

# Expectations Are The Thieves of Joy



## CAST

Alexander Stamps	'Alex'	<i>Banker</i>
Ted Slobbers	'Slobbers'	<i>Banker</i>
Sophia Malachi-Fürminster <i>Garden Manager / Yoga Teacher</i>	'Soph'	<i>Pedicab Driver / Community</i>
Richard Pratt	'Pratt'	<i>Banker</i>
Derek Brash	'Baz'	<i>Window Cleaner</i>
Steven Murphy	'Stevo'	<i>Unemployed</i>
Old Mary of Leith	-	<i>Retired</i>



# 1.

“I can't shake the feelin' that life hasn't started  
[...] is this me?  
Is this what I'm doin'?  
I know I exist, but I don't feel a thing  
I'm eclipsed, I'm elsewhere  
And the worst part is, I don't think that I care”  
- Kate Tempest, *Let Them Eat Chaos*

It was an icy Saturday morning in Edinburgh. Alex Stamps was wrapped in white bed sheets, waiting for life to crawl back and inhabit his body. Alex groaned, turned onto his back, and peeled open his eyes to see a morning sun exploring the cornicing of his bedroom ceiling. Bright sunlight was making deep reliefs between the white stucco. There, strange shadows grouped.

Alex Stamps was not a happy man, though others thought he should have been. This ‘should’ troubled him enormously. Born into the right family, Stamps had been educated at the right institutions, graduated with the right qualifications, and entered the right profession. But being on the right path had not made Stamps alright. For years he had been unable to shake a feeling that something about his life was deeply wrong.

Alex twisted in the sheets. Over the street, balanced atop a chimney, a seagull pulled open its throat. Its shriek throttled the

air, bounced off windows of the grand silver tenements and screeched across the frosty cobblestones below. There, ghosts of vapours pursed from the mouths of pedestrians. The breaths plumed into the bright, brittle air, contracted, and fell to nothingness. The roar of bottle bins being emptied sounded from blue alleyways. Tyres span. Occasionally, obscenely, a horn might blare, or rumors of music drift from passing cars. But for these disruptions, the New Town of Edinburgh lay at its most regal, a Saturday morning village of slumber and security.

Last night's chemical oblivions still danced in Stamp's veins. He clutched at his phone, and scrolled through a monologue he'd begun writing in Notes.

Everything I see is a reflection of how it sees my self seeing it. I see how other people see me seeing them. I never perceive something as it actually is, I see how others see me as I see it. I live in a cage made of mirrors. Every object, every situation is caged by my anxiety.

Writing was easier than thinking, thoughts could be captured, rearranged, and refined. It was a more gradual method for formulating thoughts. He re-read himself, correcting commas.

Knowing what I know doesn't stop me from acting in the ways that are bad for me. It's not my fault I was born rich.

My life looks every part as my peers expect. Apartment, car, career. But by following the path of least resistance I've become the person that my parents and peers expected. Life makes itself around my inaction and, little by little, I become a replicant of my privilege."

Alex had tried hard to remedy his dissatisfaction. He'd picked up new sports, jetted through exotic resorts, and devoured glamorous girls. But the minute he returned from each dose of dopamine, Alex's brain would pace, unable to find a comfortable place in which it could settle. No surplus of experience would quell it. "You're living the life," others would say to him. He'd squirm. He sensed no great achievement.

Alex instinctively flicked from notes to social media on his phone. At the top of his feed, a photo of his younger brothers stood outside the tallest building in Dubai, shaking hands with a sheik. The twins had closed a new deal. Thousands of likes. His uncle had commented "very proud" with a popping champagne emoji. Alex flicked downwards. A new profile picture for the girl he had fancied at University. She had been the leading lady in every production, and Alex had joined the drama society to get close to her. He had fancied her with a desire that was painful, spent hours browsing through items about her on social media. He laboured over messages he might send her, which cost him great embarrassment to send. She never replied. When she left the University, Alex never heard from her again. She lived on in his social media feed, a ghost of never attainable

desires. He didn't dare interact with anything she posted in case she thought cruelly of him if she saw it. He flicked down his feed.

An hour of scrolling later, he'd seen cabins built by friends in the wilderness, safari photos, new babies, funeral photos and read two articles about secret military programs. He returned to the room that fringed the small glowing screen, to see his bedsheets in disarray around him. It was past midday. Alex felt a growing horror at having made nothing of a sunny morning. Shame beckoned. Shame had kept Alex Stamps flattened by the weight of doing nothing for years.

His phone went 'PING.' A message from Ted Slobbers:

*Sunday 1:13pm*

*Slobbers: Pint?*

Alex knew what the next twelve hours would look like.

## **2.**

It was one of those city centre bars that pretended to be a restaurant, though excelled at being neither. As Alex walked in, Slobbers stood beneath a fluorescent TV screen, squirming against the bar, alone in a desert of echos and wipe-down surfaces.

Ted Slobbers was the kind of man whose life had been kept within a sequence of institutions, all of which had prescribed a

uniform. Released into the life beyond schools and University, Slobbers had never exercised his liberty in sartorial speculations. It had remained suits or rugby shirts for Slobbers, and he was untidy with either. This afternoon, Slobbers salmon shirt had one ear tucked into his brown belt, leaving the other ear flapping. He held a smart phone in one hand and a pint in the other. His face fidgeted between these, taking occasional gasps upward at a TV beyond the bar that was lit with rugby.

Slobbers, like Alex, was a junior broker at BBG. As brokers, they were modern medicine-men. They didn't read bones to predict rain, nor did they sacrifice chickens. They speculated on the swings of confidence that other investors would make upon the global markets, and used other people's money to test their personal opinions. They tried to climb ahead of the curve of the consensus, and there they would place sums of money to grow. It involved a lot of clicking. No flapping hands and shouting across rooms. More shouting down phones asserting, and assuaging others of their predictions of fortunes. As modern men their power was measured by their ability to convince others of things. The economy depended on this confidence.

As Alex reached him, Slobbers did not shift in his arrangement, but looked up, scrutinised Alex, inclined his head with a slight nod, and buried his vision back into his phone.

"Two pints in, I am already," began Slobbers. "You're on catch up Stamps. Now," paused Slobbers, pausing to peer up at Alex and narrow his eyes, "what's this mess about HR giving Ramsay a row for knobbing an intern?"

The bar staff blinked up, and with a precognition evolved by generational serfdom, pulled the handle for the Peroni tap before Alex's order had left his mouth. As the first pint went

down, Slobbers continued to squirm through a standing sequence against the bar, like a bear attempting to scratch against a tree.

“We’re all adults. She was nineteen.” Slobbers splurged towards Alex, not waiting for a reply. Slobbers talked out of the corner of his mouth, at a furious pace as his eyes roamed. You had the feeling, when Slobbers was talking to you, that his mouth was a waterwheel, churning over a list of thoughts that would never cease. “If you’re going to sleep with your boss, you can’t go complaining that it’s affected your work situation. It’s indecent to sleep with someone and then complain to their employers. Vicious actually.” Alcohol was sponsoring Slobbers’ convictions.

“I don’t know what he’s told you Stamps, but Ramsay told me it was the girl’s way at getting back at him after he stopped replying to her texts. Don’t think that’ll affect Ramsay in the slightest. Champion shagger. Hopefully HR will tick their boxes and the Ram will be back in the wilds.”

Alex winced as the word “shagger,” boomed from Slobbers’ mouth. It rebounded around the sparsely furnished room. Everything in the bar shone with an easy-to-clean gleam. From the thin stems of metal that held the glass table tops, to the shining floor of black tiles. Vague pop music listed across the background. Colours snapped across TVs hung above head height that reflected as fluorescent smears in the room’s many surfaces. A couple of parents with their adult child comprised the only people seated for lunch amid the vacant tables. They cut into pizzas on ceramic plates with squeaking forks and knives.

“What did she accuse him of?” asked Alex.

“Well she said it was rape, of course,” replied Slobbers. “But she’d agreed to go on a date with him, went back to his and woke up in the morning saying he’d raped her. She went to HR before the police, Ramsay reckons to get him fired.”

“And what are HR saying?”

“Well they’re trying to keep her away from the police. Ramsay’s been pulled up before, felt someone up on a lunch break, so perhaps he’ll be reprimanded this time. But in all likelihood, she’ll get a pay off that’ll keep her out of court and Ramsay will be told to take a holiday. I doubt HR will want to lose him to another bank.”

“What if it was rape?”

“It can’t have been Stamps. She went on a date with him.” Slobbers features crowded into the centre of his face, giving him a puggish, belligerent look. “Whose side are you on?”

All that Alex knew of Ramsay was common knowledge. Ramsay was significantly older, significantly more masculine and significantly more senior than most of the employees at the BBG bank. Ramsay had been the origin of a formula for seducing interns which his male colleagues had come to know by heart. “Simple,” he’d heard Ramsay elucidate, counting out the steps with his fingers: “One. Begin to talk to your intern about a failing relationship that doesn’t exist: elicit sympathy, demonstrate sensitivity, become their friend. Two. Invite them to a swanky restaurant. Order champagne. Three. Take a taxi to a bar for drinks after. Four. Take another taxi towards a bar passing your apartment. Point out you’ll be passing your apartment and invite them up for champagne and or cocaine. Two hundred pounds spent on a night out and it’s in the bag. Cheaper than a hooker for the night.” At this punchline, any

assembled men would laugh and flounder obsequiously. The elders of the group would wink at each other, cupping their elbows with their arms crossed. Juveniles of the group would look wide-eyed at their admission to this hidden knowledge, and pretend not to be impressed.

These professional male circles talked only about scores. Scores in sports, scores in sex and scores in salaries. Sex was another commodity in this score economy. And between brags of their highest scoring successes, the men built friendships by trading tactics with each other. Tactics to get higher sex scores, higher sports scores, higher salaries. Amid these braying boys, Alex felt lonely. At boarding school there had been plenty of it. At University it had been better. Now he felt himself isolated again, trying to make friends with those whose rules for living unsettled him. Alex had moved to Edinburgh after his degree to follow a job, and begun to make a life there. It was hard to make friends unless you spent a lot of time with someone. And to spend time, you either worked alongside them or lived with them. Alex lived alone. He separated out his work colleagues as bachelors, potential dates, and those whose insistent infants meant they had no time for new friends. The easiest company to find was that in most want of it: the bottom of the barrel. Slobbers was a bachelor par extraordinaire, and for eighteen months Slobbers had been his firmest, easiest companion.

Slobbers returned his finished pint to the bar. White suds smeared down the emptied vessel. Slobbers' chest barrelled against his shirt as he leant backwards. The second ear of his shirt's bottom popped free of his trousers.

“Another round. One Staropramen. One Peroni and two tequilas,” Slobbers emitted to the bar staff. “Yes, lemon and salt. Cheers.”

During Alex’s second pint, Slobbers began listing opinions about colleagues. Alex prodded around in his phone. The dating app was yet to serve him a date for the weekend.

The third pint was ordered with a sambuca. And we can graduate the conversation of the rest of the evening’s drinking thus:

Third pint: fraternal comradeship from common indignation at sporting events.

Fourth pint: sour disagreement about political events, traded in the manner of news pundits.

Fifth pint: bawdy stories of romances and retold memories of groping girls.

The side-eye from the bar staff had accumulated as the clock, little by little, chugged towards the hour for closing. There being no one to disturb them, meant that Slobbers’ and Alex’s performance had disturbed everyone else in the bar. The bar staff jolted out “TIME,” the instant the second hand touched twelve.

“Cowgate? Let’s go down and find somewhere more lively,” said Slobbers.

They paid the bill without noticing it, and lofted themselves into the street. The air was taut with cold. They braced into it with a tactical momentum. The day had disappeared and night was everywhere. Synthetic illuminations pierced the gloom. The alcohol worked through Alex’s veins. His thoughts felt important and his strength close to hand.

The pair, buoyant, swirled along a narrow pavement towards Princes Street, as surges of pedestrians swerved from their path. Fully boisterous, both bounded forward like bulls on parade. The ferocious feeling of having a purpose ahead of them, another drink to order, a good time still to find, filled them as they approached traffic lights. Pans of red rear lights illuminated the wraiths of exhausts. A disco tune swelled behind them with the trill of a bicycle bell. Slobbers spied a pedicab passing and all but ran to it as a boy might run toward an empty roller coaster carriage. He grabbed onto the pedicab with one thickened hand. “Yes!” He bellowed, claiming the ride for their team. He stared back at Alex, holding the pedicab with joy painted across his drink splayed face. Alex sauntered towards him, grinning at the sight of the imbecile and his victory.

The driver sat upright on the bike’s seat and looked back at them dispassionately. “Cowgate,” craned Slobbers, struggling to arrange himself into the back of the small vehicle. Alex felt the driver’s glare and the scales of a seasoned professional calculate his potentialities for absconding from the taxi, of being sick in the vehicle, of being a potential arsehole. The scrutiny was over in an instant, and their driver snapped into a smile, agreed a price with Slobbers, and began to pedal. Alex felt something familiar in that split second smile. But the feeling rose and fell back into nothingness before it could turn into a question. The pedicab accelerated past Rose Street and Alex’s emotions churned in a great drunken fire of nihilism.

The pedicab began pulling Edinburgh into a carousel. Slobbers lent forward to bellow his charms toward the female driver. Alex sat back to absorb the spectacle. Drinkers clustered in bright doorways of pubs behind glowing cigarettes. A mother

and son rushed arm in arm down the pavement, gripping boutique bags, braced against the night. Tourists bundled in bright jackets stared upwards at Edinburgh's floriated tenements. From the Royal Mile the pedicab began to spin a lazy serpent down towards the Cowgate. Cars wove around them, all bright lights and noise. A cyclist strapped by lycra zoomed past in a whirr of staccato lights.

Slobbers bawled forward to the driver, "Do you come from Edinburgh?" with zero volume control. Over her shoulder came an English accent from the driver, "Originally Bristol, I came to Edinburgh for Uni, then travelled for a few years and now I'm back. I manage a community garden."

"Fantastic," shouted Slobbers, "I love gardening," lying through his teeth. "I always thought that gardening should be for everyone. Not just the rich. Rich gardens are always tidy. Houses tidy, clothes tidy, gardens trim. Order is a rich thing. It is the expectation of the rich to be able to impose order on chaos. Order nature. Little hedgerows and ordered borders."

The driver gave half a laugh, "Our community gardens are more the embrace of chaos than order. Vegetables in raised beds. Flowers poking through troughs kids have made as their first wood-working projects. It's about helping things to flourish more than wrestling control from them. It's rugged and scraggly. To me it's beautiful."

"What's your name?" boomed Slobbers.

"Sophia," answered the driver.

And with the suddenness of epiphany, the solution to the familiarity of that smile burst through Alex. He didn't know how it could it possibly be. And yet the body understands in an

instant what can take the brain a long time to calculate, if the brain can ever think its way there at all.

## **Sophia Malachi-Fürminster**

It had been her first real trip solo. Sophia had gone to Italy with a friend when she was sixteen, but travelling solo was different. Her parents had been hippies before they became professionals in advertising, they didn't mind. So at eighteen Sophia took a gap year. She had a place to study History of Art at Edinburgh. She was burnt out after years of school, and eager to live. She booked a one way ticket to Thailand.

At first it was miserable. She sat on the other side of the world surrounded by strangers who treated Thailand like a tropical high-school disco. Threw up booze and hallucinogens on the beach, whilst their friends laughed and videoed them. She felt alone in the crowd of debauchery, and stupid for leaving her friends behind. She took a boat away from the party islands, aiming to head north up the mainland until Laos. They said Laos was more relaxed. As she was checking into a hostel in Surat Thani, she saw Alex sitting in the lobby, drawing in his journal. He was shy when she introduced herself and she liked that. His drawings were cute, of jungle landscapes pocketed with temples and studies of leaves. The next day she saw him as she was checking out. He was too. They rented mopeds and drove North together.

As the roads between towns got longer, the tourists got less common. Sophia smoked joints with Alex and together they snuck into temples. At night they'd find a hostel together and sleep in separate bunks. Alex was fun to be with, a little nervous. He tried to act aloof, but he was a goof deep down, and it was great to spend time with someone who would listen to her.

On day four, on their way up a road that had turned to mud, Alex's moped got stuck. Sophia had taken him up the road on the back of her moped to find help. They found a small restaurant attached to a farm run by the nicest Thai family, the Singjais. The farmer, a guy in his fifties had good tempered mischief behind his eyes and a face that was always smiling. He'd come back down the track with a four by four and helped them to free the moped. When they drove their scooters back past the farm, his wife came out to invite them to wash their muddy clothes and spend the night. The farmer's three kids were so adorable. The trio of infants were initially dumb with wonder seeing Alex and Sophia sitting in their parents kitchen at the plastic covered table. Then they'd peel into bouts of giggles, pointing at Sophia's blonde hair, squealing until their mother silenced them. Sophia could tell Alex was self-conscious at first, sitting in this cramped living room. He was just as shy as the little kids. But by the end of dinner, the three kids were laughing around him as he pretended to play hide and seek. After breakfast the next morning Sophia insisted she help the mother in preparing food

for the day in the restaurant, and Alex joined. They ended up staying with the Sinjais a week.

They established a rhythm. They'd help out in the restaurant in the morning until lunch, when the mother of the family spread out a feast for them, and then shoo'd them off out of the house to go into the jungle and explore. The father made them a map to a waterfall and a small overgrown temple. They spent hours at the waterfall in the company of the huge buzzing forest, the water and each other. Sophia knew Alex fancied her, but he inhabited a charade of masculinity that kept him embarrassed and shut off from talking about it. He wanted to be right about all matters and to treat the world with a superior distance. But Sophia challenged all that. She played music he didn't know, taught him how to roll joints, and how to speak basic Thai. Her knowledge of philosophy put titled theories on top of the points Alex would make, and little by little, Alex's bravado softened. Alex told her about growing up amongst his brothers, feeling alone as the eldest. How their mother had died when he was young. As soon as the laddish armour fell off, he was a kind and funny guy, a talented drawer, someone with a heart in the right place, who wished people could be kinder to each other. She knew that shy Alex would not know how to approach kissing her, so she kissed him at the waterfall, and he swooned. The last of his armour melted, and he became adorable. A happy, yapping bundle of energy.

It lasted three weeks. Alex had to return to the UK. He was starting an undergrad in PPE in Cambridge and

Sophia had eleven months left of her gap year. He'd wanted to get matching tattoos. They both cried. But both agreed they were heading to begin new sections of their own lives, and they could only do that apart.

Alex wrote a series of letters to Sophia that he sent to her parent's house in the months after they parted. Sophia read them when she got back to the UK. In his first letters he was hurting and sentimental, by his last letters he was defensive. He'd included many of the drawings that he'd made whilst they were together. After she returned, Soph wrote him two letters back. One included a copy of *Steppenwolf* by Herman Hesse, the other, two slides of fishermen that she'd found in a box on a park bench in Edinburgh. They did not meet up. Seasons slipped over semesters, and soon both Alex and Sophia were fully consumed by the adventures and obligations of their new lives. Their romance died silently.

### 3.

Alex's body jolted as the plastic pedicab turned from the Grassmarket and trundled into the Cowgate. Numb with shock, and dumber with drink, Alex's limbs lay like fallen buildings. His heart felt a familiar vertigo inside it, his chest began to close down, to clamp across his heart, to protect it.

As Slobbers blabbered on, Alex looked at the curve of Soph's spine as she lent forward to the handlebars. He looked at the

dreadlocks nested under a scarf on the top of her head. Of course now Sophia had dreadlocks. Alex thought of how long it had been and how different he had been, and how different life had seemed then.

Thickening crowds of weekend drinkers began to line the pedicab's path. Alex wanted them all to dissolve. He wanted Slobbers to disappear. He had a library of questions for Sophia, so many, that some unknown part of him had been storing. He'd need a week to ask, he'd need a month. To ask her how her life had been, and tell her how he'd imagined it, who she had become to him in her absence. It was all so long ago now.

Slobbers had begun shouting at the masses from the pedicab as if he was arriving via chariot.

The pedicab braked hard to a stop. Slobbers toppled forward, catching himself from falling, and Sophia whipped round. In a voice audible to the whole crowding street, she shouted "You can't talk to women like that. Not in my cab. Not ever. OUT."

The group of women Slobbers had been leering at pointed at Slobbers, cackling. One shouted "Cheers hern," to Sophia. Slobbers, mumbled apologetically as he fumbled in his wallet for payment. His bulbous head was unable to turn redder. Alex found his trousers being pulled at by Slobbers, who had clambered out of the vehicle, and given a wad of red notes to Sophia.

Sophia was looking back angrily at Alex who had remained in the back of her cab. In her eyes sat another drunk wanker in a shirt and shoes combination, fumbling to begin an entitled apology for his mate's privilege. And then beneath the high-collared coat, beneath the calculated stubble, behind the panicked eyes that were so intensely locked onto hers, she saw a

boy she had been in Thailand with. And as she saw him, her impatience melted into wonder, and the rest, the clothes, the haircut, fell away. Sophia's furrowed brow opened to wide eyes.

"Alex!"

"Not ideal is it?"

"Alex Stamps, you're in Edinburgh!"

His name from her mouth, the feeling of being recognised flooded him with a warmth.

"Yes, I've been here for two years now."

"Alex you should have called me, oh man, it's so good to see you. What a surprise. You look," and the boy she had been with in Thailand segued into the man in front of her. She saw how drunk he was, how smartly dressed he was, how embarrassed he was to be found in the back of the cab with an oaf, and she finished, "older. Oh here Alex it's so good to see you. I haven't heard from you since, since."

"Ten years?"

"Christ, it must be. Let's get a drink soon. When I'm not working. I do this pedicab on weekends, manage the garden Monday to Thursday and I teach Yoga Wednesday and Thursday nights, but we must link up. Give me your phone," and Alex's phone was in her hand, and she was adding herself into his contacts, and her profile picture popped up in his screen.

"It's been ten years?"

"Thereabouts."

"It must have been."

"So good to see you Soph. I had no idea."

"So nice Alex. See you soon yeah. Look after that dickhead tonight will you. Keep people safe."

In The Three Sisters pub pop music blared. The floor was sticky. The place smelt of booze and disinfectant. Alex began to tell Slobbers about Thailand. Slobbers told Alex about his time at a full moon party. Alex tried to tell Slobbers about the waterfall. Slobbers wanted to know if he'd knobbed her.

#### 4.

*"I am giddy; expectation whirls me round.*

*The imaginary relish is so sweet*

*That it enchants my sense: what will it be,"*

- Shakespeare, Troilus & Cressida, 3.2

Alex messaged Soph the next day on the tram on his way to work. "Strike while the iron's hot, no point in playing it cool." His head felt cumbersome after their night out, but if university had taught Alex Stamps one thing, it was how to turn up to work no matter how hungover and attend to the pretence of professionalism.

Sophia's profile picture was gorgeous. He clicked it and scrolled through eight photos. The messaging app told him she'd been last active five hours ago, which meant she had gone to bed around four. "So she's not going to be awake to message me back until eleven," he reasoned.

"Hi." He'd messaged and got off the tram at the stop for BBG. It was meant to be casual. Not too much effort for her to respond to. But seeing the greeting still sat alone and unanswered on his screen as Alex reached his desk, the 'Hi,'

began to worry him. He booted up his workstation and the nebulas of the stock market crawled across his monitors. This morning, Alex did not ground into the figures and decipher their causes. He kept picking his phone out of his pocket and flicking back to Sophia's chat window, which had not changed.

Was it too bland? Sophia must have loads of guys messaging her. Should he need to pad out his introduction with more words? He might be in love with her. He shouldn't tell her that. Or should he? Emotion is good. Don't want to scare her with too much of it.

He tried to focus on the work day ahead. Two calls to clients before midday. A bond financing BAE's drone program was due to pay out that week. He'd built a book of clients for it last year. Mr Parry would be making six figures, an easy call for this afternoon. He'd been researching metal bonds on a hunch, for a possible new investment. The spread of fluctuations between prices on the materials suggested a low-hanging fruit in the bond market that no-one else had spotted. Alex's suspicion was nickle. It'd be good to have more information before he called Parry. He hoped to get Parry on board.

He checked his phone again.

Since his mother died in his teens, Alex's relationship with girls had been purely sexual. His mind followed the strands that adverts for ice-creams and jeans led it down: he lusted after women and lusted for them to desire him similarly. To Alex, sex was something that women owned and could choose to grant him access to. Alex's tools of seduction were money and chivalry. He'd take girls who looked like adverts to either a glitzy restaurant or a serious eatery, depending on what he supposed their idea of glamour was. Sometimes dinner would be followed

by drinks at a bar nearby. He'd bed more of the girls he took to the garish restaurant. A few times he'd followed up by taking a girl on a getaway. But most were hangers-on, and their obvious aspiration to become a well-photographed bride repelled him. They came from all classes. The poor ones were hardest to bed a lot of the time. It was the middle-class lot that yielded to their impressions of his wealth most easily. Alex knew it was his wealth that seduced them. It all felt vaguely cruel and shameful in a way that Alex had no words for.

By noon Alex's concentration was sapped. He broke for lunch. In the toilets he sat in a cubicle and checked the messaging app. Soph had been active on it an hour ago, but his message was still listed as 'delivered, unread.'

The 'Hi,' looked stupid, desolate. Obviously not something she could reply to. Why wouldn't she reply? Perhaps she was nervous. Perhaps that's why she hadn't read his message. Perhaps she was seeing a guy and she was worried that the reappearance of Alex in her life might interrupt that. Maybe she met a guy last night and was in bed with him, and she had only logged in on the messaging app at 11am, as she was leaving his apartment to find her way home. Maybe her phone had died. The horror of the situation smothered him.

After hovering over the unchanging screen for ten solid minutes, Alex sent Soph a second message. It was an invitation to dinner that evening. He sent it in an informal tone with two kisses. No sooner had he sent the message than he regretted the idea, and his stomach plunged. He followed up the message with a barrage of smiley faces. This seemed even more idiotic as soon as it was sent. The next twenty minutes were spent in a feverish attempt to find an emoji that would restore some wit to

his soliloquy. Every emoji he scrolled by, his brain tried to fit by the mirror of Sophia's brain: how would she receive it, could she respond to it, how would it alter her perception of him? He found the right symbol, the joker card, but didn't send it because the time that had elapsed since he sent the last message was, to his brain, significant. He did not want Soph to sense overthinking or desperation behind his messages. He returned to his desk, inhaled an egg mayonnaise sandwich and tried to interest himself again in a buzz of numbers from the metal markets.

At 4pm Alex had stopped pretending to ignore his phone in the hope it might buzz. He'd quit picking it up to check if the ringer sound had been turned off, and he'd stopped looking at it pretending to be checking the time. He'd hated Sophia for ignoring him. He'd forgiven her for ignoring him. He'd hated himself for assuming Sophia was ignoring him, and tackled himself as paranoid and entitled. He'd tried to pretend that he wasn't interested in whether he heard from her, and he'd found himself looking through more photos of her on social media, without being able to remember making a decision to look through those photos. Finally, he'd lapsed to a moment of pure detachedness. His phone lit up, and Alex's stomach flipped:

*"Hey you! Sorry for silence. Thought I was teaching tonight but they've just told me class has been cancelled. I've a rare free evening. Yehhh! Absolutely take me to dinner! Where when? X"*

"Hey you," she'd said. Alex glowed.

Alex had two restaurants to which he took his dates. The first was a fancy place close to his apartment in the New Town. It was garish art, overbright lighting, and floor to ceiling curtains.

The food looked like expensive hats that had been served on plates.

The second restaurant was in an ex-timberyard next to Edinburgh Castle. A herb garden was nested between old railway sleepers by the front door. Inside was reclaimed wood and soft lighting. Chefs danced between each other in the open kitchen. All the food was locally sourced.

Alex messaged Soph the address of the Timber Yard, and said 7pm.

## 5.

Alex was at the restaurant at ten minutes to seven. He sat on a stool at the bar in his least formal of his date outfits. Blue Chinos, a pistachio coloured shirt, and a pair of tan oxfords. He ordered a bottle of sour ale to share. It was made from blueberries in Norway, matured it in oak casks, advised a little cardboard menu. As Alex tipped the ale into his snifter, it poured a thick purple. At first it tasted like vinegar, then the blueberries came through.

Alex had never understood the blasé attitude most seemed to hold towards dating. Relationships were opportunities to turn life on its head. Maybe Alex fancied people harder than other people. Maybe other people were less challenged to rise to love. But every relationship Alex pursued had been a terrifying vision of possibility. He had seduced in winding tales of devotion, woe, and charades of circumstance. The stories he could tell.

He was putting down his glass as Soph walked in. He stood up feeling flushed, his nerves jangeley, his limbs unable to find a stance. Soph dumped her pack on the floor next to his stool, gave him a long hug and perched on the stool next to his, instantly at home in the space, making it seem brighter just by being there.

“Give me a few seconds pal. Cycled here. Didn’t realise the time.”

Alex leaned over and filled a snifter with the beer for her. The cold bottle slid through his sweaty palm. He gripped hard at it. The image of a greased pig popping out of a stranglehold rose up in his mind. He tried to ignore it.

“I always get so much energy after I cycle,” Sophia began. “I was in Leith at the garden I help in, saw the time and hounded it up the canal path.”

Sophia looked around. “I’ve never been here.”

The greased pig reference would sound silly now. He had missed fitting it to its moment.

Soph sat in front of him an unfazed and constant presence. She was the least smartly dressed person in the restaurant, and the most attractive. As she chatted through her day at the garden, she radiated warmth, as if she was the sun. As a waiter showed them to their table, Soph made the waiter laugh. Not the polite little grimace that servers make to customers who joke, but a full spasm of joy, as if they were old friends.

At their table, Soph picked up the drinks menu and, seeing it, expelled a rasp of air through her lips. Alex, not-too-sure, had said, “I’m paying. Your choice.” Soph had looked him straight through his eyes into the back of his head, and said: “Alex, I’ve never heard of a single one of these beers. That last one was

blueberry? Can we get this one next?” She pointed at a ‘Mikkeller Spontansauternais’ (375ml, 5.5%, £15).

“Because I want to hear you pronounce that to the waiter.”

Sophia began to laugh. Her eyes slid shut. As her grin stretched, it lifted her eyebrows and her ears. When she laughed, Alex could almost see neurons fizzing off her. She opened her eyes to see Alex chuckling with one diagonal half of his body, his elbow crooked into his stomach.

When the waiter returned, Alex pronounced the beer without pointing to the menu, and ordered a ‘burning sky saison anniversaire’ (750ml, 6.2%, £20) for them to share. Alex winked at Soph.

“Alex, the idea we’ve just spent thirty-five pounds on two beers is nuts. Well, you’ve spent that. But thirty-five quid would do my shopping for a week. Good, healthy, everything shopping. But you’re paying.”

“It’s nice to be able to treat old friends who turn up unexpected.” said Alex. “I work in a bank now. Money really isn’t an issue.”

And after the mention of his job, as the beers went down and the first course was taken away, Soph got it all. That Alex hated his job, hated the insincerity of his colleagues, hated the industry.

“Do they know?” Alex pleaded, “are they aware of the mess, but can perform their part in the pantomime of professionalism without shame? Or do these people genuinely not realise how much bullshit the manners and banter of their office work are? That the replies to polite questions are all lies. That no one says how they really are, and no one cares how each other truly feel. The biggest boaster blags the biggest bonus, becomes the boss.

Nobody giving a single fuck about each other or the wider implications of the banking business, beyond how much they will each earn by it.”

Soph sat, feeling the alcohol, keeping her attention in a vaguely concerned expression that she nodded towards Alex. He seemed genuinely anguished. The main was excellent. Halibut and white asparagus with a combination of seaweeds and herbs.

Alex continued, “with that ‘ignorance is bliss,’ chat I was on about before, sometimes I worry that it’s arrogant of me to think I know better than all these people. I was supposed to quit three years ago,”

Soph noticed her fillet of Halibut had a single bone in it. Translucent, delicate.

“Now I’ve been working with this bank for five years. All the time hating the game and promising myself that I’m about to quit. But the first time I’d been about to quit, I was promoted. The next time I was definitely just about to quit, my father became ill and there was no way I could leave. That job is everything he believes is good for me. God knows he already thinks I’m a failure.” Alex’s face hardened. “And now, there’s nothing stopping me from quitting but myself. I want to. And for three years, I haven’t.”

Feeling Soph’s gaze shifting towards his plate, Alex recognised the meal untouched beneath him. He began to corral the greens with his fork. But this confession was overdue. Perhaps it was the alcohol, perhaps it was the opportunity of a sympathetic ear, but as Alex spoke he only renewed and reinforced his passion. Thoughts Alex had not realised he was in possession of were streaming to the forefront of his mind, demanding to be spoken.

“I don’t feel I chose this life that I live, but I must have Soph. And now I’m suffocating. Everyone knows there’s more to life than the pursuit of money, but how can I pursue anything that isn’t money without everyone thinking me a failure? What would I possibly be doing of use to myself or others if I wasn’t doing this job, surrounded by these toxic people in this toxic business? I want to quit Soph, but quit for what? I can’t quit until I know what for, and I don’t think I can find that without quitting.”

Sophia countered, opening her palms towards him.

“Alex, when we were young you told me that to influence powerful people, you needed to become one of them. We had that argument one night on the roof. I was saying I didn’t vote and you told me systems can only be changed from within. You said being part of the apparatus of power would never tie you. Oh let me see,” and Sophia stared towards the ceiling for a moment, as if her concentration was stored in it, “You said being powerful would not tie you to ‘the complacent self-serving immorality that all institutions inoculate.’” Sophia paused, blinked. “Those words stuck with me. You have always been so eloquent, I thought you might become a politician.”

“The man I’ve become is everything I said I wouldn’t, Soph.” replied Alex. “That’s happened so easily, so invisibly. I’ve hardly noticed as my life has wound down the path my parents had long prepared for it. And their parents before them. I do what my family wants me to do, but they don’t value me for doing it. They value my compliance to their ideals. I exist to them as something to reflect their wishes and their values. And I’ve seen that now for years, and I can’t even call this feeling rage anymore. It’s all so fucked and I’m a product of it. I am no politician and I am not about to change anything.

“They don’t tell you your twenties are more tumultuous than your teenage years. The same feelings, with responsibilities attached. The same worries, but with no certain structures to guide your progression. Slowly the illusion that anything is possible is replaced by the acknowledgement that you are not infinite. You’re human. A character whose virtues are clawed at by flaws, by commitments, by illness. And what if it’s already too late to change by the time you understand that?”

Soph looked over patiently. She sensed how badly Alex needed to be listened to, how rarely his honesty was met by sympathy, how undertrained and neglected his emotions were to him. His body was overflowing. She could see his jaw tensing, and his knuckles bulging to prominence as he gripped his fork ever tighter. Opposite her was the same boy pleading with hurt she had last seen at an airport in Thailand ten years ago with tears streaming down his face as he left her. She was feeling the anxiety and frustration emanating from him. She reminded herself to breath. She changed the tact of the conversation.

“Do you think things can be magic?” Soph asked.

Alex, caught off-kilter, squinted back.

“Like, Alex, do you sometimes think wearing a particular pair of socks leads to particular encounters?” Sophia continued, “Like if you put your hand into your cupboard and blindly pull pink socks, and pink socks have in the past been a sign that you’re going to get laid, you think you’re going to get laid, so you wear the pink socks and hey ho, you get laid?” The words were fizzing out of Soph. ”Or you’re going to write something and the pen that you pick up is green, and green’s your magic colour at that time, so it feels like a sign seeing it’s a green pen

that you've picked up, and that sign reassures you, and you write excellently with it?"

Sophia flushed, as if embarrassed. Alex, sensing the widening of their conversation's scope, and baffled for what he might say, was horrified to find by Sophia's silence his invitation to reply.

"Soph, I've given up trying to say one thing is true whilst another isn't. Clearly, religion became traditions and turned into institutions which hurt more than they helped, but that doesn't mean religion hasn't truth in it, nor tradition some function. Science hasn't found all the answers, that doesn't mean science doesn't hold truth either. I'm sure you could pick and choose either from the facts of quantum mechanics or eastern religion and both could explain your theories about socks and colours and luck, and maybe that explanation would be 'magic.' All I can be certain of is I don't know."

Alex looked weary, but Sophia was gazing at him rapt, pressing him to speak with her eyes.

"It's frustrating not knowing anything Soph. You think I'm eloquent but I think I'm a fraud. People are impressed by those that know things. Confidence is the foundation of our economy. It's hardly charismatic to walk around answering 'possibly' to questions because you understand there is so much you don't understand that you can't have an answer. I mean there are so many questions abounding right now as we unpick our understanding of the universe, and so much political bluster and lies to cover over people's get-rich schemes. Who can claim to know anything in this age? But people continue to pretend they know the answers. Maybe they just enjoy taking stances? I'd feel like a fraud any time I put my hand up and declared I knew. I know I don't know. I see politicians pretending they have

answers. I see business people declaring they know best. And they're either ignorant, in which case we should educate them, or they're lying to protect themselves and their friends, in which case we should remove their power. Because they don't know, they can't know and their answers are guesses dressed up as facts. Endeavours only to claim more power. As I've left University and begun to work in the world, I've understood that the world is run by the bullies. Power works on surety, and the more sure you are, the more certain you are to get the top job. That's leadership. So we live in a society arranged by the arrogant idiots who are unafraid to act, whilst the wise ponder and have the confidence to change nothing."

Alex finished speaking by looking down, and began to doodle on a napkin. Sophia could feel a great pressure of emotion built up behind the words, struggling to win their release. He would not meet Soph's eye. His pen mis-stroked, scratched. Alex began again:

"I don't mind magic. I think it's a fine thing to believe in anything these days. Many of our problems are because we can't believe, we can't be authentic and nothing can hold significance. Irony destroyed that. Information destroyed that. This world is incorrigibly plural. You can't make an action in modern society that isn't in some way hypocritical. And that has stopped us who want to be authentic, who want to be gentle, who want to be real, from doing anything at all."

Soph saw Alex's bitterness. He looked older than her other friends who were at the end of their twenties. It was not uncommon, his feeling. She had heard similar things from friends who felt trapped.

"Do you still draw Alex?" Soph asked.

“Not for years.”

“Alex! They were so good. I still have one of me you made with the jungle around me and the birds up above, all weaving through my hair. You drew it when we went to that island. With the phosphorescents in the sea that night? I’ve never seen that again. I remember the moon being up and us in the bay and you diving under the surface and seeing your body trailing under the water in lights as you swam, with the sea glittering around your movements. That was magic.”

Her eyes were wide and earnest. Sophia was always earnest thought Alex, her eyes, globing, became her most prominent feature. It was strange to see Soph asleep, with her eyes shut. She looked like an older cousin to herself. The pair of them sat back into a shared familiar silence.

When Alex began to emerge, he said with his eyes down.

“I haven’t felt anything like that for a long time.”

“You should draw again,” said Sophia gently. Alex looked down, trying to spear a cold length of asparagus.

As Soph went to the bathroom Alex realised how happy he was. It was refreshing to be able to be honest. There were lots of versions of himself. He was done with being the version of himself that he hated, that hung out with people he disliked. And here was Sophia, his shot at a new life. So good to see Soph. Beautiful Soph.

When Alex got back to the table, Sophia looked up from her phone. “My friend’s band are playing at The Rainforest Cafe, just up the road, in half an hour. Do you fancy it?”

## Dancing

I'm writing into my phone. Thank fuck for phones. Never alone with a phone. Soph's off somewhere. Since we arrived she's been off. She knows every person here it seems. They all light up like roman candles exploding across the stars when they see her. She's a centrelight and everybody goes "Awww!" when they see her. They hug. Hippy vibe. Painted everything and squalid decor. Lamps, yellow and the room is silhouettes in different shapes. A lot of people. I'm against a fridge at the back of the room. Have a beer. There's about 15 of them in the band it seems. They've started. Gonna stop typing and watch.

People really dancing. It's getting sweaty. Saw Sophia is down the front. Forgot how great she can dance. She's all over it. Big dreadlock dude powering away with her. Zero chance I'm getting in there. Couple of people given me odd looks. Suit makes me stand out. But hippies are friendly. I'm nodding along.

I've stepped outside and I'm drenched in sweat under my jacket. It's so hot in there. Bit bad not saying bye in person but sure Soph will understand. Probably hasn't noticed. Looked pretty into dancing down the front. I'll text her when in a taxi.

## 6.

“And you could peep inside the celebralised sauce of this eer illwinded goodfornobody, you would see in his house of thoughtsam ... what a jetsam litterage of convolvuli, of lands derelict and of tongues lagging too ... and equally so, the crame of the whole faustian fustian ... though a day be as dense as decade.”

James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*

For the next two days Alex turned up to work in a state of jubilation. He looked out over the computers and laminated divides of the office, and felt he was seeing them for the last time. He performed on auto-pilot, brokering trades, making calls and filing paperwork without affection or attention. Internally, he focused on composing letters to Sophia, and trying not to contact her.

Over these days a shift began to occur in Alex's mind. By comparing his life with what he imagined of hers, Alex began to understand how lonely he had become. He saw, from a new vantage point, how far his path had skewed from a life that he could be proud of. He remembered from their teenage romance that Soph's surname, 'Malachi' meant "my messenger". The more he thought about bumping into Sophia Malachi-Fürminster, the more his mind turned the encounter from a simple coincidence, into a occurrence of fortune. And that made way for the most dangerous shift to occur in his mind: having summoned the hand of fate into his life, Alex turned Sophia into a metaphor.

They say that love begins at such moments. When a person ceases to be a collection of breaths and brief facts. When they take on the character of poetry. Then, to the romantic mind, the admired becomes the moon, or the the warm breeze that bends back summer grasses. The admirer ceases to see what is in front of them. Feeling takes over. To Alex's mind Sophia had arrived as his guardian angel, ready to help him take flight into a life of purpose. She would be the fire that burnt off his disguise, and set the true him free. And having felt hope where before lived emptiness and resignation, Alex allowed his feelings to fling him from the precipice of reason. He fell into the vertigo of love, and poured that love into devotion to Sophia.

Soph had replied to his message saying he'd left the concert, "No worries! So good to see you. C u soon! Xx" (02:09). Alex had written back the next morning "Such a good time with you last night Soph. Can't believe it's been ten years. XX" (08:42) and "Can I take you to dinner again next week? Or how's about sailing? XX" (13:01).

Alex knew the rules of dating. The aloofness one was supposed to feign, the pauses one was supposed to let brew between messages. He didn't want to care about these rules now. They seemed irrelevant. He felt kindred with Sophia. He wanted to tell her everything. He wanted to confess to her. To be seen by her. For her to recognise his broken spirit, for her to stoop down, and to kiss it. The Alex he had been, and was close to remembering, could live again. He felt a burning sensation in his stomach and heaviness of his tongue when he thought of her, and he remembered being eighteen.

But Alex respected the rules. He did not flood Sophia with the deluge that brewed in his head. He kept that to his notes app. Into the pang of loneliness that came from wanting someone else's attention, Alex poured all his attention. He traced what kind of life Sophia led. He looked through her social media profiles with forensic detail. Clicking links to every article she had posted, looking through every photo in which she was tagged, taking mental notes of the places she'd been, the lives that hers had intertwined with, as if trying to recognise the patterns of a road to her happiness.

It took till Thursday before Sophia messaged him back "Alex! Really busy atm, sorry for the radio silence. Let's talk again in a couple of weeks. X" (10:07), but Alex had his plan and pounced into a quick reply, hoping she'd follow suit. "Soph, have you got an email? I want to send you a letter XX" (10:11). "[alfonsomango88@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:alfonsomango88@hotmail.co.uk) Xx" (10:36).

He was terrified. It was audacious. He had written the feelings down and been surprised at them. How simple the words looked, and how difficult they'd felt in his mind. Now, how

plain and simply formed they seemed on the screen. They looked tame, almost self evident. The act of writing them had been electrifying. Now the prospect of Sophia's eyes reading his words set his chest burning. He'd written the email over the previous week, reading and re-reading with edits so many times that its contents bore no relation to the email it had started out as. But honesty bred honesty. Loneliness was about communication more than presence. Alex felt lonely not because he was alone, but because he was not understood. If he could show his angst to Sophia, if she could acknowledge it, and absolve it, then he could begin to redefine what he meant to himself. He left it ten minutes, and when he pressed send he found himself shutting his eyes, and thinking of a pause. In that pause was Sophia, a new honesty with his life, and in that pause was love.

He pressed send, left the office, and got onto a tram at Gogarburn. From the tramcar, the city became miniscule and anonymous. Alex felt cleansed. As if his confession had been a bath of fire. That phrase repeated in his head. There were no other thoughts. Cleansed by fire.

Alex's mind, for some precious minutes was blank. As long as this tram kept moving, as long as momentum still buzzed within him, he would be safe. Everything would be as he hoped. His thoughts had been given to the electronic air. There, the email was ungraspable, unalterable, waiting to be collected. Sophia would read the words and his thoughts would dissolve and become a shadow of the past. All was necessary and it was all towards better things.

To: [alfansomango88@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:alfansomango88@hotmail.co.uk)

From: bytheway2005@gmail.com

Thursday 19th November, 18:44.

Subject: (no subject)

Dear Soph,

Incredible to reconnect with you. I am so glad to see you're doing well. You're even more beautiful than I remember. You really glow.

It's finally time to take control of my misguided path. Like I was telling you at dinner. Sorry if i went on. I write my thoughts down, like therapy I suppose, just in my notes app on my phone. Anyway I just wanted to share one with you. I know you want me to be honest with you. Thank you for that. Reconnecting with you has renewed my inspiration.

Would be great to have dinner again, or just a walk, or you could show me the garden you work at. I've a yacht if you fancy some sailing. Let me know. Good luck with your busy things bits. Emotional letter follows.

See You soon,

A

Xxxx

I keep promising myself this is not my life. This is just what I am doing right now, but this is not forever. This job that I do is not who I actually am.

I think it's the same for a lot of people, especially people like us, still young, trying to grow, still holding onto our dreams.

But it's those dreams that kill us. When we were younger, it was ok that things

weren't perfect or that things were lacking. Because in our heads we said to ourselves, this is just the start. The things we want, they're going to come, but at this moment, now, I understand that they're not going to come, and that they didn't come, and that devastates me.

I keep telling myself this isn't it. But part of me suspects that perhaps this is. All of my expectations about how life turns out, about what it would be like to be successful, were lies that society told me. And perhaps when I bury the dreams of what my life would become, the me that my imagination dreamed I would be, I am only burying the lies about life that society told me. But those lies were my dreams. It hurts to bury my dreams. What I'm left with is this job, this unhappy life, this unsatisfying shell. And those are the only things that are real and concrete and actual. They would not be a problem, were

it not for my dreams. It was my dream, not its failure, that damaged me.

## 7.

It was twenty four hours later. Still no reply. Alex told himself not to worry. It did not work.

Fitfully, in the gaps between his thoughts, Alex would twitch towards his phone and check his email account. Sometimes he managed to restrain himself.

Still no reply.

He put down a tumbler of whisky. The liquid that hadn't slipped over the glass's lip, smeared with expensive viscosity back to the bottom of the glass. He held a fineliner in his right hand that he was using to combat a piece of paper. It was like sport. You didn't lose the ability to do it if you stopped, but picking it up again took awhile. That's what he'd been telling himself. He hoped sketching was like sport. The head he was working on now looked like an almond.

In Thailand, he'd sketched every day. As the environment changed, the peering faces, the bright colours, the orientation of your room, the sheets you slept in, his rucksack and limbs

became the only packet of reality that stayed the same day in, day out. Alex had held his sketchbook to make sense of the momentum and the changing patterns of his shifting surroundings. Living alone in an apartment was different. Objects were set into orbits which they'd take throughout the living space. Habits they called those circuits. By being in a space you became aware you were in the orbit of some implement, and would reach for it. Alex tried not to eye the space next to the oven where he kept his spirit bottles. He tried not to eye the T.V. remote on the table beside the sofa. He saw, and pretended not to have noticed, the little lidded box on the shelf, full of powders and pipes. The objects of the room seemed, in choir, to conspire to draw him back into the habits of his regular Friday night.

He struggled to persevere. The pen's nib made little scratching sounds against the paper, like a cat's tongue against a hand. The drawing was getting worse. It was supposed to be Soph from memory at the restaurant. She had glowed. Ten years before she'd been a spring of unbounded energy. Now her powerful enthusiasm had been softened by grace. He planned to give the drawing to her. He'd made her eyes too elvish in the sketch. His frustration began to make its way onto the page, a cragged thick line scratched along the bottom of the eye he was drawing, making the portrait look manic.

Sophia would not admire him.

As Alex sketched, the thought came to him like a bolt of lightning. It hit the pit of his stomach with a spasm of dread. He began to consider it, hoping his faculties would show it to be false. The avenues of argument multiplied. The thought strengthened. No, Sophia would not admire him, reason

resolved. He was inept, deceitful, crooked, diminished, egotistical, a failure. A person who had slipped from idealism into a fetid comfort of an unethical professionalism. She might pity him. There was the possibility that she might feel fond of him in a sentimental sense. But Sophia would not admire him, because Alex did not admire himself. What's more, he had told her of his self-loathing.

His only hope for her admiration would be to redeem himself. To live by the values he had always held dear, in a demonstrable and noble way. Even then, he thought, she still might not want me. But if I don't change, she'll never want me. What would I be to her then? An old memory grown sad. Dinner once a year to compare different worlds from. Sophia has arrived as an angel. I feel alight with possibility under her example, but what is she to me, an image? Christ I haven't asked her a single question. About the garden, about her travels. I don't know what she's done since we last met. I've assumed who she is in fawning euphoria. Put her on a pedestal. I have worshipped an image. And I just talked at her.

I want Sophia just as I want something to make me fierce. Just as I want whisky or cocaine. Just as I want money. I want Sophia to make me fierce because I am not fierce myself. By myself I am useless. An imagination that runs, and a tongue and four limbs propelled by privilege that lack any agency. I don't quit the job I hate, I don't stop pursuing the path that tortures me. I must be in love with my own inaction. Satisfied somehow by the pain I feel from doing nothing. Sucking the pus of my own inertia. I want Sophia to be the inspiration by which I am able to start the transformation of myself that I have hungered for. That lack of transformation has depressed me. That failure

to transform has left me wallowing in defeat and self-pity. Sophia gives me a pathway, and thinking of her gives me strength.

Alex's phone spasmed with vibrations and light. Its chassis ground against the glass top of the coffee table, attempted levitation, and began to scuttle sideways. He flipped the phone screen up. "Slobbers." And flicked a button. The phone went limp in his hand. An advert for takeaway pinged across his screen.

Across the open plan room stood the fridge with its ice maker and water filtration system. Inside, on ten glowing shelves, stood beers and encrusted condiments. Alex tapped the screen of the phone twelve times, ordering and paying for takeout. He replaced his phone onto the table.

Now Alex's order passed into a router, and down an ethernet cable. It screamed as pulses of light into a device that translated it for a screen which reflected in the eyes of someone five hours into their shift. In some nebulous passageway, Alex's order now glowed and caused hands to pass, parcel and seal, a flimsy plastic box dripping with hot curry. The plastic container grew opaque with condensation, and still incendiary with heat, was slid by gloved hands into the saddle bag of a vehicle. The vehicle roared to life with white and red lights marking its extremities, and exited its enclosure in a cough of exhausts. It blended into a circuit of other lights, some white, some red, others orange and blue. From this maelstrom of lights, one set separated, and came to a stop outside Alex's building. The lights extinguished. A hand pressed a buzzer, a head nodded at the receptionist in the foyer, a person stood apart from the residents of the building in the lift, and walked past the reproduction oil paintings that lined

the hallway towards the door of Alex's apartment, perhaps aware that the same paintings, in reproduction, hung on each of the floors of the building. A hand formed a fist and knocked on Alex's apartment door, and at last, Alex was forced to peel himself from the couch, still gripping his phone, open his front door, and take possession of the outcome of his twelve taps.

He peeled back the plastic layers of the box, and the cooled steam pooled into large droplets against the plastic then ran onto his table top. He dipped his spoon into creamy masala sauce, and thought of his grandfather, a hunter of big game, wrestling stags to the ground. A spasm of self-loathing twanged in him.

The curry slopped past Alex's tongue. Greasy and warm. Alex's attention billowed into schemes whereby he might redeem himself in the eyes of Sophia. Whereupon he could reincarnate his values, and jettison dissatisfaction. He imagined giving testimony against Ramsay the slimeball, to help a victim get justice. That would make him wholly unpopular amongst the male contingent at work, and a hero to the women. Not a bad idea. He would be asked to leave by the employers after a grace period for whistleblowing. He wouldn't have to quit himself. He could join the gardening project Sophia works at. Too obvious. Join another gardening project, show he's a similar interest, talk plants, meet more people from that culture, develop an ability to talk and walk like them, begin to bump into Sophia through friends of friends. He could be a whistleblower to the papers, about the Ramsay situation. Drag the company in the eyes of the public. Get lauded like Snowden or Manning. Fuckit, could give login details to a hacker and let them find the

incriminating documents themselves, then send everything to WikiLeaks.

But behind his bravado, somewhere behind his rage, even as the schemes brewed, Alex knew that he lacked the tenacity. He had seen his patterns of behaviour many times. He knew that in five days time, the fires that fueled whatever fantasy he came to favour now, would be dwindling. Its vain construction of epiphanies beginning to creak. His fantasies of brave action would diminish and smoulder, to end up no more than another layer of burnt out ideas that would lay like ash across his imagination. Another layer of death atop of any idealism that he might make any impact. Another reason Sophia would never admire the man he had become. The thought that perhaps he might make no impact with his life skirted around the edge of his thoughts, taunting him. It was inconceivable for his pride that he might not one day too be commemorated in books or marble.

Passion turned to pain and self-pity. The dregs of the curry cooled. The sauce congealed inside the rim of the container. Alex picked up his phone and stared into the light of the screen. He flicked through Sophia's social media profile, noting no new activity. He opened the links to articles she'd posted, and that he'd already read. He prodded his mail app. Still no reply. No. He'd failed to change in the past because he was on his own. And now he'd been sent his messenger. He'd change because he had Sophia.

## 8.

In front of Alex, bodies with chests pushed out were strapped into silhouettes of sex. They boiled in a conspiracy of grins. Suits made men look manly. Dresses made women look like sports cars. The grins of the men were made mostly with their eyes. The grins of the women were majority teeth.

Against the edge of the ballroom, leaning on the wall next to a potted palm, Alex frowned and picked at a poem he was writing in his phone:

*Office Christmas parties:  
artifice for the onerous  
to articulate with all orifices  
annually.*

Shrieks burst from the buffet table. Alex glanced up. Not a single person was paying him the slightest notice.

A string quartet, for whom the bank's Christmas party was a new experience, packed their instruments with haste. Two men were propped by their elbows at the bar claspng liquor. Their gazes swam toward a point behind the viola player's cleavage.

Towards the other end of the room, a DJ began to play high-energy pop. Couples stepped onto the vacated dance floor. Ripples appeared under their feet, as if they were walking on

water. Digitised coy carp flitted away from the footsteps. The music craned:

“I’ve got a feeling,

That tonight’s gonna be a good night.”

A girl in a tight dress held a flute of champagne into the air and mimed the words as if she was on stage. Slobbers was beside her, cummerbund too tight, tie too loose, using a green beer bottle as a microphone.

From his vantage, Alex imagined the lives under these social veneers. Here were specimens of supposed success, miming to the manners they learnt on TV shows. Insidious, leering humans who had learnt how to disguise cruelty as humour. People who had practiced a fake smile so much that they had come to believe it was real. They treated each other as chess pieces, and commodities to be deceived or utilised in pursuit of their destinies. These people were able to act dramatically or with regal reserve, but Alex saw the effort they put in to perform this conspiracy of happiness. In the bathrooms they practiced their lines and emerged primed to gab glib performances. They’d battle boorish boasts, all bogus, under the nostrils of their bosses, only to blag bloated bonuses. When work was done, they’d crash through cabinets of liquor, perform audacious purchases, make discreet appointments to see psychologists and dealers. On the dance floor, a gentleman had removed his dinner jacket and was failing in his attempt at the worm.

In December, by virtue of a commodified holiday, Alex was expected to fritter away a whole evening of his own time with these fizz-livered lacks of imagination. The ice-cubes in Alex’s glass had winnowed to near vanishing point. He summoned a roaming waiter and selected a fresh drink from their tray. The

ice in this new glass was fuzzy. It jangled on the glass like chimes. The music became louder. Alex brought out his phone again and began to write. Tonight, the alcohol and isolation had tipped him towards anxiety. The further he drank the more he wanted to become invisible. Shame burnt inside. Sip by sip the alcohol sealed him into a state of silence and fury. He could hide in the toilets for an hour, then take his leave. He'd done that before. He listed through his notes app. He'd been writing aphorisms on the commute of late. He pinged his latest two to Sophia via a messaging application followed by a bunch of kisses.

*Too much thinking*

*Is like too much drinking*

*It'll sink you*

*To the well organized mind,*

*life is a mess.*

Alex shifted his recognition from his shining screen, to the party taking place around it. He found nothing to grasp but anxiety. Standing alone was a radical, shameful, gesture, at these social cauldrons. In every direction bared teeth boiled towards one another, in a rolling, intoxicated guffaw. Feeling on the edge of something increasingly uncomfortable, Alex stuffed his phone inside his jacket and thrust off from the palm towards the shelter of the toilet. He noticed as he walked that he was placing

too much effort into moving his legs. His feet were stomping sharply into the plush carpet.

“Not so fast.”

A heavy hand clapped Alex’s shoulder and his walk was jerked to a halt beside one vulgar vessel of a man. Pratt.

Richard Pratt had been at BBG as far back as anyone could remember. His record as a broker was as dim as his charisma. He was a vague relation of one of the partners. This was the sole reason Pratt was not long ago let go. He was an antiquity. A walrus. A bastion of outmoded opinions that would never be challenged to change. He was everything that was wrong and he was staring jovially down his cretinous eyes at Alexander Stamps.

At the moment that he had grabbed Alex. The onerous imbecile was surrounded by a circle of young bankers that Alex recognised vaguely. Perhaps interns? Pratt had removed his hand from Alex’s shoulder, and now was holding both his hands with palms open to face the ceiling.

“Stamps, just the man. You’ve caught me in the middle of explaining to these young guns that ridiculous myth of the hard-working poor.”

Alex neither acknowledged the statement, nor rejected it. He stared at Pratt, mute and unflinching. Pratt did not have a pleasant face. It was all cheeks, chins and lips. The lower lip hanging downward in the centre, like a large wet keyhole.

A silence began to lengthen between the pair. As it lengthened, the suggestion that an uncomfortable edge lay beyond the moment broached the thoughts of those in audience.

“Richard,” extended one of Pratt’s gaggle of sycophants, “you were just getting going.”

Pratt’s fingers closed over his palms then came together over his vast paunch. He nodded gravely.

"Thank you. As I was saying, this country has been at the forefront of the world economy for centuries. A century is certainly plenty of time for the poor to buck up their ideas, show some ingenuity, work hard and make money like the rest of us.

“Yet there are families in this country that have gone generations without so much as earning two pennies to rub together. What they make they steal from those who work harder, and no sooner is the money in their hand than they’ve spent it on drink, or worse.”

A ring of cocained nasals nodded. Champagne flutes tilted in agreement. Alex boiled.

“Time and again the poor choose to continue being poor, and it's about time we stopped this chat of respectable hard-working people giving their hard earned money to those who have no interest in being respectful at all.”

Alex stood seething. His colleagues could agree on this topic whilst they bickered over the best schools for their kids or ski-spots. This passed as small talk, as per the course as “how are you.” Alex felt his stomach burning, as counterargument seethed within him. The poor were poor and the rich, rich because they had been born that way. The systems controlling finance and government were run by the rich, and those in charge of these systems made sure the systems did not harm them or their friends. Keeping themselves rich meant keeping the poor poor. It was not a case of choosing to be poor at all.

Inside each of the classes breathed and hoped a whole host of humans, each prone to the same spectrum of possibility, mixing problems with pragmatism, acting with virtue, succumbing to vice.

Alex noticed he had begun doing something unlike himself. His arms were out, his hands gesticulating. The circle had turned their attentions to him.

As the moment unfolded, those around Alex sensed his performance as cool, almost indifferent. Internally, it was as if fate had climbed into Alex's body, depressed the clutch, disengaged the motor of his mind from the gears of his limbs, and had taken control. Alex was speaking. His thoughts were no longer internal, but spilling out from his mouth.

“Money is only a small part of power Pratt. Power is connections. Money can be a way to make connections, but only as a pathway into the institutions of power. You need to know the structures that control money to understand how to wield power with it. That's knowledge, a small piece of knowledge. The other piece of knowledge is to adopt the right garb. Because it's the impression of competence, not competence itself that's important to be included in our world. You know all this Richard. As long as we exhibit the right signs, our colleagues and bosses make their own conclusions. Signs that we belong to a club admit us to the club. Our skin colour is a sign, our indifference to extravagance is a sign. The almost displeasure with which we consume luxuries is one of the most vulgar and powerful of the signs of our club. We are not standing in this room together because of merit, we are here because we assume that we deserve this. Our entire education conspires to tell us we deserve these things,” Alex tugged the lapel of his tux as if he

might rip it, and let his hand fly open to gesture in a sweeping motion at the room of palm plants, waiters and uplighting, “our education grooms us on how to exhibit signs which make us appear to be a competent constituent of this club.”

Pratt was getting redder and redder, silent through stupefaction or anger, he was swelling, like a tomato growing in timelapse. Alex wasn't thinking, the words were rolling effortlessly off his tongue.

“You understand that connections are codified by clubs. Clubs have club houses. What we call education is just a series of club houses. A ‘good’ education is being admitted to a club house where you can make connections with other people who are from well connected backgrounds and grow your personal power club. With the right connections, you don't need money at all. A man with lots of money but no connections stands less of a chance in this society than a man with no money and lots of connections to those in power. If a man truly wants to become powerful, you should tell him to make friends with the powerful rather than try and become rich.”

Alex paused, and into to this pause, Pratt depressurised. His jowls plummeted, his brow parted like swing doors, and from his mouth he almost spat his rebuttal. “Even if they were given money, Stamps, no one poor would become successful. They'd squander it.” Pratt enunciated the syllables of ‘squander’ as if the word was moving from side to side, fury pouring from him now. “They'd buy some fancy car, a vile pad, and trash the lot. Within a decade, they'd be back in the council house they started in.”

"One million says you're wrong." replied Alex without emotion.

Pratt's piggy eyes had shrunk, then bulged, all within a millisecond. He choked on his drink, spluttered into coughs, and, as finale, sneezed.

Alex felt the eyes of all in the circle, staring at him, in disbelief, in astonishment, in glee. He heard himself continue:

"I'm done listening to these lazy opinions. Let's have a test Richard. We both put up a million pounds as a wager. The million is donated to a poor person, and we see what it is, in actual fact, that they do with some money."

Pratt rebounded, barely able to disguise anxiety as apathy: "Your terms?"

"You say the poor person will waste the money. I say they will increase it. That's my wager. The victor receives their million back. The loser forfeits theirs."

The eyes in the circle dissected Alex and Pratt. Not a man moved a mote in fear of breaking the tension. The spectacle of the two men in opposition took shape, held at a point of unendurable tension, and solidified into its significance.

"Obviously I would understand if," began to venture Alex.

"You're on," said Pratt, extending a globular hand.

Before he knew what he had done, Alex had shaken hands, nodded, turned on his heel, taken leave of the party and heard his shoes clacking over the venue's tiled lobby beneath him. A Christmas Tree, then a set of revolving doors vanished behind him. He was out into the cold street and into a cab. The Christmas lights of department stores diminished as his taxi descended towards the New Town. Renewed. Reborn. Alex Stamps felt like he was cleansed by fire.

## 8.

“So I have to dream  
Essence without Form is  
Free but ineffectual,  
Birth and education  
Guide the living stream”  
- W.H. Auden

In dark chambers along the Royal Mile, a snoring Pratt hoovered dust through his nose and exhaled stale from alcohol between lolling lips. His rooms were cluttered and dank, full of objects shrouded in memories that had long since died.

Pratt considered himself a gentleman. He was lazy, ineffectual and verbose. As a bachelor he'd bathed for years in bygones, nit picks, and faded links to once famous figures. As a friendless man he'd been allowed to calcify rigid views about reality without interruption.

It was not of Pratt's habit to rise before noon on weekends, and seldom would anyone trouble him to do so. This morning, a ringing battled its way to the front of Pratt's stupor. His hand padded, fumbled, found the vibrations of the phone, fondled it, and without so much as opening his eyes, Pratt brought the device to his ear:

“You've found me” rasped Pratt.

“Well I suppose that should make me glad. Listen, let's meet to agree terms before the gossip gets carried away.”

“Stamps?”

“Yes. Have I caught you sleeping still? It’s eleven eh em. The Balmoral Hotel, the Palm Court. At three?”

It was a trap. By the time Pratt bludgeoned out of his apartment towards the Balmoral, Pratt had pronounced himself adamant that the wager had been a trap. That queer bastard Alex Stamps had led him into it. A cruel and calculated humiliation. Pratt’s head swam from the alcohol of the party still in his system. Around him, Christmas shoppers paraded the city centre in expensive coats, holding bags imprinted by names they hoped other shoppers might admire. Pratt eyed these sourly. Pratt was loathe to spend. He clutched money and kept it for nothing in particular. For two decades he’d told acquaintances vague things about buying a property in the south of France. He recycled tea bags and drank Famous Grouse. He was filled with rage at the idea that he’d risk a million in a wager for no gain.

A trap. Challenged in front of company, he had been left with no choice but to shake hands on the wager. An irresponsible and doomed charade of charity.

**9.**

"Many hard workers make nothing but wealth. They don't produce food, fuel, shelter or helpful ideas; their work is just a way of tightening their grip on folk who do."

- Alasdair Grey, *Lanark*

Palm trees doubled by floor-to-ceiling mirrors buttressed frescos above a parquet floor in the Balmoral hotel. Alex Stamps leaned into a wingback armchair under the glass-dome of the Palm Court. He looked up from his phone, where there was no new signs of Sophia, to see Pratt waddling towards him, twenty minutes late. Alex rose to greet him, shaking hands. Pratt sank into the armchair opposite with an aggressive silence. To Pratt's eyes, Alexander Stamps looked smug. Pratt became aware the frown he was wearing might look like a scowl, and tried, without success, to seem relaxed. Their table was already set with tea and crustless sandwiches. Pratt touched neither. Alex pushed the silence aside.

"Well let's get straight to it. I surprised myself by proposing the wager last night Richard. I'd been thinking these things for a while, but I'm excited to put a theory to the test."

Pratt, eyeing Alex with soured eyes, conceded a "hrrmmph."

"We shook on it last night, but I feel no charade of bravado should carry this forward if you haven't the money to make this wager comfortably. Say now and we can call the whole thing off."

Pratt blinked into action, tensed, and shot Alex a look that made those on the tables adjacent tighten.

"No, no my young friend. No backing out now." he spat. "I'm tremendously excited to watch you sink a million into some naive sentimentality toward the working class."

“Let me tell you Stamps, every winner of the lottery does not go on to become the next great entrepreneur, and neither do I see many lottery winners up for knighthoods. Have you seen what it is that lottery winners do with their winnings? They splurge them. Holidays for them and their eight children, then the first shack they find in the suburbs with gates and palm plants. They buy some garish car they end up crashing blind drunk after wasting the last of the money at the bookies.”

Alex raised an eyebrow:

“This wager is about appetites and integrity Richard. You say that money will be used as a gateway to excess. That all those who are poor are vulgar and stupid. I contend that the rich can be just as vulgar and just as stupid.”

Pratt didn't blink.

“Of course, to your mind the scrabbling, unwashed poor are not as rich as us because they don't work hard enough. But that's the mild version of your truth. Really you think the poor are poor because they are inferior human beings to you or I. Am I right? That is far worse than 'garish.' That assumption of superiority is the evil that disfigures humanity. I want to combat that. I trust that, just as the rich can be industrious and entrepreneurial, so can the poor. We are all humans. The poor are not worse people, they are people in a worse situation. Money can be a gateway to success, and regardless of what someone was born into, given a real chance, people may be just as hardworking as you and I.”

Pratt nodded gravely and smeared open his mouth:

“So I see Stamps, that you are planning to gratify your urge to act like a saviour. Some petty philanthropist who is yet to have his naivety tempered by reality.”

“Look Richard, you and I both believe in free enterprise,” continued Alex, unfazed. “That's our common ground. What we disagree on is character. I'm here to demonstrate that character

and ability are universal. The million wager is this: someone who is not of money is given money. The individual is left to follow their own path without interference. I believe it's a hand up, you believe it's a hand out. This wager will prove one of us right."

"I simply can't wait to see your face as this fantasy of goodness crumbles," replied Pratt, his ill-temper beginning to show, "no, though it's not sporting to gloat over another's misfortune, I wonder who is worse, a poor man, satisfied with his lot, or you: a traitor to a noble family, pretending to be some crusader for a class he has never belonged to. I hope to God your father hears of this charade whilst he's still got time to alter his will."

And as Pratt shook hands to end their conversation, Alex registered a smugness mixed behind Pratt's beady eyes, so sure was that bastard that the poor were somehow even lazier, obstinate, close-minded, and vulgar than he.

## 10.

*"The eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages."*

Virginia Woolf

In the days following their meeting, Alex's mind buzzed with the fantastic significance of his wager.

"A eureka moment" is how he'd describe it to the TV talk show hosts. He'd tell them "there comes a point at which you can't let the idle chit-chat of ignorance continue. Of course, a couple of drinks helped generate the necessary courage." He'd share a wry chuckle with the hosts at that one, and they'd all

lean back on the studio sofas a little more at ease for the morning viewers. “No, philanthropy is something that’s interested me for years,” He’d go on, “but it took that all too familiar situation of the dreaded Christmas party to shake me into action. The idea of the wager arrived like an epiphany. And the rest,” he’d pause and muster the moment, “is history.” He’d flash the TV hosts a wry grin.

Yes, appearing on TV talk shows following the success of his wager would be best. TV would allow more of Alex’s personality to shine through. It would be important to come across as humble and unexpectant, allowing the viewing public to warm to him. To redefine the character of the rich in the minds of the general public, he’d have to show he was cut from the same cloth. Alex wondered if magazine articles about the wager would need photographs to accompany them. If there were, Alex wondered what he’d wear.

He wouldn’t tell Sophia about any of it directly. She’d see the news reports, and she’d come fawning to him, filled with admiration. He wouldn’t have to chase her, she’d chase him. This was a long game. The wager would take a year before it was settled. But that gave Alex a great start. With it in motion, he could begin other endeavours in character improvement. Volunteer. Get his health back. That kind of thing. He’d stay at BBG and work hard. It didn’t matter if his million wasn’t returned to him, he had no outgoings other than the rent on his flat. But maintaining an income would be prudent. He’d change the finance industry from the inside, not as some Jerry Maguire renegade, growing his hair out, shaggy beard and top button undone. Neither was there any point in telling his father or his brothers. It would just worry them. If they heard rumours from

the office gossip spreading, he'd pooh-pooh them. The big reveal would come when he was victorious.

Soph still hadn't replied to his confessional email. That no longer mattered. Things would be different when she learnt of his role in the wager. He was on the right path now. He felt incredible. Able to do anything. It didn't matter that he wasn't romantic with Sophia yet. The thought of her goodness had been inspirational enough to change him. It had given him the strength he needed. He thanked life for her introduction to him.

The coffee machine in his apartment clicked steam through a plastic capsule.

It had been a curious thing for Alex, how the wager had come about. Here was his way to impress Sophia, to reinvent the benevolence of the rich, to uphold the human dignity of the poor, to overturn assumptions. Here was his way to return to a path of integrity, and be seen by society as benevolent. He'd become the banker who was different, who'd spoken up, smashed the charade. The banker who gave away his heart of gold. It felt like fortune, the disconnected sense he'd felt as he'd proposed the wager to Pratt. He'd felt as if he was outside himself, observing himself as he acted in the way he'd always want to but never had the confidence to broach. It had felt spiritual, for want of a better word. The more he thought about it, the more this spiritual quality took on significance. Alex began to believe he had found his destiny. And fate, the universe, or whatever hands controlled life, had delivered him out of the desert of his solitudes to enact a role preshaped for him. Time felt, at those rare and precious moments, like it was in joint. Alex burned with the passion of purpose, and

continued to imagine how noble he might seem, in mirrors made from the imaginations of others.

## 11.

Over the next few days, lawyers liaised with Alex and Pratt to draw up the terms of the wager. For another week, the lawyers prolonged that game of tit-for-tat by which the legal profession justify their salaries. By the next Thursday an agreement with syntax that all parties accepted was signed. That agreement read:

### **TERMS OF THE WAGER**

- Both parties put up a million pounds. This money is to be combined. One million placed in a safe-holding account and one million donated to the recipient.
- Success or failure of the wager is to be determined by an independent financial advisor, agreed upon by both parties.
- Success is defined as the million pounds being increased by plus five percent, or invested in a way expected to

increase that money above five percent after a period of one year.

- Failure is defined as the million pounds being decreased by more than minus ten percent, and no investment having been made that will increase the million above five percent within a period of one year.
- There is to be no interference during the wager. Neither party may speak to the recipient until the twelve months are up and the wager concluded.
- The recipient will not be informed of the wager. The recipient will receive a cheque for the full sum of a million pounds, and no further instruction.
- The recipient must be poor. Poor is agreed as earning less than £25,000 p/a, from a family where annual income has never exceeded £40,000 p/a.
- The recipient will be chosen by the proposing party of the wager, Alexander Stamps. The recipient cannot be previously acquainted with the proposer in any way. Breach of these conditions will forfeit the wager.
- On conclusion of the wager, the victor shall receive their million investment back. The prize for winning is pride. The cost of losing is a million pounds.

Guided by internet searches for the most deprived areas, Alex set out for the most run-down part of the city of Edinburgh. Into the belly went our benevolent knight. To find another life for his charity to set aflame.

## 12.

"Love seeketh not itself to please. Nor for itself hath any care  
But for another gives its ease and builds a Heaven in Hell's  
despair." - Blake

Baz had short hair, silver as Scottish clouds. His eyes were the colour of where the sea meets the sky. His face grinned a mottled purple. Baz had stared at the sun on the South China Sea and his laugh had whipped wicked into the winds of the Baltic. After years in the Merchant Navy he'd settled back in the port town from which he hailed, Leith, and now one of his specialities was being able to talk to you about anything.

Baz grinned with the whole top row of his teeth while he washed down the windows of the Co-Op, squeaking blethers as many passed him in the street that he counted among his pals.

The weather that December had long since plummeted into the grips of Winter. That day, the streets and the windows would have been frozen were it not for being gritted by the salt sea winds.

Baz had paused washing down the window to talk to this fella. He thought this voice was a bit odd. It wasn't purely serious like one off the telly, nor a voice all uppity. It got a bit flustered this voice, and it covered that up by using too many words.

Baz tried not to jump to assumptions from the way people dressed or spoke. He was a while listening to this man in this suit, but whilst the guy kept talking he thought, "rare you see a man suited like this in this part of Leith who isn't on some business of somebody else's. But this guy can't be from the council, I'd recognise him. Mind, there's few in the council could afford that suit he's wearing. And this guy seems a tad nervous, not that bored and entitled mix that most officials glide around on."

Baz was telling him "aye, I've been washing windows for years now, before I was on the boats, the Merchant Navy, all over. The windows are steady work, except when the wind wails and you can't get up a ladder. Mind, the windows that want washing most regularly are the business ones, and most of them are on the ground floor. Aye, I was born and raised here, so I ken a lot of the folk round here and business is steady. Can't complain, got the partner and dog to support, and everyone's friendly ken? There's far worse places to be."

"Then I realised this guy must be international, not posh Edinburgh,"

Baz's day was done. He was back in the pub, giving the tale of that afternoon to the regulars. As he began to tell the next section, a glint travelled across Baz's eye:

"A confused look scrunched across this posh guy's face and he goes to me 'My name's not Ken, it's Alex.'

"I wanted to laugh at him, but the fella looked nervous enough as it was, so I let it go and nodded and this Alex kept asking me his questions. So at the end of our chat this Alex gives us an envelope. I thought he was giving me a Christmas card, so I put it in my pocket and never paid it much mind. But

it was when I got home and the husband's sat with his feet up, and gets me through the 'how was yer days', and I told him 'aye alright', and all that about the Co-Op staff saying the store might be moving, and I told him I seen Old Mary on her way back down the road carrying all her shopping, so what people were saying about her being badly injured by a fall couldn't be true, and then I went 'oh aye, and some fella in a suit stopped for a blether and gave us this Christmas card'. And so I fished it up from my work gear in the hall and came back, and right enough I opened it and there was a wee robin on its front, and I said aw that's nice, but then fuck me but what falls to the floor?"

Baz stops himself, and brings his hand halfway to his mouth. The telling of this tale has swelled with him and he's attracted more ears in the pub. Baz begins to wonder whether he shouldn't have sworn so prominently. There's kids present: two over there with their mum. And now Baz is rationalising that it's the fault of their mother for bringing kids into a pub if she's not expecting them to hear language. Sure they'll hear worse in the playground,

"Baz!" someone shouts, and Baz breaks back to a:

"Oh, aye, where was I? Well what falls out of that bloody card but a cheque? But christ, what do you think the cheque says on it? Only where there's a space for the name it says in pencil 'write your name here' and I look in the amount column and the cheque this fella's given me is for one million fucking pounds."

The pub's quiet. The barman is quiet, the dogs lain under the tables are quiet. Even the whirring of the fridges seem to have stilled. Only the lights from the betting machines, blinking yellow and red seem now to be animated by life. Until one of

the pub's more regular regulars shouts: "well then Baz, what are you doing with the money?"

And Baz goes: "What d'yeh think I'm doing? What do I want with a million pounds? I always had a bet with my best friend Danny, that if either of us ever won the lottery, we'd be best off giving the money to charity, not letting it ruin our lives. Danny's dead ten years now and that cheque from the lottery didn't turn up, so that cheque's gone to a charity!"

And the pub roars. And from the back comes a yell: "you muppet Baz, I thought you were getting a round in."

But many a person stood Baz a drink that night, and right as North Sea rain is cold, Baz was at his work the next morning, washing down windows, later than was usual, and with limbs more tired.

## 13.

"The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
That I ever was born to set it right."

- Hamlet 1. 5. 196-7.

Alex peeled the plastic lid across the vegan lunch capsule that had been delivered to his desk. A scramble of sprouts and ancient grains evaded his fork. Alex held his phone in his left

hand as he read Sophia's reply for the tenth time. Each time he read the message he felt her words shift. As if each word was not a fact, but a mirror to her state of mind. He peered deeply into the words, trying to ascertain the processes in Sophia's brain that had conjured each.

“Alex,

Your honesty is appreciated. You're a wonderful guy. Thank you for sharing your writing with me. We all change, when you think about it. We're all different people throughout our lives. That's ok. That's good. We've got to keep moving. But it is beautiful to keep close the memories of all the people we used to be, and to love the lessons that they taught us.

Sophia Xx”

Alex had adopted Sophia's habits from what he could glean from her internet profiles. It made him feel closer to her. He'd been vegan for three weeks now. He abstained from porn. He'd bought a squadron of house plants, including two kits to grow your own vegetables in window boxes. He'd felt his mood shift. His outlook wasn't as dark as it had been. He was able to identify his emotions as depression, and to talk about them with himself. His notes app overflowed. His aphorism game had gone up a level. He wasn't not drinking, but he was drinking less. His spare time was no longer filled with people he didn't like in places he couldn't feel comfortable. Now he was finding a space for his own company. His flat, with the house plants, with a fridge lined by food, with his drawing supplies littering

the floor, was becoming a nest that he was beginning to enjoy returning to. It wasn't necessary to be with Sophia in person. He could let Sophia's guiding influences into his life from afar. By becoming more aligned to her way of being, he wasn't just maneuvering for possible romance down the line, he was benefiting himself with cleaner living and a higher quality of life. She was an angel in so many ways. By her influence, he was lifting himself out of bad habits and toxic company, and finding, by her example, fulfilling ways to be. He thought of it as raising his vibration towards hers. Alex thought of Sophia constantly. Sometimes thankful, sometimes forlorn. His tongue traced a pomegranate seed that had become stuck in his molars. As his tongue waggled the seed, he let his gaze lift across the office where it found, as always, Pratt.

It's funny the way people phase into and out of your life. Since the wager two weeks ago, Pratt seemed to be everywhere. Alex saw him in the revolving doors at the start of the day, as he arrived to the office. When Alex phased out from his screen and glanced, emptily, over the office, he found his gaze snagging onto Pratt, who was staring right back at him. Alex might stand up from the toilet, flush, and leave a cubicle just as Pratt emerged from another stall. This entanglement of their lives was not conscious, and given the choice, neither Pratt nor Alex would have desired to have become so bound. Life had not given them that option. Ever since the wager had been agreed, each found the other dogging their path. They reacted to the appearance of each other with increasing scowls and snorts of impatience.

For most of his life, Pratt had been a bell that clanged a limited tune to a dwindling audience. But Pratt now had quite

the audience. Since the wager, Pratt sauntered around BBG a changed man. He made vast verbiage of his role in the wager and extended the characters of Alex and himself into caricatures, to the delight of their colleagues. The office revelled in the emerging sport. In the two weeks that had passed since the wager, Pratt had propped a hammer and full sized sickle against Alex's desk one morning. Another day a copy of Pygmalion had arrived in the post for Alex, with Alex's company headshot glued over the author's portrait on the back, signed on the title page 'Best wishes, R. Pratt.' There were three days before the office broke for Christmas and New Year. Alex looked forward to the break.

The wheels of the wager were in motion. It would be months before the scheme came to maturate. Seeds well sewn and all that. Alex attempted to focus on what might that Baz do with the money.

He was reminded of Sinjai, the farmer in Thailand, a friendly honest poor person when he saw Baz smile in the street. That was how small the gesture was upon which Alex intuited that Baz was his man. He saw Baz smile to someone who was passing, and it stopped Alex dead in his tracks. He knew at that moment, this was his guy. Baz, he'd said his name was. He was going to be a winner. A naval background, a hard worker, a pillar of the local community, Baz ticked all Alex's boxes of what it meant to be industrious, yet not rich. On paper it looked good, but more than that, simply when he had seen that smile, something was understood. It felt right.

Baz had stood out like an angel on Leith Walk. Alex had avoided the men that looked like hams and the women who looked like bones, sucking cigarettes outside places that had

windows tinted like police vans. Coughs reached the pavements there from dim rooms with net curtains. People approached bins in ways that made you unsure whether they were going to put something in, or take something out. Baz had seemed as far from that as they came: interested in others, hard working, honest, cleaning things. All classes had their Pratts, Alex had been certain he wasn't going to splurge a million to benefit neither a rich Pratt nor a poor one.

He shovelled the last of the ancient grains from the recyclable lunch pod. Alex thought about announcing the completion of the wager and what questions the press might ask. For such an ambitious display of charity, Royal Honours might not be off the cards.

A sprout leapt clear of the stabbing motion of his fork, flinging itself across the plastic veneer of the desk. Alex looked back down towards his phone and tapped open the local news. At first, he reamed straight past the headline. Then, like someone had pressed rewind on his memory, the headline flashed back into his mind. Curious, with a dread building at the top of his stomach, Alex scrunched his brow, scrolled back. By the time he clicked the headline, he already knew. His eyes pulled back, then widened. His gaze swam beyond the screen. A tinge of what might of been a smile twisted from one corner of his mouth.

## **“LEITH FOOD-BANK CHRISTMAS MIRACLE**

Leith food-bank had its very own Christmas miracle this week thanks to a mystery benefactor. Staff at the Food-bank, that has struggled to cope in recent months with escalating demand, arrived on Friday to find a cheque for one million pounds had been put through the charity's letterbox. Food-bank co-ordinator, Steven Wright, described what the donation meant to the charity.

"Over the past few months the amount of families and individuals that we've had coming to us in need of basic food has skyrocketed. This Food-bank provides a lifeline to some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society. Recent months and government cuts have put a severe strain on our ability to feed people who have literally nothing to eat. This donation is a miracle. It will allow us to provide meals for many in Leith over the tough months of Winter. To celebrate, we're organizing a big Christmas dinner on Christmas day, which, as with everything we do, is free for all who want to attend."

Wright told The Herald that the person who had made the donation wished to remain anonymous."

And as simply as that, Alex understood what had happened. His wager was lost.

## 14.

*“Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot  
Unlikely wonders; how these vain weak nails  
May tear a passage through the flinty ribs  
Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls,  
And, for they cannot, die in their own pride.”*

- Richard II 5.5. 18-22.

In the stories that are told about upstanding characters who try to do this world a bit of good, most often there is a place to which they can retreat when they have been challenged. That place is their sanctuary. Sometimes that place is in the whispers of a forest, other times it is under an old pier on the edge of the ocean. Always the place is somewhere that the character can be sure they will not be disturbed; sit, let their mind still, place events into an order and become gentle with themselves. It is there that they forgive the world for having interrupted their ambitions.

Having been brought up the child of an international businessman, Alexander Stamps was too modern to have stayed put the amount of years one needs to come into an accord with such a place. The only companions that stayed constant

throughout Alex's life had been brands, bands, and banned substances.

Alex had fled from his office in a state of shock as soon as he saw the article headline. He had collapsed into his apartment, and lain catatonic over the covers of the bed. Time had dropped like a stone through the surface of reality. Alex's mind plummeted.

And then, unrestrained, the realisation of his uselessness, his vanity, and his pettiness surged through him. It hit Stamps, as such realisations do, like a change in weather hits a valley. Every emotion turned to turmoil. With the failure of his wager, broken was the trust he had built in a destiny and in his own abilities. It was a physical removal, insupportable, irreparable. All the love he had for himself, the hope he placed in others, gone. The bitterness he felt was as actual as if the stories he had believed had held up his veins. As if the trust in his own truth had been a buoyancy against a void he was now crushed into. All the lightness, the great love that holds and silently sustains us, supported his flesh no longer. The floor of reality vanished, and Alex lay against the sad sea of the infinite, flattened to a new lovelessness of terror. Every sneaking suspicion of the cruelty of the world, of a harsh and unfair existence, exploded to envelope him.

Laying against the bed, Alex's heart thudded so rapidly it must soon destroy itself. So fast his body must be nearing collapse. Torrents of emotion convulsed his body, in deafening, unbridled, rhythm. They ran rampant throughout him, dissolving every cell that had hoped and every nerve that had trusted. All hope, stripped, in a heedless, ceaseless torrent of hurt. Incomprehensible to himself now, Alex swam in

half-sensible visions. A cavity began to open in his chest. Each breath filled the space between his ribs with an acrid coldness. His body registered as a course of rocks across which his hurts, like legion, as if a river, thrashed across without settling.

Beyond the pain, Alex saw himself laying on the bed below him. His mind grasped, slipping in and out of resolution. Sometimes producer of thoughts, next visitor to illusions.

A fish is walking on its hind legs wearing a top hat. It is propelling itself down the street with a cane in one hand. In its other hand is a pipe. The fish is wearing a monocle. It has a moustache. In between sucks of its pipe, it opens its mouth and blobbers: "We will all be better off for this." Crimson vehicles roll past with biscuit wheels. Trees are made of long lengths of grass, slender and tall. Twin hairpin lamp posts line a tonka town high street. The fish multiply. A green fish is strolling, with its own top hat and yellow stripe down its back. Its cane is black but its pipe is red and its moustache is superb. "We will all be better off for this some day," it blubbers too. As the fish parade somewhere above his temples, from someplace that hurt lives, deep under his sternum, all Alex can do to keep abreast of this vertigo, is to cling to the fish's phrase: "We will all be better off for this some day."

The daylight merged the contours, of his bedroom, shadowless. Outside, rain drizzled. Unnoticed by its inhabitant, the room turned grey. Rectangles of dull orange came to float on the walls in slanted frames. Time lengthened, suffocated itself, stayed motionless. The walls reemerged, dripping grey, and the orange frames disappeared.

Alex lay, a stranger to sleep, in a timeless stupor. Exhausted and inseparable from his convulsing mind, his body jerked with

automatic authority when his regular alarm screeched. He led himself, numbed, towards the bathroom. In the shower, hot water thundered down and the steam climbed to envelop him. The dancing water entered his mouth, outlined the weight of his swollen tongue, and then Alex heaved. He retched, and out began a desperate sob. He retched, and spasms of retching engulfed him. The water welted on his shoulders as he stooped forward, his lungs rasping for purchase on the air. At the centre of his chest an incredible pain, like salt on ice, a collapsing torrent, pouring inwards. A tightening ache between his pectorals. He could feel his heart, failing. The organ dying. Needing to get out, unable to stay inside that fire of salt and flesh. He was dissolving. His body convulsed. Each breath swelled the size of this wound that defined his chest. He breathed pain, heaved out sobs. He felt his body trying to purge itself of him, to reject his very essence. Death. He knelt on all fours. The steam rising from his back.

Shaking, Alex crawled out of the shower and grabbed at the skirt of a towel on the rail. He bandaged himself and padded for his phone, found the number for work, and stared at the screen blankly, for what might have been minute. He hit call. At the end of the line the HR assistant's voice was thin and robotic. He reported himself sick. It was not the done thing. Weakness.

He staggered to his bedroom and lay on top of the bed, not bothering to cover himself. His mind churned. His thoughts spiralled. Subjects and suspicions multiplied. Alex saw a thousand selves. The bitter, the ambitious, the gracious, the proud, the naive, the idealist, the traitor, the victor, the spurner. He rested in none of them. His racing brain kept shifting his emotional frame. His logical faculties scrambled, ran overtime

and would not still. His mind exhausted itself for answers, trying to fix the story of his situation. Every explanation for his failure gave rise to new theories and counter arguments, as shame, as jealousy, as arrogance, and entitlement leapt to offer explanations. The questions multiplied. He tried to rationalise their origins. His certainty was like a mirror hung on a wire that turned with the breeze. It would fix on nothing. By whichever route his mind argued, he found himself betrayed. His story remained broken, and his body pinned to the bed, prone.

## 15.

The glare of the laptop screen irradiated Alex Stamp's eyes. His apartment lay in confusion around him. Stamps itched under his left pectoral which yielded accommodatingly. The aircon was at 28 degrees. For a week the apartment of Stamps had been adrift. It had become an island that moved in its own time zone, celebrated its own culture, and feasted on its own cuisine. The cuisine was take-away, the culture was explicit, high-definition and fullscreen. Its customs involved intricate instruments and potent substances. The timezone was bendy. All that was consumed was imported from other nations, guzzled to the temporary satisfaction of an orifice, and repeated quickly.

Christmas did not arrive in the apartment that cocooned Stamps. A delirium for meaning and a buffet of stimulants had chased him through a hundred revisions of a single email, that blinked on his screen.

It had been a plea for help, it had been a cry of indignation, it had been a declaration of unrequited love, and now it was nearly finished. Stamps read it again and again, careful not to have entered Sophia's email address in the 'to' field, lest he press send prematurely.

He had been tired for days, but unable to sleep, barely able to summon an appetite. Spent beer cans and empty bottles littered the floor. The ashtray, crammed with dead stubs of cigarettes, looked like a crown of burned foam. Alex's brain churned more relentlessly than it ever had. Racing for new solutions to his betrayal, another clue to his hurt, a new story to go forward with. He had been betrayed, by himself or by others. Naive, idealistic, just another man with a saviour complex, unable to abandon his ego.

The email had started off as a farewell. A grandiose affair of words like 'relinquish,' and 'duty.' It had since become a shaping shop for a certainty which still felt foreign. Whisky and weed patrolled Alex's psyche as he attempted to find a shape for his thoughts. Whisky dissociated the terror of feelings. The weed engrossed him in tasks. He lit a joint. Blue smoke curled backlit by the laptop's pixels.

The email blinked:

**Dear Sophia,**

I had a great affair with a ghost of you, who never existed. To quote Leonard Cohen: "The great affair is over, but whoever would have guessed, it would leave us all so vacant, and so deeply unimpressed."

I've found out that it's never enough, when you free your fantasies. Expectation outgrows your intention. It makes mock destiny seem somehow ahead of you, now yours to walk into and bask in the glorious implications of. And your intentions become eclipsed as your ideas spawn fantasies of what will happen, before anything has been done. So that when you do the thing, it doesn't work out how you expected it would work out, and the situation wilts into a trap of disappointment. How disappointed you are for believing in your fantasy: your disappointment that you have fallen into this same trap before, and yet you're here again. And so on.

The further you go in, the more you see that what you've become is some pathetic reflection of your fears and stupidities manifesting again. At that moment you hate yourself. And you know ways to follow this feeling of self-hate, and to dwell with it right up against your heart. To squeeze that feeling tight, until it controls you. Squeezing into the crevice between the bed and the wall, and laying there, protected by inertia, a blissful stasis, finally, without any twists or turns or unintended consequences or disappointments, knowing only your own self-hate, your ability to perpetuate it with isolation, with

chemicals. You rest there in the arms of despair. Stopped where you've fallen. Stuck to the point where your dreams failed and your expectations crushed you. Happy because you are in control of the narrative.

I wanted you to save me, I wanted to show I was good enough for you. I spent a million pounds to show you that i am not a bad guy. But I am. That's what it's created. Fate has had its way. And logic is unable to solve the riddles of why. But logic is all I have.

Maybe we use other people to break ourselves. I hoped when I changed to become a version of myself who you'd desire, I'd find myself redeemed. Instead I find myself slain. My mind wanders its own tragedy, until it consumes me again in a sweetheart labyrinth of questions. Am I so affected because I was wrong that people are good, or because the dream I breathed failed to become real? I wanted fame from charity, admiration from altruism. I tried to bring order to the chaos of the world. And life has thrown my charity, my vanity, my folly back in my face. Just as the wanker bankers I'd rejected knew it would. They cheered the sport when they saw my idealism going out to bat. They knew it guaranteed a gory end. They'll feast on this spectacle my

slaughter and become only more sure of the necessity of their own greed. Are they right Sophia? Is the only order that can be put on the world greed and fear?

I am eternally sorry. Please do not reply. I am OK.

A

&\*&\*&\*&

Stamps thought of sending the email. Not so close to Christmas he thought. She's an angel. She'll be surrounded by family. I don't want to appear in her inbox time-stamped for all of history as depressed in the middle of Christmas.

'Oh who's that emailing you Sophia?' 'oh mum it's just that boy I met in Thailand,' played Alex's mind. 'Who sent all those letters to the house whilst you were on your gap year? Goodness, have you reconnected? Is he well?' 'Yes, we have reconnected. No, he's not doing great.' 'Oh, he never was, was he? Some poor people are born into this life to struggle.' Alex parsed the possible interactions. Used these expectations as evidence for fresh inaction.

"No, I'll hold off sending it until the festive season has passed," he rationalised. He swigged from a can of pre-mixed gin. "God, I wanted to please and delight her. I wanted Sophia to find me entertaining and fascinating. I'm in love with her in such a servile way that I'm afraid to engage with her. So fragile is my illusion. I would rather be nothing to her again, than to be

broken. She is on a path I cannot reach. I have put her on a pedestal that is too high.”

Alex’s eyes went to the clock on the bottom of his screen. ‘December 25th, 13:06.’ Christmas itself. The pendulum of booze at the bottom of his can of gin mix was no longer heavy. The booze delivery service wouldn’t be stopped today. Probably just triple their prices. Stamps eyed the spirits cabinet. Every cupboard in his apartment gurned open. Contents splayed across the floor. He gained no information from his scan ... Christmas day ... There was a thought swirling through the jetsam of his thoughts, trying to form an identity ... Christmas day... The foodbank ... That million fucking pounds is being eaten right now, at that fucking foodbank! And then Alex saw Baz standing at the back of the Food-Bank’s million pound Christmas dinner, grinning through ragged teeth, arms akimbo, as the unfortunate ate their gruel in plastic chairs.

Alex jolted from the couch towards the shower, forming a plan as he lept. A takeaway tray under his foot buckled onto its side. Its remnants seethed towards gravity. The shower hissed in jets. As the wraiths of hot steam waltzed, Alex could only think of those mouths clustered around a table. Baz, arms folded, with a sanctimonious leer smeared across his face. Well Alex would show him. They didn’t even think to invite the founder to the food-bank feast. Stamps had made it from the shower to his wardrobe to wrestle with a pair of navy chinos before the idea came crashing down. He curled into the pillows of the sofa, sobbing, trapped again at the pathetic root of himself. His brain exploding with explanations and contradictions, his loneliness spasming through his chest. He half expected Baz to walk into his apartment and laugh at him. Who turned down a million

pounds? Who really turned down a million pounds? Baz was trying to make a mockery of Alex. That bastard had destroyed him.

The message to Sophia lay unsent, as another passion overthrew his mind.

## 16.

“Love seeketh only Self to please, to bind another to Its delight, Joys in another’s loss of ease, and builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.” - Blake

Stamps pushed on the revolving door to BBG and allowed the office to take on a hallucinatory quality. The appalling glare of the ceiling lights on the plastic desks, the angry LED’s beaming down prices, his ignorant colleagues wrestling with the plastic limbs of their computers, bawling into telephones.

“Bullish? All day.”

“I’ll pay four!”

“It’s gonna be better than a haircut, you can’t turn this one down.”

Ted Slobbers, poor dishevelled Slobbers, was on his feet, his telephone clamped to his ear, his lips moving with dervish speed, his thick fingers drumming on his desk with a plastic pen.

Stamps turned to his computer screen and let the fluorescent numbers distend across it. “You can take it from me, this industry is on the rise, look at the index. It’s going to outperform year on year.” Between the numbers Stamps plotted confidences. He’d spotted a bond issued by the Peruvian

government that was about to mature, backed by the price of tin. Tin prices had been spiking like crazy in the past decade, many investors had left the metal alone and this bond lay forgotten. It was due a twenty percent profit when it matured in three years. Alex was collecting clients for it. It would take a couple of months to gain sufficient orders. But when he executed, the deal would be spectacular. He'd earn the million back, before anyone found out what had happened.

“How's the bank's favourite Communist?” Pratt passed. His face had taken on more features over the Christmas break, his jowls sagged like a flooded ceiling, ready to burst. “Incendiary,” replied Stamps “I've had the NASDAQ to myself whilst you've been funnelling toblerone.” The noise of the tensions of the salesroom clicked up a tick. Stamps picked up the telephone. A voice warbled down the other end, Stamps detected an edge of hesitation to it, and depressurised into the mouthpiece, selling, selling, selling.

The Alex Stamps that had returned to work following the Christmas break seemed almost a new man to his colleagues. Ruthless in trades, savage with his calculations, he engaged the small talk about the holidays as if his had been incomparably pleasant. Banter about his wager was diffused by a range of well prepared comebacks. His colleagues, impressed by his surge of charisma, asked him his secret. “Realistic, not idealistic,” Alex would say, and wink. He was reading Ayn Rand, he'd tell them. Internally, Alex was shattered. It was only a matter of time before someone found out the fate of the monies, and his wager declared lost. Then the ravenous jowls would howl at his idealism. But he'd be ahead by then. He would have the million earned back. The longer his failure took to be discovered, the

longer he could keep at his job, and the more chance he had to recoup his money. If he gave it his all, he could earn a million, maybe more, within the year. This tin bond wasn't his only iron in the fire. Alex stared into the screen of his work computer, as figures reamed across it. He cherished each fluorescent coordinate of possibility.

At home, in a nightly pattern, Alex lay on the sofa, eyes to the ceiling, clutching at whatever he could, asserting his dominance over his own psyche by substances or over the bodies of women by sex. Jolts of dim colours reflected in the living room's lacquered floor as the a giant TV skipped between scenes. The apartment was awash with torn baggies, spent liquor and bent cans. His academic mind spiralled into rabbit-holes of confusion. He lay lacerated by a lack of veneration.

He was sick of caring how others saw him. Sick of running from the power he was born into. Sick of wanting to be people he was not. "Let my money provide me a playground," he realised with the power of epiphany. "Let my bad habits be charismatic. If I was born to be part of the upper class, I might as well embrace it."

He had tried to do a good thing. He had tried to do a generous thing. His mind trod these pathways, as if on a run through a park, knowing the places it put its feet, zoning in on a faster and faster time. He had staked his reputation on this goodness. He'd been shamed by having had the courage to believe in idealism. Faces of braying colleagues floated towards Alex, uproarious in condemnation. A good deed should only expect the opposite of thanks. To dispel the hells of his imagination Alex drank until he sank to that state where memory and sensation stop.

## 17.

*"I am fate, and stronger than your petty plans. I am how things turn out, and I am different from your little dreams. I am the end of time and the limits of beauty and unfulfilled desires. All the accidents and imperfections and the little minutes that shape the crucial hours are mine. I am the limits of your control. The one who made the mirrors. I am the vast overwhelming beat of the universe"-*

*F. Scott Fitzgerald - The cut glass bowl*

In grey March, before spring arrived for a week then fled the minute people began to think Winter done with. In grey March, as the tans of ski-season were on their way out. That grey March, an afternoon internet trawl by a colleague at Alex's office, pulled his life into its penultimate chapter.

From: Ramsay

Recipients: Alex Stamps, Richard  
Pratt

Subject: 'imagine if!!'

Body:

A million pounds donated to a food bank in Leith!?!?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-12962569>

Alex saw the email halfway through a meeting, felt sick and fled to the toilets. He was not seen in work on Thursday or Friday. Pratt called the independent advisor appointed to the wager to check who had banked the wager's cheque, almost purring with glee as the advisor rang him back with a reply. On Friday afternoon every employee in BBG found a gloating email floating in their inbox. Pratt had forwarded confirmation from the advisor. Pratt had included his own message above the forwarded confirmation. In large red letters, followed by a train of exclamation marks, he'd written:

“VICTORY!!!!!!!!!!!!1!!!”

## PART 2

### The Story of Baz

#### 1.

##### *Winds of fortune*

Baz was taking a walk up the Water of Leith. A great Winter storm had come in off the North Sea. It was always this way after the false week of Spring left and Winter returned. There would be no going up ladders in weather like this.

Since giving away that cheque, not much had changed in Baz's life. Baz was content with that. Christmas had been good. Teah the dog had the operation on her cataracts, and that had gone well. She wasn't bumping into the furniture now, it was near enough a miracle. Half her life Baz'd had to carry her around because she couldn't see beyond her nose. In recent years, gradually, she'd moved less and less. She was getting arthritis the vet had told him. And now! Like a puppy again, she was bounding around the place. She couldn't go fast enough. "Slow down," Baz had to remind her, "You can't go faster than your body." He might go for a holiday in the summer. Somewhere hot. But he wasn't that fussed these days. Once

you've been all over the world, just being where there are familiar faces round about you is the thing you want most.

The cheque barely crossed his mind. What an incredible act of generosity it had been for that guy to give a perfect stranger a million pounds. A million pounds. Even the amount was ludicrous. It had inspired Baz to be friendlier to everyone, and to share what he had. Mind, he'd soon denied that it was him that gave the cheque to the food-bank. Blabbing about that had been an error. The attention that had begun to build had sickened him pretty soon. "You don't earn a spare million washing windows do you?" he'd told people. The whole story had been so ludicrous that most people assumed it was lies when they heard it. The retelling of it soon dwindled as people moved on to fresh tales and let Baz be. Though Old Mary had taken to winking to him every time she crossed his path.

As Baz walked the river path, the beech trees that enclosed the valley threshed high above in a gale. Their silver trunks groaned, their thin limbs whipped.

The movements reminded Baz of the time he saw Sylvie Guillem dance at the Edinburgh Festival. Watching her dance almost put you into a trance. Funny when the movements of one object are familiar to the movements of another. What was it those Thai fridge magnets said? "Same same, but different."

There was the time Baz had seen Akram Khan dance. That'd been one of Baz's favourite dance performances. Khan danced the scene from the Mahabharata where the princess burns in the forest. The most agonising, horrific dance. His fingers were the flames. Khan was burning as he danced. You tried not to look. It was shocking. Baz was transfixed. That man was some dancer. Khan's partner, a lass from Korea, had hurt herself before the

show, so Khan needed to adapt the performance to fill the gaps in which his partner no longer appeared. So, mid-performance, Khan stopped dancing to tell the audience a story about when he was out in Australia. That'd been a lovely, amazing story.

## **The Tale of Akram Khan's Angels**

Akram Khan grew up in England, but his father was Bangladeshi and had left that country when he was eighteen. Now Khan is massively famous. He choreographed the Olympic opening ceremony in London 2012. He's out in Australia doing a world tour, and he finished his performance that night, and he thought he'd walk home, because the hotel wasn't that far away. But Khan's knackered, so he caves in and thinks he'll just get a taxi. So he sees where the taxi rank is, and he's on his own, waiting. Finally a taxi comes up, and he goes to open the door, and these other two people appear from out of nowhere and just jump into the taxi like "thanks very much," as if Khan was there to open the door for them or something. So Khan's standing there, raging. By this point he would've been quicker walking home than waiting. So he turns round and it just so happens there's another taxi coming up the road. He gets in and the driver begins talking, like he's wanting to drum up a conversation with him, and Khan's tired, but the driver's a lovely man, who's asking him what he does and Khan says 'oh you know I'm a

dancer,' and the taxi driver says 'where is it you're from?' and he says 'I'm from England,' and the taxi driver says 'originally, where would your family be from?' and he says 'oh, Bangladesh.' The taxi driver says in Bangladeshi 'your Father, what village was he from in Bangladesh?' and Khan's Dad's from a little village, an obscure little village, like the only people who know that this village exists are people from that village, but Khan names the village, and the taxi driver says: 'did your father leave that village when he was eighteen years old, with a dream of opening a restaurant in England?' and Akram Khan's thinking that he's met some dodgy psychic or something. But then the taxi driver says his Dad's name, and Khan's thinking that this is mad. Then the taxi driver says 'Whilst I've been driving, I'd keep seeing these posters of the name of this dancer coming to Sydney, 'Akram Khan,' and I'd keep thinking about my best pal, when we grew up as children. I remembered when he left our village at eighteen, saying that he was going to go to England to open a restaurant. His surname was Khan too.' And of course Akram Khan's father had managed to reach England, had managed to open a restaurant, and never returned to his village, and then all these years later, this taxi driver in Australia is Khan's father's long-lost childhood pal. The guy driving the taxi is crying now, finding his long-lost best-friend's son in the backseat of his car. So Khan flew his Mum and Dad out to Sydney for a reunion. You could see all the audience almost crying when he finished telling the tale, it was mad.

Totally true, you could see the passion in his face. ‘You know, people talk about guardian angels,’ Khan said to the audience, ‘but without being too spiritual or too spooky, I’d like to think those people who jumped in that first taxi and pissed me off were my angels.’

The wind licked the path at the corner, tugging on Baz’s hat. His hand whipped to secure it. No good having your bonnet scuppered in the river.

Baz took most of his walks when the winds meant that the windows could not be washed. He’d zip himself into his fleece and waterproof, put on his orange woolen hat, brown walking boots that he’d had resoled four times, and walk into the pushing and pulling gusts. He would watch the descriptions of the wind move along the leaves of the trees and scrawl their tempers across the surface of water. The wind would pull across the river and dance a swell to shatter lights across its surface. As the wind turned the trees to its own patterns, the river would pull on, remaining a stately whole above the rapids, fracturing into white waters over rocks, becoming strong currents at the corners. The river surged towards the sea immovably, like the pull of the great waves off the coast was already within it.

Baz had thought for years that the emotion that you practiced became the emotion in which you lived. And precisely because it was hard to inhabit joy was precisely the reason it should be practiced. This Baz called simply, leading a good life. It was important to acknowledge when people had made you glad, and to credit them. It was like telling everybody all the time: "you're

doing really well." And when Baz told the world it was doing well, the well doing shined back on him.

Baz could love washing down windows. Right enough, some days it was misery, but on others that began grey, he could wash, beginning to enjoy himself, and the weather would clear. He'd laugh, and the sun would burst through the clouds. As if managing to find his happiness could bring the sunshine, he'd told his pal Carol, one night, drenched in wine. Carol had creased. "You wee hippy," she'd said, "we can't judge what our actions make! You're like a dog in a storm, who holds up its leg to a tree and begins to piss just as lightning strikes the tree. The tree bursts into flames, the dog scatters off and yelps, 'look what I just did!' as the tree burns."

No, washing windows was fine work. To be out in the breezy light, able to see who's passing and get a bit of a chat. Just a generation before, men's work had been to descend under the ground, to hack fragile corridors towards darkness. Who bullied men into doing that? Economics. Money was the cruelest bully around. It had no face to hate, and it could never be avoided. Baz rounded a corner on the river and passed through a Victorian viaduct. A blackbird trilled. Its call accelerated in the gusts.

There was no way that Baz could have known, but sheltered underneath the trees, just up the river in a gorse bush, was a den that belonged to a guy called Stevo. Passing below that den, jogging towards him, would soon be Alex Stamps.

Alex Stamps and Baz would both owe their lives to Stevo soon. But at that moment, as Baz continued to dream and to walk the river path, Alex was just leaving his apartment, and Stevo was across Edinburgh in the Old Town, wheeling his

mountain bike away from an off-license. Three litres of cider swung from Stevo's handlebars in a blue plastic bag. Stevo was fully set for a visit to his den.

## 2.

### *The den of Stevo*

Stevo's den was in a gorse bush above the river, accessible only by a narrow scramble of steep mud up off the path. Its entrance was a small hole in the gorse that had to be crawled through. Dogs and some kids sometimes found it, but few adults would ever know to look there. Inside the bush, at a space where two bushes met, was a clearing that maximum four people could sit, but not stand, unseen from above or below. Cigarette ends and ring pulls mixed with mud for a floor. Two logs, one charred, could be used as perches. There was a camping mat rolled up and trapped under the biggest log. Stevo had a stash of firelighters up there, and tried to bring water. Matches got wet if he left them out. But he'd turned up without a lighter too many times, and that was agony. Stevo allowed no pissing in the den, and he tried not to leave litter behind, but the odd can, bent and faded lay out of reach in the mulch beyond the bush.

Stevo had a lump of soapbar in his pocket, that he'd smoke up at the den. Soapbar was cheaper than hash. It was made from

marijuana oil blended with cheaper chemicals. This mix was compacted into a hard brown lump. Stevo once put some soapbar in the microwave to get it squishy before rolling a joint, and sparks flew out of it.

To get a proper buzz, Stevo would smoke soapbar from a bucket in huge hits. A bucket was an empty plastic bottle with tinfoil on its neck. To make a bucket, Stevo filled the bottle with water and put tinfoil with little holes poked in over the bottle's neck. He put the soapbar on top of the tinfoil and held a flame to it. When the soapbar was burning, he poked a hole at the base of the bottle. As the water spilled out of the bottom of the bottle, air was dragged through the little holes in the tinfoil at the top, past the burning Soapbar. The smoke from the burning soapbar spilled down into the bottle and became a thick soup. When all the water was drained, the bottle would be filled with thick smoke and the bucket was set. Then Stevo would take the tinfoil off the bottle neck and inhale until the smoke was all in his lungs. He'd hold this for as long as possible before heaving into a fit of coughs. Such a hit would send Stevo's mind off to a place where everything felt significant, and for those moments everything was ordered and tranquil.

Inside the womb of the gorse bushes, below the trees, you could be hidden from sight. The bushes held off all but the strongest winds and if it rained, it took a lot before the floor got actual soaked. Stevo had fallen asleep in there, many times. If you had a fire going it could be the nicest part of the world. After the planes stopped landing at the airport, silence would descend, and thicken. The birds would be tucked away for sleep. The mammals and insects too. Shadows would dance from the light of the fire. Stevo wouldn't need tunes playing then. He

could just lay with the flames, staring into them. It was like having a dog with you. It could be a companion. The fire was as alive as you let it be.

### 3.

*[Baz's walk concludes]*

As Stevo cycled up the river towards his den, Baz was lost in thought. His mind mixed memories, with ideas. His limbs moved slowly, rhythmically. His consciousness was not so much in his body as spread all around him, softly touching the walls of the valley on either side of him, extending ahead to the bend in the river. Inside this pocket of tranquility the world was calm and poignant. Birds sang to one another, readying themselves for mating. When a fish jumped, Baz heard the interruption it made in the fabric of the atmosphere, and then felt his breath, and the songs of the birds, resuming to patch the gap and form peace anew. The sight of a figure on the path up ahead popped Baz's solitude and made Baz brilliantly conscious of himself. His attention contracted sharply until he inhabited his body in an agonising, awkward way. He no longer knew where to place his eyes. Where on the landscape he could look to place his balance again. What should he do with his hands. That figure was a way off, jogging, Baz reassured himself. Animals are probably more scared of you than you are of them.

The yellow gravel of the path passed under Baz's feet. His eyes sifted it without measure. A small grey object snagged his attention. He stopped and knelt. A fishing weight. Kneeling, he

took the fishing weight in his hand and it became his world. The coldness of the landscape was in it. It had a dull slate gleam.

It'd been years since he'd been fishing up here. Baz looked up at the surface of the river. A thick reflection was bulging down the water, shattering around some rocks, frothing into nothingness before it met the deep channel bounded by stone walls in front of him.

The jogging footsteps approached, scrunching gravel. Baz, remembering the figure, kept his eyes on the water. He shouldn't glare up all of a sudden, that'd look aggressive. He'd keep his eyes on this fishing weight until they'd run past and then.

“Baz?” It was an odd, posh voice.

Baz glanced up. The jogger's reddened face was leering down. Baz saw a fist and his consciousness folded over itself.

## 4.

*Alex's walk concludes*

Baz hadn't even acknowledged him as he approached. No fight or flee, instead glib pretence not to have noticed. That clod, squatting there as if he was hidden, head in the sand, by eyeballing some trash in his palm.

Being ignored was all the evidence that Alex had needed of Baz's shame. Unimaginable how he'd lived with the guilt of his treatment of his benefactor. Surely he'd seen the news reports.

The blown out banker. The car crash. Sophia had put two and two together and messaged him. He'd felt so encouraged to know that she was thinking of him still. He'd posted bail. Drink-driving and manslaughter. Jogging helped. He drank like a fish to get through it. You would though wouldn't you. Work had been supportive. His lawyer was the best.

"Baz," Alex had said, and that prick had looked up from his ostrich-ing, obviously feigning surprise. Alex had smashed a fist between those thieving eyes. All our little karmas come home to roost one day, thought Alex.

Connecting his fury with its intent engulfed Alex in an incredible sensation. The awesomeness of life rushed across his shoulders, down his arms, and for the first time in months, he felt alive. He felt the cold wind on his numbed nose. The warmth of his forearms throbbed. Clarity reigned, and for that moment, Alex felt a sense of peace. "It's as if I've thought about apprehending this bastard so much, I've made him appear," he thought, and stood over the unconscious body, "I couldn't have planned this." Adrenaline focussed Alex's actions. He gave the body a few kicks then began dragging that ungrateful prick towards the river.

## 5.

*[Steve's cycle concludes]*

The yellow gravel slithered under the bike's tyres as Stevo wound down the river path. He stood on the pedals with his arms locked straight. The bike, taut to him, slalomed with momentum. With small adjustments of his hips, Stevo steered. Water to his left, trees to his right. Under the stone viaduct. No dogs to swerve. Out onto the clearing with the metal bridge and the tufts of straw grass that hide birds which explode from under your feet, and there's a guy kneeling and a guy standing over him, and the guy standing just pure smacks the kneeling cunt in the face. That guy is sparked out instantly and the guy who has knocked him out begins to kick his body. Once, like trying it. Then the guy laughs. Then twice, three times. He keeps kicking the guy he's knocked out.

Stevo bends his arms at the elbow and pummels the pedals of the mountain bike. The thick tyres scrunch the path and spit pebbles as the bike accelerates. The aggressor is dressed in lycra. Like a jogger. Now he's dragging the unconscious body towards the ledge of the river. It's a stone bank there. A good two metre drop from the ledge onto the water.

Stevo's ripping toward the fella, bouncing his left leg on left pedal, right leg on right pedal, the bike writhing under his hips like a snake, his hands clamped to the handlebars, knuckles straining. He's locked onto the guy, pulling towards him through a tunnel of concentration, ready to bail off the bike and stop him. The fella up there has stopped dragging the body and begun shouting at it. He is holding the unconscious man by the front of his jacket. The unconscious body is limp, an orange hat on its head. And the guy begins dragging the body towards the river again. The guy is straining. He's leaning into it to drag the passed out guy towards the ledge. He clocks the mountain bike,

‘cos he swivels his head. His eyes bulge seeing the sight of Stevo bombing toward him and he loses his grip on the body, and pings backwards from his straining, falling through the air as if he’s loosed himself from a crossbow. His feet slip out from under him. His head takes the impact. The momentum crumples into his skull, his body compressing. He’s sparked out instantly. But with the way he’s fell, the guy’s hips are over the ledge to the river. The legs droop over the edge, pull the hips, that pulls the chest, and the arms follow akimbo. A dragging, ripping sound as his lycra top scrapes over the stone ledge.

Stevo arrives just as Alex’s body hits the water. He ditches his bike beside the knocked out Baz throws his phone from his pocket, and jumps from the ledge towards the water, after Alex.

## 6.

*[the arrival of the emergency services concludes the scene]*

A dog walker had rounded the river’s corner to see the scene’s full menagerie: Baz’s body laying by the path, still unconscious. Stevo in the water, struggling to tug Alex’s body from the current.

The police had come, followed by the ambulance.

As Stevo told the police, once he was dried off and a blanket put round him, he thought he was gonna get a fight with the guy who was assaulting the other, but that fella freaked it as soon as he saw that he was seen, slipped as he scrambled to run, flipped his head off the stone ledge, and the rest of his body followed the script of its momentum.

Stevo put his finger inside his cheek and pulled until his finger flicked out. His cheek snapped against his teeth: "plop."

## 7.

*[the busyness of drama]*

Baz looked at the fishing weight that had been clutched in his hand when he'd been delivered to the hospital. It was up on the living room mantelpiece between the candles and the lucky trinkets from past adventures. Smiling, gurning photos from exotic locales, shells and lumps of rock, feathers, semi-precious stones and a small inlaid box from China. His husband had put the fishing weight up amongst them saying "some memento." It stood like a little grey obelisk to a petty event. It looked squalid and silly next to their trinkets thought Baz. He thought better of complaining. The hospital had released him with a concussion. His head still ached. He'd enough trouble without trying to argue with his hubby.

It was always a serious issue to the police when someone like Alex, someone with so much money, got badly hurt. But the statements of the dog walker and that boy who had jumped into the water meant that the police didn't trouble Baz beyond the bare necessities. They had asked Baz if he wanted to press charges. But what would be the use? This Alex was up in the hospital, in a coma now by all accounts. First he gave Baz a

million pounds, next he assaulted him, now he's comatosed. Baz wanted no further part in it.

He went back to work the next day. Aching head and all. Of course, people gabbed. Baz was too well known not to be the talk of the Port as soon as he debuted a panda eye in public. Those who knew about the cheque made the link with his assailant. The people who didn't know, reckoned they might. A fight over a secret, sordid account. In pubs, cafes, and at knitting groups, in the foyers to doctors and dentists, in the enclave of bus shelters and passing each other outside Tescos, people yapped the news in mutating shapes. Reckonings rocked into speculations. Speculations bred gruesome offspring.

Though Baz hadn't known it, the papers had already been full of Alexander Stamps. He'd gained notoriety in Edinburgh's social gossip and printed columns for his lavish spending, and eyebrow-raising behaviours. Then he'd written off a supercar, drunk, injuring a passerby and finally headlined the front pages. The papers gave over another front-page to this latest installment in the 'burnout banker' narrative.

'STAMPS ADDS ASSAULT TO INJURY',  
'COMA KARMA.'

Alex's victim was, at first, unnamed.

But by the following morning, journalists had heard from 'anonymous sources close to Mr Stamps,' about the failed wager and the cheque and the relationship between Alex and Baz. Paparazzi had been the first Baz had known of his path to celebrity, as a calamity of camera augmented bodies swarmed him when he left the house for work. It was mad all day. They kept arriving. Snapping at him as he tried to wash windows.

“Clack Clack” went their cameras, like the call of Jays. Baz was embarrassed for the businesses.

“It’s you that looks like the convict by the photos,” Baz’s hubby had said when he got home, nose deep in a tabloid, fascinated by the reports. “They’ve caught your worst side.”

Baz was sullen enough, and barely glanced at the paper his husband sat entrenched by. “My bad side?” Baz replied, seeing a photo of him with a sponge against a window speaking over his shoulder to Old Mary. “Christ, there’s enough photos of me in that paper to build a 3d model with. Those sleekit bastards have photographed every side I’ve got.”

The papers reported the truth about the wager in such a fantastical way that it sounded like rumors. They featured profiles of Baz. They painted him as a working class hero. His husband asked the questions that all of Scotland wanted to know. Was the wager true? Did Baz know about it when he’d given the cheque away? Had he jilted Alex of his charitable intentions intentionally?

Baz knew nothing, and wanted to know even less. He’d say that to anyone who asked. The guy had given him a cheque the first time he met him, sparked him out the next. No use in wondering. The guy was unhinged. Awaiting trial for something, and unable to answer questions from his hospital bed, comatosed. “Poor bastard,” is how Baz characterised Alex, and refused to listen to the news, refused to speculate, and refused to speak to journalists. “You cannot blame someone who’s ill.”

Baz carried no lasting injury. The concussion had worn off in a week, and the black eyes within two. He attempted to stave off the self-pity that comes with unwanted celebrity. He took a lot of walks.

Baz turned his attention to his main goals: keeping his windows washed and finding a kilt for Teah.

He'd seen dogs with ties at festivals. Why not a dog with a kilt? Wee bells on the back instead of a sporran. That'd be nice. Teah would look beautiful with a kilt for the festivals, the wee darling. She'd match Baz. She wouldn't need socks mind. All those people though. Maybe a festival would be overwhelming for Teah with her eyesight back. Carol's pal might be able to make the kilt, she'd said, in Baz's tartan, but she was taking ages. Baz had googled 'dog kilts'. Two million, three hundred and ten thousand results. Wasn't just him that was mad eh?

## 8.

*in which neighbours do neighbourly things*

By May, Spring had finished flirting with its entrance, and burst through Edinburgh in a million fluorescent blossoms. By July, a string of disappointing Saturdays had shelved hopes for a summer that season in Scotland. Steel grey monotonous skies reigned over the annual influx of umbrella'd tourists for Edinburgh's festival.

As the months had gone by, the story of the altercation between Alex and Baz had stopped being told. First by the newspapers, second by Baz, third by his family, and finally, by the neighbours.

The summer saw two new cafes open in Leith, both of which wanted Baz on their windows. His regular contracts remained

regular, and the amount of water that fell out of the sky that summer did not seem to dampen his client's enthusiasm for having Baz along to add more.

Teah got her kilt, Baz and her enjoyed the festivals. At the end of summer he'd gone on one last hurrah with Carol down to the lake district, for a sold out festival, without tickets, chancing it. Chic had headlined. Baz had managed to be on stage with Carol, and a bunch of other lunatics, dancing their nuts off for Chic's last song, cradling Teah in his arms, rocking her from side to side, going doolally.

Baz got recognized nearly everywhere he went. Less than at first, when the fallout of the wager and assault had made him international news, but still on a daily. On his way to the lake district it'd been every second person. He barely paid for his food or drink, though he always tried. Unless it was Tesco. He'd have happily taken their stuff for free, but the corporation outlets hadn't got emotions built into their tills it turned out. It was a strange way to exist to be so recognised all a sudden. But he was treated with warmth, and felt compassion more than having become an object at a zoo. He turned down every speaking opportunity and interview that came along, and looked forward to becoming a regular member of society again.

## 9.

*Neighbourly duty*

Soon it was again the time of year that the cold winds had ripped the leaves from the trees and council workers could be seen stringing LED lights from a cherry picker, to make the Port of Leith blink with Christmas cheer.

One November night a knock came at the door, to interrupt the dinner of Baz and his husband. But it was only the neighbour Terry from two floors down, who said yes to coming in, but no to joining the dinner, though he said it smelt delicious. Claire was back at his, cooking his favourite and he didn't want to spoil his appetite, "but just on the off chance, the reason I've popped round, I'm needing a weight for my fishing tomorrow, and I've ripped the house apart, but can't find mine, though Claire's saying she's sure she hasn't chucked them. So I'm avoiding world war three you see, by popping round to see if you've still got your ones Baz?"

And it's a "well hey," from Baz's husband, "naw, Baz gave all his fishing stuff to Colin when Colin was taking his kids out on the river, but here, hold on a minute, hah, here's something you can use", and Baz's husband reaches down from above the fireplace the small fishing weight saved amongst their lucky trinkets that Baz had brought back from the incident with Alex. "I knew there was a reason we hung onto that."

Terry tries to hand them a fiver for the weight and Baz is telling him not to be daft, it's just neighbourly duty. "Take it. We expect nothing," and Terry's persistence not to take something for nothing is resolved only by saying "well thanks. I'll bring you back the first fish I land tomorrow, that's a promise, though you know my luck," And it's a cheery bye the now and all the best wishes are given for Terry's morning's fishing.

## 10.

*In which our tale takes its turn*

The next day drizzled. They were saying that Old Mary's near to death, but Baz comes home from work to report that he seen her buying tennis balls from the Co-Op looking as fit as Spring. Baz clicked on the kettle and began to loosen off his work gear.

Baz's husband tells him to take a look in the fridge, and there, barely squirmed between the white plastic walls, swaddled in plastic bags, is an absolute monster. And Baz, remembering Terry's promise the night before, greets the fish by saying a "what a beast."

Baz's husband begins, "Terry brought that round the back of three, says he didn't catch anything else all day, so I was saying don't be daft, take that home and cook it, but he was having none of it, you know what Terry's like, I was arguing back his 'a promise is a promise,' half an hour before he says, 'here, if you don't take this off me soon it'll spoil and then it won't be feeding no one.'"

Baz laughs. Stubborn old Terry. "Might as well fillet this monster whilst i'm not out of my dirty clothes," says Baz to his husband and pulls his boots back on. He takes a bowl and a knife and carries the fish out of the flat into the close and down the vanilla-lit stair into the dark garden out back, so that the smelly job of gutting it won't mess up their kitchen. The handles

on the plastic bag strain so much Baz fears they might snap, and hooks an elbow under the bundle and carries it on his chest. The fish weighs about the same as a labrador. Baz can barely imagine the battle big Terry must've had to wrangle this thing out of the water.

Under the blue beam of an LED torch, Baz lays the fish down and saws off the fins with his knife and throws them into the bowl. He turns the fish so that its white belly is facing the sagging orange sky and slices down into it, drawing the knife from its jaw towards the tail. He opens the belly and reaches in his hand to scoop out its innards. And it is now that this tale, and the fortunes of its characters, takes its final turn.

## 11.

### *Retelling*

A town is a thing like an animal. A town has a will, it has its vital organs, and it has a nervous system that can distribute information quicker than mouths could shout or limbs type messages. Baz had great news. No sooner did Baz know it, than the whole Port of Leith knew it. In the harbour, the boys on the fishing boats clinked drinks at one another to the news. In the glitzy restaurant beside the harbour, the waitress lent on thoughts of what she would spend a such a fortune on, and in the vicarage, the priest thought of the repairs needed to the church roof, and how she might make Baz sympathetic.

If all of Leith had heard the news, it seemed half of Leith were trying to celebrate it with the man who had made it. Baz sat in state in his local boozer. More than a few whiskies were poured down than more than a few gullets that night, and many were on their way to getting absolutely hammered.

Some, despite the excitement, and with no bad manners intended to the storyteller, who'd stood the pub rounds of rounds that would resound well into the night, were drunk enough that their attention had wandered. Because it's the third telling of this tale now that Baz has run on to, always with the same structure. But the faces grouped about the tale kept on changing and eventually enough new folks arrive who won't believe the tale as others have told them, and so Baz unclenches his hand and shows them 'The Unexpected Thing' and then returns back to words for yet another cycle to knit that Unexpected Thing, to its emergence from chaos to end up there in his fist.

And so, in his tale, Baz is out the back of his house in his garden as drizzle wets down against the orange and black night. And out of the mouth of Baz sat in the pub comes how he had carried that huge fish which Terry had caught, and laid it down onto the garden to gut it. And out of Baz's mouth spills the tale of how Baz had sliced down to gut the fish, and that Unexpected Thing had spilled out of its belly. And then comes the telling of the certainty, despite the darkness of the night and the muckiness of the object, before he washed it off, that when Baz put his hand on it, he could feel, if not see, that this was an object of immense value. And then, to prove this point upon which the whole pub is fizzing ecstatic, Baz brings it out. It is bigger than his fist, bigger than the fist even of Stevie, the port's

champion boxer. He holds it out for them to see, and all the eyes that see it glitter like freshly pulled lager. Out of the belly of that fish, Baz had pulled a huge diamond.

## 12.

To have a huge sum of money handed to you twice in one lifetime was a weird fate.

Baz wasn't superstitious, but he'd done nothing but stand in the street doing his job to get given that cheque. He felt he'd done barely more to be handed this diamond. It was a struggle to resist the idea that fortune had favoured him. But what Terry had said when Baz had told him the news of the diamond inside his fish had stuck in Baz's head. Terry had looked shocked enough for a second then shrugged. "Finders keepers," Terry had said, and refused that he deserved a penny of the spoils.

The commotion following Baz's discovery was uncommon. Baz's status in the community went from mythical to mystical overnight. The guy who'd given away riches only to be handed them straight back by karma. Baz, yet again, was sorry that he'd gabbed his news. "My own worst enemy I am. Do I ever learn?" Baz muttered to Teah, his hangover still pounding the day after the pub, as the phone rang with yet another journalist, junkie, distant relative or local priest. Teah sat in the hall, beside the phone, staring up at Baz with puzzled eyes.

Baz had been besieged by calls and messages. Sometimes he answered, out of pure rage. "No, no one finds a diamond in a fish's belly do they now?" Baz would scold, "you're hearing

some old piece of superstition and mixing me up in it. Why would you believe that?" It didn't seem to put anyone off that day. The local priest called five times.

When Baz's husband got home from work he unplugged the phone and turned off Baz's mobile. It just hadn't occurred to Baz. "Ya daftie," his husband soothed, and eased a congregation of pakora from steaming polystyrene. "I'm married to the most famous man in Scotland," his husband joked, binning the plastic bags. Baz sagged. Not even a fake chuckle. He looked done in. The pair went through to the living room and sat with their feet up and shared a bottle of Cobra. They watched a DVD of a Chic performance in Johannesburg. Baz managed to relax.

What was the use for Baz of people getting interested in his story, he reasoned to his husband? The Water of Leith would be trawled by glory hunters trying to trade on the tails of his fortune. The poor fish would all be gone from the river before you could say 'Licketty Splish'. And who knew what archaic law someone would find to claim that they had the right to the diamond. Then Baz's treasure would be dredged off him by court fees. He wished he could turn all this attention away from him and into something positive, but his mind drew blanks. Attention for attention's sake, that was useless. The cults of tourism and celebrities focused on vapid, hollow spectacles. This modern squandering of our unique and most valuable resource, our theatre of consciousness. Baz didn't want anyone's attention but his husbands, and maybe Teah's. There were better things people should be doing with their attention, he reasoned.

“The locals know what they know now,” commiserated Baz’s husband “and no one of any repute would give tales from the denizens of Leith much credence,” he winked.

For the next week, the pulp papers published their rumors, and the phone continued to ring. But Baz clung to denial that any diamond had ever happened to diffuse the eruption of further drama. The whole tale sounded so ludicrous that all but the trashiest papers soon abandoned it. Baz was well-versed enough in celebrity to be unfazed by the latest bout, and left it to diffuse swiftly,

Meanwhile the diamond was up in a safety deposit box in the city centre. Baz continued to work the same hours, as ever. He continued to put his business flyers through the doors of new shops that opened, and discount flyers through those properties whose windows were mankit. There was no great problem with his life, he reasoned. He had no plans with what he would do with any money that resulted from the diamond. No great desires. Maybe a nice holiday. He’d send Terry’s family on a holiday too. Perhaps another kilt for Teah, a new jacket for the hubby. Resole his boots. But in the back of Baz’s brain, what Terry had said when Baz had told him of the diamond had begun to form a plan. And though Baz didn’t yet know the full character of the thought, he had the patience to let it become at its own pace.

In the evenings after work, Baz would study the laws surrounding ownership of treasure. He anticipated what questions jewelry dealers might ask when he turned up to sell them a huge rock, and he found how to answer them legitimately. He learned the variants that affected the value of diamonds. Their carat weight, cut, colour, and clarity. Baz

researched equivalent sums for rocks weighing similar amounts, and concluded this whole shiney-rock industry was utter madness. His research confirmed what he'd known since he first touched the stone: this diamond would yield more money than his thirty-five years of diligent work. He studied the tax codes and worried how much of a share the taxman would rob from him. Robbie Burns, staunch Scottish nationalist had twelve kids and was forced to work as a taxman for the same British Crown that he so loathed during the last six years of his life. Not all taxmen are bad, Baz surmised, and tried to be soothed by the thought.

There was no great hurry to cash in the diamond, because there was no great urgency to do anything with the funds. Baz was not going to trigger the labyrinth implications that cashing-in the diamond would bring unless he had a very good reason for doing so. He'd been content before any of this carry-on had happened, and he wanted that content to continue. But when things change, you can't pretend that they haven't. And things change constantly. That's the nature of things, if you educate yourself to sense it. It was important for Baz to recognise how his circumstances had changed and not to be bitter. Neither sentimental for a past that was no longer present, nor sentimental for a desired future that had not expressed itself. But recognition is itself a tricky thing. To reset the cogs of your brain, to regear it, and accept the changed nature of your circumstances, to allow life to flow on without struggling to bend it to your ego, that takes surrender. Baz wasn't religious, but it took some kind of faith, in a way. Faith that he was a small part of something much bigger, and more mysterious than he was. Something that was tied together with chaos and love. It

was a struggle to surrender like that in an age that worshipped the self the myth of the individual. But how bitterly an ego would shatter, exposed by its futile desires if it did not accept its smallness. To surrender guarded one against such fragility. So ran Baz's thoughts. He tried to accept all that had happened, to let his life flow without tarnishing its course with his vanity.

### 13.

That reason arrived one afternoon, sooner than Baz expected, whilst on a walk up the infamous Water of Leith, a place his husband now called "the portal of fortune," half joking.

Baz could not quite believe the reason when it arrived. It made little logical sense. He had no idea where the notion had come from. It was an idea that simply arrived, fully-formed. He didn't let its lack of logic diminish its importance to his mind.

Baz wanted to make toys.

"Educational ones you could call them. Toys that help cultivate attention to healthy bounds. Toys that are instructions about how to play, not instructions for what play should make," he told an advisor at a Business Gateway meeting. The advisor looked over Baz's employment history, noted no relevant experience, assumed a mid-life crisis, and told Baz not to bother.

It soured Baz's mood. "If he's so entrepreneurial why's he employed by a quango, and speaking to me, not his own employees?" Baz grumbled on his way home. The sky was concrete grey. It let down a vague, persistent drizzle that clung, as if static, to every cranny of Baz's clothes. His walk took him

along roads clogged with roadworks from the city centre, back down towards Leith

Baz knew his idea didn't look reasonable, but he hoped his enthusiasm might have convinced the advisor. Aye his business plan was a collection of a scrawls supported by napkins, but it all linked up in his head. He knew what he needed to do. The realisation that he should make toys had not been a realisation that had any particular logic. Baz hadn't any children himself. But the more Baz thought about children's toys, and the addictive properties of them, the more his idea made sense. 'Finders Keepers', the toys would be called, just those words that Terry had said. Finder Keepers toys would be adventure kits. They would help kids to explore the world, without being prescriptive. They'd encourage creation not emulation. Baz could see every detail of the kit in his mind's eye. There were no things that needed thinking out or designing. Baz simply needed to find the means to pull this imagined kit into reality. He thought the Business Gateway service would have been the ones to help him.

But then a funny thing happened. Baz arrived home soaked and minging from that lackluster meeting, a bit put off, and there was a letter on the doormat. Baz was still getting the odd request from the press about the diamond, or the wager, but this one seemed different. Personalised stationery and fountain pen. Thick vanilla envelope. Baz wrestled off his boots and got himself into the living room, cosy now, and cracked through the thick envelope. Cursive handwriting distended across the page, spindly like, cramped old hands. It didn't ask for an interview, just to meet. So Baz arranged to meet this Richard Pratt, and when he came through, Baz couldn't help but like the fellow for

how obviously out of place the oblivious man was in a greasy spoon in Leith. An old boy. Watery eyes. A little big. Right away Baz knew he must have been a friend of Alex. He was made of that arrogant ignorance that masqueraded as pragmatism.

"Well you see," Pratt presented to Baz over the red and brown sauce bottles, "I heard about the diamond in the press and put two and two together from what Alexander Stamps had told me of the cheque business. I knew it must be the same window cleaner involved in both. You're a lucky fellow it would seem." Pratt took a large mug of tea and two bacon egg rolls.

And this Pratt, maybe he was just being nose-y, maybe he just felt bad about his friend Alexander being comatosed, but when Baz got to his business idea for making toys, Pratt offered to support it and put his connections at Baz's disposal. In exchange he suggested forty percent of the new company. Baz was flabbergasted. Here was the help that Baz was seeking, and it had arrived out the blue at exactly the right time. It felt like a good flow of events, as Carol would say. This man had no interest in helping him like that. So Baz accepted there and then. The fella clearly wanted to do it for whatever personal reasons.

With the help of Pratt's contacts, Baz transferred his business plan from his mind's-eye into something that others could share. Pratt put Baz in touch with manufacturers in China, design agencies in Edinburgh and buyers at the fancy department stores. A year later, in time for Christmas, Baz's toy company launched. Its name was Finder Keepers. Its logo was a fish with a diamond in its mouth.

As the launch approached, Baz dug up the contacts of each journalist who had ever pestered him, and sent them his press release. He took full advantage of his weird history and posed

for photocalls holding fake diamonds, plastic fish, and copies of his new products. The gimmicks worked. He made page three in the Herald ('Scotland's luckiest man makes his latest Splash'), and found coverage across all the national papers.

The slogan for Finders Keepers ran: 'What's In The Water?' The toys that it produced instigated adventures. As any good adventurer will tell you, adventures are stories. The stories that were created by playing with the Finders Keepers toys began to spread, and in a very little time, stories of Finders Keepers adventures were buzzing between lips of children all over Edinburgh, then Scotland, and soon Britain. The toys sold out their production runs faster and faster, and pretty soon Baz found himself with a staff of fifteen and full-time premises. He subcontracted his window round, and then gave it up all together.

Business acumen came naturally to Baz. His business thrived. He had keen grasp of what people needed, and how to make them able to want what was good for them. To generate press for each of the new ventures that he launched, Baz would play off the story of finding his own great treasure.

On days when the production processes stalled, or shipping went wrong, or a lawsuit looked pending, Baz wished for his squidgee and the shop windows of Leith. But most days he was just as happy as he'd been washing windows. He was creating jobs, but most important to him, the things he was making helped to cultivate healthy imaginations in the youth. He had plans to branch out, to adventure kits for adults, to restaurants, to entertainment at large. But Baz kept firm reigns on the present. The present was a confusing enough place to be without trying to live in the future or the past too.

## Epilogue

The sea was breathless and doldrum still. A puny swell flopped onto the beach, then fizzled into its own shadow. The tourists lay stuck to the sands, squashed by the midday heat. The horizons on every axis wobbled. Flesh, fruit juice, and kulfi effervesced into the sticky air. Large clouds lay out to sea, too far to hope that they might bring relief from the humidity. In his hands he cradled a marimba. He played the instrument gently as he walked. Its soft melodies spread out from him. He picked his way around a naked couple, who lay in an embrace on the sand, their eyes closed and their mouths slightly agape. Pieces of shells adorned their ankles, gems their necks, feathers were woven into their hair. They shifted slightly as he passed. He called out, "Fridge magnets. Spiritual fridge magnets. Portable philosophies, whole world prophecies. Postcards from enlightenment, truisms that stay true. Flowers for your spirit, colours for your kitchen. Gifts for your friends. Fridge magnets. Get a spiritual fridge magnet. Pay as you feel."

He wore a wide-brimmed fedora, a loin cloth, sandals, and sunglasses. A sandwich board strung over his shoulders displayed his merchandise down his front and back. His wares clung to his board like small sea creatures.

He turned from the beach, where the tourists seemed too drowsy for trinket shopping, and walked towards the shorefront. He was glad to find that the incense vendor who sometimes squabbled for the pitch was not at his spot on the main drag. He

removed his sandwich board and separated the halves via velcro straps. He propped up the boards to face the street, and squatted down on his haunches in the shade. He took up the soft melody on his marimba again.

From behind his sunglasses, he squinted as tourists continued to parade up and down the main drag of the town's beachfront. The people formed a river. It was a river like any other. This river was capitalist fed and sun driven. It would dry out when the rains came, and the birds left, then the tourists would disappear too, the businesses would shutter. Then he would retreat. Take what he had earned from the season and move North, towards the Himalayas. The place that he needed would find him. He would meditate, work in service or hermitage and return South to Goa for the next summer season, as surely as the migrating birds and holiday makers. Alex breathed, continuing to play his melody on the Marimba, and called "Fridge magnets. Spiritual fridge magnets. Portable philosophies..." towards the people who walked in the street.

Hours passed. The river passed. Alex's thoughts bent to the people, skirted around their thoughts, and came back to his own. His hands played through the marimba, sounding softly out into space. His voice called, on automatic register, hawking the slogans of his wares. Internally, he attended to his breath, brought a calmness throughout his body. Sometimes he'd paint and varnish magnets whilst sat with his street shop. But most often he was content just to sit and to watch, and to encourage people when they were close to buying a magnet from him. Salesmanship had not left the salesman. If one person stopped to look, Alex kept them chatting. Queues made queues, and more people would come. Heads would poke over shoulders to

take a look at Alex passing his magnets into people's hands, describing their genesis, accentuating the personalities of their construction, selling five or six in a few minutes. Then resting for hours.

The sights and smells of Goa embalmed Sophia. She took her yoga teacher training here, shortly after Uni, decades ago now. Like anyone, or anywhere, it had changed a lot since she first knew it. She strolled up the front street of the town's beach, leaning on her lover, browsing the wares that lined the road, spread under umbrellas and across blankets. Sliced fruits on ice, trays of puri, sketch artists, street writers. She stopped and bent to look at a collection of fridge magnets. Each was hand-formed in a wonderful style, and brightly painted. She scanned the range:

*Vanity can't  
make Charity.*

*A thought without a deed  
Is not a thought at all*

*Be Not Unkind To Strangers  
Lest They Be Angels in Disguise*

*There exists no preferable  
Only most comfortable.*

*Love lays*

*Beyond comfort.*

*Too much thinking*

*Is like too much drinking,*

*It'll sink you*

*There is no dip in serendipity.*

*We are now, not then.*

Something about the style comforted Sophia. “Each handmade from local clay. Baked in the sun.” The vendor was telling her in an English accent from behind a long sun-bleached beard. “No machines. Hand-rolled, scalpel and paint. Simple construction, pure result. No moulds, no two the same. The magnet finds its owner. Not the other way around.” Sophia plucked her favourite from the board. The magnet left the metal with a clack. The vendor brought his palms together at his heart and cackled the mysterious laugh of a devotee. He told her it was his best-seller. She paid the equivalent of a week’s worth of meals into his alms bowl, and moved on.

Alex watched Sophia walk away, squeezing a partner to her side. The tingles of God rushed from the base of his spine to his head and spread through his body. He felt the presence of the mystical tapestry that knits coincidence to connections, and

weaves lives through each other. That energetical field, beyond logic, inside emotions, that old societies termed fate, or weirdness.

Alex searched his emotions. Did he feel forlorn? No. Smug? No. Sophia looked well, after all these years. She looked old. Both of them were old now, he supposed. He had kept no contact with anyone after he'd been released. Sometimes he wondered about that world, decades ago. It was a fortunate sign that Sophia had appeared again. A synchronicity. A test. A blessing. He felt encouraged on his path. And then the curtain of reality fell back into place. The humdrum thrummed back into its regular rhythm, and Alex's vision of life was described by normality yet again.

Sophia felt her lover nestled alongside her, saw the electric light bulbs in many colours turn on and the restaurants put on their lights for the night arriving. The heat of the streets rose up towards the dusk. She looked at the fridge magnet that now rested in her palm. A red fish, delicately outlined in gold paint with a diamond in its mouth. Words swam around the fish, forming a river. The magnet read 'Expectations are the Thieves of Joy.'

# END

"He that was ever fair, and never proud  
Had tongue at will and yet was never loud,  
Never lacked gold and yet never went gay,  
Fled from his wish and yet said "Now I may,"  
He being angered, his revenge being nigh,  
Bade his wrong stay and his displeasure fly.  
He that could think and never disclose his mind,  
See suitors following and not look behind.  
He was a right if ever such right were"

"and he did what?"

"suffered fools"

- Othello.