

It's Complicated

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©2010 Nic Penrake

E: nicholas.penrake@gmail.com

M: +44 (0) 7779 102 348

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November 2, 2009, East London

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. This lanky teenager in a shell suit was literally taking her round the houses and for all she knew into an alleyway where she'd be mugged or worse. She'd got her flats on but she could hardly keep up because of the cramp in her legs, which was worse today – probably the damp weather. It was that hour in early November just before night suddenly snuck up on you, when any sudden movement – even those birds flying overhead – possessed an ineffably menacing quality to it. The postcode didn't help, either: E14. She could picture her sad, trundling journey played back on CCTV for the benefit of Crimewatch viewers... "Last seen walking..." Perhaps that's why the boy insisted on keeping 10 yards in front, so no one would be able to say they were together. Smart kid. Face as thin as a switch blade, as pale as the underbelly of a fish. He was cutting a straight line for that great big tower block over there. Jessica thought she recognised it – Balfron Tower. Wasn't a tower where they used to imprison people? Must be twenty storeys high. At least she'd be out of the cold.

The boy pressed a buzzer to the right of the entrance doors and mumbled something into the speaker. The catch popped open and he tugged the door handle like he was calling order on a nasty breed of dog on a tenuous leash.

He slipped inside and re-opened the door as she arrived on the porch, give seconds later – the fat woman coming in last.

An unremittingly grey lift area punctuated by the red exclamation of a fire extinguisher.

She joined the boy in front of the farthest lift. He seemed determined not to engage in small talk. A birdlike profile, defiant long nose, weak chin – dream for a cartoonist. Standing still, waiting for the lift to descend was nearly as painful as walking, no, worse. She bent forward to rub the backs of her shins. Not that it would do much good.

The alloy jaws of the lift slid back releasing an entire Somali generation, mum and grandma eyeing her suspiciously from behind their veils. They stepped inside and the boy pushed a button, as if squashing a beetle. Doors closed, sealing in the wonderful freshness. She'd smelled worse lifts.

They stepped out on floor 15 and turned left. The boy pressed in a code on some security thingy on the wall and pulled open the first door they'd come to. She followed him down the corridor, doors on her right – Chelsea blue, Arsenal red, West Ham purple, God, purple – dirty windows on her left. She could see all of East London from here.

They arrived at a green door and the boy wrapped on wood – three times, then twice, like a code. The door opened revealing a dark interior, a cave, and a man with dreds, a pale shade of black skin, and doped up eyes. Slowly he awakened to what he was seeing –

“Hey, Darren, man, good to see you man,” the man said brightening and stepping forward to give the youth a bro handshake and brief hug, their little ritual, perhaps, for signing off delivery of the stupid white middle-class missionary.

“So you the lady?”

She put him at around thirty, though he projected something of the smug attitude of a man of means in his forties.

“I’m Jessica,” her voice sounded conspicuously controlled coming so soon after a riff of dead consonants and elastic vowels.

The man stepped out into the corridor – in his socks – glancing to the end where wolves might be lurking.

“’s cool?” Darren asked.

“Yeah, man, yeah, ‘s cool. Just stay down there a minute, yeah?” he said, pointing to the far door. “Ten minutes, yeah?”

“Sure.” The boy nodded seriously, he seemed a conscientious lad. Working hard at his trade, no cocky attitude. Perhaps a mummy’s boy trying to prove himself at last.

As the boy headed off with a squeak of rubber his Nike soles, the man invited her inside.

Warm wasn’t quite how she’d have described it – the waft of close air nearly knocked her back into the corridor. No wonder he was only in a T-shirt. Perhaps he did Bikram yoga a home.

“I’m Joey,” he said with a slo mo flash of teeth instead of a handshake, now slowly making his way toward a back room, like some old dog back to his bed. He scratched his head and chest as he walked, the walk of a man never in a hurry it would seem. “Take a seat, Jessica,” he said, pronouncing the ‘c’ like a ‘k’, as they entered a living room piled with boxes of vinyl, magazines, speaker cabinets, junk and an embarrassment of cushions. He had a dark red throw over his worn out sofa, which, with its sunken seat, looked as though he lived there. He stooped to remove a pile of vinyl from a clapped out armchair, paused and said, “...Unless you’d prefer the poof.” To her surprise the man had a leather poof – *now getting post colonial retro rasta* –

“It’s OK,” she said, not fancying a chair without a back, back hurting again today. She took the armchair, wheezing a “Thank you” as she sat down.

Joey eased himself back onto his sofa, wrinkling his nose in discomfort, a malingerer dog.

“So...” he addressed her like the master pirate of the seas, his hands hung limply over the ends of his knees, “I hear from Simon you’re looking for a piece, Jessica.”

He made it sound like a rare Picasso drawing somehow.

“Yes.” She thought to clarify by adding ‘a gun’ but decided not to, not cool.

He sniffed. She asked if she might take her coat off.

“Yeah yeah yeah. It is a bit hot in here – the council just blasts the house down and the thermostat’s fucked, ‘scuse my French. I’ve got Caribbean blood though, so...” his word trailed off as a proud grin interceded. He didn’t offer to take her coat, so she threw it over the arm of her chair.

“So you met Simon, yeah? And Darren, obviously...”

Simon was the boy – 15, 16? going on 29 – whom she’d met in the park two days ago. Hanging with a tubby black boy with a sulky face and a loud laugh. It was the middle of the afternoon and she’d just come from a local rough pub, putting herself out there like a piece of chum, hoping the fishes who sell guns and other contraband would come and take a nibble. Buying a gun was a bit outside her comfort zone as a columnist. The nearest she’d got to crime as a journalist was some local reporting at a magistrate’s twelve years ago. The male punters had observed her with their usual London suspicion and left her to ooze and swim some more. The occasional slovenly woman who’d appeared had viewed her much the same way. Of course a stranger might be a cop, she might be a piece of chum with a big hook in it. At least she’d had the sense to dress down. Then again, maybe that was working against her; she couldn’t tell. She’d put on a pair of old misshapen tracksuit bottoms and a crumpled shirt and a shabby old raincoat. “Are you alright there, love?” an unshaven man unsteady on his feet had asked her. You see, they soon sniff out whether you’re here for a drink or actually looking for someone, out to do some Business. The man didn’t look like a possible lead, though – she had a nose too – and she’d answered politely that she was fine and the man had withdrawn. The brief exchange had slightly unnerved her and she decided she’d try somewhere else, or may just give up and go home. So she quietly abandoned the foul fruit juice she’d been nursing for over an hour and slipped outside – only to be accosted by the sharp smell of defeat. Her second day at this, and she was almost prepared to give up. You don’t even know what you’re doing, a voice whined in her head. She bought herself some thinking time, opting for a local park that looked a bit dodgy. After ten minutes’ pointless shivering on a bench, she saw three teenagers enter the park, joshing with each other. She didn’t know why but she felt certain she’d be better able to talk to boys in the open than grown men in a pub. For one thing, younger men are more likely to act

on impulse and, if she showed them money, like a flash of knicker elastic – remember those days behind the bike sheds – something might happen. “Hi there,” she said with a smile, “I wonder if you can help me with something. I need to buy a gun.” They gawked at her as if she were mad. “Is that something you might be able to help me with?” There, she’d said it. It didn’t even sound so unreasonable now it was out in the open.

“I don’t normally do this sort of thing in my own place, like,” Joey was saying in an accent that owed something to his Jamaican parent, LA wrap culture, and his post code, “but Simon reckoned you was OK and – if you don’t mind me saying – you’re a female journalist, so I’m like, OK...” He shrugged and rolled his eyes to the window and back. “So which paper do you write for, Jessi-ka?”

She’d not intended telling the boys what she did, but they’d asked to see her press badge and she realised things wouldn’t proceed very far if she didn’t show them. They’d taken it and passed it around, back and forth, like it was her hat they were teasing her with by not giving it her back.

“I’m freelance. I write for a couple of the broadsheets.”

“You mean, like, not the gutter press, like what I’d read?”

She didn’t want to presume to know what he read, though it wasn’t difficult to guess, so she simply added that she was doing a piece on gun crime and hoped she didn’t come across as prim and proper.

“Oh, yeah,” Joey said, as if he’d *heard* of gun crime, that it might be a problem these days. “Piece on a piece,” he said, with a throaty laugh. He threw a limp arm over the back of the sofa as if to include it in the conversation. “So you buy a piece – from someone like me, presumably – and then you write about how easy it is to buy a piece, yeah?”

“Yes.”

He came forward, now wearing an attentive frown to show her he was every bit her match intellectually. “I get it: if you can get one, anyone can get one.” He scratched the mangy stubble on his chin, giving the subject more thought. “And you think I’ve got a piece somewhere in this flat, is that right?”

She wished she’d not bothered with make-up, it was turning to cake on her face. She edged forward, interlinking her fingers, tucking in her chin – time to get business-like. “Simon took my money, so I assume I’m here to pick up what I’ve bought.”

His eyes widened, a little pink, a little yellow in the corners of the bulbous whites... “That was trusting of you, Jessica.”

She said nothing, but determined to maintain eye contact, however regrettable.

“We’re not here to steal from people, y’know? I don’t live like that. I like to trade. You start stealing, it’s bad karma, you know what I mean?”

"I think so," she replied, superfluously.

"You don't want bad karma on an estate like this – it can get you killed."

She didn't doubt it.

Joey sat forward and reached for a pouch of tobacco, some Rizlas, on a cracked glass-top coffee table strewn with club flyers. She could tell this was going to take a while. She might be down to her undies by the time she got hold of the gun.

"You smoke?"

"Um..." She didn't. And yet – why hadn't she thought of this before – didn't some MS sufferers find exceptional relief smoking marijuana?

"It's very smooth. You have some," he urged generously. "Real Moroccan. Have a try. Mi casa es tu casa. I do you a small one."

She couldn't really refuse.

"You're welcome, Jessica."

She watched him pick up a small cellophane bag from the table and sprinkle some finely ground leaves of marijuana into a line of tobacco lying in a Rizla. Ingrained fingers rolled the paper and contents with twitchy, loving care. He ran the sticky side of the Rizla along his thick pink tongue, sealing the joint. He smoothed out a couple of minor kinks and, now satisfied, held out the joint. She took it, feeling a bit stupid with it poking out between her fingers. Three lighters on the table – the small orange Bic one coughed up an anaemic flame. She leaned across the table and took a drag... exhaled. It was indeed smooth, smoother than anything she could remember having had at college.

"Yeah, I don't do that resin shit – no, gives me a headache, man... sends you a bit crazy..." He was shaking his head and frowning censoriously. "I only smoke the best," he said summarily. "You like it?" he asked again.

Within a minute she was feeling calmer, the rabid pain in her legs was subsiding into a contented Cheshire grin.

Joey fell quiet for a moment as if to let her savour her experience more fully without conversation. He watched her as you would a new experiment. Dimly she grew aware that he might also be viewing her as men view women – for her fuckability. He pushed himself up from the sofa.

"*What you have there* – that's more my business, not guns. The only reason I'm giving you this piece, yeah – OK, I'm sellin' it, but that's cos I need some money, I just had this operation on my left testicle, a cyst, y'know? So I'm like cooped up in here for two weeks, can't hardly walk down the street... and so I'm losing money, right? I wasn't wanting to sell that gun to someone from around here, I mean, it'd get back to me, but when Simon showed me your ID, I thought, *Maybe...*" He sat back, returning to the regal corner of his sofa: "This estate – it gets worse, man, I tell you. And as

long as you keep me out of your piece you're doing, yeah," he grinned at the pun, "and no mention of this estate, no mention of my boys, Simon and Darren and Leon, you're welcome to kick up a fuss in your newspaper column."

She'd been puffing happily away while all this was going on – she'd better slow down or she was going to need his sofa, as a bed.

Joey had disappeared. No announcement. Strange.

When he padded back in – at least now she understood why he walked as if he'd wet himself – he was carrying some black metal object in his hand.

"You ever held a gun before? It's heavy, man. It's like – you don't think it's gonna be this heavy, but it is, it's like dense, man, like a tombstone." He seemed quite gratified to have hit on this apt simile. Indeed she was beginning to wish she'd brought her tape recorder. Would she remember these words? Or, indeed, any of their encounter?

Joey returned to the spot before his seat on the sofa and stood before her holding the gun.

"Is that good?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, thanks... very smooth." She felt slightly stupid saying smooth, as if she were giving a testimonial for a new baby product by Johnson & Johnson.

"Yeah, it is, isn't it. The real thing. No, that's Coke," he added with a barking laugh.

"Very good," she added, conscious of not expressing quite enough gratitude till now.

Joey seemed to recall he was holding a gun and that maybe he should give her a demo. "This gun – it's not mine, yeah? – some old guy left it behind when he went inside... but he's dead now. I dunno why I kept it... I've been meaning to get rid of it for a while..." He turned it over as if looking for a sign that might explain his passive fondness for the item.

"Is it one of those automatics, a Beretta or something?"

"Yeah, automatic. Not a Beretta though. Some Russian name..." He searched in vain for a name. "Anyway, it works..." He put his left hand over the gun and pulled something back with a click, like he was releasing a safety catch.

"OK, motherfucker," he said, and suddenly he flew into a rage, shouting in a Mississippi accent, flapping the gun about, *Christ!* "...and I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers! And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee!" His nostrils flared and he glowered madly at her, eyes popping. He raised his arm, pointing the gun at her face... and then he pulled the trigger – twice.

She felt her body shake with each click as though it had been hit by an invisible bullet.

Slowly he lowered his arm and the gun. His mad expression drained away, though he looked deadly serious still. She realised she was trembling, but otherwise totally fine.

“What you think, Jessica?”

She cleared her throat. “What do I think?”

“Yeah. My performance. I always forget the first few lines of that speech. You seen the movie, yeah, *Pulp Fiction*? Great movie.”

“I have, yes.”

“Samuel Jackson. What a dude, man. So you know that scene?”

“I do.”

Joey scratched his dreds. How could he stand it in here. She looked to the window – they were all shut and looked as if they hadn’t been opened since *Pulp Fiction* won at Cannes. Joey sat down, finally, placing the gun on the coffee table among the tobacco paraphernalia. *Clunk*. RIP Jessica Kidmont.

“You want some bullets, too?”

“If you have any, yes.”

She thought she read disappointment in his eyes. He got up without a word and left the room. Her joint had snuffed it. She decided to re-light it in a bid to pacify the African drum in her chest.

Joey returned with a little box and Sainsbury’s bag. He gave the box a rattle and put box and gun in bag, wrapped the bag around itself and placed her order on the sofa cushion beside him. Like that was only part one of their trade. But he’d forgotten something: took the gun out of the bag and wiped it down with the tail of his T-shirt.

“Can’t be too careful, now you’re asking for live ammo...”

She made a slight regrettable smile – which he seemed too busy to notice.

After giving it a thorough rub-down using his shirt tail as a glove Joey dropped the gun back in the bag, wrapped it up, put it back on the cushion.

“None of my business, but why do you need bullets if you’re just writing a piece about how easy it is easy to find a piece?”

Jessica felt she was in need of a disingenuous reply. “Do you have any of this for sale?” she asked, pointing to the little cellophane bag on his coffee table.

Joey studied her with a sober expression of brotherly concern, then chortled, almost but not quite coughing up phlegm. “I thought you’d never ask.” He had a charming squint to his smile, shame about the scary teeth. “How much do you want?”

She returned to the street with a handbag that felt like a dumbbell and a head as voluminous as the internet. She was happy about her strange encounter on the 15th floor and realised in spite of all her dark thoughts, there were still things worth living for. She ought to get out more. She’d

suspected as much. She'd got too comfortable writing about issues, instead of human lives. Now she had an effective painkiller, maybe she didn't need the gun any more. Suicide was on hold.

2

April 21, 2009, Central London

He was beginning to regret this. Brad wasn't supposed to stick around trying to seduce the girl, he was supposed to join them for an hour and use that time to help break the ice and talk him up. Then leave. This was Myles's date, in case he'd forgotten. Well of course he hadn't forgotten, not in the real sense, he was just a selfish sod. You haven't even been able to catch his eye for the past ten minutes. Another kick under the table – the first one Brad ignored – and she'll start to suspect something...

Myles took another sip of his white wine, a watery, slightly acidic, Pinot Grigio. Brad was trying to convince Gina that she should be making more use of Facebook to market herself as an 'independent' – i.e. broke – screenwriter/producer. Gina was resistant to the idea, she was quite happy with her 98 friends, thanks very much; she seemed quite protective of the old fashioned concept of 'friend', although amused – and nearly won over – by Brad's ramblings.

Brad had behaved like this on a couple of dates they'd arranged this way, but just as Myles had begun to feel as if he'd stupidly invited a cuckoo into the nest, his friend had suddenly, almost breathtakingly, excused himself and their arrangement had been preserved. Myles would sigh with relief and the girl would lean a little closer, her face aglow from Brad's mercurial attentions.

They'd been 'crashing' each other's internet dates – as a sort of dating strategy – for the past six months. And they were faring better this way than flying solo. Brad had gone to bed with two out of seven, Myles one out of six – this date being his seventh, though Brad was possibly trying to make it his eighth. They'd never set out to date like this. But then one night the two of them fell into a sort of good cop bad cop routine with a girl Brad had invited for a drink. The next day, a happy Brad had bounded up to Myles for a Soho coffee mid afternoon and exclaimed, *It worked! What you were doing – it worked! What worked? She came back to mine! I thought I'd need a couple more dates with her, but it worked. You being there, the way we were talking, it was like a catalyst...* He said that the girl had even said as much herself. Being marketing guys, when you chance on a 'technique' that makes a sale, you rinse and repeat, don't you. So that's what they did.

So what was their usp – or unique selling point – as a double act? They weren't tall –both around 5' 11", with physiques that might have made them good ballet dancers but for their 9 to 5 existence – and they weren't loaded, either. But they both dressed well – Myles in Armani linen jackets and slim-fit white shirts with minimal collars, black 501s or G&G trousers, Italian slip-on shoes, and Brad in cream, khaki or grey chinos, retro sports jacket, perhaps a suit jacket from a charity shop, shirts as random as Americana to city boy stripes. Chatting together in a bar or cafe, they invariably drew glances from women nearby. Myles suspected it was the hint of homo eroticism that existed between them that they picked up on and were curious about. For some it seemed to work like catnip. Sharp and intelligent enough they may have been, but it was their double act, their timing, that made the difference. Brad would typically throw his whole body into talking to a woman – gesticulating theatrically, swaying on the seat of a precipitous bar stool, then slipping off it to go swanning from chair to chair. At times Myles would cringe, thinking, how camp, at others, he couldn't help finding beauty in his friend's movement – he was simply beautiful to watch, like a conjurer dazzling his audience with his sleight of hand. Myles had never met anyone so gifted at spinning tales and witty remarks from thin air. Like any good double act, they could read each other in the blink of an eye. They would pretend to bicker, then descend on the girl, turning her inside out with riffs of teasing and flattery. The 'dumb ones' were usually too confused to want to engage, but the more discerning women, such as Gina – the ones they were interested in – were entertained, even if they weren't always convinced. And for Myles, who still lived with his 'estranged' wife who was now dating a drummer in a pub band, 'being entertained' was key, not 'getting laid'. Myles had gone back to dating with as much relish as if he'd been sent back to the school of Turning Things Round. Signing up to a site, uploading a photo, writing a profile, sending out witty missives to anyone and everyone who looked like a possible 'fit' had been emasculating enough. Then came the string of cringe comedy encounters with 'curvy women' who were fat, the 'slim women' who were ten years older than their photo led you to believe, the seemingly interested women who got you to pay for the night out then disappeared without a trace – and other combinations of mismatching, which made a mockery of the fatuous optimism of the sign-up experience. And yet – and if only because – he had actually met a couple of people who had found love online, he'd told himself that internet dating was simply like anything else, like sending out your CV for jobs – you just had to keep at it.

But what a relief when Brad had joined in. Myles discovered he was livelier and altogether wittier on these internet dates with Brad than he had been on his own. As a younger man, he once took a crack at acting and had loved it, loved the buzz giving a performance gave you, loved stepping out of himself, running with the ideas of a fictional self. So even when one of Brad's dates had

shown some interest in him, he'd never minded walking away after the agreed hour because he would have had so much fun and was happy to have enhanced Brad's chances of success. Perhaps best of all, these double dates made Myles feel young again – no longer 44, but 34, or even 37, which was Brad's age. Except, tonight, that former sense of feeling young again was remarkably thin, and it was rapidly draining out of him leaving behind a crusty layer of middle-age anger – at the younger man...

Ominously Myles had picked up that Brad and Gina had already met once before, at a party, about a year ago. They had a connection, in other words, which could potentially unhinge the connection Myles had worked pretty hard at building up with Gina through emails and Skype. Right this moment, as Brad leaned in again to touch Gina on the arm, Myles was trying to calculate whether he had the stamina for competing with another man for a woman's attentions, even a woman as alluring as this British Italian, Gina. He imagined himself interjecting, So shall I leave you two to it? and leaving in a huff before they had time to respond. He noted the absence of a strong competitive impulse knocking on his brain – it was just a memory, it seemed, and if he had to manufacture it, was it really worth the trouble? And yet, he had to do *something*: it was now ten o'clock and Gina had just invited Brad along to a hotel bar she thought they'd both like.

It was a dark April night, raw and wet, begrudging of the slowly arriving summer round the corner. A night you'd remember for the tyres rolling in the wet, the clunk of a closing cab door, the honing of your hunter's instinct.

Myles jumped in the cab after Brad and Gina, discovering a reservoir of optimism through the spring in his step. Brad ramble on as if to fill the cab space with himself, only himself, drowning Myles in his own silence. There was the traffic to watch, the sounds to reflect upon, Gina's laughter to study – and then they were there.

Brad jumped up, nearly hitting his head on the roof of the cab, as Gina gathered her skirt and angles her beautiful legs toward the doorway.

"Here." Brad stuffed a fiver in Myles's hand and ran off with Gina, leaving Myles to do the honours.

They were no longer a team, it was more like sergeant and his rookie.

A year later Myles would try and remember where this hotel was, what it looked like from the outside, the way a writer or detective wants to visit the origins of a sad story, even a tragic story, but his memory would remain vague on this. True, he was already a bit pissed, but he knew the place was somewhere around Great Portland Street. Why had he never been able to find it again? Was

that because what was to happen next would turn the rest of the evening into the kind of memory that immediately acquired the character of myth?

Myles flipped his jacket collar up and stepped inside. He would remember a dark and gloomy reception area, a silent figure seated by a side table and an open guest book, a sense of inexplicable apprehension in his chest as he quietly announced that he was with Gina and 'her friend'. The wan figure nodded and pointed down the corridor and said, stiffly, "To your left."

Myles made his way to a large bar area. A long, almost empty bar with sofas and armchairs, little lamps in corners, the atmosphere of an older England that the new members club they had just left had seen fit to erase. He saw Gina – she was in the middle of the room talking to a waiter, like they were great friends – but no Brad. *If only he had really disappeared.* The waiter was young – mid twenties – a stockier version of a pouting James Dean. So now there was another man interested in Gina – *this is how it is when you date a beautiful woman, like a slight, sharp pain in the chest, a foretaste of what it's like to experience a real heart attack.*

As Myles approached with appropriate lack of haste, Gina touched the waiter fondly on the arm, laughing gaily to show the world she loved a good looking man's attention – *and why not?* The man by contrast remained composed, as if it weren't somehow appropriate to join in, possibly because he was on duty – but Myles couldn't help feeling the waiter was vain and had trained himself not to laugh when women laughed.

As the waiter moved away, Gina turned and waved to Myles. She didn't wait for him, though, she carried on down the room, solo, cutting a path as if to her favourite far corner table, like a woman who knows what she wants – or, at least, who knows what she wants when she's out with men she finds attractive. The message was: he'd better keep up if he wanted to keep her interested.

"How do you like it?" Gina asked, unbuttoning her coat.

"Very Kubrick, somehow."

"Exactly. I thought you'd like it." She slipped sexily out of her raincoat – Myles wished he could do that – and sat down on the sofa, giving her rain-dotted hair a slight toss to the side. "Don't you think he would have loved to film here?" she said, as Myles further appraised the jaded atmosphere typical of hotel bars that have always fallen short of 'glamorous'.

He chose the opposite corner on the same sofa and immediately regretted not having placed his behind a little closer to hers. Her round and toned.

"You say Kubrick, but, I don't know... maybe Lynch. With all this red carpet, the dark furnishings..." He noted only three or four tables out of twenty or so were occupied – small groups of older patrons, who spoke in hushed tones and occasionally burst out into bouts of quickly contained laughter.

As he'd thought, she also loved Lynch, even the more confused and confusing recent work which Myles had lost patience with. A girl so attractive with such dark taste... and yet, hadn't she said she was writing a romcom?

"So –" Myles began, he couldn't help himself, he had to get some clarity on this matter, even if his query betrayed some uneasiness on his part – "you and Brad, you know each other apparently?"

"No, not at all. Honestly. We met at some party ages ago. He seems to know a friend of mine – well, not a friend, an acquaintance. I haven't seen her for ages..."

"Jessica?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"No, not really, not well..."

"Small world! My God!"

"Well it keeps getting smaller, doesn't it, everyone having a few thousand friends each, these days."

"I take it you're not a fan of Facebook."

"I'm a fan by necessity."

"So did Brad just say that we're friends?"

She brushed an imaginary hair from the hem of her skirt. *They rarely come in trousers to an internet date...*

"No, I just..." Myles spotted Brad in the corner of his eye and dried up. He turned to watch him come over – his shambling gait called to mind a silent movie comedian who's been looking all over the place for his friends and finally chanced upon them getting up to mischief without him. He wore a perpetual smirk on his face as if he'd just experienced something very funny in the toilets, assuming that's where he'd been. Myles couldn't help envying his friend's look of constant amusement at this stage in his drunkenness – brimming with farcical possibilities.

There was an empty armchair waiting for him, but Brad went straight for the space separating Myles and Gina. Then darted forward to grab the wine list.

"Bit quiet this hotel bar of yours," Myles remarked, unsure whether he was admitting to intrigue or airing his disapproval.

"Almost funereal," Brad added with enthusiasm.

"I quite like it," Gina said.

"Yeah, no, I do, it's – very – atmospheric," Brad added, playing along. "The quiet little lamps in the corners, the murderous crimson, the stifled longing of velvet –" He paused and smiled.

Myles shot to his feet. He didn't think he could take any more of Brad's rambling just at the moment...

“Haven’t frightened you off already, have I?” Brad said with feigned concern.

“Where’re the loos?” Myles asked them both.

Brad was looking at him wearing a soft dreamy smile and wrinkling his brow in a manner that expressed affectionate concern and condescension in equal measure – and as usual Myles had already forgiven him for still being here.

“You go through those doors, along the corridor – and you’ll see a velvet curtain and a dwarf...” Brad smiled roundly.

Myles smiled thinly and headed off.

“Let me know if they serve food in there!” Brad called after him. “I feel this is all so... Buñuel!”

Arriving in the oily light and hard space of the Gents toilets, Myles realised he needed to think more than he needed to pee. He entered the end cubicle, bolted the door and dropped the seat. First: *Why was Brad doing this?* OK, Gina was attractive – sensuous lips, patrician nose, a bob she’s let grow and pulled back to look carefree, real, shapely breasts – but, hey, that was irrelevant: some of Brad’s dates had been attractive and *attracted* to him, but he’d always left after the agreed hour. If every date was an open competition, their act would disintegrate into real bickering. And they so couldn’t afford to fall out: they were partners in a start-up ad agency, for Christ sake, and there was a recession on! He was amazed Brad appeared so blind to the dangers his behaviour was courting. With alcohol in his system, Brad was always unpredictable, that’s what made him fun to be out with – but just lately both drinking and selfishness had been reaching new heights of destructiveness and Myles was getting vertigo...

They’d met nearly three years ago in Café Bohème, a Soho watering hole, around 3 pm in the afternoon. Brad was at the bar, seemingly engrossed in his coffee and newspaper. Myles ordered a cappuccino and hopped onto a bar stool. He struck up a conversation with a quietly sardonic French waiter which Brad commented on. Clearly he knew the waiter reasonably well and was a regular here. Myles picked up a sense that Brad was the kind of person who had an uncanny understanding of social politics in any area of life, be it a bar or a blue chip company. When the waiter disappeared to the cellar, Brad and Myles got chatting, slightly wary of each other at first, but talking at speed, with an openness Myles found startling. They quickly discovered that they were both in advertising – Brad was a planner, or consultant, as he preferred to call himself, Myles a copywriter – and had meetings to go to later that afternoon. They drew their stools together and Brad offered to buy Myles a drink, already ordering a glass of wine for himself.

“I used to come in here all the time in my twenties,” Brad had said. “I must have spent half my earnings in here.”

“Me too,” Myles replied, with an equally foolish smile on his face.

It amused them that they had no recollection of seeing each other in this bar during the ten years or more they had patronised the place, and yet here they were, infrequent visitors these days, and they had finally run into each other. Unusual for two men to express openly a sense of regret for time passing in only a few minutes of getting to know each other – but wistfulness and longing seemed to be something they immediately shared in common. This being the gayest street in Soho, however, a man engaging you so readily in conversation, you can’t help being on your guard at first, especially when gays have been known to tell you how beautiful you are and especially with someone like Brad who had a rather camp way of expressing himself, a salacious glint to the irony in his slightly sloping brown eyes, but whatever Myles’s apprehensions in that department they were overcome by a growing fascination in this younger man with the silver tongue.

As their exchanges became ever more urgent and discursive, they also discovered that each of them was at the end of a relationship – Myles his ten-year marriage to a Japanese woman, Brad in a deeply frustrating relationship with a ‘stunning’ Egyptian girl, (she’d actually grown up in Streatham, South London), who was also ten years younger than he was. Having made calls to postpone their meetings, (they no longer seemed important), now on their third glass of wine, they discovered that they had gone for similar types of women – both foreign, artistic, even talented, but prone to prevarication. They pretended to each – and possibly themselves at the time – that they were both still ‘trying to make it (their relationship) work’, and yet, on the evidence, with the two of them propped up in the very bar they used to frequent in the hope of running into pretty girls, who were they kidding? Their husband personas, perhaps.

Brad was seven years younger than Myles – and yet, annoyingly, he seemed to have lived much more. He’d been a performance artist, a singer in a rock band (that Myles had never heard of), a producer of a few dance singles (that Myles had never heard of), a commercials producer and, latterly, an ad man – a string of glamorous offices in Amsterdam, Singapore, New York and London. He claimed to be working these days as a freelance consultant at a top 10 ad agency Myles had tried to get into when he first did the rounds of ad agencies looking for placements as a junior. The best Myles could summon up was to say he was doing alright as a freelancer – in fact, he hadn’t worked for nearly six weeks. They both pretended to be enjoying life – though unfulfilled sexually, this was only temporary – and yet, the funny thing was, they were both pretty miserable – until now. In just two hours of meeting one another they had reignited the spark of their battered optimism and, boy, did it seem to be alive and kicking. They ordered another glass of white wine and continued to regale each other with stories of client incompetence, rampant office paranoia and staggering displays of arrogance from certain Creative Directors they had worked with. Or was that *under*? They

discovered they both shared a love for Art, and still clung to dreams of working in Hollywood. One day it would all come right, they told each other... At around six pm, Myles was aware of a warm glow from within that he hadn't felt in quite a while with his clothes on: and it wasn't merely the alcohol; he hadn't had this feeling among friends in years. True, he recognised the feeling for what it was – a passing and unreliable flashback to what it was like to be 24 – and yet, and yet... On a more practical note, Brad said he might be able to help Myles with something *real*, the here and now. He'd heard the agency he worked at was recruiting creatives, he seemed pretty sure he could get Myles in front of the Creative Director he worked with, and, notwithstanding the fact that all he knew of Myles's work was a by now old toothpaste commercial for Sensodyne – albeit the best he'd ever seen – he saw no reason why he couldn't get him 'in there'. Standing at the urinal with a slightly drunken smile on his face, Myles dared to believe he had a real chance of escaping the dreariness of working in below-the-line-agencies – direct mail and point of sale – and be writing commercials again before Christmas. And all because of a chance meeting in a bar, all because he'd chosen to be friendly and open when he was in no mood to talk with a male stranger. Brad looked like the kind of guy who could pull off such an introduction. And didn't they say, It wasn't what you know but who you know? How could you even repeat those words without vomiting? And yet...

The next time they met, Brad was evasive about the hiring rumour – the recessions wasn't helping and, in fact, they might even be making some teams redundant – and two weeks later Brad revealed he himself was no longer at the aforementioned glamorous above-the-line-agency, he was working full time at a below-the-line agency. Myles said goodbye to the ship that never was as Brad rambled on about politics – he couldn't stand the politics; too much bitching, he said. He'd got blamed for a pitch that went wrong but, luckily, he'd been able to get in to this new place almost overnight – through a friend. (Brad seemed to have friends everywhere.) He was much happier now, anyway, he said. Fuck commercials. He was getting more money there, his boss actually appreciated what he did and there was less pressure. He reckoned he'd be MD there – or somewhere like it – within the year. And, of course, he was still on course to become a millionaire by the time he was forty. Dollars, he added with a grin. Myles let himself be amused even as he quietly berated himself for ever having given Brad's 'opportunity' much credence in the first place.

"Look, we'll find something for you," Brad had said, touching his arm. "I know we're going to work together one day."

And then, one day, two years ago, Brad had bumped into Myles in The Groucho club and revealed he was no longer working at that stupid little below the line agency which had turned out to be even nastier than the glamorous one, he had his own agency, a start-up, and they needed a copywriter. Myles was interested. It turned out however Brad could only offer an average of 1-2

days a week, at £200 a day – just until we get in another account. Freelancing at the time, Myles said that wouldn't be a problem. When Myles's freelance sloped off and he grabbed a full-time position to shore up the rising credit card debt, he still managed to continue working with Brad. And for the past 13 months the two men had become so inseparable as to be the stuff of gossip. But gossip is 'colourful' as long as it is being swept along by success – and although they were not raking it in, they looked the part. So why, with all that potential working for them, was Brad so disrespecting of him tonight? Had he let things go too far, mixing business and pleasure with Brad?

He suddenly realised he'd been sitting there an embarrassingly long time and got to his feet. No one had visited the room in ten minutes. Spooky hotel. He flushed the toilet – entertaining the fragile hope that any further impediments to a happy outcome to the evening would simply wash away.

Returning to his seat, Myles felt sharper and determined to wrest back control from Brad even if he failed to secure a second date with Gina.

"So, what're we drinking?" he asked them both, and immediately liked the note of authority that had returned to his voice.

But Brad was doing his thing of pretending not to hear, slowly turning his head and smiling his kindly supercilious smile before reaching for the wine list and exclaiming, "Champagne, of course!"

"Fine, it's on you – seeing as you insisted on coming along."

Brad made as if to cough and splutter at the 'hurtful' dig, but remained smiling as he scanned the list.

"...Hm, not very recession-friendly these prices, are they..."

The waiter Myles had seen earlier appeared – and again Myles had the impression of a very vain and humourless young man.

Brad ordered the Chablis.

"And some nuts, please, if you have any," Myles added. He was starving.

"Gracias, Javier!" Gina called as the waiter left with their order.

"Javier?" Myles queried.

"Yes. He's one of my language students. He's cute, don't you think? I quite fancy him."

Brad sat back and gazed at her as if amused at something gauche about her remark.

"Myles used to TEFL, didn't you?" Brad said now turning to Myles.

"Yeah – years ago. Part-time."

"That's what I do – part-time. It's good – it gives me the afternoons free for writing."

"This romcom you're doing?" Myles said.

“Yeah – with another girl. “

“Is it a 'strong woman' story?” Brad asked, as though anyone’s lofty ambitions were inevitably a source of ridicule.

“You might call it that.”

“What’s it about?” Myles asked, trying to add warmth to his second ‘interview’ question.

“Secret.”

“A romcom mystery movie?” Brad concluded facetiously.

“No, what it's about is a secret. I don't particularly want the concept bouncing around bars so any old hack can have a go at it.”

“What attracted you to Myles, by the way?”

“He was funny. We had good email.”

“Ah, so it follows – you might have 'good sex' as well?”

“You never know. “

Brad gazed at Gina as if demanding her to consider transferring her ‘you never know’ to him, as of this moment.

Myles looked about the room, restless for refreshment. “The waiter seems to have forgotten us, doesn't he?”

“There’s probably an unspoken house policy that you're left to sit a while, so you have time to absorb the soothingly homicidal atmosphere,” Brad said.

Gina got to her feet.

“I’m just going to the loo, OK.”

The two men watched the gentle swish of shapely hips in a black skirt as Gina headed off for the far door. Only when she was gone did they turn to look at each other.

“What do you think?” Brad said. “Isn't she gorgeous?”

“I feel a bit weird – you two having met before.”

“Yeah, she's a friend – or maybe a Facebook friend – of Jessica's – y'know, the journo.”

“That’s why I feel at a disadvantage; it was supposed to be anonymous, now it feels vaguely incestuous already.”

“Why don't you go then – retire with early symptoms of swine flu – and you can have the next one. You don't seem to warm to her much.”

“I do, I just – “

“I think she’s gorgeous! I can't believe I've met her again – through a fucking internet date!”

“My internet date.”

“Oh, don’t be so bourgeois.”

“Bourgeois? I didn’t know people still used that word.”

“I’m going to have to take these dates more seriously,” Brad said, as if to himself.

“She’s certainly the brightest I’ve met on one of these things,” Myles admitted, trying to be generous yet sounding picky to his own ears.

“Intelligence, Myles – it’s the only true aphrodisiac.”

Worryingly, the word ‘aphrodisiac’ propelled Brad to his feet and sent him off in the same direction as Gina. Heads turned to look at Myles as if they could sense his growing unease. It was a relief to see the waiter appear, carrying their wine in an ice bucket, together with two glasses. Myles thanked him and asked for a third glass and the waiter apologised and left with assurances to return immediately.

Myles took a sip and sucked on the citrusy flavour. He wasn’t a fan of Chablis; it seemed to hiss at him; he preferred the softer, fruitier tones of a Viognier or the generosity of a Bhone wine. Setting his glass down, he spotted Gina emerge by the far open doors. She stopped and turned round. Brad appeared, talking to her. He moved closer to her as if to pluck a feather from her hair, but then pinned her to the door jamb and kissed her. On the mouth. Myles felt his blood boil, his empty stomach tightening. And yet it was as fascinating as watching a bird swoop down on its prey and break its neck. Even for Brad, this was extreme. For a moment Gina was either pinned to the wall or enjoying it too much to resist. It was perhaps only 3-4 seconds, but for Myles it went on and on like a fall in a dream.

Gina gradually seemed to come to her senses and pushed Brad away from her. Without saying a word – probably too shocked – she extricated herself with minimum fuss. Myles would have welcomed exclamations of outrage upon her return, but she confused him by acting as if she’d just taken a refreshing dip in the sea.

Brad now glided after her, as if on a wave of elation, a stand-up comedian returning on stage to perform his encore.

Gina sat down without a word, without glancing at Myles, a faintly amused and defiant smile adorning her lips.

“Are you OK?” she said as if she knew of the lump in his throat.

“Yeah... Are you?”

But Brad had arrived already – he picked up the bottle of wine exclaiming, “At last!” and began pouring.

And then the waiter was back with the third glass –

“Just in time!” Brad said, almost snatching the glass from the waiter.

“I get the nuts,” the waiter said, and left.

Myles wished he'd never requested them – the waiter's tardy comings and goings were turning his evening into even more of a farce than it already was. No doubt Javier was from Barcelona, as well.

Brad raised a glass.

"To virtual love, then – "

"Are you alright?" Myles asked Gina once more, as if half-expecting to see a welt come up on her mouth.

"Yeah, fine," she said with a nonchalant sweep of her hand through hairs set free by Brad's kiss.

"What's the matter with you?" Myles directed at Brad.

"Did he say he was jealous?" Brad said, directing his question at Gina. "Or don't you say that kind of thing in your dating profiles?"

Being dilettante by nature, Brad had a real talent for mocking anything that could be interpreted as 'trying too hard' – if he'd been on internet dates, which of course he had, it was only because he wanted to prove how 'virtual' they were.

"I don't remember. Are you?"

For the first time in the evening Gina's voice had gone a bit flat.

"Myles is a dark horse." It was possibly the first thing Brad had said in the last two hours that actually returned some of the initiative to Myles. "I'll be back in a minute. I just have a call to make."

Brad bounced out of his seat and headed for the exit.

Was he giving Myles some space in which to manoeuvre, or was he planning some mischief?

"I hope he's not gone to order us coke or something," Gina said.

Myles laughed, relieved to hear her air his own fears. "That *would* be the final straw." After a pause he said, "Shall we escape while he's gone?"

"Oh, it's OK. He's quite amusing."

"A few drinks and he gets totally out of hand."

"Is he right then? Are you a dark horse?"

Myles couldn't think of anything to say without sounding vain – so he half-shrugged.

"What do you want from this site? A Sugar Babe?"

Myles laughed.

"I seem to remember you were one of the few I wrote to who weren't 'limited exclusively to a sugar babe relationship'.

"No, actually I put that I was."

"Oh."

They laughed.

“And are you looking for a Sugar Daddie?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Have you had men asking you for arrangements?”

“Oh, yes, of course. I had a man recently call me on Skype offering 10,000 a month if I’d be available to him twice a month.”

“On Skype? So he’d never even met you?”

“No.”

“Prostitution.”

“Of course.”

“Tempted?”

She pulled a face. “Possibly. But I’m not like to have to give up my freedom like that.”

“Only two nights a month.”

“Yes, but it’s the whole – state of mind, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

She studied him further.

“You must have lots of women after you with those beautiful blue eyes. It was such a striking photo. Most other men – they’re small in the picture, blurred, hardly ever a close up where you can see into someone’s eyes.”

“Yours too.”

“Really?”

“Yes, beautiful... very dark.”

“Black.”

“No, dark brown.”

“No, black,” she insisted.

“OK, black.” Though a little tiresome, the ping pong almost restored him to his good humour of two hours ago.

“You’re a strange mixture,” Gina remarked, pursuing the same testing line of enquiry.

“Aren't we all.”

“I don’t think we are. You seem very self-contained, but – I dunno... “ She trailed off, took a sip of her wine. “Why did we come here with your friend? He seems a bit gay by the way.”

“Bi – or he was, anyway... so he told me.”

“I didn't know sexuality could fade. “

“With him, it comes and goes. Like a fashion...Shall I ask him to leave?”

“Well no, I think it's a bit late now. I don't mind... don't worry about it, it's OK, I just think it's a bit off. I mean, what do you want?”

“It's more what I don't want. If I insist he goes, he might make a scene.”

“And you don't want a scene.”

“Not with Brad, no – not if I can help it.”

Gina observed him critically for a moment.

“You're very cool, aren't you? But I don't get from you that you want anything decisively enough. Maybe in your work, but – “

“Why, just because I might suffer Brad's company for another hour?”

“Have I offended you?”

Myles gestured a sort of 'you might have'.

“I don't mean to. It's just – maybe I'm looking for someone who needs more. I don't get from you a sense that you really *need* anyone. Maybe you're just looking for a shag – and there's nothing wrong with that – I feel the same sometimes... but I'm not in that zone any more. I was, until about a month ago, but I'm trying to – “

“Missed your 'window' then, did I?”

“Perhaps... I don't know.” He liked the way she allowed him a lingering hope, even though her interrogative approach was rapidly dampening his desire. “...But it left me feeling... empty. Bit of a cliché, I know, but I'd tried it and, to be honest, I'd rather stay in to watch repeats of Friends with a bowl of Doritos.”

Myles gave a slight laugh and liked her again. *Feisty, a little funny, sexy. Brad definitely wasn't having her.*

“ So anyway, do you like me? Physically, I mean.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah,” she echoed with anaemic emphasis.

“Sorry, should I be drooling when I say I like you?” Myles replied and reached for his drink, almost knocking it over.

“What's your type, your perfect body type? Name an actress, a pop star.”

“I don't know.”

“Oh, come on – who?”

“There isn't anyone. I don't –“

“Oh, come on.”

Myles shrugged, “Kate Moss?”

So wouldn't I be too curvy for you? Because if that's your type, why would you say you like me?"

"Well for a start I'm not exclusive in my tastes."

"I think that's a lie – we all are. It comes out in the end."

"Gina, I've only just met you, I don't want to think about 'the end'. "

"OK – two weeks then. I don't want two weeks. I just told you. For me it's one night or one lifetime, but not what you're looking for: two months and then – whatever."

"How do you know I'm looking for 'two months and then – whatever'?" Myles was almost wishing Brad would return and put an end to the drilling he was being given.

"I just sense it."

"I think you need to give things a chance, a bit of time –"

"Don't you trust in your intuition? Don't you think it's better we're honest from the outset?"

"I'm not so sure. Being honest can be brutal; it can crush the beginnings of something precious."

"So you'd prefer to wrap your ideal date in secrets, would you?"

"Put it this way, if you strip away any possibility of mystery, where's the intrigue?"

"You have a point. But I've got a feeling you're more draped in secrets than you are in mystery. I could be wrong, but – "

She was interrupted – by Brad. He was calling Myles's name all the way from the door where he'd kissed Gina. As if for an emergency.

Myles sighed, "What's he up to now? Don't go, OK?"

"Don't be long."

Gina's mind was calculating and recalculating at surprising speed considering she'd put away nearly a bottle of wine already. She liked Myles – intelligent, discerning... sensitive... perhaps a bit too sensitive; she rather suspected he wasn't exciting enough. By contrast, Brad was virtually out of control, but at odd moments – like when he was nearly still and his eyes lingered wistfully on hers – she found him almost irresistible. A couple of years ago she imaged she would have chosen one of them – either for that night or for the next date. But experience was at work here: early on she'd identified a seed of suspicion in herself that these men were playing a game with her and that choosing either one of them would be the dating equivalent of sliding on a banana skin. On the other hand, she'd had a successful day on her script, and she was in the mood for playing games. Hadn't she opted for this hotel bar partly because she knew that her student Javier would be working here tonight and might be called upon somehow if she needed to raise the stakes in

whatever game it was she was taking part in? She'd noticed the way Javier looked at her in class and in the wake of a messy and complicated separation she warmed to the pleasing sensation of moulding putty in her hands. He was cute, sexy, and, as long as you played to his slightly chauvinistic image of himself, he was probably hers whenever she wanted. And here he was, carrying a little stainless steel tray of nuts. What a darling...

"Gina, I'm sorry I took so long! I had to go to the other kitchen to find the nuts. We're short of staff today."

"That's OK, don't worry." Her voice had returned to her classroom voice, but was oiled by the wine and sounded sweet to her ears.

Javier placed the tray of mixed nuts on the table and Gina reached to take a few.

"Ah, pistachios – great!" She was glad of shells to break, things to pop into her mouth while she accustomed herself to Javier's somewhat dense sexual presence.

"Your friends go, already?" He perched on the arm of the armchair.

"No, I think they just popped outside or something. Are you still up for that drink by the way?"

"Er, yes. Yeah yeah. I would like to – if you want."

"Yeah – yeah, I would. You can help me with my Spanish." As if either of them cared.

"Yes, OK. But we speak English, too, yes?"

"Sure." She was a little disappointed he continued with this pretence that he was more interested in practising his English with her than being in her company.

"These're great actually," she said, popping another pistachio in her mouth. "You're improving fast, by the way – your English."

"Oh, thank you. "

So perhaps that was it: *caress his simple vanity and he's ready turn on the affection*. Javier topped up her glass and carefully put the bottle back in the swimming ice.

"Gracias."

He smiled graciously and, for the first time that evening, showed her those pining puppy eyes he was unable to help himself from showing her at the end of each English lesson...

Brad had led Myles to the toilets – where they could talk. And sure enough, Brad had been calling 'his dealer'. He wanted to go on to a party later – with Gina. And, preferably, without Myles. When Myles protested Brad countered, "God, you're so selfish!" And to Myles's surprise his friend didn't react with a laugh and admission of guilt, he grew serious, even dark and brooding, like a man possessed.

“Excuse me, but why’re you even here?” Myles demanded, working up his indignation. “You agreed that this date was mine – so if anyone should leave, it’s you!”

“Myles, Myles, no, it’s *me* she wants...”

“How can you be so bloody arrogant?”

“I just know.”

“Bollocks.”

“It’s true,” he continued, now in a pitying vein – as if to a sad, perennial sinner.

“How do you know she doesn’t like me?”

“I didn’t say she didn’t *like* you – I just know you’re not suited together, I just know.”

“Oh, you just *know*, well that’s alright then – “

“I do, yes. I told you we met before –“

“Yeah, like five minutes, apparently –“

“ – it doesn’t matter – we had this connection and I can feel it now! You just have to accept that!”

“I have to accept it. What the fuck’re you on about?”

“Please just go.”

“No!”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn? I’m besotted with her! This is something bigger, Myles, not just a shag.”

“You couldn’t possibly have fallen in love with her in just a few hours.”

“But I did! I have!”

“Bollocks.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“Listen to him,” Myles threw out his hand as if to a hidden audience – only to run into his wan and defeated reflection in the basin mirrors. “That’s what you said the last time we went on one of these internet dates – when it was my turn, if memory serves.”

“Turn? It was no one’s turn – don’t be so petty and mean.”

“We agreed – “

“No we didn’t. There’s never been an agreement, like a contract. You have to be more flexible Myles. “

“I think you mean, I have to defer to your selfishness is what you’re saying. We had an arrangement – “

“Yes, OK, but it’s never been anything formal, Myles – why’re you being so stiff about it.”

“Because if we’re not fair, it won’t work.”

“There will be others, Myles. “

“You’ve done this twice already – what do you think I am? Your fucking doormat!”

Brad’s jaw dropped as if he were shocked, hurt, wounded.

“I mean, where’s the incentive for me to play along if you always get the prettier girls? Because you FEEL something! Jesus Christ –”

“Please go,” Brad repeated, lowering his chin, his voice, assuming the air of the reasonable man here.

“Here’s an idea: you go.”

Brad stared at him for a moment. A stand-off. Two grown men in a hotel toilet, ready to strangle each other. Myles couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. And then Brad began pushing him, no more words, just pushing him –

“Oi!” Myles shouted and pushed back. It was like being back in the school yard. He tried to block Brad’s thrusting arms, but Brad quickened his pushing. Myles pushed back and grew angry, shoving Brad back toward the urinals... until his rhythm was suddenly broken by a sharp whack on his nose. He stopped dead in his tracks. He brought his fingers to his nose. It felt wet...and yes, he was bleeding.

Blood, red, anger – “You fucking asshole!” – Myles spat as he swung at Brad with his foot, years since he’d done any kung fu but the arch of his foot easily found the soft side of Brad’s knee. Brad went down, throwing out a hand to grab the basin so he didn’t hit the floor.

“What is your problem,” Myles said as he headed to the basin farthest from Brad, treading carefully in order to sidestep the trickle of blood dripping from his nose.

Brad slowly pulled himself up, rubbing his knee. “Why’re you being so stubborn?”

Myles whacked on the cold water tap.

“You know what, Brad? I can’t help noticing you use that word a lot when you don’t get your own way with me.”

“But you are.”

Myles dabbed his nose. At least it wasn’t broken. A long Roman nose like his didn’t couldn’t afford a break...

“How about we just forget this whole idea of going on dates together – huh? ... if you can’t play fair, forget it.” The cold water was calming his temper. He kept dabbing his nose.

“I thought you’d be reasonable and just get it,” Brad insisted. “I would certainly leave if I thought she was right for you – but she isn’t. I’m sorry you can’t see that.”

“You’re sorry,” Myles echoed derisively. He was about to add more when a man in a raincoat entered. He glanced furtively at the pair of them then disappeared into a cubicle and bolted the door with unnecessary violence.

Myles grabbed a couple of paper towels from the dispenser and swept himself from the toilets.

He returned to the bar to find Gina and Javier seated opposite one another. They were laughing together in a familiar and affectionate fashion. As the waiter spotted him in the corner of his eye, he moved away like a piece on a chessboard.

Holding a now sodden tissue to his nose, Myles greeted Gina with a request for a fresh one.

“God, what happened?” she said, alarmed by the sight of blood.

“Brad just hit me,” Myles said. He knew he sounded like a schoolboy telling tales, but he didn’t care.

“Why? ...Here.” She passed him a packet of tissues.

“Thanks... He thinks-he thinks he has some sort of special chemistry with you, so I should fuck off and leave you both to it.”

“ Oh, come on, it was one stupid kiss. I thought he was just being theatrical –“

“ No, you don't know Brad, this is how he thinks.”

Brad arrived and produced a toilet roll from behind his back, like a ridiculous peace offering. When Myles merely glowered, he tossed it at him.

Wow, Gina thought, two grown men, like petulant schoolboys. She’d never had this affect on a man, never mind two – on a first date, at that! It was either alarming, or hugely entertaining – she wasn’t sure which just yet; she’d have to improvise.

“Myles, I’m sorry, it was an accident... honestly. “ Brad sat in the armchair and threw a shoe over his knee, grabbing his shins as if to fortify himself against any egregious mean-spirited accusations from his friend.

“Fuck it was.”

“Guys, what's going on?” Gina cut in, sensing now was the moment she must take control.

“I was just waving my arms about, suggesting that he leave,” Brad was explaining “ – and you got too close.”

“Too close? You punched me.”

“I was trying to persuade Myles to go home,” Brad calmly explained to Gina, as if she were a passer-by. “And he wouldn’t listen.” Brad dipped his hand into the ice bucket and picked out a couple of ice cubes. “Here, put some ice on it.” He squeezed the ice cube between his thumb and

forefinger, sending it off like a projectile at Myles. It landed in Myles's lap. Myles picked it up and tossed it back in the bucket.

There was a pause. Sulking men. Gina looked from one to the other... "Y'know what? I think both of you have some explaining to do. I mean, what is all this coming and going and slagging each other off?" She looked from one to the next – teacher waiting for a feeble excuse. Myles kept dabbing his nose. "This is some sort of charade, isn't it? Uh? You two."

"Charade?" Brad replied.

"Yeah. Why do I feel I'm being manipulated into favouring one of you?"

Myles was amazed – she'd rumbled their game. And yet the ironic thing was, their game had gone to shit over an hour ago. Actually he was glad she'd rumbled them, because he was now more interested in seeing Brad disappointed than anything else.

"Too much script theory, darling," Brad said, but with less conviction than he usually carried off with his flip remarks.

"I don't think so. There's this-this chemistry between you two, like-like-like you do this for a laugh. I just can't believe you, Brad, happened to be in the same bar as your friend the same night you, Myles, have an internet date. And then you hang around? What's that about? You're not a teenager."

"I'm besotted by you, Gina," Brad answered, hand on heart. He struck Myles as so camp, and yet convincing in the same moment.

"Really?"

"Yes. Myles, why don't you show some grace and take a cab home?"

"No, I don't want him to go," Gina said. "I don't want anyone to go now." She glanced at Myles. "That's not real blood, is it?"

"It is, actually," Myles said, showing her the bloody tissue. He felt on the verge of laughing and admitting that she was right about them having set out to manipulate her, but something held him back. "It is real – look."

"So you're good actors, or it got out of hand, I don't know. But it seems like – like a set-up, like a sting: I'm supposed to feel sorry for you, because Brad's a bastard, I take you home for a –" she ticked the air – "'coffee', and you two have a laugh on e-mail tomorrow... Close? I'm not blind, y'know."

Normally Brad would have responded to such a denouement with a round of applause, a burst of laughter, but when Myles next glanced at his friend, he saw he was just slumped in his armchair sulking.

"OK, let's try this," Gina said, having failed to elicit a confession. "Who's got a condom?"

Myles let out an incredulous “What?” and laughed.

“Well, you do practice safe sex, don't you?”

“Myles practices, I do it for real. This is all very debasing, Gina, why're you –“

“Can you shut up a minute, Brad. You've been rabbiting on all night. Just – STOP. OK?”

Gina fixed him with her cold, ‘black’ eyes – she was wasted part-time teaching, Myles thought to himself, she should have been a headmistress. “Now, I tell you what. It's very quiet here tonight. Sex is obviously what you're BOTH after, so, this is what we're going to do: I turn my back and one of you puts a condom on the table. And then... I'll make my choice.”

“That’s really cruel,” Brad complained. “This isn't about sex, Gina, I really do –“

“I thought you just told me you weren't into casual sex,” Myles said, cutting across Brad, choosing rational argument to mask his embarrassment and confusion.

“If you don't follow the rules of the game, I'm not seeing either of you ever again.”

They sat motionless for a moment. Long-faced. Out-played.

“Come on, hurry up – I've got a prelim budget I've got to finish for the Film Council by tomorrow afternoon. You have ten seconds. 10... 9... 8...” Gina turned away from them, as if counting for hide and seek...

Brad sprang to life and grabbed Myles's bag and began searching the pockets and taking things out and plonking them on the table...

“Dental floss, pen, Viagra – “

“That’s Chlorella – “ Myles snatched back the pills.

“...3..2...” Gina was counting. “Hurry up.”

Myles snatched his bag from Brad and dug into a small pocket with a Velcro pocket.

“Ah, sexy Velcro, that sounds promising...”

Myles took a condom from the Velcro pocket and placed it on the table and put his bag on the floor.

“Are we done?”

Gina turned round. Surely it was just a game – to put them in their place – and yet, there was this knot of hot excitement in his chest that told him she just might be serious.

“Ah, Extra Safe,” she said, picking up the condom. “Well, that's reassuring.”

She picked up her coat and her bag. Brad raised a pair of dark, sorry eyebrows, like a dog looking up at its master in anticipation of an undeserved beating.

“Gina –“

“Myles,” she resumed, ignoring Brad, and in a tone that reminded Myles of TV talent contests for wannabe models, “go to the end cubicle in the Ladies, in about five minutes. Or... stay here.”

Myles gazed at her, gobsmacked – she was obviously going home and he'd never see her again, but what a performance! But then she confused him further by gently touching his shoulder as she walked away. *A sign that she was serious?*

Brad gazed into the ice bucket – for the moment, utterly disconsolate.

Myles watched her go. She stopped by the exit to talk to the waiter and lingered a while. After maybe half a minute they disappeared together. *Perhaps getting her a cab home...*

"How did she suss?" Myles said finally.

"I told you she was bright," Brad replied, resting the side of his head on his forefinger. "Well, you got what you wanted, so stop moaning – she wants to fuck you... in the fucking toilets!"

Myles tossed the bloodied tissue on the table in disgust. Brad remained motionless. Myles glanced at his watch.

"I bet she's gone. It's just a wind-up."

"In another two minutes, you can go and see for yourself, can't you?" Brad was petulant now. So much for his connection. You could almost feel sorry for him...

Myles noticed how quiet the whole place was now. Virtually deserted. Only one far table was occupied – three middle-aged people having a nightcap. Then he realised he was middle-aged – only rock stars behaved as he and Brad had done tonight at his age.

"I wasn't attracted to her at first," Myles began in a reflective mood, vaguely soothing to his own ears, at least. "I found her – "

"She's gorgeous – " Brad insisted, like an automated moron.

"Can I finish?"

"You're so fucking picky, no wonder you're having to resort to the internet."

"This was your idea to team up on internet dates, mate, in case you'd forgotten."

"For a laugh, yes. But when real feelings come into play, you should have the decency to back down. You're being childish."

"Fuck off."

The fell silent. Myles picked up his wine, but didn't want it, except to hold.

"Ten minutes ago she was telling me she doesn't want casual sex, now she's proposing I fuck her in the loo?"

"Oh, so what. Women change their minds all the time, get used to it! And anyway, the end cubicle in the Ladies is hardly casual – it's in your face, if you ask me."

"Why five minutes?"

"I don't know, maybe she's powdering her nose first."

"Coke?"

“Don’t be silly, she'd've been using it before now and I would have noticed and bought some off her.” Brad glanced at his watch. “OK, time's up.”

“I can’t... this is – “

“OK, I can.” Brad jumped to his feet, resolute. But Myles was just as quick and blocked him.

“Hey – “

“You just said, you can’t. So – “

Brad pushed against Myles, but Myles pushed him back and into his chair.

“She’s expecting me.” The words sounded pompous the moment he’d uttered them.

“So this'll be a pleasant surprise. Myles, her kiss told me everything I need to know – “

“You’re so fucking vain, aren't you?”

“No, I’m just honest.”

“Stay there, OK? I AM NOT going to be involved in conspiracy charges to rape...” Brad began simpering. “Do you understand?”

“Honestly, Myles, admit it, you're just as low as I am... Well, make it quick. Shouldn't be too difficult for you – “

“Ha-ha.”

Brad picked up the wine bottle and upturned a dribble.

“We’re out of wine – and it's your shout. “

Myles turned and pointed, “Stay there,” he commanded and continued on his way from the room.

This was crazy. She wouldn’t be there. Like WMD – just a wind-up. What a couple of fools they’d been. And yet, he couldn’t deny he admired her check-mating of them both.

He pushed open the door. No one there. Except... there was a door closed on the cubicle at the end. He took a step closer. And now he could hear Gina’s voice, not words, just breath, half uttered whispers... and for about two seconds he had visions of Gina sitting on his lap with her skirt up... He nearly spoke aloud, but another man’s breath cut him short.

“Gina?” he called softly, only two feet from the door.

He heard Gina’s breath, caught, then released, let out...

“Gina?” he repeated more loudly but with the same faint authority.

“Myles?”

“Yeah. What’s going on?”

“I’m with Javier... I’m afraid he beat you to it.”

“...What?”

“I’m with Javier,” she repeated, a little louder. “Sorry.”

Myles suddenly felt he’d been thrown into a comedy sketch and wondered what was expected of someone playing his ‘character’. He bent down to look under the door. A pair of men’s shoes, socks, concertinaed black trousers with a cream lining. He stood upright. Blood rushed to his temple and throbbed in his right nostril, threatening to explode again. He thought he could hear kissing, suddenly punctuated by a distinctly masculine laugh which died precipitously. He imagined himself kicking the door in. But the impulse – if it was even real – was stolen by his fascination in their sounds. And suddenly he was overcome with fatigue, indifference and disgust. He turned and walked away.

He returned to the long, now empty bar to find Brad lain out on the sofa, quietly munching pistachio nuts. Myles felt like a dumb rookie constable about to report to his sergeant that he had failed to execute a simple mission. For the life of him he couldn’t understand why he also felt so robbed of laughter.

“God, that was even quicker than an Italian.”

“That’s cos she’s she's doing it with an Italian. Or should I say, a Spaniard.”

“What?”

Myles sat down and Brad sat up, brushing his front of pistachio shells.

Myles described what he’d seen and heard in a tone of quiet incredulity.

“Who the fuck is Javier?” Brad interrupted.

“The fucking waiter.”

“The man with your nuts! God, that is so spiteful – “

Brad sprung from the sofa and rushed off in the direction of the toilets. For another doomed mission...

Brad claimed later to have climbed up the toilet door to find Gina giving the waiter a blow-job. When he swiped at the waiter’s head, the waiter gently removed Gina’s mouth, stood up and punched Brad on the nose. Almost casually, he remarked. Without any hesitation. Myles arrived as Brad, blood streaming down his chin, threw random kicks at the door shouting obscenities. There was nothing to do but grab his crazy friend by the arms and drag him from the room. Myles bundled him into the Ladies – which, luckily, was empty. He ran the cold tap and directed him to the basins. Brad was still cursing him, blaming him for everything, when a woman came in and uttered a horrified gasp.

“Sorry, wrong room,” Myles said, and the woman looked confused, as if he’d meant she was in the wrong room – which in some sense she was – and she bolted.

“Fuck,” Brad was saying, peering at his face in the mirror. “Did he break it?”

“I can’t really see in this light. Just hold that to it,” he said handing him some paper towels.

Brad began laughing. And immediately the tension began to flow from Myles’s body.

“I’m not giving up, though,” Brad insisted, falling serious again.

Back in the bar, Brad reached into the ice bucket and scooped up one small ice cube. Useless. So he dunked his head in the water. The most sensible thing he’d done all night. Myles felt like pushing it further under. A waiter was watching, impassively, as if this might be a signal for a special kind of nightcap.

Drying his face off, Brad said, “Well I won’t be leaving a fucking tip, that’s for sure.”

And shortly after, they left the building.

“Where are we?” Brad said. “I haven’t a clue where we are.”

In six months time Brad’s remark would play back as prophetic whenever Myles remembered that evening.

3

Gina woke up the next morning around 5 am trying to crawl out of a toilet bowl that she'd fallen into somehow. As she came to, she realised she was gripping the edge of her mattress, not a toilet seat and that her legs were dangling over the edge of her bed not down a sewer pipe. Her immediate relief was swept away by the head-pounding realisation that only a few hours earlier she had been up to something down and dirty. Her dubious – albeit brilliantly improvised triumph – was now flushing back to haunt her.

She sat up and assessed the extent of her hangover. Probably about 5 on the pain-ometer, slightly less than she'd expected. Now that she was sober, her suspicions of the night before – that the two guys were playing games with her – had strangely evaporated, leaving a scum of doubt. The scenes played back strangely devoid of comedy, or even irony. She must have been twelve the last time two boys got into a physical scrap over her – and if she were honest the experience had been nearly as bewildering, even though this time she'd contrived a means of dishing out a comeuppance.

Javier. How would she deal with that? Her thinking – a month ago – had been not to have sex with him until the end of term, when she could easily escape any need to see him again. Now she had created an awkward situation for herself – mid-term. He would feel jilted, he would sulk, he might even gossip... The head pain dial went up, just thinking about it.

She entered the kitchen, cold on her bare feet. Raising a glass of water to her lips she remembered the sensation of the gristly object that she'd let bang against the roof of her mouth only a few hours ago. She had the vague recollection of wanting to bite it... How unreal that scene appeared in the calm moonlight of her kitchen, the fridge humming peacefully to itself.

She hadn't counted on Brad coming into the toilet and scaling up the door like a mad cat. Nor had she counted on Javier punching Brad on the nose. Why did she still imagine she could push men to their limits and expect them to go away and cry like girls when they got hurt? She'd pretended to be disgusted by Javier's violence, when in fact she was using this cliché female reaction to men turning to violence as a mask for her embarrassment and as a future excuse never to have sex with him again. She also pretended to be amazed that Javier had assumed they could simply resume what they'd been doing after Myles had dragged Brad kicking and screaming from the room. He seemed to think that his reckless and casual pop at Brad was an act of gallantry and would further endear her to him. And yet, *Men were like this. Perhaps, especially Spaniards.*

She drank the rest of her of water and set the glass on the side.

Strange that Brad had waited around. He gave her quite a fright when he popped out of the shadows calling her name. He was alone, smoking a cigarette in the drizzling rain. He approached her wearing an expression that hovered nipped by self-pity and contrition. His nostril clogged with dried blood, he struck a pitiful figure in the wet.

"I wasn't sure how long I was going to have to wait for you," he said in a solicitous tone of voice, like a lawyer concerned for his errant charge.

"Where's Myles?" she said, more by way of avoiding any comment on what had just happened than because she wanted to know.

"He's gone," he said simply. His lips had moved as if wanted to add something, but then he hesitated – she sensed he was waiting for her to say something, anything. He took one last hurried puff of his cigarette and while grinding it out with his heel he shook his head and said, "I know it was all a mess in there, but I really want to see you again. Is that possible?"

"I don't think that'd be wise, do you?"

His face shattered, but his eyes, although pleading now, were as serious as before.

"I know it may have seemed like I was just messing around, but I really do want to see you again." She could have said any number of things, but she omitted any comment, and instead glanced around as if for a cab. "Well, look," he dug in his trouser pockets for his wallet and produced a card. "Here's my card. And perhaps I could email you through Facebook."

God, she'd thought, now we're all on Facebook, everyone has a way of messaging us... But she decided it was easier to indulge the man, poor thing, and agreed to walk with him to the nearest street where they could hail a cab – the first one for her.

She lay back on her pillow and closed her eyes. No more internet dates for a while. Far too complicated.

Gina taught at one of the less prestigious English language school in the West End. Which fact suited her fine: both staff and pupils seemed more relaxed than a couple of posher places she'd interviewed at and the last thing she wanted was to be lured into taking a full-time position and find she had to give up her writing afternoons.

She arrived outside the school at 9.20 but didn't go inside. Javier would probably be hanging out in the corridor with some friends. He had to be avoided whenever possible. She window-shopped to kill time and swept into her class two minutes after 9.30. Javier was sitting at the back. He usually sat at the front. Was that a good sign? Did it mean he understood she would no longer entertain the idea of doing an intercambio – or language exchange – with him later in the week? For most of the lesson he observed her with an impassive, if not indifferent, expression. But every now and then she caught a glimmer of expectation in his eyes and alarm bells went off again.

At break she decided to take no chances and rushed out to take a walk round the block. She reckoned she would have to continue playing the elusive female at least until Friday, allowing him the weekend to process her silent message. She timed her return to precisely the allotted ten minutes between classes. Then, at the end of class, she went to her whiteboard and put up some homework – and, as they were still copying it down, she skedaddled.

"Gina!" a man called after her, as she stepped outside. Her pulse racing she turned her head. But the man was calling another student, a native Italian. She was free to go.

The first day is always the worst.

Home was a two-bed apartment on the third story of a terrace not far from Kilburn tube. She was proud of her find – a personal connection which she'd moved on very swiftly to secure an unbelievably cheap rent, just as rents seemed to be going up in the wake of the fall in house prices. She'd then sublet the smaller room to students at her college, preferring to sub-let to Italians so she could practice her Italian now and then, which was no longer quite as fluent as it should be given her heritage. Her last lodger had just returned to Rome, and today she should have put up an ad in the common room, but she'd had other things on her mind. *You see? Men, they can cost you.*

She made herself a tuna and cheese sandwich, an Illis coffee and sat down at her 17 inch laptop in the kitchen, with a view overlooking the backs of the houses opposite. She gravitated to her gmail account and found her inbox loaded with Facebook invites. There was one from Brad. But first she opened the latest from her co-writer, Andrea. Andrea was always changing their arrangement – it got on her nerves – and this time it was because of a wedding she'd somehow forgotten she had to go to. Why did no one ever write to bring things forward? She wanted to get on with the damn thing. She had her own screenplay, but she was stuck with it. It was neither all that funny nor dramatic, a sort of wishy washy hybrid in need of a genre. It wasn't lost on her the irony that she

often made extreme and ridiculous choices in her love life but the moment she sat down to write she abandoned her instincts and became a slave to script theory – so yes, her characters ‘learned something’, they had their neat little ‘character arcs’, they ‘redeemed themselves’ (some of them), but weren’t all that memorable. It was as if she were using her writing as therapy to impose some kind of paradigm of order and rationale on her own life – and yet, on the evidence, it wasn’t really working. *What if she was just a phony, a wannabe, with little to say, only an enormous vanity to BE someone?*

Brad’s short email was an invite to a screening of a short film. She clicked on the link which took her to her Facebook page. She thought to click Maybe Attending, but wasn’t even sure if she wanted him to see her there on the list.

She returned to the rest of her email... clicked on links, opened web pages... clicked on more links and before she knew it most of the afternoon had gone and she hadn’t even opened her script. She filled the kettle for another coffee, but then decided not to. A bottle of white lay in the bottom shelf of the fridge. It was only five but she was sorely tempted. *That’s what happens when you drink heavily the night before.*

She had an email from a good looking guy on guardiansoulmates.co.uk. His email was short, jocular and a million miles from where she was. She saw Myles there in her favourites. It had given her a perverse thrill to think of fucking Myles in the toilets, precisely because she suspected he wasn’t the type to do something like that. But she’d run into Javier and changed her mind, just like that. So was it all just a question of chance and timing? For thrills, maybe, but not for anything lasting, surely.

“Have you got five minutes, maybe ten?” she remembered asking.

Javier had looked puzzled, but not unwilling to be better informed. She’d grabbed him by the hand and nearly run for the loos.

“What’re you doing Gina, what’s happening?”

His foreign accent was perfect for this kind of nonsense.

She told him to bolt the door and then hoisted up her skirt.

“Oh, and hold this,” she’d said handing him the condom.

What if she hadn’t run into Javier, or Javier had been stuffy about his job, would she have had sex with Myles? Had she wanted to? She couldn’t remember. Possibly. Although, perhaps at the last minute, she recognised she and Myles – if there was a she a Myles – deserved a bed. And right now there wasn’t a bed, so, too bad. Myles was too old – mature, then – surely for that kind of thing. Perhaps as a stunt after they’d already had sex, but not for the first time.

She drifted back to Facebook and frittered away another hour commenting on updates, checking out screenwriter groups, checking out guys. She noticed the more interesting ones had put – under status – It’s complicated. What did that mean? She noticed none of her female Friends had put ‘It’s complicated’; it was, then, a male thing. A male thing to admit it, anyway.

By six, she had to admit she’d accomplished nothing the entire day. She definitely needed that drink.

She was happy to have a night in. She’d watch a movie later on. She drifted back to her computer, the magnet of the internet. Her cooking burned, but it was still edible. She flicked through the photos of men on SugarDaddie.com as she ate her dinner. Over 100 photos and she hadn’t written to one of them. Then she remembered she’d promised herself NOT to do any more internet dating for a while. She clicked to her Facebook tab. *What’s on your mind?* it asked her. The first ten updates were written by people she’d never seen or even spoken to in her entire life. At the bottom of the page there was an update from her co-writer Andrea. It was something so incomprehensibly idiotic and sentimental she wondered if she even knew her friend. Perhaps somebody had hacked into her profile and pretended to be her to make her look like a moron. Four of the posts ended in links to business opportunities that promised earnings of \$10,000 a month ‘easy’. She clicked to remove them from her page. It occurred to her that she spent more time spring cleaning her Facebook wall, her email accounts – of which she had four – her swom wall, her dating inbox and her downloads folder than she spent on tidying her own flat. She typed in Brabantia bins into her search box. Nearly £80. She couldn’t afford one till the end of the month. But if she bought something cheaper, she’d only regret it, throw it out and still be left having to find a decent bin. Chucking rubbish into carrier bags was driving her a bit crazy. Conceivably it was even affecting her ability to organize her day. So she clicked add to cart and ‘order’ and just preyed she wasn’t going to go into the red.

The day after his date with Gina, Myles was startled awake by his alarm at 6.45. Kasumi, his wife and latterly someone else’s girlfriend, groaned at the sudden jerking movement beside her and complained, “Why do you always have to do that! You wake me up.” He had no idea why he was so panic-stricken by the alarm these days. Like a man with a guilty conscience. Not that sex came into it – he wouldn’t be cheating on anyone, they were separated. Was it the burden of accumulated responsibilities at forty something, or simply a physical symptom of middle-age?

Myles tended to take a shower before going to bed, but he’d arrived home at around 1 am and hadn’t wanted to wake up Kasumi, so after brushing his teeth and rinsing the clotted blood from his

right nostril, he'd slipped into his pyjamas and stepped over Kasumi in bed and slid down the duvet, taking care not to touch any part of her. So this morning he'd take a shower.

The stream of warm water began to rinse away the potentially irritable mood his alarm had put him in. Images of the night before bubbled up as if from a blocked plughole, few of them pleasant. A voice in his head urged him to shrug the whole thing off. Things with Brad would be fine – although clearly their internet dating partnership was on ice, if not over. Which was a bloody shame, because if past experience was anything to go by, internet dates without him would return to being 'hard work'. In fact, if he thought about it, he was sick of going on dates. It was easier to go back to seeing escort girls. Yes, easier, but he'd there, done that; the thrills of having sex with strangers – even gorgeous ones – within thirty minutes of laying eyes on them had waned.

Was his sex drive fading?

Five years ago the caressing downpour of a shower on a body intoxicated by alcohol, and aroused by the sexual frustration of the night before might have induced a certain familiar shuffling of his right hand, but he was conscious of being devoid of any libidinous urges. An air of defeat enveloped him like steam. He strove to summon an inventory of practical tasks for the remainder of the week, but this particular impulse was also limp.

The shower curtain was moving. His sleepy twelve-year-old daughter was peering in at him, naked.

"Oh, hi Dad."

He noticed her breasts had grown perhaps a centimetre since he'd last seen her naked. Just as well he hadn't been doing anything but standing there...

"Nearly done, darling," he said, shutting the curtain.

Except he didn't think so. He didn't want to get out. The shower, it seemed, was the only place left that was warm and caressing.

"Can you wash your lunchboxes, please," he chided gently, now in the kitchen suddenly brisk in his movements as he knocked up a tuna risotto – which had to be ready to go in twenty minutes.

Two more sleepy faces – Anise, 10, Ray 9 – in navy blue uniform.

"Last day of the week," he said, trying to cheer them up.

"So what," Anise replied, moodily. "We can't go anywhere and you'll be working again, as you always do."

"I don't have to this weekend. Maybe we can go somewhere."

A look of surprise from the middle one, the family's socially most adept and sharpest critic.

"Like where? You're probably going on another internet date," she said with withering sarcasm. He really didn't need a beating from another woman quite so soon after the last one.

"I don't know. How about the Movie Museum?"

"Really?"

"Sure."

"Yeah!" They all cheered.

"At last," Anise added for good measure. "I mean you have been promising for *ages*. Are we really going to go?"

"Yeah. We really are."

Anise scrunched up her mouth and twisted it to one side, as if to warn him that there would be consequences were he to break his promise.

"Sunday morning," he confirmed, "and then we can go to that cafe you like in Soho."

"The Italian one?"

"Yes. Princi."

They all cheered again.

Now wasn't that so easy compared to anything that he had attempted the night before? Simple, unequivocal sounds of pleasure. His kids were his best friends. Arguably, his only true friends.

Having managed to get out of the house promptly at 8.30, Myles was then rewarded by 'severe delays' on the Piccadilly Line mid way between Ealing Common and Acton Town. One by one the passengers began texting or calling to explain why they were running late. Myles resisted the urge to wheeze with anxiety – it was undignified and he'd had enough indignities for one week. At 9.56 he dodged criss-cross people traffic passing the plaque commemorating those who had died in the King's Cross Fire as far back as when smoking was still allowed on the tube. And at 10.05 he was walking up Cowcross Street from Farringdon tube.

Myles had never been fond of Farringdon. He'd tried to share in Brad's enthusiasm for the area – Brad would talk it up as if he were estate agent – and admittedly it had sprouted bars and restaurants during the Labour boom in the early noughties, but it still had about it an air of clerical industriousness that ruffled his bohemian sensibility. The scale of it was masculine and the drinking that went on there always struck him as a functional extension of office banter. It was a relief when he and Brad had given up searching in this area for an office and stumbled on a space in Soho for their little start-up. And yet that had its problems too: till recently Soho had been Myles's old stomping ground for coffees and glasses of wine with friends in film, talking of feature film projects and TV pilots that had never come to anything and now – now the place had the morning after smell of a night out that hadn't really been so wonderful after all. If he thought about it, he'd exhausted London in many ways. Or, rather, it had exhausted him. But for the kids being at school in London,

he might have jumped on a plane in a bid to start afresh. A globe-trotting freelancer, on long term contracts. Hong Kong, Beijing, Bangkok. Well, it was always good to have a Plan B for when the kids left the nest. And yet, he suspected it would never kick in. Because in ten years' time, he'd be even more jaded. Unless, something happened now...

Farringdon was the land of below the line agencies – agencies that did everything in marketing save make commercials. Office space was that much cheaper here than traditional ad land in Soho and generally larger in scale. ISB was housed in a nondescript grey building down a short side street. The glass doors were tucked back apologetically from the pavement and led down to a Reception and company logos. The presence of a widescreen TV in the far corner of the room was the best – and only – clue to remind you that you'd arrived at an ad agency. Once you passed through the door to the lifts, the decor went noticeably downhill. First there was the decaying old mustard carpet, which you had to look at while waiting for the lifts. Then there were the piles of office equipment lining the stairs whispering to each other about budget cuts if you hadn't fancied waiting for a lift. The slightly yellow walls accommodated a couple of oversized and garish pop art like prints, which completed the unsettled stomach experience initiated in the lift area. On the second floor, along with more unremitting mustard, you were greeted by the smells of two leaky toilets.

Myles swiped his card and pushed through the door to the creative floor. Making a bee line for his desk, he noted a couple of unswitched-on computer screens and was relieved to discover he wasn't the only one to arrive 30 minutes late. His Art Director, Jim B, was at his desk, tidying papers.

“Wo!”

“Sorry,”

He'd narrowly missed running into the CD's Jamaican PA, a busty Essex girl.

“Hey Myles!” She always had a big white smile for him – like he was a malingering patient on her ward, where she cared for all of her creatives. “Good night, was it?” she cracked.

“Don't even go there!” Myles rejoindered, with a hint of laughter that was instantly flattened by Maj's roar of hilarious laughter. *I wish*, he thought to himself, slipping out his jacket.

“Alright, mate?” he said to Jim.

A proper large Eastender, Jim would typically greet him with a low key reply and agreeably impassive expression – but not today. “Maj was amused, anyway,” he said apropos the laughter.

“Out swinging in Soho, was ya?”

“Hm... we met a girl.”

Jim pursed his lips together, eyes on a line he was drawing along the side of a Perspex ruler. “You and that mate of yours... Brad? One of them internet dates you two get up to?”

He still hadn't looked him in the eye – something was up.

“Yeah.”

“Well I wish you hadn’t picked last night for some fun and games because there’s shit stirring and you being in late isn’t exactly ‘elping.” He straightened himself up suddenly, cocking his eyebrows, as if better to wrinkle some reassurances from his partner.

“Why, what’s up?”

“That mailer we did – client’s not happy with it. As in, hopping mad.” Jim made a false smile and resumed his drawing.

“But we just finished making the changes they specifically asked of us.”

“Yeah, well, maybe someone else’s taken a look at it and vomited on it, because they’ve thrown it out. It’s back to the drawing board apparently.”

“Well that’s not our fault.”

“It’s always our fault. We’re creatives.”

“What do they expect when they suck all the idea out of the bloody thing? We told them it was crap.”

“Yeah, well, seems like the penny finally dropped and they’re not happy having spent the money.”

Blimey, as if he hadn’t got a hangover enough.

Myles turned on his computer and felt he’d finally clocked in.

“Sorry, mate, I really was stuck in a train.”

Jim drew breath as if about to comment, but then pursed his lips, shuffling papers, eyes averted. His blood pressure looked to be up – and it didn’t suit him with the new, barber’s haircut.

“On top of that, this agency has just gone and bugged up some sort of data capture.”

“I know – Easy-Tel.”

“Yeah...well, they’re saying we sent out a whole load of mailers to people outside the catchment area. We’ve billed them for the service and they’re not happy about it.”

“So the MD got it in the neck, did he?”

“Yeah. So you know what happens: that gets passed on to the easiest target – us. And if Easy-Tel walks, we’re seriously in the shit ‘n’all. You might want to be dating one of them headhunters on your list, cos we might need a job. Not great timing,” he added. “Just when I need another 5 grand to keep hold of that property in Spain I was telling you about.”

Some deal had gone wrong, Myles recollected. Spanish laws, legal incompetence, a crap exchange rate, something lost in translation and Jim’s retirement plans were subsiding into oblivion.

Jim had been at ISB nearly ten years, when Myles joined him six months ago. They’d got off to a favourable start, easy in each other’s company, pushing out a crop of decent creative for every brief.

But within the space of four months, two major clients had walked. And two more 4 year accounts were up for pitch. By all accounts morale was at an all time low. Jim had survived 3 rounds of redundancies but he was pretty sure his number was up, recession or no recession.

“How you getting on with that website copy?” Jim asked.

Myles had thought he’d been getting on fine with it. But only yesterday afternoon the project manager, Cara, had handed him a small rainforest ablaze in red biro.

“I thought you understood I wanted you to incorporate my changes in the new draft,” she’d said, pointedly. A large, bossy woman in her mid thirties, she was the bossiest project manager he’d ever had the misfortune of running into in 12 years in the business. She awaited his response with staple gun eyes and small, anxious mouth. She possessed a froideur that robbed him – a man of words – of useful speech.

“I didn’t see your changes,” he’d blustered like a junior. “Your email said to incorporate the client’s changes marked in red – on the tracking.”

“I thought you’d go to the trouble of printing it out and double-checking against the original.”

“Sorry,” Myles had said, knowing the woman was not to be joshed with, “...must have been some misunderstanding.”

“Not really a misunderstanding,” she said, like a nail clipper greedy for fingertip flesh. “That’s not a misunderstanding, is it. I don’t feel you’re really focused.”

He would have preferred her to go on – but her style was to deliver sharp little missives of professional loathing and then observe as he floundered in attempt to offer a satisfactory excuse for his clearly documented incompetence.

“Never mind seo,” Myles had said to Jim as she swept herself back to Bootcamp HQ, “she might like to try some s.o.h.”

“Sense of humour?” Jim ventured. “Yeah. Well....difficult client, by all accounts,” Jim added. Always the diplomat, Jim – somebody had to seriously put his nose out of joint before he lost his shirt.

Myles opened ‘Copy_Draft 6’. A tangle of tracking in blue, red and purple assaulted his eyes – still red from the night before. He needed immediate sustenance...

Walking to the water cooler, he reminded himself it was just a job, and if he got fired tomorrow, at least he had the start-up agency to work for, even if it wasn’t likely to pay him a salary for another 3-4 months. Thumb on the tap, his water gurgling into his plastic cup from the upturned bulb of still water, Myles glanced around the floor gauging the mood. Jim was right, bad mood. Desks and floor space looked more shambolic than ever. Appearances do not lie.

Generally the people here were long-term below the liners.” Uninspiring,” Alex, an old friend and senior Group Head of Copy, would say, pulling a face. “They’re not really interested in ideas, are they? Books, films... the kind of stuff we’re into. Big Brother and The Daily Mail are about the extent of their worlds, aren’t they,” he’d say disparagingly. Myles would applaud his friend’s candour, although he considered the judgment a little harsh, even as he found himself readily agreeing with it. Generally it was true that the Creatives here were of a breed that is happier poring over the alignment of a logo, the ‘punchiness’ of bullet point copy, the new draft of a wireframe for a web build, the point size of the call to action, than the ‘big idea’ for a 48 sheet poster campaign. They called what they did craft, they called it work – above-the-line Creatives had it easy, they had 4 weeks to knock up a few scamps for a washing powder commercial, for Christ’s sake!

As he stood there, sipping his water, surveying the sea of desks, it occurred to Myles only he and Alex had made any commercials. But neither of them had shot even a third rate spot for over 5 years. At 54 Alex was resigned never to getting back into above-the-line and thought only of the money these days, that and ‘getting his two kids through private and higher education, respectively. Who else was there on this floor? Alex’s Art Director, Louis, another Greek north Londoner; Dave, ‘Spud’, a south London geezer, who was still making a living off of his reputation of ten years ago and his Asian writer, Omid; Jenny and Emma, the allegedly sexy junior team; scruffy tubby Russell and his northern lass copywriter, Amanda; Tony the wooden MD, who never acknowledged Myles even when they passed each other in a narrow corridor, as if he mustn’t be seen fraternizing with the lower classes; three Mac guys, who dressed like they’d just come from a rave –and who often smelled as if they had – one permanently frazzled looking graphic designer who looked as if he’d inherited genes from a line of heavy drinkers, even if he wasn’t one himself, one head-shaven, beefy Flash designer, and the pretty but pale heavy smoker Liz, on creative services. Upstairs you had the suits, finance and HR. With the creatives floor somewhat depleted of late, there was talk of putting everyone on one floor. Already a few suits were down here, sitting alongside the Mac boys. If all of upstairs wound up downstairs, or vice versa, the suits would begin snooping around Creatives’ desks commenting on scamps and layouts even before they were ready to be presented, and, if that ever happened – or happened more frequently than it already was happening, Alex had noted recently – that would be the end of this agency. The mixing of creatives and suits was displacing the sense of departmental loyalty, Alex would argue. All in the name of getting things done, meeting clients’ increasingly exiguous deadlines. The slippery slope, Alex would say. “First they take away our offices – a false economy – and now they want us hob-knobbing with suits! Talk about lowering standards!” Alex had guffawed, even as he meant what he said.

Returning to his desk, Myles accidentally kicked over a pile of papers and books that someone had stacked against his desk. He piled them up again. It occurred to him that someone had stacked them there to hide a stain for when a client had been taken on a brief tour of the office. Then he remembered Jim had put there when he complained about the vicious draft issuing out of the floor's air con vent.

Perhaps it was the alcohol and his disastrous date, but Myles had a sudden powerful need to curl up on an office sofa with a pad, doodling ideas, like he used to. Less and less he was working on ideas, more and more on tomes of copy. He was gradually being farmed out to the world of content creation. Before long he'd be one of those sad old jobbing writers called in to do the long copy brief no one else could face on a fulltime salary.

He hadn't had an office for 3 years now. Open plan exhausted him. People moaned that Facebook was killing privacy, but as far as he was concerned it had begun to disappear with the breaking down, literally, of walls. The homogeneity of the open plan had effectively removed the mystery to the creative process and reduced it to a tool of management, a means of maintaining 'a happy client'. He wasn't even sure he deserved the grand epithet of Creative any more.

Around eleven o'clock, Alex stole upon them and baldly announced, "How's it going... you cunts!" Coming from an art director the swearing wouldn't have been funny, but from a copywriter, who thickly underlined the abusive term in irony, it never failed to amuse.

"Alexis Maximus, Jim said.

"I'm Greek not Roman, you thickus prickus."

Alex guffawed – as he guffawed at most things.

"Ahh, there's no difference if you read The Sun," Jim said, every bit as sharp as his North London rival.

"I hope you two realise you're in disgrace over a mailer that the client ruined for you." He guffawed again.

Alex reminded Myles of an ostrich – tall, with a narrow head, a small mouth and small eyes, a strong Greek nose – he sort of waddled along, on womanly hips, flicking a distracted, faintly bewildered eye over the things and people about him as if checking that his eggs weren't hatching crocodiles. His manner was Mediterranean warm, his humour dry but moistened by frequent chuckles and laughter, like generous drizzles of olive oil. He was a walking highlighter pen underlining dysfunction wherever he saw it – and he saw it everywhere, it was actually legion, if only you saw things through his eyes. Some Creatives found his cynicism too much to bear, but Myles

took most of the talk of gloom and doom with a pinch of salt, content to appreciate the man's irony and maverick form, without dwelling too much on the pessimism of the mindset.

Alex lowered his voice and mentioned he'd just been to a meeting – a sort of nod nod, wink wink about the way he said. "That person I was telling you about," he added cryptically.

"Oh, right, that one," Myles said.

"Yeah. How's that thing of yours going? The new venture with your mate?"

He was alluding to Myles's start-up with Brad.

"Yeah, it's OK... slowly, y'know?"

"You might need to push it up a gear before long– by all accounts things are not well in Denmark."

Alex had assumed a suitably ominous expression.

"Yeah, we know..." Myles said.

"It's very rocky," Alex continued. "Not good. Anyway, are you able to step out for a coffee in five minutes?"

Myles looked over to Jim. Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"Could do."

"Alright then. See you outside reception in five."

Myles didn't know how much more of Alex's Machiavellian talk he could stomach just now, but he had just the slightest inkling Alex was about to propose something positive for once.

In the private enclosure of the lift – the nearest thing they got to an office – Jim mused quietly that he didn't think he wanted to do this job much longer. He laughed, as if embarrassed to have finally come to that conclusion with still twenty years to go till he was of official retiring age. "I don't enjoy it no more," he added in a voice like a big kid. Myles said he felt the same way. What a pair of lemmings. Thing is, what else do you do, Jim said, as the doors opened. "Well, you can join our little agency, if we ever get it up," Myles said with necessary innuendo.

Alex wasn't outside – which was typical somehow. He was always making arrangements in a rash of urgency and then cancelling them just as suddenly. Myles made a call. Alex had been dragged into a meeting, he said. He'd meet them down there. "Make it the greasy spoon. I haven't had breakfast yet."

"You see," Myles teased, when Alex finally arrived, "you still think like an above-the-line man. Breakfast in the middle of the morning. When you fall from grace and end up in below the line

you're supposed to slurp cereal at your computer, not come out here for sausages and bacon and a pot of tea at 11.15."

"Yeah, well I had to get up to Cambridge for this meeting, didn't I."

"What was that then, job interview?" Jim asked, with a dry chuckle.

"Friend of mine – he's been talking to the agency about giving them a chunk of business, and then when he found out I was there, he said, was I interested?"

"You?" Myles and Jim said in chorus.

"Yeah. We used to get on when I was at Saatchi. He loved the work I did. The creative director stole it and pretended it was his, but my friend knew it was mine and he always came to me for ideas. Until the CD got the hump and got me fired."

"Nice," Jim said.

"Anyway, we've kept in touch and he's set up his own thing working with some Chinese company and they want to set up an account over here."

"With Alex, Alex and Smart Alec," Jim suggested facetiously – and they all laughed.

"Well, this is the thing, that's why I wanted to talk to you boys." He glanced at Myles. "You said you had an office in Soho."

"Yeah, a broom cupboard."

Alex groaned.

"Five desks, one sofa," Myles qualified.

"We might need another floor if I was to introduce my friend to you guys."

"Has your friend got a name?" Myles inquired.

"He has, but I have to keep him anonymous for now. Sorry, but I just can't take any risks anything getting out – that would finish it. I will tell you, of course. Let me get something set up, though, first. I think he's interested."

Typical Alex – always the whiff of paranoia.

"We might be able to arrange the two floor option for a day," Myles replied.

"On a Sunday," Jim joked.

"I'd need to meet this mate of yours, Brad," Alex said.

"OK."

"Why're you still here, actually? Why aren't you over there full time?"

"Can't afford it. We're not quite breaking even."

"Tough, isn't it. I can't promise anything, but it's worth exploring."

"Sure," Myles said.

"I think he'd come in. He trusts me. I told him to stay away from ISB..."

Alex went on to say he'd never worked in such a shambolic place as ISB. Jim chipped in, wanting them to know it used to be very different.

"Really?" Alex intoned with gloomy incredulity. "It's not a creative agency, though, is it. It's led by suits, management. Which might be alright if the account handlers weren't so thick. And the Creative Director look like he's having a nervous breakdown. The MD's a stiff old fart from public school and hasn't a clue how to motivate the agency... grim," he rounded off. "The atmosphere's turning me into a zombie. What about you two?"

Myles stuck out his hands and acted like a zombie.

"I thought so..."

"So, how's the start up going?" he asked of Myles, seemingly forgetful he'd just asked this question.

"We have one client," Myles replied. "One client, two projects and one client talking to us."

"Well, that's good, that's great," Alex said encouragingly. "Are you in on it?" he asked of Jim.

"I'm sort of in the wings... have to see what happens here."

"How do you manage client meetings when you're working here?" Alex asked Myles.

"Either we do them after I finish here, or Brad does them. Most of it can be done by email and phone, though. We're very virtual," he added with a smile.

"Careful you don't get virtually caught," Alex warned. "You're moonlighting – breach of contract mate," he added assuming the persona of a boring old solicitor. "But well done," he added, sawing at his last strip of cold bacon. "I hope you do well with it. And when this all goes tits up, you'd better give me a job – you cunt!"

A couple of heads turned as they were laughing heartily at Alex's ironic refrain.

Alex was one of the few admen Myles could call a real friend. As with Brad, they shared the sentiment that their jobs were regrettable necessities until such time they could give it all up to write for TV or film. They might be dogged underachievers, but at least they were more honest with themselves than anyone else they knew in the business. The humour was the only part of being in the business Myles enjoyed these days; it was the humour of the jaded but wise, the loser who was still in the game, if only just. Without it, he really would turn into a zombie.

"OK, guys," Alex dabbed his mouth with a paper serviette, "let me talk to my friend and I'll let you know."

Myles was about to point out to him that he'd missed a spot, but he rather liked the look of Alex this way, it suggested he might actually be hungry to bring him a major piece of business they could all feed off for the next year or so – when times were hard...

In the afternoon Jim was called upon to re-jig a layout while Myles continued to chip away at the website copy Cara had sent back to him with amends. Web copy in this sort of volume was tooth-pulling laborious. The task it, seemed, was to produce copy that was totally devoid of expression, yet 'smart, modern and aspirational'; every paragraph was to be pared down to its bare essentials and served to provide – on this recruitment site, at any rate – nibbles of information that took the visitor on a restless journey from module to page and a call to action. At the end of a day like this, Myles would typically find himself standing on the tube platform at six thirty, drawing nourishment from reading again the long copy of a Jack Daniel's ad, imbibing every moist word and turn of phrase, slowly returning life to his burnt filament of a writing brain. *Long copy*, he would think, *has gone underground...*

Glancing over the attachments that the client had just sent through for the next section he was on, he wondered how on earth he'd find the will to improve on any of it. His mind lurched back in time to the humiliating ordeal of the night before and he almost blushed recalling the 'toilet scene', even as he sat there at his computer. One bad date like that can set you back months, he realised. It was less the humiliation that troubled him than the confusion it had left him in. He'd sat on the tube – last train home – unable to read his book, sinking into a bog of dark thoughts as it dawned on him that he wasn't all that interested in 'fun' any more, not even sex, of itself, he wanted... a companion. He thought he just might have found one in Gina – the sexiest screenwriter he'd ever come across, socially they usually looked as if they'd left whatever vitality they might have had in the script they were obsessing over – but she'd turned out to be the 'sexual predator' she had assumed him to be. He should have known better: wanting an attractive companion just gets you burned, whichever way you play your hand.

At 6.05, Clara appeared like the wicked witch from the West, red ink pen wand in hand. Myles's throat constricted in anticipation of the inevitable fire and brimstone she was about to unleash. She sat down in the nearest empty swivel chair and let out a sigh that nearly melted the chair Myles was sitting on.

"I don't know," she started off. "There's a lot of stuff in here that I thought you'd understood, but you just haven't. I don't know what to suggest. I've been through the templates with you, I've heard from you that you're alright with them, you tell me you understand SEO... but I keep coming across stuff that suggests you only half get it. And now I suppose you're wanting to go home – and I'm behind on schedule."

Bizarrely she then let out a giggle. Perhaps he was sending her mad...

Myles didn't want to go home exactly – his wife – or was that ex? – would be there, possibly with her boyfriend who would probably be playing X-box with the kids in the front room – he simply

wanted to wake up from the bad dream. He'd promised Brad he'd be in Soho for a meeting with their accountant at six thirty. Clearly that was no longer going to happen.

"This is a template A," Clara was explaining, reaching for the site map and template illustrations, "but this looks like Template C."

"I thought we'd agreed to change that."

Camilla just stared at him, as if he were a dead screen that just might surprise her and flicker to life. When he failed to answer, she resumed: "It clearly states, Template A. We need a line of copy here and a link through to the page underneath. What do you not understand about that?"

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt the urge to slap a woman across the face, perhaps when his mother used to tear into him verbally for his alleged displays of teenage selfishness, anyway, he felt it now. But because you can't do that, his throat was constricting further, his mouth was drying out and he could only reply in fragments, like spitting broken teeth.

Clara ran through the remainder of her amends and asked him ever so nicely, if he thought he could manage all that before he left for the evening. *She* was going to be here till midnight most probably – at which she let out another of her tickled laughs, like the Queen of Hearts, as if in truth she found the whole exercise deeply absurd.

As she headed off, back to her coven, Jim was getting ready to go home.

"Been a naughty boy, then," he remarked ironically.

"Yeah. I have to stand in front of the blackboard for the next couple of hours."

"I should watch them typos mate – she don't like 'em."

"There were 3 in 30 pages. She wants a 300 page website turned around in five minutes and she seems to forget I'm new to this– she may have been living and breathing it for the past 3 months, but I haven't. She's like one of the maths teachers I had at school. She'd ask you if you understood, you'd shake your head and she'd run through it all again at the same speed and then formulate the question again in such a way you dare not ask her anything for fear of looking an idiot."

"Well, you better wear your shorts and school tie tomorrow then. Don't kill yourself – Alex and his friend might have need of your services." He patted Myles on the shoulder and headed out.

Myles took out his mobile and wrote a truncated explanation and apology to Brad. Brad pinged one back: 'i can't keep moving my schedule around you, Myles. I'm doing this meeting without you.'

When Myles, now fuming, called from outside the ad agency, Brad ignored his call. He left a vexed message, reminding Brad that till their venture properly took off, his current job came first. He almost added, *I have a family to feed*, but that exercised due restraint.

At 9.15 the office was empty save for Myles and Cara. She was about forty feet away, right the other end of the room, working on her laptop. How could anyone munch on crisps and listen to music on headphones at the same time? What a shame she didn't look like one of the junior creatives. A porno fantasy featuring sex on an office desk popped into his head. Such things did go on, but he'd never been so lucky. He didn't really fancy agency girls. Or they him, presumably. He imagined Cara gushed and screamed and let out that tickled laugh of hers when she was fucking. That tight coil she existed inside for most of the day suddenly springing open as she went hell bent for pleasure.

Myles rested back in his chair and rubbed his burnt eyes. His mobile was ringing. He read the caller ID: Kasumi. For two or three seconds he felt a stab of nostalgia as he recalled how happy he used to feel seeing her name pop up on his phone. He knew immediately what she'd be calling about: she'd made the kids dinner and was going over to Steve's later that night. Great, he could partake of some porn in peace.

"Hey, it's me," she said quietly, as if she could already sense that he was in a quiet place and yet not free to talk in private.

"Hey... Still working."

She made a sympathetic sound.

But she hadn't called to chat, ask him how he was... She wanted him not to forget to renew the car tax. For the car he never drove, the car she drove around in with Steve and just occasionally used for super market trips for all the family.

"OK," he said.

"And don't forget to wake up Ray before you go to bed and make him go to the toilet. He wet the bed again last night."

"OK," he said.

"Bye," she said. She sounded relatively cheerful, as she often did over the phone. As if to a trusted business partner.

He hung up and saved the document he was working on. Drew the cursor over Shut Down. Cara wouldn't be happy – he hadn't finished the revisions she'd given him – so perhaps she'd be here till one o'clock. Too bad: he had three kids to get home to. Three people who loved him as he was and still accepted him with or without SEO.

Slightly to his surprise Cara thanked him for staying late and gave him a cheerful goodnight. He swiped the buzzer with his card and tripped down the stairs. The African on the desk called out a cheerful Goodnight, sir! And, as the front doors zoomed open, he replied with matching friendliness.

He was on the street, his eyes drinking in the fresh air. He was tired and beat. But at last he was going home.