember much about yesterday.'

Although Kieran had only asked him about last night, he felt that was his dad's answer to it all. He couldn't tell if it was genuine, or an excuse to cover up his real reasons for why he did what he did.

'Do you think you'll do it again?'

This time his dad got up and began walking towards the kitchen, his words trailing behind him.

'I don't know Kee.'

He heard the kettle flick on. He then heard the clang of a teaspoon as it landed in the cup.

'So, you want tea or what?'

Kieran got up. He wasn't going to get anywhere; it was all fucked. He was best going out and finding trouble than dwelling on it all.

'Nah I'm alright dad, I'll see you later.'

Chapter Sixteen

Kieran felt a weird smile on his face and his mum turned into the old bus garage. The noise booming off the walls, the smell of the two-stroke engines hanging in the air, even the sticky, unavoidable heat trapped under the old glass roof felt familiar, friendly even.

They both climbed out of the Bluebird and walked over to sign in. They were amongst the first to arrive, with Kieran being given the number five. He led the way into the seating area and found a good spot near the track, where he could watch the track employees testing the karts.

‘There’s going to be some fast laps today, mum.’

‘Sorry mate?’

‘The karts look fast. They’re hardly sliding into the last hairpin. The track must be sticky from the heat.’

His mum made a face at him, scratching her chin in mock consideration.

‘Oh, is that right? And what else can you tell me Shumi Junior?’

‘Well, that should be good for me as the bigger guys have more grip when it’s colder. And this layout of the track is really fun, and I think Josh might be away on holiday so that’s one less fast person I need to beat.’

‘Don’t get me started on that *boy*. If your dad hadn’t been acting the goat that day, I would’ve given his mother a piece of my mind over what he did to you in that final, seriously...’

At the mention of his dad Kieran felt a sudden jolt in his stomach. He’d left him in bed to be here today, with him insisting he’d be fine at home. He felt guilty about how much more he liked it this way. No sickness in his stomach as he arrived, no waiting to be bollocked every time he parked the kart. No fear of it all coming back on his mum when they got home.

He thought about what his dad would be like at the track now. The shrinking he seemed to do in hospital had remained now he’d settled back into life at home, with him no longer dominating every room he stood in or every conversation he barged into. Now out here, in the real world, how

would he act? Maybe being here would inject a bit of life into him, he might even enjoy himself. It would be nice to go karting for once and not feel like he was putting anyone out.

‘...and that’s what I think is wrong with parents these days. Ain’t that right Kee?’

‘Yeah, definitely mum.’

As he tried to work out what he just agreed to, he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Karim.

‘You alright mate, I’ve never seen you here this early before!’

‘Yeah, yeah, nice to not have to rush as usual.’

‘Honestly I’ve always been kinda impressed how you can show up, sign in, and be ready like two minutes before the briefing.’

‘It’s a skill for sure, just wish I was that good at getting ready for school quick.’

‘Yeah, I feel that. Where’s your dad?’

Kieran froze. He scanned around the trackside for something he could use to change the subject.

‘You good Kee?’

‘Yeah, yeah, sorry bro. My dad’s just not well at the minute.’

‘Shit man sorry to hear that. Is he gonna be alright?’

‘Yeah he should be eventually, I think.’

A silence settled over the two. Karim was now staring off at the trackside.

‘Anyways bro, I hope your dad feels better soon.’

‘Thanks man.’

Karim turned to go as his mum approached the two of them.

‘Hello Karim, how are you doing today?’

‘Oh, hello Mrs. Roberts, and yeah good thank you.’

Kieran saw her twist her face slightly at the sound of Mrs. Roberts.

‘Oh, just call me Jess. You fancy your chances out there today?’

‘Oh yeah, especially with Josh away. But only if Kieran lets me win of course.’

‘Well, they’ll be no chance of that young man, you can be sure of that. I’ll make sure this one races fair or he gets a clip round the ear.’

At that moment Kieran felt his mum go to flick his right ear. He dodged it, and felt his cheeks go bright red as Karim stood back laughing.

‘Ah mate sort your fan club out!’

‘I’m trying mate believe me.’

Karim spudded him and turned to walk away from the seating area.

‘But anyways have a good one yeah? I’m going to grab my gloves before my sister sucks on them again, little gremlin.’

‘Good luck bro, I’ll catch you out there.’

Kieran turned around to see his mum had gotten up and wandered over to the vending machine, returning with a bottle of water and a tall can of Monster Energy.

‘Here. And you better enjoy it, you know how much I hate you drinking these things.’

‘Oh, cheers mum.’

‘Just shut your gob and drink up. So, Kee, why don’t you chat to these lads more often when we’re here? I know you’re all racing each other but they’re a good craic from what I’ve seen.’

‘Erm, dunno mum. I just get caught up in the racing and sort of forget, y’know?’

‘Rubbish, I hear you and Harry jabbering away when you’re trying to kill each other’s soldiers. There’s more to this, isn’t there Kee?’

Kieran knew she was onto him, he may as well come clean.

‘Also, like, when dad has been here it can be hard to talk to people when he gets pissed and wants to have a go and stuff.’

‘You do realize we do this for fun right? The only person you should be here for is yourself.’

Kieran nodded and looked past her.

‘No, I’m serious Kee. If this isn’t for you, if it doesn’t make you happy, we don’t have to keep going. Nobody is going to hold it against you.’

‘Yeah, but dad said that...’

‘It doesn’t matter what your father said Kee. Truth be told, I told him the other day that he isn’t going to be allowed to come back and watch you until he can prove he can behave himself. I’m

sick of people looking at us while he throws his temper tantrums because you didn't win or whatever. I'm also tired of you not enjoying yourself because of it.'

Kieran looked back at his mum, wide-eyed. No more dad at the track, no more bollockings, no more insults, no more flack passed onto his mum. He felt like he'd been underwater and had finally broken the surface, beautiful gulps of fresh air in his lungs. He was free to race now.

For the first time in forever the energy of the track drove excitement into his body. The engines ticking away in the pits, the smell of two-stroke, the music buzzing away on the tannoy. He could feel the warm seat vibrating away under him in his mind, the track stretching out ahead.

'Okay, thanks mum. And I think I want to keep going, I do like it and I know I can do better; I sort of want to prove that to myself y'know?'

'Okay, but that point remains, yeah? If you don't want to do it, just say, I don't need no appeasement like grumpy indoors.'

Just then, one of the staff called out for drivers to gather for the briefing. Kieran gave his mum a little half-hug and jogged off to join the other drivers. The briefing was the same as always; flags, rules, sarcasm and giggling from the experienced drivers.

Kieran stood there in silence, tapping his foot and looking over to the karts tricking over in the pits. He was desperate to get out there and show what he could do. As soon as the marshal ended his briefing Kieran ran back to grab his kit. He was first to the gate and first to get into his kart. The kart looked relatively new, with the rubber around the steering wheel still thick and most of the paint still on the pedals. He gave the engine a little rev and it felt smooth against his back, no rattles or signs it might cut out on him. This was definitely one of the karts to have today.

The practice session went by in a blur. The track was nice and warm, meaning Kieran barely had to brake as the kart stuck to the road around the tight bends. He was a little sad to see the checkered flag come out and call him back towards the pits.

He levered himself out the kart, only now noticing how warm he was, his hair greasy to the touch and his overalls sticking to his body. He walked back to his mum and took a big gulp of Monster, lovely and cold as it slid down his throat.

'How is it, Mr. Test Driver?'

‘Yeah, good. Lots of grip out there which is nice. Hot though.’

‘Ah, I see you’re not whinging about me getting a drink now, are ‘ya?’

Kieran was about to give his mum some lip when he heard his name come up on the tannoy. He was in the first heat. He squelched back into his helmet and shoved his sticky fingers back into his gloves. Walking over to the pits, he was guided into the first kart in the line, pole position. He popped his number on the front and dropped himself into the plastic seat. He could tell by the hard, smooth rubber around the steering wheel that this kart was also newer and unlikely to be a dog. Maybe today was just his day.

He could feel the tension growing inside him, his stomach light and his hands shaky. But, for once, it felt good. It felt exciting. Kieran felt a wide grin stretch across his face as the marshal directed him around onto the starting grid. Kieran rolled slowly around into his starting box. The kart felt responsive under him, eager to carry him to a win. His stomach felt light and empty, nothing else mattered apart from the short row of coloured lights hanging over the track above him. Everything fell still, time seemed to hang in the humid air around him.

He watched the lights, and watched, and watched. His foot began to ache, hanging over the accelerator. It felt like forever. A trickle of sweat run down the side of his face, tickling his cheek. What the fuck was taking so long? He didn’t dare look behind in case he was caught napping. Out the corner of his eye he saw the starting driver second take a look around. Something must be going on, maybe another kart has broken down on the grid, it happened often here.

They never seemed to be able to maintain the karts evenly, his fucking dad never seemed to get that. Always giving him shit when he had no choice over whether he got a good or bad one. Why couldn’t he have a go at them instead, why did he...

The lights went green.

Kieran stabbed at the accelerator, but it was too late. The driver starting in second shot past, and he was rammed up the back by the driver starting third who was already up to speed. His back thumped against the hard seat as he wrestled the kart into the first turn, the kart ahead already breaking free. Weaving his way around the opening lap, first place was already beginning to get away.

By the time Kieran had crossed the start/finish line to start his second lap the leader had already rounded the first corner. Shit, he was gone.

Peeking over his shoulder he could see a kart right behind him. Kieran took a tight line into the first turn to block him off, but it caused him to slide across the track on the exit. Out the corner of his eye he saw the other kart pop up on his inside. He tried to block him off but was powerless as he slithered past him into the next turn. Kieran stayed tight to his bumper for the rest of the race, weaving this way and that for that little bit of daylight he needed to regain the place. The other kart gave him nothing, feeling two karts wide as Kieran rubbed up against walls and tapped its bumper to try and get by.

Kieran let out a scream as he crossed the finish line. He thought he saw the driver in front stare back at him, but he didn't care. Fuck's sake! Why can't it just go right? Why couldn't he just not fuck things up for once?

He climbed out of his kart before it had stopped moving in the pits, letting it bounce off the kart parked in front. Taking his number off he walked back to his mum with his helmet on, who sat waiting for him in the seating area. He slapped his number down on the table and laid his helmet on top.

'Oi, where's this attitude coming from?'

'Messed up, again.'

'What are you talking about mate? You got third, that's really good!'

'Not good enough.'

Just then, he felt his mum grab his arm and turn him towards her. She fixed her eyes on his.

'Look here yeah? He's not here. And he's not coming back until he can prove to me he won't behave like an arse. There is no need to be so hard on yourself, do you understand?'

'Yeah, but I messed the race up.'

'Look, Kee. I don't bring you here because I want you to win every time and be the next Lewis Hamilton. I bring you here to have fun doing something you're passionate about. I don't give a monkey's if you finish dead last every single race, which you don't, I might add. All I care about is putting a smile on that mushy dip of yours, that's it.'

Kieran felt the frustration begin to fade inside him a little. He still wanted to do better, he knew he could, but it was because *he* wanted to now, and not to appease his dad.

‘Yeah, I know mum, I want to do better.’

‘And you will. You’ve done one race today, you sausage. You can bring it back, just stop being so hard on yourself and it will come, in good time. For now, drink some of that disgusting energy shite, paint a smile on it and go and have some bloody fun, yeah?’

‘Yeah mum, okay. Just going to pop to the toilet first. Be back in a minute.’

‘Alright, go off and have a pee and do your makeup. There better be a smile on it when you get back.’

Kieran stuck his tongue out and made his way to the bathroom. The stairs to the bathroom took him away from the heat of the track and he could feel himself cooling down, sweat in his clothes getting uncomfortably cold.

He felt numb inside, nothing made any sense. His dad was ill, but it didn’t make him sad. He wasn’t going anywhere. He was staying in London, around his mates. But that didn’t make him happy either. He just didn’t know what to feel.

After going to the toilet, he sat on a bench in what looked like an old dinner hall for the bus drivers. It was a fairly large room with a counter at one end. There were a few tables and chairs stacked by the wall, but it was otherwise mostly empty. The counter and windowsills had a layer of dust on them and there was a mustiness in the air. Kieran thought it felt like a place long forgotten by the world outside.

Below him he could hear the roar from the karts, a slight rumble whenever they roared past downstairs. Kieran sat with his back against the wall, feeling a light breeze below in from the open slit window above. The adrenaline had completely left his body now. His eyes were heavy and slid shut without much resistance...

He felt a large hand clamp down on his shoulder. His eyes jolted open, and he could see one of the marshals leaning over him.

‘Kieran, we’ve been looking for you mate, you’re up.’

‘Ah sh-sorry, let me get my stuff.’

‘Okay pal but move it, or we’ll have to start without you.’

Kieran got to his feet and flew down the stairs, skipping the last two or three steps of each flight. Running back into the seating area to his mum’s table, he grabbed his equipment and began to throw it on, putting his gloves on over the wrong fingers and trying to fiddle them back into place.

‘Where the hell have you been?’

‘Sorry, lost track of time.’

‘Doing *what* exactly?’

‘Nothing, doesn’t matter.’

He sensed that his mum knew better than to try and force him to explain himself right now, thank God.

‘Look, Kee, get those gloves on and I’ll do the helmet.’

Kieran finally got his gloves on the correct fingers while his mum shoved his helmet over his head and did up the strap. The foam inside had caught his hair a bit, but he didn’t have time to make himself more comfortable.

His mum handed him his number and he ran for the pits. Despite the “NO RUNNING” boards surrounding the pitlane, no marshal stopped him as he ran out amongst the karts, finding the empty one third in the queue. There were two other drivers waiting behind his empty kart. He could feel their scowls burning into the back of his head as he climbed in.

He sped off to join the rest of the grid, the two drivers ahead looking around when he and those behind finally joined them. Getting his kart positioned in the grid box, Kieran had barely stopped moving when the lights went green. Not ready, he was once again slow to start, the two drivers ahead speeding away as he defended from those behind.

Kieran tried his best to clear his head and concentrate, he couldn’t bottle another race. He drove as smoothly as he could, tapping the brakes and turning the wheel slowly as the kart glided through the corners. By the end of the first lap, he could hear the engine notes of those behind getting fainter: Time to set his eyes ahead. By the end of the second lap, he was closing on the leading pair, scrapping for the lead as they ran nose to tail on the straights. Kieran spent the next lap driving as well as he could, paying close attention to every breaking point, steering input and corner exit.

As they entered the final lap, Kieran was close enough to get a proper look at the leaders. Seeing the Day-Glo green helmet in second place, Kieran knew it must be Karim. As they approached the tight hairpin turn for the third time, Karim made his move, throwing his kart to the inside of the leader. He'd overdone it.

Karim's kart briefly flashed past the leader into the entrance of the turn before running to the edge of the track, coming to a near stop to miss hitting the wall. The leader went back through, and Kieran found himself right on Karim's bumper going into the next turn. With Karim out wide to the edge of the track, Kieran now committed his kart down the inside and managed to get it stopped into the next turn, taking second place.

Staring over his shoulder Karim was right there, inches from the back of his kart. As they approached the final corner before the start/finish straight, Kieran put his kart as close as he dared to the inside wall to block Karim getting by. However, as they entered the corner Karim went to the outside, his bright helmet appearing out the corner of Kieran's eye. Kieran led into the corner but couldn't help his kart sliding wide at the exit. Looking over Kieran could see Karim right alongside him, the side skirt on his kart almost grazing his. Ahead the final straight had a kink, a small flat-out turn where the wall came to meet the drivers as their karts slid through. Kieran kept his foot to the floor, hunkering himself down over his steering wheel as he tried to draw the last drop of speed from his kart.

Karim was still alongside, and Kieran quickly realised he wasn't going fast enough to pull in front of him before they reached the kink. His heart was racing in his chest. The kink was upon them. He wasn't going to lift.

They went through the kink side by side. Karim's kart suddenly fell back slightly as he tapped the brakes. Kieran could see the wall getting closer, and closer, and closer. He felt the kart kiss the wall, but it only slowed him a little. Karim was almost alongside again, his smoother line making him faster at the exit of the kink. Kieran saw the finish line approaching as Karim's kart edged further and further alongside. As he crossed the line, he looked over to see Karim's kart dead level with his.

Kieran drove back to the pits as fast as he was allowed, barely acknowledging the marshals waving at him to slow down. His heart was thumping in his chest, the anticipation gripping his insides and refusing to let go. He felt amazing. He felt alive.

He stared across at Karim who was still rolling along beside him. He could see a wide smile on his face through the tint on his visor. Zipping into the pits, he jumped from his kart before it had stopped moving and ran over to the old plasma screen TV mounted outside the seating area. Here, the race times and results flickered under a crack on the screen:

1. Matty Johnson – 2.04.541 (+0.00)
2. Karim Brahimi – 2.06.119 (+1.578)
3. Kieran Roberts – 2.06.123 (+1.582)
4. Anna-Louise Richardson – 2.08.444 (+3.904)
5. Michael Sarpong – 2.08.961 (+4.420)

Over his shoulder he could hear panting as Karim approached the timing screen.

‘Bro, who, got second?’

‘Shit man you got me, point zero-zero four!’

Karim slapped a sweaty hand on his shoulder and held out his other to shake Kieran’s.

‘Good race man, you were coming so quick, I’m sure you got fastest lap at least.’

‘Thanks man, thought I had it in the end but couldn’t hold onto it on the outside of the kink.’

‘Bro you’re an actual madman for that one, I don’t even know how you didn’t crash. What’s your results been today?’

‘Two thirds, pretty meh but it is what it is.’

‘Don’t worry man you’ll come good on the last one. Catch you about yeah?’

‘Yeah, yeah bro. Congrats on the P2.’

Kieran walked back to the seating area, his whole body buzzing with adrenaline. This was the feeling he remembered when his parents took him for the first time on his eighth birthday. The excitement, the butterflies in his stomach. He never thought he’d feel like this again at the track. He couldn’t believe he had nearly given this up.

‘Alright mum.’

‘Bloody hell Kee where did you go before that last race, you nearly missed it!’

‘Oh, yeah. I just felt a bit faint in the toilet so had a sit down, lost track of time a bit.’

Kieran watched as his mum slammed the bottle of water down in front of him and dragged the energy drink away. He was glad she had bought the faintness excuse and wasn’t going to pick his brains again.

‘Drink. And no more of that shite today, the sugar must be drying you out.’

Kieran took a big swig of water, which after such hard racing and his rush back to the pits was much needed anyway.

He got up and walked over to the part of the seating area facing the track to watch the racing. He then watched the next few heats, seeing what lines the drivers took into the final bend and who was quick. His mum came to join him and questioned him on what lines were best and who was going to be fast. Kieran knew this was just an excuse to check up on him, for the faintness and otherwise, but he played along to keep her happy.

Eventually, his name was called out for his final heat before the finals. Taking his number, he went back over to the pits and was shown into his kart at the back of the queue. This kart was old, he could feel the vibration of the engine knocking behind, while the rubber on the steering wheel was flaking away from years of being gripped by rough racing gloves. From his seat, he could see the barge boards on the side were missing chunks of plastic. Screw it, if it drove in a straight line he’d make do.

As he accelerated off towards the grid the kart resisted, engine revving as it slowly hauled itself up to speed. Kieran looked ahead at the other racers. The top two were regulars who he’d have no chance of catching in this old shit heap, but the two behind were new boys, one in shiny silver fresh-off-the-peg Sparcos and the other in the tatty green overalls provided by the track. Third had to be the goal.

As the lights went out Kieran’s kart struggled to get going, but he reacted fast enough to get a jump on the green overalled driver into the first turn. He’d begun to turn his attention to silver Sparcos ahead but was caught by surprise when the other driver barged his way through on the next turn.

Kieran tried to get him straight back, but the driver positioned his kart in the middle of the narrow track, making it difficult to find a way past either side.

As they began the second lap Kieran noticed that they were both closing on silver Sparcos, so decided to hold off on retaking the tatty green driver until they had both moved forward. Coming up to the final corner, tatty green threw his kart to the inside of silver Sparcos and overtook him into the turn. With nowhere else to go, silver Sparcos was forced to the outside of the track, allowing Kieran to squeeze through into fourth place on the exit of the turn.

With no other drivers around them, Kieran went on the attack and closed the gap. He could see from how low down in the kart the other driver sat that they must be small, and it meant that they were hard to keep up with on the straights. However, Kieran could close right up on the rear bumper of the tatty green driver's kart in the turns, and he was right on their tail coming into the third turn of the final lap. He put his kart on the inside of the track and prepared to dive inside tatty green's kart. They also went to the inside to defend, but as the corner came upon them their kart continued straight, tyres screeching as they slid into the wall.

It looked like quite a hard hit out the corner of his eye, but Kieran kept his eyes on the road. He had to get that third locked up if he wanted to get enough points to qualify for the main final. He rounded the final turns and crossed the line, taking a breath. Job done.

As he drove back around to the pits, he was glad to see that tatty green's kart was no longer in the wall, they must be alright. Parking his kart back in the pits, he saw tatty green arrive back behind him, and he hung around near the pits to wait for him to come out.

He eventually appeared, a short ginger kid that looked barely old enough to tie his own shoelaces, let alone drive a go-kart. Kieran held out his hand as he approached. The kid's small hand met it with a light shake.

'Good driving man, unlucky on the spin.'

'Oh, thanks. I just braked too hard I think.'

'You, like, been here before?'

The kid shook his head, his curly hair flopping from side to side.

‘Nah, I’ve raced at Buckmore but we moved house, so I race here now. I’m Robert by the way.’

‘Oh, I’m Kieran, nice to meet you man. How you finding it here?’

‘It’s really different, the walls are so close here, and it’s super narrow. You ever raced outdoors?’

‘Nope not yet. They’re all a bit too far away for us right now.’

‘You should ask your parents to try it one time, it’s honestly so different. You race good so I think you’ll enjoy it.’

‘Thanks man. I’m going to grab some water, hopefully catch you in the finals?’

‘Yeah definitely. See you around.’

After the last few heats were completed, the usual buzz began to build as drivers waited for that all important piece of paper to be pinned up showing where they qualified. Kieran stuck around the board as much as he could, not wanting to crane his neck to see where he was when it was pinned up.

Eventually, a marshal came and stuck the qualification results up. Kieran found out that he made the main final, but only just, starting ninth out of the ten drivers who automatically qualified. Normally this would knot his stomach tight with fear and worry, what if he couldn’t go forward? What if he finished dead last? But today he just wanted to go out there and move forward. He could get a top five with a good race, maybe even a podium if he had some good luck.

He walked back over to his mum and sat down.

‘Well?’

‘9th in the A Final.’

‘That’s good! See what you can do when you stop worrying and enjoy yourself?’

‘Yeah, I know, glad I don’t have to start in the B or C final and progress through, never have good luck with those.’

‘Oi, no pessimism today yeah? Just go out and have fun, that’s all I ask. If I don’t see a smile on your dip when you get back, you’re going home in the boot.’

Kieran felt a smile grow onto his face, a real, genuine smile that he didn't need to force or paint on.

The early finals came and went, with each one faster than the last as the quicker drivers came closer and closer to the grand final.

Finally, the A finalists were called, and Kieran grabbed his kit and headed for the track. He always felt a tick of pride when he made the A Final, sitting amongst the fastest drivers on the day as he put his number on and got comfy in his kart. They did the warmup lap, something the other finals didn't get to do, making it feel that bit more special still. There was no need to do the F1 weave he usually did when the track was this sticky in the heat, so Kieran focused on his lines. He took each corner slowly, making sure he had all his braking points and steering inputs set solidly in his mind. The kart drifted easily to the apex of each corner, and then out close to the wall on the exit, responding well to his inputs. He hung back slightly as they left the final corner, the kart behind him sitting close to his bumper. He decided he'd keep those ahead waiting just a little longer, seeing if he could distract them enough to make a slow start.

Finally, Kieran pulled into his grid slot. He could barely see the starting lights, little red dots shimmering in the haze. Kieran saw the figure of a marshal head off to the starting box, not long now. His foot rested over the accelerator until he saw those little shimmering dots go from red to green.

He slammed his foot down and, unlike his previous kart, it shot forward. He had cleared eighth and seventh before turn one and set off in pursuit of the rest of the pack. He caught sixth by the end of the second lap. Approaching the final turn, the kart ahead left a slim gap on the inside of the track. Kieran needed no other invitation. He pointed his kart down the inside and seized the position, putting a grin on his face that felt like it stretched from one side of his visor to the other. A couple of laps later he had caught up to fifth, their kart getting slowly larger as he drew nearer.

Coming into the twisty complex in the middle of the lap, Kieran was now nearly within striking distance, tempting gaps appearing on the inside of the kart ahead. A few more corners and he would be there. As they sped towards the next hairpin Kieran heard the screech of tyres. Someone had overdone it ahead. Coming into the turn, he could see the driver who had started first facing the wrong way. An extra rush of adrenaline charged through Kieran as another opportunity to move forward

arose. The pole sitter's spun kart was in the middle of the bend, slowly rolling backwards. Caught off guard, the kart Kieran was chasing swerved to the outside of the track, tapping the tire barrier as they squeezed through the closing gap behind the reversing kart.

Kieran drove to the inside of the spun kart, and emerged from the bend side-by-side with the kart he was now scrapping with over fourth place. They remained alongside through the next corner and were now barrelling towards the final turn. Kieran left it as late as he dared applying the brakes, tapping them just hard enough to slide into the corner without spinning out himself. He made it to the apex first and emerged ahead onto the final straight. Fourth was his.

Ahead he could see the three leaders in the distance, but they couldn't be caught, appearing the same distance away each time Kieran caught sight of them on the main straight. He kept an occasional eye on the recovering pole sitter who was now behind him in fifth place. He drew no closer to him in turn, giving Kieran some breathing room. He crossed the line in fourth place.

Normally this would be a moment of shame and regret, crawling round back to the pits to face the final humiliating bollocking from his dad before the long, quiet drive home. Today was different, every day would be different now he supposed.

Parking back in the pits, he took the time to shake every other driver's hand, they'd been fun to face today. Lifting his helmet off his soggy head one more time, he went to find his mum. When he found her, she seemed weirdly distant, not congratulating or consoling him. Maybe she didn't see the race?

'You alright mum?'

'I'm fine thank you. So, how'd it go?'

'Didn't you see mum? I came fourth.'

'Of course I did! But did you have fun?'

Kieran now saw his mum's game. Between this and asking if he wanted to quit earlier, she wanted him to see if karting was still for him. He stood and thought to himself for a moment. He *had* enjoyed himself today. It had been nice to step away from his dad and hospital appointments and Harry and booze and the move that never happened, and just do something fun with his mum.

'Yeah, I did thanks mum.'

‘That’s all I wanted to know today. We’ll be back next month then.’

Together they walked to the podium area where the trophies were being handed out. The owner, a tubby middle-aged man with a goatee and baseball cap, stood before them, surrounded by a crowd of drivers and parents ready to congratulate the top three drivers on their results.

Kieran listened to him read out the names of the top 3 drivers and applauded alongside everyone else as they each went up onto the podium. Although he had enjoyed himself, he couldn’t ignore the pang of disappointment that he had gone another race meeting without his name being read out, without him getting the applause. He was just about to begin walking back to the car when the track owner began talking again.

‘And finally, new for this round, we would like to give out our driver of the day award. This can go to any driver who has shown impressive race craft or sportsmanship which deserves recognition. And today we believe that this should go to the driver who just missed the podium, pulling some very impressive moves on his way to fourth place overall. Mr. Kieran Roberts!’

Kieran froze but felt himself being shuffled to the front of the crowd and before the track owner who held out his hand. Kieran slowly lifted his arm and was met with a crushing handshake and a medal placed around his neck. Glancing down he caught sight of it, a golden metal circle hanging from him by a ribbon with a black and white checkered design.

He couldn’t believe it. Around him everyone clapped the same as they had for the top three finishers. Towards the back of the crowd, he spotted his mum, a beam on her face that he hadn’t seen for a very long time, maybe ever. He beamed back, the metal of the medal softly clanging against the zip of his race suit.

Chapter Seventeen

Kieran had only just wriggled out of his sticky race suit when his phone vibrated, rattling against the wood of his desk.

Hazza: Sup bro you still here to hangout? Park??

Kee: Yh going 2 head out now, meet by playground?

Hazza: Caaaalm see you there

Kieran threw on a fresh t-shirt and grabbed his bike, wheeling it to the front door.

‘Mum, dad, I’m off out!’

A voice came back from the kitchen.

‘Where you going? Fl’s coming on soon.’

‘Yeah mum I know, but Harry’s doing something. I forgot about it until just now.’

Silence came back from the kitchen. The tap started running and Kieran could hear plates clanging around. He couldn’t hear the sigh, but he sensed it.

‘Okay, fine. Taking it you won’t be back for dinner then?’

He knew the flat would be quiet and stuffy without him, his dad glued to the TV for dear life and his mum busying herself needlessly. A little jolt of guilt stabbed him in the stomach, but he ignored it. He wanted to see Harry again and have a nice fucking day. Just this once.

‘Erm, nah, don’t think so. Will text you either way.’

‘Alright, off you go then.’

More clanging, followed by a soft click as the kettle went on. The leather on the sofa creaked as his dad adjusted himself in front of the TV. Kieran opened the front door and pulled his bike out and up the slope towards the street.

He cycled slowly towards the common, feeling the late summer breeze blow through his baggy t-shirt. The streets were weirdly empty for a Saturday afternoon, the muffled sounds of music

and voices in flats and gardens barely audible over the sound of his clicking chain and the muffled roar of his chunky tyres on the tarmac.

Arriving at the park he spotted Harry standing by the bridge, back leant against a lamppost.

‘Hey bro, thought we were meeting at the playground?’

‘My bad man, I got here a bit early so thought I’d come towards you a bit.’

‘Oh, yeah, that’s fair, that’s fair.’

Kieran didn’t know whether to share his news or wait for Harry to ask. He stared over at the bridge behind them. The train guy wasn’t there today. Without him stalking the bridge and running from side to side greeting the trains, it seemed weirdly naked, lifeless.

‘So, like, when’s Dubai happening?’

‘Oh, it’s off now.’

‘It’s off? Really? Why?’

Kieran heard the jump in Harry’s tone, his freshly broken voice cracking.

‘Dad’s stroke and that. Like, we can’t leave him now. I know that some stuff happened but he’s still family, right?’

‘Yeah, but are you... *good*? That’s a bit of a madness to go through, y’know what I mean?’

‘Fuck, I-I don’t really know man. I just want to chill, if I can.’

Another silence. Kieran suddenly felt very tired, his head heavy. He sat down on the grass by the pathway, laying his bike next to him. Across the grass he could see a family having a picnic, one of the kids laughing as they fed something to the dog. As they laughed and ate Kieran felt a surge of jealous anger run through him. Why didn’t he get that? What the fuck did he do to deserve all this drama? Harry laid his bike alongside his and sat down, the bikes between them.

‘You alright man? Your eyes are a bit watery.’

Kieran quickly dabbed at his face with his t-shirt.

‘Yeah, yeah. Life’s just a bit shit, innit?’

‘Yeah, but... I’m glad that you’re staying in truth. I know life’s shit for you and that, but you’re still my bro no matter what, lowkey was going to miss us hanging out.’

Kieran continued watching the family across the park. The kids had run off to play with the dog, but the parents stayed on the blanket. The faint sounds of their talking and laughter were carried to him on the breeze. Fuck 'em. He looked over at Harry, who was looking at him.

'Yeah bro, no-homo obviously but happy we can keep chilling and stuff. Like, even if life's shit at least we can always hang, chat shit and play videogames.'

'For sure man... and fuck Dubai honestly.'

Kieran smiled and held out his fist, spudding Harry.

'Fuck Dubai.'

They sat for a little while longer on the grass, Kieran wasn't sure how long. The breeze was getting cooler and clouds were starting to gather. The family across the green were picking up their blanket and making their way off the common. In the distance, he could see some cars on the road had put their sidelights on.

Kieran looked over at Harry, who was stabbing away at the keys on his Blackberry. From where he was sitting, he could see rows of kisses at the end of each message.

'Who you messaging?'

'No one.'

'Fuck off. *Who* you messaging?'

'Just Alisha.'

'And?'

'Started going out with her last week.'

'Knew it! Thought I saw you two getting mad cozy at Connor's the other day. See, I wasn't that fucked up huh?'

'Bro don't chat shit you were *so* fucked up. I had to come rescue you from the kitchen remember?'

Kieran thought back to drifting in and out of consciousness in that kitchen, that boy spotting him there. He'd been so dumb, no wonder he'd got robbed that night. Fucking easy target.

'Alright, alright, that's fair. I was thinking though...'

'Hmm?'

‘So, like, could we chill on the weed and drink for a bit? It got me in mad trouble with my parents and that. Just want to go back to banging COD and hitting underpass for a little while.’

‘Aww you going lightweight on me?’

Kieran looked over at Harry, he had a silly grin on his face like this was just banter. He wasn’t understanding. Kieran lowered his tone and looked Harry in the eyes.

‘Bro I’m dead serious. My mum’s been mad stressed since my dad got sick, fuck knows what’s going on in his head either. I don’t want to add more stress to them, y’know what I mean?’

‘I get you but we’re *young* bro.’

Kieran looked down at the ground. Fuck it, he was young. Why was all this pressure on him anyways? He took a small stick and chucked it across the grass, scattering some pigeons.

‘Yeah, but, I gotta get it together man, I’m not having some dickhead rob me again because I got too fucked up.’

Kieran saw Harry look away, drumming a little tune on the hollow frame of his bike.

‘Alright, how ‘bout this? We go out, have fun but just watch each other’s backs? Like if you look like you’re getting too fucked I drag you out, wherever we are, even if you get all pissy about it at the time. And you do the same for me.’

‘Hmm... yeah, I guess that could work. You promise you’ll do that, no matter what?’

‘Yeah man no worries, unless you’re moving to a girl because I can’t have you dying a virgin on me.’

‘Fuck you dude.’

Kieran laughed and then sat alongside Harry in silence once more. He felt the inescapable urge to get up and move. He saw Harry stretch and look around the park.

‘So, what do you wanna do now?’

Kieran got to his feet and pulled his bike up. All the routes to their regular haunts ran through his head. Across parks, over bridges, weaving through bollards, the crackling of gravel under tyres.

Kieran took a breath, the whole evening was ahead of them, the whole year even. He felt a dryness in his throat, sweat dripping down his brow and stinging his eyes. He could go for a cool drink right now, but he had fuck all money. Where could he con a free drink?

‘Dunno bro, there’s this café in the middle of the park where I cop free water sometimes, think it should still be open. Wanna go?’

‘Oh yeah I know the one you mean, the one by the bowling green?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Fuck it, why not. Race you there though.’

Before responding, Kieran kicked off and began pedalling as hard as he could.

‘Loser sucks his nan’s toes!’

‘Bastard!’

He heard Harry kick off behind him. He changed up into a higher gear, his chain clicking as a summer breeze cooled his sweaty face once again.

**Turning the Page on Childhood Trauma: The Role of
Tragedy in Reading the Addict Parent in Autobiographical
Texts**

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Abstract

Although a culturally significant and often socially enjoyable element of societies around the world, it is an unavoidable truth that the consumption of alcohol can be highly addictive and damaging¹. This damage can be compounded when alcoholics form part of a family unit, with children exposed to the erratic and sometimes violent behaviour their parents exhibit as they battle their addiction².

As a result, writing an alcoholic parent can be a difficult task, with the portrayal of their addiction and treatment of their children having huge ramifications on how they will be perceived by the reader. However, the challenge of this task becomes greater still for those writing autobiographical texts, where the author must distil the complexities of someone who raised them into a functional part of the narrative.

In this thesis, I will be analysing three autobiographical texts from authors who have tackled this challenge: Jeanette Walls's memoir *The Glass Castle*, Edouard Louis's autofiction text *The End of Eddy*, and Douglas Stuart's autobiographical fiction novel *Shuggie Bain*. Despite their differences, analysis of these texts has revealed a clear unifying element regarding the alcoholic parents in each narrative: An undeniable sense of tragedy. Moreover, this tragic element has proven to be intrinsic to both creating a nuanced depiction of their characters and their wider roles in the narrative.

Therefore, this investigation outlines how each author portrays the alcoholic parent through a framework constructed around the theories of tragedy. This is the subject of the opening chapter, demonstrating how addict characters are compatible with a tragic framework due to their drinking being the tragic flaw which ensures their downfalls. This analysis will subsequently be supported by the second chapter, which explores the implications of a tragic addict character being a parent. Using family systems theory, it will explore how their behaviour affects the child protagonist even once they have left their parents behind, leading to questions of the addict parent's tragic self-destruction being cyclical. Finally, these elements are combined with an exploration of mode, and how it interacts with

¹ NHS, 'Overview - Alcohol misuse', 04 October 2022 <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/alcohol-misuse/>> [Accessed 9 September 2024].

² Amelia Sharp, 'The Effects of Alcoholism on Families: How Alcoholism Effects Families', *American Addiction Centers*, 08 March 2024 <<https://americanaddictioncenters.org/alcohol/support-recovery/family>> [Accessed 9 September 2024].

the narrative function of the alcoholic parent depending on the messaging the author leaves with the reader.

Introduction

Setting the Scene

That was quintessential Dad. These gestures that you could take as either Dad with his B.S. or you could take as this incredible belief in me. I chose to believe in his mythologies about me. And, yeah, I thought when he wasn't being a no-account shiftless drunk he could be very inspiring and beautiful.³

If one wanted to express how the relationship between the protagonist and her alcoholic father is presented in Jeanette Walls's 2005 memoir *The Glass Castle*, they would be hard-pressed to provide a more succinct expression than the one above from the author herself⁴.

Walls's quote offers a small but illuminating insight into the challenges of presenting an alcoholic parent in a text. How does a writer unflinchingly present a parent who was, in their own words, a 'shiftless drunk', whilst also wishing to express to their readers that they had the capacity to be 'very inspiring and beautiful'. This tension between presenting an alcoholic parent both authentically and effectively from a literary perspective sits at the heart of this thesis.

In the case of *The Glass Castle* this proves to be a delicate balancing act, with Walls taking equal care to present her father Rex as a unique intellect and adventurous soul who filled her early years with wonder, as well as dropping readers into the heart of his violent drunken episodes and depicting in great detail the battles she and her siblings faced to survive as he repeatedly failed to provide for them.

This blend of showing the best and worst of an addict parent is also present in the other two texts analysed in this thesis: Edouard Louis's *The End of Eddy* and Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*⁵.

However, in each case simply analysing how each author presents their alcoholic parent character in their best and worst lights, isn't enough to understand how they are strong, emotionally resonant

³ Susan Wloszczyna, 'There Are People Like Me: Jeannette Walls on "The Glass Castle"', *RogerEbert.com*, 09 August 2017 <<https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/there-are-people-like-me-jeannette-walls-on-the-glass-castle>> [accessed 23 October 2023].

⁴ Jeanette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (Virago, 2005), hereafter *TGC*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

⁵ Edouard Louis, *The End of Eddy*, trans. by Michael Lucey (Vintage, 2017), hereafter *EoE*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text, Douglas Stuart, *Shuggie Bain* (London: Picador, 2020), hereafter *SB*. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text.

characters within their narratives. This is where the concept of viewing the addict parent as a tragic figure takes precedent.

By viewing the slow downfall of the addict parent within the context of tragedy as a literary form, it provides an insight into the structural and emotive framework necessary for them to be a satisfying part of a literary narrative. This is not only due to the presentation of their addiction as tragic making them more empathetic to readers, especially when wanting to show the traumatic behaviour their addiction can create authentically, but it also offers a strong narrative parallel to the journey the child protagonist undertakes. This parallel is especially clear for the working-class alcoholic parent narratives in this thesis, with the parent becoming increasingly vulnerable to the social conditions around them as addiction takes hold. This is due to it occurring while the child protagonist fights to escape them and build a better life, with further tension created through their seemingly contrasting trajectories. Through this, the author implies the possibility of a secondary tragedy should the child repeat their parents, retaining tension even once they make their escape.

Before venturing any deeper into this analysis, perhaps a moment should be set aside to reveal my motivations for researching how tragedy and the addict parent intertwine. Much like the authors of my primary texts, I too have written a semi-autobiographical narrative where a child protagonist must negotiate the process of growing up alongside an alcoholic parent. While reading other novels with similar subject-matter during the early stages of my first draft, I noticed some commonalities between each narrative I read and my own, chief among which was how the addiction of the parent appeared to be a tragic flaw which sealed their downfall and increasingly smothered the more empathetic elements of their characterisation. As a result, I was curious to see the extent to which theories of tragedy could be used to dissect and understand these semi-fictional figures, a curiosity which has grown into the thesis presented in the coming pages.

All three of my primary texts are working-class narratives about growing up with an alcoholic parent, following a protagonist based upon the author from a point in early childhood until the early stages of adulthood.

However, despite these thematic and structural similarities, the three texts contain some key differences. The most significant of these differences lies in their modes of writing. Walls's narrative is a pure memoir, and thus presented as a narrativized version of her genuine lived experiences. Stuart's narrative is presented as autobiographical fiction, where the line between what is factual to his own upbringing and what is constructed as fictional narrative is deliberately blurred, and therefore not making the truth-claim that a memoir does⁶. By contrast, Louis reads as autofiction, a mode which like autobiographical fiction is not interested in a wholly accurate retelling of events. However, unlike autobiographical fiction, it does make a truth claim, although this manifests itself predominantly through the themes, messaging, and authorial voice of the narrative⁷.

Although it is not the only factor concerning how an alcoholic parent is presented to the reader, an author's choice of mode can drastically affect the characterisation and thematic role of the alcoholic parent within the narrative. This therefore will be the primary focus of my third chapter.

Critical Framework: The Theories of Tragedy

In *Poetics*, Aristotle states that tragedy concerns the imitation of a serious action of weight, presented in attractive speech, which reaches its conclusion through events of pity or fear before a satisfying purification of those events⁸.

However, one clear, well-trodden point of contention when applying Aristotle's definition to contemporary texts is that it is specific to Greek tragedy, which due to its own formal conventions and cultural specificity will inevitably have fundamental differences to how we understand tragedy in a modern context. This sentiment is echoed by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, who argues that applying modern assumptions to Greek Tragedies risks a misunderstanding of the readings contemporary

⁶ Fiona J. Doloughan, 'Theoretical and Critical Concerns: Key Terms and Arguments', in *Radical Realism, Autofictional Narratives and the Reinvention of the Novel* (Anthem Press, 2023), pp. 19–40.

⁷ Annabel L. Kim, 'Autofiction Infiltrated: Anne Garréta's *Pas Un Jour*', *PMLA*, 133.3, (2018), pp. 559-74, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.3.559>.

⁸ Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 221, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674288089>.

audiences would have taken within their own social context⁹. However, although this is a valid point to consider within the realm of classical study, the statement Sourvinou-Inwood makes that modern filters can, and indeed have, been applied to classical tragedy signposts a malleability in their principles which has kept them relevant for contemporary literary analysis. This is not only demonstrated through how Aristotle's key tenets of an action of weight, pitiful events, and a purifying conclusion can be tracked onto the narrative arcs of the alcoholic parents in this thesis, but also through how some of Sourvinou-Inwood's own classical analysis will subsequently be applied to these thoroughly modern texts.

In addition, an obvious analogue to the working-class narratives in my thesis are the works of Thomas Hardy, a writer who wrote primarily about the impact of industrialisation of the increasingly urbanised British working-class¹⁰. However, although the tragic fates of his protagonists and social commentary offer important wider context of the literary tradition from which the authors of my primary texts descend, this thesis's focus on modern literature with a defined, autobiographical link to an alcoholic parent limits his text's utility for my overarching argument. However, one innovation that the Hardy texts exhibit which is useful for my thesis, is the ability to present a tragic narrative from the affected character/s point of view. This ability is one not afforded to stage dramas due to their audience and performed nature, and each of the writers of my primary texts use the ability to incorporate narrative interiority to further immerse the reader in the experience of witnessing the decline of an alcoholic. In doing so, they show the reader how such an experience can affect the interior world of the child protagonist or, in the case of *Shuggie Bain*, the addict themselves.

A more contemporary social commentator who does form a significant part of my critical framework is the literary critic and theologian Rowan Williams. In his book *The Tragic Imagination*, Williams builds his argument from the question of "What *follows* and what *follows from* extreme loss?", arguing that the act of mourning and processing tragedy are humanity's natural reaction to such

⁹ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Greek Tragedy and Ritual', In *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. by Rebecca Bushnell (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), pp. 7-24 (p. 9), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996393.ch2>.

¹⁰ Choedphong Utama, 'A Scientific Reading of the Protagonist's Tragedy in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles*', *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities*, 19.1 (2016), pp. 28-44, doi:10.1163/26659077-01901002, Fiona Fleming, 'Resisting Tragedy in D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy', *Études Lawrenciennes*, 52 (2021), pp. 1-22, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/lawrence.2287>.

events, something he urges is present in both classical and modern tragedy¹¹. According to Williams, this is due to how we communicate about the tragic. This is as although he argues we may not necessarily relate to the tragic hero and are powerless to prevent their fate, we do have the freedom to express what we are exposed to through witnessing the tragic to each other, arguing that it is ‘‘what we have to talk about’’ in both senses of the word¹².

However, the third major pillar of my critical framework comes from a theorist who critiques William’s approach to the tragic, namely Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton. In his essay ‘Tragedy and Liberalism.’, Eagleton deconstructs Williams’s argument and compares it with Aristotle’s traditional, fatalistic notion of tragedy as an inevitable and wholly cathartic conclusion. However, despite the increased focus on empathy and humility, the similar lack of tangible physical reaction in Williams’s concept dissatisfies Eagleton, leading him to establish his own argument that tragedy should act as a call to action. This is as tragedy affects our real world, with its factors often linked to socio-political inaction. Eagleton even goes as far to argue that theorists who purely analyse tragedy through the lens of Aristotle are ‘cavalier’ towards the suffering of other humans¹³. Furthermore, he argues that Williams’s argument that tragedy can build empathy through collective mourning is also limited, as it only concerns tragedy that is publicly reported and documented, excluding the small-scale tragedies that happen to individuals away from the public consciousness. He then argues that this calls into question how the aesthetic of tragedy as we understand it on the stage or page is given importance over the events themselves. Events he points out do not usually come to us through monologues, meditations, and elegant prose in the real world¹⁴.

Eagleton’s psychoanalytical connection between the audience voyeurism of real and fictional tragedy therefore provides a useful additional layer to my tragic critical framework. Although he is far from the first critic or writer to explore this connection, his specific argument that the analysis of tragedy ought to extend further than the formal aesthetic of classical tragedy complements the concept of the

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination: The Literary Agenda* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 144.

¹² Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, p. 148.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, ‘Tragedy and Liberalism’, *Modern Theology*, 34.2 (2018), pp. 252–57 (p. 252), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12402>.

¹⁴ Eagleton, ‘Tragedy and Liberalism’, pp. 254–55.

character arcs of alcoholic parents being analysed in tragic terms. This is compounded by the fact that they are all formed upon autobiographical foundations, meaning the injustices they suffer do reflect past or current real-world social issues.

Another coincidental yet useful way in which Eagleton's analysis on the perceptions of tragedy assists my own analysis of Walls, Louis, and Stuart are the three modes he identifies for perceiving tragedy. These are Aristotle's cathartic fatalism, Williams's empathetic reflection, and his own proactivist approach. When applied to my primary texts, each of these approaches apply roughly to how each author encourages readers to react to their respective arcs of their addict parent characters, something that will be analysed in greater detail later in the thesis. In short, Rex's self-induced alcoholic decline in *The Glass Castle* can be linked to the fatalism of classical tragedy, Jacky's alcoholic demise under the suffocating social and economic conditions of his community in *The End of Eddy* bears the hallmarks of Eagleton's proactivist approach. Meanwhile, Agnes's slow, agonising battle with drink in *Shuggie Bain* encourages the empathy and audience mourning that Williams establishes in *The Tragic Imagination*.

However, despite there being clear avenues for crossover between the theory of tragedy and my primary texts, it is also important to recognise that none of them are understood to be primarily tragic texts, nor are their tragic characters the main perspective character due to the child protagonists. Therefore, it must be established exactly how the addict characters and their arcs exhibit tragic characteristics within these stories.

This will be the subject of the opening chapter, establishing what makes the addict tragic and how this is demonstrated in my primary texts. This will then be followed by the significance of the tragic addict being a parent, both in terms of the dynamic between them and the child protagonist and the wider narrative significance of their actions. Finally, the closing chapter will explore the significance of mode and perspective, and how they influence the model of tragic theory which can be best used to explore the tragic addict and their significance to the text and narrative.

Chapter One: Addiction as Tragic Narrative

Tragic Addict Narratives in My Primary Texts

Initial analysis of the character arcs of *The Glass Castle's* Rex, *The End of Eddy's* Jacky, and *Shuggie Bain's* Agnes would suggest that they are all tragic figures, with the debilitating need for alcohol being their fatal flaw in a traditional tragedy narrative.

Where the individual tragedies of these characters distinguish themselves is through the context in which the author presents them. Walls presents her father Rex as an enigmatic, flawed yet utterly unique figure who stands apart from his peers due to his intellect and bohemian principles, with his portrayal remaining uniform in this respect throughout the narrative. However, although Walls always depicts Rex as a man who exists outside of contemporary societal conventions, her portrayal of Rex's idiosyncrasies shifts as the narrative progresses. In early passages from *The Glass Castle's* second chapter, set during Walls's nomadic early childhood in the arid deserts of America's Southwest, she describes Rex with a glowing, childlike awe which mirrors her tender age at this stage of the narrative:

Everybody said Dad was a genius. He could build or fix anything. One time when a neighbor's TV set broke, Dad opened the back and used a macaroni noodle to insulate some crossed wires. The neighbor couldn't get over it [...] Dad was an expert in math and physics and electricity. He read books on calculus and logarithmic algebra and loved what he called the poetry and symmetry of math. He told us about the magic qualities every number has and how numbers unlock the secrets of the universe (*TGC* p. 25).

Outside of the prose reflecting her tender years during this section of the narrative, Wall's breathless admiration of her father encourages the reader to hold him in similarly high esteem. This is an important narrative choice to note when understanding Rex as a tragic character, as it means readers initially encounter him at his strongest point, a man with the admiration of his daughter and power to control his own fate through his intelligence and practical skills. This then sets the scene for the pitiful and fearful events that create his eventual demise, made unavoidable by his addiction to alcohol.

However, throughout Rex's slow but inevitable downfall, Walls ensures that she notifies the reader that she feels Rex's free-spirited nature is a two-way street, with his addiction also being a personal failing. This is because although Walls does briefly speculate that Rex's abusive upbringing did likely contribute to his drinking habit (*TGC*, p. 178), his inability to leave drinking behind and his behaviour whilst under the influence is placed solely at his feet:

'Francie Nolan's father sure reminded me of Dad. If Francie saw the good in her father, even though most people considered him a shiftless drunk, maybe I wasn't a complete fool for believing in mine. Or trying to believe in him. It was getting harder.' (*TGC* p. 202).

In this passage, taken from the book's third chapter detailing Walls's adolescence in the West Virginia mining town of Welch, Walls communicates to the reader the gradual erosion of her faith in her father as he slips deeper into alcoholism. She does this by comparing her own father to Johnny Nolan from Betty Smith's 1943 semi-autobiographical novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, who was another alcoholic father idolised by his daughter who dies poor in New York. By this later stage in the narrative, the wide-eyed, breathless prose has been replaced by a more subdued, contemplative style which shifts between short and complex sentences, mirroring the doubt and self-awareness a teenage Walls has about her father's condition. Through Walls expressing this shifting perspective via her teenage self, readers are not only able to witness Rex's continued slide towards oblivion but a significant source of the tragedy surrounding his arc. By seeing it through Walls's eyes and thoughts, we can observe the her initial childhood enamour for her father disappear as the narrative goes on, and her despair and eventual acceptance that he is on a path of no return. This filtering of Rex's downfall via Walls's own emotional pain of being powerless to prevent it, further galvanises Rex as a tragic figure to both the protagonist and readers alike.

Finally, the significance of Walls referring to her father as a 'shiftless drunk' cannot be overstated. Through this phrasing, Walls places the blame for Rex's inability to get back on the wagon firmly at his feet, and thus away from any of the social and personal traumas the other two authors cite as helping tether Jacky and Agnes to the bottle.

This final point is particularly important when considering the nuances of the tragedy in Rex's character. As wider social factors are excluded from his downfall, it means the tragedy of Rex's descent most closely resembles the traditional notions of tragedy as laid out by Aristotle. As readers, we are therefore led to voyeuristically embrace the spectacle of his alcohol-induced descent, secure in the knowledge that nothing could have been done to reverse his fate.

Walls's personal, relationship focused context in which she has the reader experience Rex stands in stark contrast to how Edouard Louis presents his father Jacky in *The End of Eddy*. In his autofictional text, Louis wastes little time in explaining to the readers his belief in the intimate link between the social conditions in which his father lived and his drinking habits:

As far back as I can remember I can see my drunk father fighting with other drunk men leaving the café, breaking noses and teeth [...] My father's father drank heavily, pastis and wine from five-litre boxes, as is usual for most men in the village. It's the alcohol found at the village shop, which also serves as a café and a place to buy cigarettes and bread. You can buy anything at any time of day, by just knocking on the owners' door (EOE p. 11).

From this passage written early in the novel's opening chapter, Louis begins to immerse the reader in the social structure through which he feels his father was encouraged to become an alcoholic. He not only does this through descriptions of the actions of his father and grandfather before him, but through the tone of the prose he uses for these descriptions. Louis's dry, matter-of-fact tone contrasts with the descriptions of mindless violence, with his admission that his recollections go back as far as his memory reaches creating a sense of normalcy and desensitisation to such behaviours. This then defines a further contrast between the reader who may be surprised by how such behaviours are normal in Jacky's community, and the narrator's depiction of Jacky as an individual unaware that this is anything out of the ordinary. Moreover, the dryness of Louis's narration itself further disarms the reader, insisting to them that such traumatic events were normal to him and implying, at this early stage in the text, that such events will soon become familiar to the reader as they progress through the narrative.

This is further reinforced by Louis's well-defined links between Jacky's background and his drinking, a sharp contrast to Walls avoidance to tie Rex's drinking to external forces outside of the odd moment of subtext (*TGC*, pp. 157-158). He achieves this by identifying Jacky's father as an alcoholic, before using his drinking to further establish the normalisation of excessive drinking within the village.

Regarding the establishment of Jacky's drinking as a social consequence of his environment, the latter point carries considerable importance. This is because although he is referring to Jacky's father's alcohol consumption, he uses the present tense to describe how anything, including alcohol, can be acquired from the café at any time of day. Through this, Louis implies the café has always sat at the centre of the community, serving both as a key component holding it together and an institution which sustains and reinforces the alcoholism of the residents. Here, his use of language not only normalises the behaviour of Jacky and his father, but through grounding it in a historical context he demonstrates how such an unrestrained attitude to drinking has become a baked in part of the village's social mechanics. As such, although we still begin the story with Jacky at the height of his powers, the archetypal macho tough guy that a young Eddy always aspires to be, unlike Rex he is already consigned to his tragic fate through the social conditions which ensnared his father and other men in the village.

Another way Louis depicts the tragedy of his father's situation as being emblematic of wider societal issues is by telling the similar stories of other men within the village, doing so in a manner comparable to the Eagleton proactivist school.

Amongst his other case studies is Eddy's older cousin Sylvain and his uncle. Although Sylvain's tale supports Louis's message of the violence and crime in the village being socially constructed through class-based suppression, the latter tale of his uncle is the one which most strongly supports Jacky's alcoholism being a by-product of a wider systemic issue:

He had smoked, but also he'd drunk a lot after work, like my father, in order to forget the exhausting days of hauling around cases and crates, of having fifteen minutes in which to eat, with your eye on your watch, the lousy heated-up lunch your wife had prepared the night before and put in your lunch tin. Then there was the noise of the sorting room, deafening, a kind of assault, even. There's barely enough time to sit down for lunch, and

if you go a minute over the foreman starts to yell. My mother would tell me about his increasingly pronounced drinking habit *That's how he became an alcoholic, your uncle did, like all the others, they're really all the same, not a single one of them who holds the others back* (EoE pp. 103-104).

In this passage, partially written from the perspective of Louis and partially from the perspective of his mother, he draws a direct comparison between his uncle and father in terms of the subjugation they experience and the alcoholism they engage in as a result. He achieves this by firstly describing what his uncle and father do in their places of work, rattling through the unpleasantness of their workdays in a relentless, list like form. Through his usage of sentence structure and the bleak, almost dystopian imagery he conjures in this passage, Louis adds an additional layer to the tragedy of his father's story by contextualising his uncle's and fathers' reliance on alcohol as a means of escapism from a nightmarish working life from which there is no obvious escape. Although Louis often uses his father, uncle, and other older men as examples of how the social conditions of the village made its residents hostile towards him, contextualising their addiction also humanises them to the reader. This is crucial in making the tragedy of their self-destruction emotionally resonant and thus compelling to the reader, without which his message concerning needless working-class subjugation would ring hollow. This contextualisation further solidifies the link between *The End of Eddy* and Eagleton's theory of tragedy, as it does press the question of what ought to be done when tragic situations can be avoided, where the spectator may be complicit in their inaction.

Finally, Louis concludes this passage by shifting the perspective to his mother, using her voice to shift away from his own detached, extradiegetic narration and adopting that of another person living amidst the social conditions of the village. Unlike Walls, Louis's choice to write in the autofiction mode as opposed to a traditional memoir provides him the ability to shift perspective and tense at will, without the need to stick to the cohesive, consistent narrative structure usually required to portray a typical bildungsroman narrative journey. This is something he does throughout the text with these italicised comments from his mother. In this case, it helps galvanise Louis's argument about the social construction of alcoholism within the village, as his mother's position as a woman within the village's social structure gives her a somewhat wider perspective than the males, something Louis previously

establishes by identifying the women's role as emotional mouthpieces for the village (*EoE*, p. 11). In a somewhat unexpected parallel to classical tragedy, Louis's mother performs a similar role to the Ancient Greek chorus, providing a voice of reason from inside the community and bridging the gap between fiction and reality¹⁵. As a result, Louis can use her voice, opinion, and status as a sort of self-citation, constructing his mother's voice as a secondary source showing how the women of the village already knew the men all became alcoholics through the very same process of tough working conditions and communal enablement long before he ever decided to articulate it to the reader. This too further builds the sense of tragedy around Jacky's character, as Eddy's mother's fatalism over his alcoholism adds to the sense of his drinking being an inescapable flaw in his character which is aggravated by the other men in his community, leading to his inevitable demise. However, by presenting this fatalism through an analytical lens, Louis is making an appeal to the reader to share the same pessimism. By exposing the reader to the factors behind the tragedy of Jacky and men like him, he leaves the reader with the uncomfortable and provocative knowledge that the conditions surrounding Jacky's demise are systemic and deliberate. Therefore, much like Eagleton's more active approach to tragedy, it suggests a call to action to change these conditions, as opposed to the individualism of Rex's downfall as depicted by Walls.

While *The Glass Castle* presents the downfall of Rex through another's perspective, and *The End of Eddy* places the tragedy of Jacky within a wider social context, Douglas Stuart uses the flexibility of an overtly fictional mode to put readers into the mind of the tragic figure in *Shuggie Bain*. This is because Stuart contextualises Agnes's alcoholism as both her own personal affliction and exacerbated by her living environment, doing so in no small part through showing the reader how these factors affect Agnes from the character herself. The first instance of this method of contextualisation can be found when we are introduced to her for the first time. Here, unlike in *The End of Eddy* or *The Glass Castle*, Stuart provides a form of "inciting incident" for Agnes's alcoholism, a point where her tragic downfall appears to be put into motion:

¹⁵ Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Greek Tragedy and Ritual'. pp. 16-17.

She wanted to show the city this claret velvet dress. She wanted to feel a little envy from strangers, to dance with men who held her proud and close. Mostly she wanted to take a good drink, to live a little [...] her man, who when he shared her bed now seemed to lie on the very edge, made her feel angry with the littered promises of better things. Agnes wanted to put her foot through it all, or to scrape it back like it was spoilt wallpaper (*SB* p. 17).

Stuart uses this opening passage to contextualise Agnes's drinking within the personal desires she wishes to fulfil, namely a longing to vicariously absorb the vibrance of Glasgow's nightlife and to dull the pain of the degeneration of her relationship with her husband Shug. However, although this personal contextualisation could be compared to Walls's bundling of Rex's drinking into his eccentric nature, their approaches differ through their usage of perspective. This is because this passage in Stuart's narrative both serves to introduce Agnes's drinking alongside her character as a whole, with both coming from her perspective. This is a significant departure from *The Glass Castle* as we only ever get to experience Rex in the narrative from the perspective of a young Walls, meaning we only experience his alcoholism through its destructive impact on Walls's childhood. By having Agnes establish the context behind why she is drinking herself, Stuart immediately encourages readers to empathise with her due to her clearly suffering with the isolation and dissatisfaction she feels with her life. This is crucial for him to achieve, as readers will be following Agnes for the rest of the narrative as the perspective shifts between her, protagonist Shuggie and their family, which naturally requires the reader to invest themselves heavily into her arc and place within the narrative. As such, whereas Walls cultivates the personal context behind Rex's alcoholism to build empathy for those around him, Stuart uses the same context to build empathy for the tragic addict herself.

Another area where Stuart and Walls differ in their approach to the addict parent's narrative role is through using the character to signal towards wider social inequality, something Louis does at length with Jacky in *The End of Eddy*. However, it would be inaccurate to say that both Stuart and Louis perform this task in a similar manner. This is because of the emotional investment Stuart encourages the reader to place in Agnes, which is mostly absent in Louis's narrative. This, as explored above, is due to Stuart's decision to write an overtly fictionalised narrative. As Marta Figlerowicz explains, a

reader must be able to imagine a character having a complex interpersonal world beyond what we see of them in the text, with a natural part of that process being the reader having an investment in that character and their journey through the narrative¹⁶. Consequently, the prose Stuart uses to describe the social issues Agnes faces differs greatly than the blunt, detached prose of Louis:

They would listen and nod and see their plans to jump his mother in the afternoon slip away. Some had spent quite a lot of money getting her just the right level of pliable. Now they were blocked from a clumsy, sweaty fuck in front of the after-school cartoons. The returning uncles wised up; they would bring cheap footballs, plastic kites, all toys meant to take Shuggie outdoors. The truly desperate would hand over a greasy pile of coins, suggesting to Shuggie, “Take yourself to the pictures for an hour.” (*SB*, pp. 211-212).

Even though this passage is written from the perspective of Shuggie, the appeal for empathy regarding Agnes’s situation from Stuart remains amidst his wider commentary on predatory men. This is because unlike Louis and Walls, Stuart takes moments within Agnes’s arc to display to readers the vulnerability alcoholics have to bad actors outside of the enablement of other drinkers. One factor behind this shift can be attributed to Agnes being a female alcoholic in these brutal, post-industrial working-class environments. Consequently, she finds herself on the receiving-end of the misogyny and sexual violence on display from Rex and especially from Jacky and the other men from Eddy’s village.

Furthermore, this diversion can be noted within the language of the passage itself. This is because much of the confrontational, discomfiting prose Stuart uses is not directed towards Agnes, the alcoholic, but towards the men who are taking advantage of her. They are predatory, planning to ‘jump’ Agnes, their sexual desires being ‘desperate’ and ‘sweaty’. Even the coins they offer Shuggie to get him out the house are ‘greasy’, as if their sleaze physically soaks into everything they possess. Although Stuart utilises similarly vivid language to describe Agnes in her various states of intoxication, the fact that he also uses it frequently with the men who take advantage of Agnes draws the reader’s attention to the frequency and commonality of these predatory men in the working-class communities in which Stuart grew up. The threat of these men is made greater still due to the

¹⁶ Marta Figlerowicz, ‘Novels and Characters’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 123–37.

investment we make in Agnes through following her arc through her eyes, giving the abuse an even greater emotional resonance as it further propels her descent.

In summary, although sharing Louis's desire to highlight some of the social and systemic issues faced by the community he grew up in, Stuart's approach to this narrative challenge is to place the reader much closer to Agnes and give them a far closer view of her tragic decline. This is as Stuart's approach uses the emotional core of his narrative, the troubled relationship between an alcoholic mother and her son, to gesture at the social issues which were faced, and continue to be faced, by low-income post-industrial communities in his native Scotland. By contrast, Louis's perspective takes on a greater distance, less interested in the emotional dynamics between Eddy and his father and more concerned with the sociological mechanics which exacerbate his reliance on alcohol.

Therefore, through presenting their addict characters within a tragic context, and showing the inevitability of their downfalls through addiction either through personal failings, circumstances, or structural issues, each of the three authors demonstrates how the addict can be read as a tragic character within their narrative. However, establishing this is only part of the story as these characters are not only tragic addicts, but tragic addict parents. As such, the role that their status as parents plays in the tragedy of their characters, and how the impact of their tragic descent impacts the young protagonist must be investigated, in order to further understand how they are effectively implemented within each text.

Chapter Two: The Tragic Addict as a Parent

Chapter Introduction and Critical Framing

Having established the ways in which an addict character can be tragic, this chapter will be concerned with the narrative and character implications of such characters being parents.

Historically, the tragic hero hasn't often appeared as a parent. Where they have, such as in the instances of Shakespeare's *Lear* and *Macbeth*, there isn't much commonality to draw between their respective parenthoods. However, one aspect which does bring these characters together is the matter of agency. As Clifford Leech argues, like the actions of all tragic heroes, *Medea* is presented as 'willed as well as willing' when killing her children, her actions deliberate and personal with the Gods being a reactive presence as opposed to influencing her from the outset¹⁷. Although it could be argued that Jacky, Rex, and Agnes are also masters of their destiny, with nobody actively forcing them to continue their habit, viewing their actions towards the child protagonist purely through theories such as Leech's (or even Eagleton's) doesn't fully explore the effect of their addiction on parenthood or the practical responsibilities of being part of a family unit.

Moreover, their status as both addicts and parents creates further nuance to how their characters intersect with tragedy. As my analysis below and upcoming in chapter three demonstrates, these characters often put the child protagonist in uncomfortable and occasionally outright dangerous situations due to their inability to control themselves or the family unit. Therefore, to understand how the authors of my primary texts retain the audience's sympathy despite their sometimes-objectionable behaviour towards their children, some work needs to be done into analysing what being an addict parent means, and its significance to the narrative of my primary texts.

To address this, I will be analysing my primary texts within the critical framework of Murray Bowen's family systems theory. First introduced by Bowen during his research into family interactions in the 1950's, family systems theory is a foundational school of sociological study which observes the

¹⁷ Clifford Leech, *Tragedy: The Critical Idiom Reissued*, (Routledge, 2018), p. 42.

family as a singular emotional ecosystem, with each member's behaviour informing the behaviour of other members in turn¹⁸.

This school of study has provided a framework for sociological investigations into the functions of the family under differing internal and external pressures, including how families absorb and respond to the emotional pressure of having a chemically dependent parent. Therefore, as the narrative of each of my primary texts are driven by semi-autobiographical accounts of how families respond to the challenge of living with an alcoholic parent, these studies offer an opportunity to investigate what sociological characteristics can be applied to the addict parent archetype. In addition, it provides an opportunity to investigate whether the responses of the family members studied mirror the decisions of Jeanette, Eddy, or Shuggie's families, which drive key events in their narrative journeys.

Of all the findings family systems theory has helped to explore, the concept of parentification is quite possibly the easiest to apply to the addict parents and their narrative relationship to the protagonists.

To elaborate on this, I will be referring to a 1992 study by Linda Goglia et al., which defines parentification (and more specifically the "parental child") as a phenomenon within the family structure where a child's 'caretaking function is not supported, diffused, or reciprocated by parental figures'¹⁹. In other words, the parentification of a child over their parent is a form of family-structure role reversal where the child takes on a primary carer role over their parent, with this studies' focus on alcoholic parents demonstrating how an addict parent can be a catalyst for setting this role reversal in motion.

Therefore, due to the holistic nature of family systems and parentification, this framework should not only allow opportunities to observe the narrative role of the addict parent in isolation, but also offer another dimension to our existing framework. This is because it puts a specific focus on the impact an addict parents' role within the family has on children such as the protagonists of the primary texts.

This then leads to avenues through which to observe how the tragic downfall of Rex, Jacky and Agnes

¹⁸ 'Introduction to the Eight Concepts', The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, n.d. <<https://www.thebowencenter.org/introduction-eight-concepts>> [accessed 18 December 2021].

¹⁹ Linda R. Goglia, Gregory J. Jurkovic, Afton M. Burt, and Katherine G. Burge-Callaway, 'Generational Boundary Distortions by Adult Children of Alcoholics: Child-as-Parent and child-as-mate', *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 20.4 (1992), pp. 291–99, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01926189208250899>.

affect the events each protagonist goes through during their narratives, and how such tragedy impacts the generational cycle within the families of each text.

The Effect of Parentification within My Primary Texts

When considering the concept of parentification within the context of my primary texts, the narrative that spends the most amount of time exploring the role of a child caretaker is *Shuggie Bain*. This is due to how dependent Shuggie's mother Agnes becomes on him as she slips deeper into addiction, a dependency which becomes more intense when her elder children begin to distance themselves from her. Within the narrative, this dependence is often framed through Shuggie's perspective as he attempts to care for his mother despite his tender years. One such scene occurs when Shuggie finds his mother blacked-out after she, unbeknownst to him, was sexually assaulted by a taxi driver while drunk the night before:

He turned her head to the side to stop her choking on her rising boak. Then he placed the mop bucket near the bed and gently unzipped the back of her cream dress and loosened the clasp on her bra. He would have taken off her shoes, but she wasn't wearing any [...] Shuggie arranged three tea mugs: one with tap water to dry the cracks in her throat, one with milk to line her sour stomach, and the third with a mixture of the flat leftovers of Special Brew and stout that he had gathered from around the house and frothed together with a fork [...] he went to the kitchen and filled a fourth mug with bleach for her teeth. He tore a page from his "Popes of the Empire" homework and wrote in soft pencil: DANGER! Teeth Cleaner. Do not drink. Don't even sip by accident (*SB*, p. 187).

In this scene, Stuart emphasises the role-reversing effect of Shuggie's parentification through the contrast between the actions he performs and the way he performs them. For instance, when filling glasses with various liquids to soften Agnes's hangover, his inner monologue describes their purposes with the simplistic, fanciful vocabulary of a child. This language also extends to the note he writes Agnes to ensure she doesn't accidentally drink her denture cleaner and poison herself, with the remark of 'Don't even sip by accident' emblematic of the frustration children often have to make themselves understood with a limited vocabulary.

However, through his role as caretaker of Agnes, Shuggie subverts the findings in the Goglia et al. study which states that ‘the male children of alcoholics were less likely than their female counterparts to have assumed a parental role in their families-of-origin’²⁰. However, there are two key narrative factors which can be seen as explanations behind Shuggie’s subversion of the Goglia et al. study. The first of these factors is Agnes herself. This is because she, much like the other addict parents to be analysed in this chapter, is deeply reliant on her children to maintain stability in the home as they wrestle their addiction, something which serves the narrative purpose of exhausting the child protagonist as they grow up and motivating them to fly the nest. In fact, after arriving in Pithead, Agnes is depicted as the most dependent of any of the addict parents, partially because she is now a single mother without a sober partner, something which is identified in the Goglia et al. study as a common factor behind the beginnings of parentification based on previous studies²¹.

The dependent pull Agnes puts upon Shuggie then intertwines itself with the other factor behind the nature of his parentification, namely his appearance and implied sexuality. Throughout the novel, Shuggie is depicted to be noticeably effeminate in his speech and physical mannerisms, something which causes him to endure bullying and ostracization from the other males around Pithead due to his implied homosexuality (*SB*, p. 212). Unlike Eddy, who fights against the social rejection created by bigotry towards his queerness, Stuart depicts Shuggie withdrawing from his community and spending large amounts of time at home with Agnes. Stuart then builds this dynamic into a co-dependent relationship, where Shuggie runs errands for a hungover Agnes in return for not having to face his bullies at school (*SB*, pp. 322-323). As such, due to their co-dependence Shuggie subverts the problem child archetype discussed by Goglia et al., with the care he takes in Agnes almost intimate in nature, a phenomenon identified in the study as ‘spousification’²².

Although *The Glass Castle*’s young protagonist Jeanette is also parentified through her relationship with her alcoholic father Rex, the nature of their relationship and how the parentification manifests itself is quite different. Firstly, as the Walls family is larger and remains unified for longer, the

²⁰ Goglia et al., p. 296.

²¹ Goglia et al., p. 292.

²² Goglia et al., p. 292.

parentified roles are split more evenly between the three eldest children: Lori, Jeanette, and Brian. Moreover, they are also joined by a second parent in Rose Mary, who although not an addict also parentifies her children due to her eccentricity and compulsive selfishness. Finally, Rex's own eccentric nature and financial irresponsibility both puts financial pressure on and endangers Jeanette in ways not seen in Shuggie and Agnes's relationship.

A section of the narrative where Rex's overreliance on Jeanette is brought to the fore occurs when, in an act of unusual rationality, Rose Mary leaves town to renew her teaching degree to seek work. Without her or her eldest sister Lori at home, Jeanette is left to try and make ends meet while Rex continues to pull on her emotions to feed his habit:

'Hon, I need some money,' he said. 'For what?' 'Beer and cigarettes.' 'I've got sort of a tight budget, Dad.' 'I don't need much. Just five dollars.' That was two days' worth of food. A half gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, two cans of jack mackerel, a small bag of apples, and some popcorn. And Dad wasn't even doing me the honor of pretending he needed the money for something useful. He also didn't argue or wheedle or cajole or ratchet the charm way up. He simply waited for me to fork over the cash, as if he knew I didn't have it in me to say no. And I didn't (*TGC*, p. 250).

Unlike Shuggie's childlike descriptions of hangover cures, Jeanette meticulously rattles through the material impact of her handing Rex cash for booze and cigarettes by carefully listing all the food she would no longer be able to purchase to feed herself and younger siblings. Moreover, by showing the reader this mental shopping list, Walls draws extra emotional gravitas from the next part of the passage. This is as she then makes the reader aware through Jeanette's thoughts that she is painfully self-aware of her emotional vulnerability to her father, with her still unable to disobey him even when it takes food from her sibling's mouths.

Aside from matching the Goglia et al. study's findings that female children are more likely to perform parental roles, Jeanette's actions also corroborate with their background research which establishes that 'youngsters had an increased capacity to care for others and a strong sense of accountability within the family', along with 'impairment of individuation and autonomy'²³. Jeanette's awareness of

²³ Goglia et al., p. 292.

her financial situation and weakness to her father's demands reflect both of these parentification symptoms. Her care and sense of accountability is shown through the ease in which she takes on the role of temporary head of the home, knowing exactly how to budget to provide for her siblings in Lori's absence. However, the fact that she knows this yet still lends money to Rex with little outward resistance, shows this responsibility does not reward her with autonomy, with her still having to answer to the traditional parental figure even when it is against her will or self-interest.

Although Rex and Jeanette's dynamic is different to that of Shuggie and Agnes, a loss of personal autonomy befalls both young protagonists due to them having to deal with the consequences of their parent's addiction, manifesting itself in both passages through the children having to perform parentified roles. This tentatively suggests that part of the addict parent archetype is to have their actions limit the autonomy of their children through parentifying them. This process then establishes the conditions of the to-be-discussed "moment of redemption" in the final act, when the condemned addict parent unshackles their child and frees them to pursue their own path. Moreover, this reliance and emotional trauma they place upon their children is another analogue to tragic convention, as their children are ensnared in the destructive actions of their downfall.

To test this hypothesis one more example must be explored, namely the dynamic between Eddy and Jacky in *The End of Eddy*. However, due to the greater emotional distance between these two characters, generated in no small part through Eddy's inevitable failure to live up to Jacky's masculine, heteronormative expectations, the clear examples of direct parentification as seen in the previous two texts are not so readily available. Despite this disconnect between father and son, Louis does take time within the narrative to depict a facet of Eddy's childhood where he was forced into a highly responsible, parentified role by both of his parents. Here, much like Jeanette, Eddy is thrust into a distressing position via parental authority:

Sometimes my mother would get tired and stop pretending [...] she'd make me go to the shop in the village to ask for credit, ask to buy on account what we needed to eat [...] I tried to get out of it until my father intervened, *Get your arse in gear and get down there before I give you what's coming to you*. He was so terrifying that I would do as I was told in silence. Children are better at inspiring pity and I had been designated as the one most

likely to succeed at that game in order to get us some food; it wasn't only the shop I'd be sent to, some days it was also our neighbours, or others in the village, to ask for some bread, a box of noodles, or a little cheese (*EoE*, pp. 74-75).

Although it is Eddy's mother who originally pressures him into going around the village to beg for food, it is Jacky who uses the threats and aggression required to force Eddy into performing this task. Furthermore, it is made clear to him through his parents that he specifically had to undergo this task, a task on which his entire family getting fed hangs upon, because he is a child and therefore better suited to emotionally manipulating the adults around him. This reversal of family responsibility places Eddy as an almost literal breadwinner in the place of his father, who is spending much of his wages on booze while working, and is then unable to return to work after recovering from a back injury due to his habit.

Although this form of parent/child role reversal appears to be less of a care role than the roles Jeanette or Shuggie perform, Shuggie does endure a similar ordeal when he is forced to beg workers at the local benefits office to cash Agnes's benefits in her absence so they can both eat. Meanwhile, much of Jeanette's childhood is defined by her constant need to keep herself and her siblings fed, from severely burning herself cooking hotdogs as a toddler, stealing food from school as a child and entering the workplace as a young teen.

Therefore, when observing the narrative impact of the addict parent through the process of parentification, the examples provided by Stuart, Walls, and Louis suggest that the addict parent not only robs the protagonist of their autonomy through thrusting their deferred adult responsibilities onto them, but this process appears to be often symbolised through the acquisition of food. This commonality can add further nuance to the addict parent metanarrative, with the destructive nature of their condition causing both them, and often the other parent, to repeatedly fail to feed their own children, forcing the child into a parentified role as provider for their parent and often wider family. This in turn acts as an additional element to the tragedy of their narrative, the flaws brought forward by addiction causing their suffering to spread to those in their family unit.

The Addict Parent's Redemption

Outside of the similar manners in which Walls, Louis and Stuart present the tragic addict parent and their effect on their protagonists, a moment all three authors share within their narratives occurs when the addict parent sacrifices their own needs to release the young protagonist to pursue their own future. In both *The Glass Castle* and *The End of Eddy*, this occurs when Rex and Jacky sacrifice what little material wealth they have to ensure their children have the opportunity to break free of the class subjugation their families have been trapped within, and escape via the cultural institution of further education:

I told him that while most of my tuition was covered by grants and loans and scholarships, the school expected me to contribute two thousand dollars a year. But over the summer, I had been able to save only a thousand dollars. I needed another thousand and had no way to come up with it [...] he opened the paper bag and turned it upside down. Hundreds of dollar bills - ones, fives, tens, twenties, all wrinkled and worn - spilled into my lap. 'There's nine hundred and fifty bucks,' Dad said. He opened the plastic bag, and a fur coat tumbled out. 'That there's mink. You should be able to pawn it for fifty, at least.' (*TGC*, pp. 313-314).

He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a twenty-euro note. I knew this was far too much, more than he could or should be giving me. He told me I'd need it *You'll be needing to eat lunch. I don't want you feeling ashamed in front of any of the others or feeling different cause you don't have enough money. You spend all of this this morning, you don't bring any back with you, I don't want you to be any different than the others* (*EoE*, pp. 180-181).

Through these passages, it is clear that both of these moments share a number of similarities. Firstly, they are both structurally integrated into their respective texts in a similar manner, with both these passages occurring during the final act. In addition, both moments serve as subversions of what readers have come to expect from Rex and Jacky, with both addict fathers pushing financial independence on their children for different reasons.

For Rex, this moment departs from his usual bohemian principles of personal independence for his children at all times, and perhaps more importantly, his habit of stealing from Jeanette to fuel his drinking habit. Therefore, this act of selflessness, giving his daughter money and a coat that he

himself could desperately use as a homeless man, provides a redemptive moment where he finally supports Jeanette in real, material terms. This moment is similarly redemptive for Jacky, albeit for slightly different reasons in accordance with his own narrative arc. This is because not only does he also provide Eddy with what little he has, but he does so to allow his son to pursue his passion for acting after spending Eddy's childhood refusing to show any enthusiasm for Eddy's interests, lest he also accidentally encourages him to be open about his sexuality.

However, despite the similarities in the purpose these scenes serve for Rex's and Jacky's narrative arcs, the greatest importance of these scenes can be found in what their sacrifices serve within the wider context of each narrative through the aforementioned path to higher education. The transformative social and cultural power of higher education was highlighted by Raymond Williams in his 1967 essay 'The Idea of a Common Culture', where he wrote:

Culture was the way in which the process of education, the experience of literature, and – for someone moving out of a working-class family to a higher education – inequality, came through. What other people, in different situations, might experience more directly as economic or political inequality, was naturally experienced, from my own route, as primarily an inequality of culture; an inequality which was also, in an obvious sense, an uncommunity. This is, I think, still the most important way to follow the argument about culture, because everywhere, but very specifically in England, culture is one way in which class, the fact of major divisions between men, shows itself.²⁴

Considering the era in which Williams's essay was written, it could be argued that the higher rate of working-class individuals attending universities, along with the wide-spread public awareness of cultural concepts such as racial, gender, or class privilege, has taken some of the emphasis off higher education as a cultural barrier. Despite this, the concept remains a useful means of analysing Rex and Jacky's actions in these scenes²⁵. This is because by viewing these scenes via the framework of Williams's concept of higher education being the barrier which one must pass through in order to be culturally indoctrinated into the bourgeoisie, these late actions in both Rex and Jacky's arcs provide a

²⁴ Raymond Williams, 'The Idea of a Common Culture', in *Raymond Williams on Culture & Society: Essential Writings*, ed. by Jim McGuigan (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014), pp. 93-100 (p.94).

²⁵ Paul Bolton, 'Higher education student numbers', *House of Commons Library*, 02 January 2024 <<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7857/>> [Accessed 04 May 2024].

surprising amount of symmetry considering the differing contexts under which Walls and Louis write. This is because both characters offer their children a means of escape through this barrier as they recognise its potential for social mobility, mobility which was denied to them during their formative years. As such, it serves as a point of separation between child and parent, not only through their physical movement into a new establishment, but a separation from the addict parent's tragic trajectory.

This is a notable departure from the conventions of both the tragic and family systems frameworks that have been established. Firstly, this is as it halts the domino effect caused by the purification event at the bottom of the tragic character's downfall established by Aristotle, and thus ruminated on as either empathetic or a call to action by Rowan Williams or Eagleton. Instead, the child protagonist is allowed to escape in a position of relative strength compared to the beginning of their parent's downfall. Moreover, it breaks the cycle of trauma inflicted upon them via parentification, with the addict parent freeing them from this burden of responsibility to pursue their own destiny.

Although this character moment is related to higher education in *The Glass Castle* and *The End of Eddy*, the motivation for Agnes to release Shuggie into the world in *Shuggie Bain* is slightly more complex. This is because Agnes does not provide Shuggie with any financial security, nor does she release Shuggie into a higher education establishment. Despite this, her reasoning for releasing her son does bear some resemblance to that of Rex and Jacky, and ultimately performs a similar function within the plot:

“Look!” she reasoned as she unpicked him from herself. For a moment her eyes cleared of the fog, and his mother seemed like she might actually be in there. “Don’t you ask me to phone you a taxi and then stand there and make a liar out of me. Get your bag. You’re papped!” [...] Agnes went to the bay window and looked down into the narrow street. She watched her baby come out of the close mouth and search the sky for her. She nodded smugly that she had been right, that she had always known he would leave her, like they all did. She watched him climb into the waiting taxi, and she knew then that she had lost him (*SB*, p. 373).

On the surface, Agnes's actions in this scene stand in direct contrast with Rex and Jacky's selfless generosity, with her throwing Shuggie out in what seems to be a moment of vindictive self-pity. However, as Stuart directs us into Agnes's perspective during the scene, we can infer that this is not the full picture. The first clue to this is given to us through Shuggie's perspective, where he observes Agnes's snap decision to throw him out occurs in a moment where her eyes were 'cleared of the fog' of intoxication. The second, more substantive clue occurs when Agnes is watching Shuggie leave. This is as amidst her self-pity over Shuggie's departure, she confesses to herself that she has 'lost him'. This indicates to the readers that Agnes knows that by cutting Shuggie loose, he will begin to get a taste of the freedom and opportunities that eventually pulled her other children Leek and Caroline away from her years before. Therefore, as she pushes Shuggie away in full knowledge of this, Stuart implies that this is something she has done for his greater good, as like Rex and Jacky, she recognises that her addiction will tether her to a life of poverty and subjugation for good. As such, although she does not send Shuggie away under the pretence of a Williams-esque belief that Shuggie will pass through the cultural barrier of further education onto a road towards a more prosperous life, her actions serve a similar narrative function of pushing Shuggie away from the struggles of her reality in the hopes of him being able to find his own path. Consequently, through this process of cutting him loose to free him from the burden of parentification, and to attempt to keep the inevitable tragic end of her downfall to herself, Agnes is still performing an emancipatory act which mirrors that of Rex and Jacky.

Despite analysing Rex, Jacky and Agnes's characters in reference to the tragic form, it would be inaccurate to depict their arcs as purely tragic in the classical sense. Aside from the fundamental formal shift which relegates them to secondary characters due to the young, author-insert protagonists, their redemptive moments at the end of their respective texts are a notable deviation from the character arc of a traditional tragic hero. Rex's, Jacky's, and Agnes's final actions at the end of their arcs are done to serve the growth of their kin as opposed to their destruction, with this growth intended to elevate them beyond their social situation as opposed to keeping them trapped within it.

Although this aspect of their character arcs deviates them from the arc of a classically tragic archetype such as Thomas Sutpen, their fatal flaws, preventable deaths, and the trail of destruction they leave until their final deviation, mean that their journeys still bear many hallmarks of a tragic character arc. Moreover, as the following chapter will investigate, emancipation from their parents does not leave any of the child protagonists unscathed as they attempt to navigate the world as adults.

In conclusion, the role of the addict parent across the three texts is broadly similar. This is as Walls, Louis and Stuart all depict their protagonists being parentified by their addict parents, forced to stand in and perform the responsibilities within the family they have vacated until eventually being emancipated towards the end of their respective narratives.

However, there is nuance in the type of responsibility they take on, with Jeanette and Eddy pushed out to earn for their families, while Shuggie is forced back into the home to perform a spousal caretaking role for Agnes.

Chapter Three: The Tragic Addict Parent: Perspective and Mode

Introduction

Although the previous chapters go some way to establishing how tragedy helps develop a greater understanding of the addict parent in autobiographical texts, there are two more avenues of analysis which can be further explored: Mode and perspective. As someone who has written a manuscript containing an addict parent myself, I have found myself particularly interested in the choices Stuart, Louis, and Walls have made regarding how their narratives are told and who gets to tell them.

Firstly, Walls, Louis, and Stuart all chose to write their narratives partially or wholly from the perspective of a child protagonist experiencing the events of the text in the moment. Therefore, a significant proportion of the tragedy that befalls Rex, Jacky, and Agnes due to their addiction is shown to us through their children's eyes, which naturally leads to questions regarding how their parent's demise affects their own character arcs.

All three texts present this impact upon the child protagonist, but do so in distinctly different forms, which both inform these perspectives and the addict parents readers witness through them. As previously established, Walls writes her text as a memoir, a mode which revolves around a narrativization of lived experiences, with the writer making a truth claim that the events they are portraying did occur as they are recalling them. This adds significance to the recollections Walls chooses to focus on when curating the narrative of her early life and the part Rex played in it, something that will be explored in further detail below.

Meanwhile Louis's writing presents as autofiction, a mode which also makes a truth-claim about its narrative²⁶. However, unlike in memoir, this claim is more nebulous, less concerned with presenting the events of the narrative as accurate or cohesive and more with the truth found in the wider themes, messaging and authorial voice. As explored below, this additional freedom to be flexible with

²⁶ Louis, 'About the Book'.

structure and perspective allows Louis to be introspective, exploring how Jacky and his peers' behaviour has affected him personally beyond his childhood.

Finally, Stuart's narrative is autobiographical fiction. Unlike memoir and autofiction, this mode makes no truth claim at all, with the lines between truth and fiction never revealed to the reader. Therefore, this total freedom over the narrative allows Stuart to go beyond the limited perspective of his child protagonist, showing readers the true horror of what he is exposed to, and how it all affects him in later life.

Tragedy Through a Child's Eyes

Due to Walls's narrative being a memoir, every single instance of Rex's drunken behaviour is presented to us through Jeanette, filtered by her recollections of her thoughts and feelings in that time. This dual filtration of narrative voice is unique amongst my primary texts, with both Louis and Stuart having narrators with consistent voices throughout their narratives. This allows Walls to tweak her voice to fit her age in the narrative, a technique analysed in Chapter One. However, this not only affects the moment-to-moment presentation of each scene, but also, due to it being a narrativization of her life, the significance of each of these instances on the life journey she takes us through.

The clearest example of this occurs when she finally confronts Rex directly about the impact of his drunken behaviour on the family, and how he has failed her as a father. The scene is presented as a standoff, with Jeanette not believing her father would act out his threat to whip her with his belt until 'there were six stinging blows on the backs of [her] thighs, each accompanied by a whistle of air' (*TGC*, p. 263). Here, by basing the scene purely on Walls's recollection of events from her perspective, readers are not only being shown a depiction of Rex's violence as a father abusing his daughter, but a narrative moment where the protagonist is finally betrayed by her mentor figure, whose intellect and imagination has guided her even as he failed in his duties as a father. As such, when the very next scene is her deciding to leave home and escape to New York, it serves as a suitable progression of the narrative frame from which Walls hangs the recollections of her youth.

Outside of its narrative purpose, having scenes such as these be presented purely from Walls's perspective also has a particular effect on the tragedy of Rex's descent into addiction. This is as it means that Rex's addiction is presented to the reader via a spectator to it, powerless to correct Rex's downward trajectory. It means that readers are also led to observe the tragedy of Rex's character as a spectator, once again in a manner not dissimilar to the classical perspective of tragedy laid out by Aristotle. Therefore, readers are left to experience this downfall as a unique twist of fate, set into motion by the flaw of Rex's inability to control his habit, and fuelled purely by his inability to change his ways.

Although this statement remains somewhat true in the other texts, their differences in perspective offer some additional angles for the reader to interpret the tragedy of each addict parent's downfall. In *The End of Eddy*, the introspectiveness that autofiction's fluidity encourages leads to Louis portraying the actions of Jacky with a further degree of separation, a meditation on each anecdote of his behaviour feeding into a wider thesis as opposed to driving a wider narrative.

This is demonstrated by an example he provides of his father's violence in the home, where he snaps at Eddy's younger brother and punches a wall (*EoE*, p. 30). Through the context Louis provides via his reflections on his father's behaviour in the text, moments such as these deconstruct the tragedy of his self-destruction in turn. Louis achieves this in this scene by using his prose to focus on the oddness of his father's behaviour, using short sentences to describe the erratic sequence of actions that led him to decide that hitting a wall was the best way to unleash his rage. Alongside this, Louis also uses autofiction's lack of a need for narrative consistency to partially take the reader out of the scene, referring them back to his wider thesis of the toxic social conditions his father exists within and how it had set him on the path towards his inevitable decline. In this scene, he reminds the readers of how Jacky's angry drunken tears were contradictory: 'no tears for him unless he was drunk, on other days, he kept himself under control: be a man, don't cry' (*EoE*, p. 30). Alongside this, readers have been previously made aware of Jacky's father's violence towards his mother, adding additional justification to why he strikes out at inanimate objects instead of his family. Due to this context framing the scenes of Jacky's decline, the tragedy of his suffering is somewhat taken out of his hands by Louis, who

presents him as someone who has developed tragic flaws due to his environment as opposed to Rex, who Walls presents as an individual who was uniquely flawed and destined to self-destruct regardless of any social or economic factors.

As a result, once again the tragedy Louis presents in this scene is dependent on the narrative fluidity inherent to autofiction. This is evident through the fact that Eddy himself is completely absent from the scene, his father the sole subject as Louis immerses the readers in the pitifully contradictory nature of the emotions that he was never socialized to express healthily. As such, this scene would be far more difficult to achieve in a memoir, where one would expect to witness the author's presence in almost every scene, or a novel, where such a scene would be expected to serve a wider narrative purpose. Therefore, this serves as a prime example of how Louis uses autofiction to express Jacky's addiction in a manner sympathetic to the Eagleton model, equally an exercise in characterisation as an active call to action to try and do something about the system which makes such tragic demises unavoidable.

Unlike *The Glass Castle* or *The End of Eddy*, *Shuggie Bain* not only has multiple perspectives, but is also a work of fiction. As such, the flexibility of fiction allows Stuart to show readers facets of scenes which exist outside of the set perspective of his characters, which has a significant effect on how readers witness Agnes's behaviour through the eyes of Shuggie.

A prominent example of this occurs in a scene where Shuggie walks in on Agnes shortly after she has attempted suicide, with his brother Leek trying to plug the bleeding from the slashes on her wrists (*SB*, pp. 313-314). Here, not only is the scene presented from Shuggie's child-like perspective, with him unable to make sense of what he is seeing outside of how it was so odd that his normally tidy mother would make such a mess of her living room, but Stuart also draws the reader to things Shuggie cannot see: 'If he could have focused, he would have seen that there was also blood on the TV and the brown table and the fringe of the settee'. Through Shuggie's confusion and the details of the scene that his young mind is unable to comprehend, Stuart maximises the dramatic irony between the reader and the protagonist, leading the reader to naturally sympathise with Shuggie as he makes sense of the horror unfolding before him.

However, although this would perhaps lead readers to sympathise less with Agnes for making this potentially gruesome climax to her downward spiral a terrifying spectacle for her children, the fact that Stuart has shown a significant amount of the narrative from Agnes's perspective means that readers have ample context to why she would take such extreme action. However, unlike the context Louis provides us with Jacky, it doesn't feed into any wider thesis or social commentary, leaving the reader to purely focus on Agnes's pain and the trauma it places on her children. Due to this, the tragedy of Agnes's downfall settles more within the Rowan Williams's school of tragedy, with a focus on empathy for the character's suffering, something which is somewhat lacking in the outright dramatic spectacle Walls uses to paint the similar self-destruction Rex experiences. Moreover, being a critic who has personal and academic interests in Christian theology, Williams's perspective on the tragedy of Christ also bears a point of comparison with Agnes. This is as Williams positions the crucifixion of Christ as the divine tarnished in the face of human atrocity²⁷. Although Agnes is not a divine figure in the literal sense, she is held in a similar esteem to Shuggie for much of his early life, and her downfall and ultimate loss can be seen as being done through the atrocities of humanity, whether that be through the abuse of the men in her life, the abandonment of her family, or the apathy to her suffering shown by others in her community.

The Legacy of the Addict Parent on a Child Protagonist and Mode

Another important element to consider when analysing the addict parent via a child protagonist, is the legacy they leave once the protagonist escapes and must come to terms with how they have been treated and what they have witnessed. All three texts tackle this issue, continuing to use the nuances of their modes and chosen perspectives to show the long-term impact growing up with an addict parent has had on Jeanette, Eddy, and Shuggie. When combining this concept with the tragedy of the downfalls of Rex, Jacky, and Agnes, it also begs the question of the extent to which their tragic

²⁷ Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, p. 158.

demises are cyclical, and whether their final acts of sacrifice are enough to prevent their children from befalling the same fate.

In the final act of *The Glass Castle*, Jeanette is able to finally break away from her parents and begin a new life in New York, only for them to follow her there. Her parents become a source of repulsion, with Rex coming to represent a male archetype she wishes to avoid at all costs.

Walls explicitly makes the reader aware of this when describing her relationship and eventual marriage to Eric, a man who to her represents the polar opposite of her father. However, when describing him, a man to which she dedicated years of her life, Walls lists off his virtues dryly and dispassionately, with his ability to be ‘decent and responsible’ and ‘pay[ing] his bills on time’ presenting him more as a pleasant housemate than a lover (*TGC*, p. 317). However, despite the blandness with which Walls presents Eric, her appreciation of his virtues is presented to the reader as genuine, and her anxiety over settling down with the type of ‘hard-drinking, hell-raising, charismatic scoundrel’ she considers Rex to be, a truly rational concern. As such, Rex’s chaotic downfall and the trauma it has caused Walls has led her to demonstrate to readers the necessity of stability with her romantic partners, even if this comes at the expense of suffocating her own romantic passion and desires.

With her text being a memoir covering a significant amount of time, particularly during the final act, Walls doesn’t delve much deeper into how her romantic choices are influenced by her need to break away from being smothered by the addiction of others. However, it remains significant that she chooses to make the space within this fast-moving section of the narrative to discuss her love life at that time in those terms. This is as it signifies to the reader how strongly that anxiety influenced her life during this period, especially considering this period sees Walls present herself as otherwise thriving amidst the opportunities presented by New York City.

However, outside of Rex’s lingering influence on her personal life, she does also make clear to the reader her embarrassment over what her parents represented to her, shown in a scene at the very beginning of the memoir where she hides from her mother after spotting her dumpster diving on the

streets of New York (*TGC*, p. 4). By choosing to begin the story of her life in medias res, Walls frames the entire narrative that proceeds this scene within a sense of shame over those who raised her. Even though Rex himself is absent from this scene, the fact that Walls paints her parents as a source of shame before we are formally introduced to either of them in the narrative, signifies to readers their role as spectre-like figures who continue to haunt her life even when she later peels herself away from their self-destruction. Their unwanted presence in her life therefore somewhat undermines Rex's redemptive moment in the final throes of his alcoholism, as although he provides the funds to help her finish her degree and continue her ascension through New York's social order, she continues to do so with one eye over her shoulder lest the truth of her dysfunctional origins be discovered.

Similarly, in *Shuggie Bain* Stuart uses an in medias res opening section to foreshadow the lingering influence his upbringing has upon his protagonist, this time through the predatory elder man who visits Shuggie in his bedsit and Shuggie's repulsion to the lager he is drinking (*SB*, p. 13). However, unlike Walls, Stuart makes no mention of Agnes in this section, leaving the reveal that Shuggie's behaviour is influenced by his mother until the novel returns to his present in its final chapter. This not only serves to hook the reader into the narrative, as the connection between the opening section and the rest of the narrative is not initially obvious, but it also allows Shuggie's actions in the final act to have greater emotional gravitas.

When Stuart returns us to Shuggie's present, he finds himself faced with a shelf full of ornaments he had taken from Agnes's home following her death, with him taking one in his hand and snapping it between his fingers. Not only does Stuart present this destructive act as one of rebellion against the caring role Shuggie was forced into by his mother, with him angrily recollecting how he 'had always been so careful. He had always tried his best', but also one of which shows him trying to break out of the influence that Agnes's specific downfall had over him. This is because the ornament he had broken was a fawn, which 'kept beaming its same serene smile', even as he squeezed it until the porcelain snapped (*SB*, p. 388). Here, Stuart not only shows how witnessing Agnes's slow, unstoppable descent into chronic alcoholism has traumatised Shuggie, but also the fact that Agnes's personal quest to try and appear dignified as she did so forced Shuggie to adapt the same façade as he

suffered at the hands of it. As the reader is also aware of this element of Agnes's character, having spent time seeing the world from her perspective, this small act of destruction still offers catharsis through its symbolic destruction of Agnes's legacy, both through the possession and what it represents.

However, Stuart shows the reader that this rebellion towards his upbringing only goes so far. This is as with Jeanette, Shuggie's freedom to pursue his own destiny must be done while having to battle with the circumstances of his upbringing. However, this time the effect is less a shame of his background but psychological conditioning, once again foreshadowed in the introduction by an obsessive attention to detail and susceptibility to manipulative men which mirror Agnes. As such, readers are left in suspense by the end of the novel, not knowing whether Shuggie is doomed to repeat the same predestined demise as his mother, the tragedy of her life being passed down to her offspring. This suspense is something which Stuart achieves specifically through his use of the novel form, as unlike *The Glass Castle* or *The End of Eddy*, the protagonist is not directly related to the author and their life in the real world.

Although not as heavily signified as Shuggie's repetition of his mother's behaviour, Louis also shows moments where he echoes the actions of Jacky within *The End of Eddy*. These occur in the form of asides, with the two most prominent occurring when describing the story of his cousin Sylvan, another doomed male within his family, and when he recollects his attempts to live up to the tough guy reputation of the men in his family, especially Jacky.

When recollecting how both his father and Sylvan enjoyed drink driving, Louis, in an aside to his readers, announces that he is 'doing some serious drinking tonight to mark the occasion' (*EoE*, pp. 111-112). Unlike in *The Glass Castle* and *Shuggie Bain* where their authors use structure to feed readers back to the narrative's present day, Louis suddenly pulls the reader through time to his own present during the writing of the text. Through this, Louis uses the malleability of autofiction to step out of the narrative at will, and show the effect the events of it have had on him as they are presented. In this instance, the fact that he is drinking heavily in ironic celebration of his father's and cousin's dangerous drunken behaviour, mirrors the personal and community rituals Jacky used to drink heavily

whenever possible. This not only allows Louis to show that he has been unable to step away from alcohol despite the destruction he witnessed it cause to Jacky, and by extension his younger self, but also that a fragment of his community's drinking culture has remained within him despite his escape. Although a small additional element to his prose, this aside adds a vital additional element to Louis's thesis concerning the cyclical nature of the self-destructive behaviour that societal inequality has forced upon Jacky and his peers. This is because despite positioning himself as an outsider to other boys and men in his community throughout the narrative, Louis is able to use this brief aside to show how he has absorbed some of their self-destructive tendencies despite this. Therefore, much like Shuggie's treatment at the hands of elder men in his bedsit and Jeanettes paranoid existence in New York, Louis's presentation of a cavalier attitude to drinking undermines Jacky's selfless act of driving him to Amiens and giving him money to help him feel more secure pursuing his new life at the college.

However, Louis also uses a present-day aside to show the impression of what he was unable to absorb from his community has had upon him. While recollecting on his desperation to be a "Tough Guy" and fulfil the expectations of Jacky, Louis takes the reader aside to tell them how putting such memories on the page is making him cry due to how much this desperation consumed him as a child, even telling himself to become a tough guy over and over in the bathroom mirror each day as a sort of twisted affirmation (*EoE*, pp. 142-143). Here, not only does Louis show the reader the trauma he carries through forcing himself to conform to the brand of masculinity Jacky attempted to impose upon him, but in turn further reinforces the tragedy of Jacky's character in turn. This is as despite his attempts to protect his family, including his insistence in breaking the cycle of violence perpetuated by his father by refusing to raise his hands to his children, Jacky ultimately failed to prevent his self-destruction from harming them. In this way, despite the tragedy of Louis's narrative being based upon a concept of tragedy which reflects the Eagleton proactivist approach, Louis's demonstration of the damage Jacky has done to him both during and after his downfall reflects that of classical tragedy, the permanent and lasting changes cast upon the characters around the tragic hero following their descent and final downfall.

In summary, this long-term trauma partially undermines the final act moment of redemptive sacrifice Rex, Jacky, and Agnes perform to free their children. This is as Jeanette, Eddy, and Shuggie all continue to be influenced by their parent's behaviour after this emancipation, shown through Jeanette's emotional suppression and paranoia, Eddy/Louis's drinking and tears, or Shuggie's vulnerability to the same sort of predatory men who took advantage of his mother.

Moreover, this lingering trauma is filtered through the form each writer writes within, shaping both the inciting incidents of the trauma and its lasting effects. Walls uses memoir to shape Rex's abuse and the perception of love it gave her as a challenge she needed to overcome to come out on top in her story of trial against adversity. Meanwhile, Louis uses the narrative malleability of autofiction to analyse the structural failures that made his father the man he became, and to put the reader in the room with him as he struggles with the emotional toll of his brutal upbringing while attempting to put it into words. Finally, Stuart uses the novel to focus on the emotional core of Agnes and her drinking, both for Shuggie and Agnes herself. To do so, he both withholds information from the reader and shares details that the characters are not aware of, maximising the emotional impact of Agnes's decline and the messy legacy she leaves for Shuggie, as he attempts to make his way in the world without her.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, a complex, nuanced, yet consistent pattern has emerged through using tragic theories to analyse the addict parents in my primary texts.

All three texts position alcohol addiction as the tragic flaw to which Rex, Jacky, and Agnes are consigned as it drags them towards their self-destruction. However, their paths of self-destruction share deeper commonalities, with all three parents forcing parentified roles upon their children, before making an attempt at emancipating them when it becomes clear that their decline is irreversible.

Despite this, all three protagonists end the narratives carrying trauma from their parents, creating ambiguity over whether the downfall of their parents will become cyclical.

Through this, the trail of destruction each parent leaves and the pitiful fate they become increasingly confined to draws useful parallels to the tenets of classical tragedy, with the reader encouraged to witness their downfalls from a place of pity as opposed to scorn and judgement. Meanwhile, the trauma they leave the protagonists with prevent their attempts at emancipating their children from being fully redemptive, once again drawing comparisons to the irreversible changes to the status-quo created by the demise of the tragic hero in a classically tragic narrative.

However, where using tragic theory exposes nuance in my primary texts is through mode and perspective. This is because through Walls's narrativization of her life through memoir, Rex is presented as an archetypal flawed genius, with his drinking presented as one of the personal failings destined to prevent him from finding success. This mode naturally lends itself to viewing Rex in this manner, as we can only ever experience Rex through Walls and her personal recollections, with his alcoholic downfall happening against her own curated narrative of triumphing against the odds. This presentation of Rex's downfall makes *The Glass Castle* the clearest reflection of classical tragedy, as the purely self-imposed nature of his downfall encourages readers to engage in the spectacle of his drinking-fuelled chaos without considering any of the wider cultural or economic factors which characterise the communities he roams through.

Meanwhile, Louis uses the reflective and self-analytical qualities which naturally lend themselves to autofiction to implement Jacky into his wider thesis about how systemic failures have ravaged the community he grew up in, which in turn led to his brutal, traumatic childhood. He builds this thesis using further malleable elements that such a mode can afford, such as the ability to move between tenses and narrative strands at will, and the ability to conjure and integrate other external voices through the chorus-like presence of his mother. As such, readers are encouraged to view Jacky's downfall as something out of his hands, being at the whim of the social and economic pressures of the community in which he was raised. Therefore, the inherent tragedy of Jacky's downfall becomes how higher powers could have made it avoidable, which makes the fate of Jacky more closely aligned to the proactivist school of tragedy championed by Terry Eagleton.

Finally, Stuart uses the flexibility of autobiographical fiction to present Agnes's struggles with alcoholism from her own perspective, as well as using narration to give readers information beyond the perspective of his characters. This additional perspective draws the readers closer to Agnes than the external perspectives of Jacky and Rex would allow, heightening their empathy of her self-destruction despite her treatment of protagonist Shuggie. This empathetic presentation of Agnes's downfall aligns most closely to the school of tragedy presented by Rowan Williams, who emphasises the reflective and empathetic power of tragedy.

Despite these nuances, the consistent inevitability of each parent's respective fates, the pitiful circumstances they find themselves in along the way, and the lasting psychological damage they unwittingly place upon the child protagonists, shows the clear compatibility of tragic theory to fully explore the addict parent on the page.

Finally, although this investigation uses the texts of Walls, Louis, and Stuart to demonstrate the relationship between tragedy and the addict parent, it would be remiss of me to admit that I have also been mindful of the parallels between my critical framework, analysis, and my own text containing an addict parent. Much like Rex, Jacky, and Agnes, he too finds himself ensnared in a self-destructive cycle, and although he tries to provide his son some space to be a teenage boy when his drinking

confines him to a hospital ward following a stroke, the child protagonist is still haunted by the anxiety of his father's drinking and violence returning despite his pitiful condition.

However, of the three strands I have established, it has been the Rowan Williams/Douglas Stuart path my text has taken, both in terms of it being autobiographical fiction and its narrative being a socially conscious but still emotionally focused depiction of a working-class family struggling with addiction.

Discovering these parallels during my writing and research has been extremely encouraging, not only in terms of shaping my thinking as a writer going forward, but also as it shows the potential for this framework to encompass different texts, writers, and formal nuances.

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