THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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Martello Street

Naomi Pearce

Bone is built of two basic components: flexible fibres of collagen and brittle chains of calcium-rich mineral hydroxyapatite. These relatively simple ingredients, the springy and the salty, are woven together into a complex web of interlocking layers. The result: an engineering feat of tensile, compressive and elastic strength.

1

21 December 1975

The Night

The girl has never been on the bus so late. The top deck smells tired: wet hair, stale tobacco and damp clothes. She grips the rail with both hands, and stares straight ahead. The sharp points of her knuckles shimmer in the overhead lights as her arms begin to shake. *No!* She should be in his arms, tucked up, not like this, can't be. They'll have more time together. What about being an air hostess? What about growing up?

Smoothing the short pile of the moquette, she hums a tune she can't remember; she hears it knocking between her ears, reverberating around her skull. She stares at the blood soaking into the seat, the fabric a woven morse code of orange blocks and blue dashes. The girl thinks about all the other stains she's made. The dull, penny-sized blob on the corner of her mum's apron from where she pressed it to her stubbed toe, aged three. Or at school last week, running to the science block — how she'd fallen and made a mess on the fourth step. Her fingers stick together as the blood coagulates. A much bigger stain on this seat — another place she'll never leave.

Everything else, all gone. She doesn't know what the fuss is about, all those stories of terrible pain. Mustn't look down. Wants everything out. Had he helped her? She smiles at two new passengers, but no one pays attention, no one sees. Oh, she has done it this time! The other girls won't believe it. Sally will be

shocked. Needs to rest, needs to lie down. The glare of the lights. She closes her eyes.

Hairspray and sunshine, hands gripping a trolley, now — walking down the aisle, the sky all around cruising at 40,000 ft. Truly the clearest, light sharper than glass. Her lips tremble. She knows God doesn't exist, but suddenly this doesn't seem funny anymore. She looks down at her trolley, where there are stacks and stacks of metal trays with tiny spoons and forks; smooth recesses filled with domes of wobbling mousse and rectangular cracker packets. The cabin rocks. Some light turbulence. *Nothing to be frightened of Sir, just a pocket of hot air.*

A horn sounds through the clouds; angry toots respond in quick succession. Her eyes flicker, and the smell of hairspray disappears. Those lights, too bright, she squints, *someone turn off those lights!* She really has done it this time. She hears her mum's voice chiding her, suspicious and disappointed, and bats it away with a sticky hand. Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out. *Terribly sorry.* Sorry for whoever is cleaning tonight. They'll probably have to replace the whole thing.

Such an adventure, though! Too adventurous this time? Cold, despite his wool coat. It wasn't his fault. Dress ruined; polyester hanging heavy on her thighs, on stockinged legs she doesn't recognise. At least the pain has stopped, what a relief! She feels like a deflated balloon. An itch now, like she's forgotten something important. What was he doing? He was taking care of it. Who was taking care of her?

She rocks forward and bumps her head on the chrome rail as the bus shunts along. Where is she now? Saturday night, backed up congestion. Numb. If she can only get home. A sharp swing right. Playing in these streets since she was

little, she knows every curve, every bump. She lifts her head, only realising its weight as she does so. She rubs condensation from the window, the darkness revealing only the reflection of a girl with matted hair.

Bethnal Green Road. "My stop," she murmurs, reaching for the rail with a lumpish hand and grasping nothing. She hasn't been quick enough. It's caught up to her. She tries again. A slap of cold linoleum on her right cheek. If she can just rest here for a few minutes. She shuts her eyes. *Why is the pillow so gritty and hard?* She opens them again, but she's tired. The seats are the wrong way round, upside down. This must be what it's like for those astronauts. A woman's face comes into view. *Nosy bitch.* She doesn't look right. She looks scared, her lips moving but no sound coming out. Terror flashes through her. Then it disappears as quickly as it came, and she doesn't care about the seat or her dress patterns. What pattern was it? Oh, who knows. Her limbs are numb, plucked like petals from a daisy. The trouble has finally caught up with her. As the last breath leaves her body, she's cruising at 40,000 ft. The world of dresses and mums and bus seats with bloody puddles doesn't matter up here.

10 June 2017

41 years, 5 months, and 21 days after The Night

SOILBEND: Black cast iron soil pipe bend, left of main entrance.

LINTEL: First soldier course brick lintel, ground floor facing London Fields.

STEEL: Steel truss, recently painted white, apex of roof, near railway line.

FIBREOPTIC: Fibre optic broadband cable entering termination box corridor reception area, ground floor.

TIMBER: New joists in loft conversion, flat 4, second floor, CLS treated, ext. grade.

LINTEL
nothing like a good brick

SOILBEND
wetting

LINTEL
cleans us right out

FIBREOPTIC
petrichor is the earthy scent produced when rain falls on dry soil

STEEL
we were saying secret of the mystery is in the picture

LINTEL
must we go over it again trying to warm our grouting

FIBREOPTIC
aperture ambient light automatic exposure

STEEL
what we mean is it was found

SOILBEND
yes yes

FIBREOPTIC
recent images wifi code head mole sunset mirror augmented reality

SOILBEND
dont start with that new fangled stuff

LINTEL
hidden in box top of filing cabinet

STEEL
no not those photographs

SOILBEND
oh

STEEL
the other one

FIBREOPTIC
seventy inspirational quotes for photographers

STEEL
no no protest photograph

SOILBEND
oh yes

LINTEL
well what about it

STEEL
did we know

LINTEL
know what ever so bohemian werent they

FIBREOPTIC
superfast workers speed sleep deprivation truly unlimited unlikeable reboot infinity feeling frisky

SOILBEND
nothing like these two neither

STEEL
did we expect it

LINTEL
not our responsibility

STEEL
stockings of superior style

FIBREOPTIC
flexi # temp # pret

SOILBEND
no sense of purpose

STEEL
no steam no rhythmic machines

SOILBEND
weak work ethic soft gloppy no pressure in the system

STEEL
just young

LINTEL
punks and hippies

FIBREOPTIC
opinion how the police oliberated british youth cultures

STEEL
shudder judder we didnt like that rusting moisture back to this photograph

SOILBEND
well that cocky one hid it

FIBREOPTIC
unknown command

LINTEL
must we go over this again and again and again

SOILBEND
not our choice naturally

LINTEL
no one comes off well

STEEL
complicit

LINTEL
accessories witnessed unfortunate shhh

SOILBEND
the one from the cottage intervened

FIBREOPTIC
404 bad gateway

SOILBEND
oh yes poor duckie

STEEL
too late though wasn't it

LINTEL
why we going over this again

SOILBEND
nerves can't stand it

TIMBER
couldn't see the wood through the

(….BBC News. Well, we'll hear reports from Venezuela, Ireland, Egypt and India in Foreign Correspondence *in half an hour— now, with a discussion about where British politics goes from here,* The Week in Westminster*, presented by Steve Richards….)*

FIBREOPTIC
output level volume max

SOILBEND
feeling wobbly sets us right on edge

(Hello, and welcome to a special live edition of The Week in Westminster *in the aftermath of a historic election…)*

STEEL
quiet

(You hearing this Jen?)

LINTEL
bored to death

SOILBEND
dry rot rising damp

FIBREOPTIC
google why is my hair falling out

TIMBER
flexible plastic plumbing bossed a connection existing soil
stack bath tucked under the eave right tidy little bit bodged

SOILBEND
not felt right since they moved in

TIMBER
all the gear no idea

(…orthodoxies on their head)

LINTEL
oh yes cross ties tugging tight

3

They'd disagreed on colours and fabrics, and bought cheap blinds as a temporary solution. Jenny watches the thin plastic drag along the sill in the breeze. She kneads both palms into the hollows of her eye sockets and recalls last weekend's trip to Croydon Ikea: the lack of meatballs, the bank holiday traffic, the way the other couples ignored each other, manoeuvring their trolleys along the winding walkway like a factory conveyor belt. They'd got back to Hackney and found the blinds fitted badly because, *surprise surprise*, generic twenty-first century products won't fit a Victorian warehouse loft conversion. At night, an orange strip of streetlamp had fallen across the duvet and directly over her face. Now, during the day, a sharp white line slices through the room like a laser alarm. The industrial windows of the mezzanine bedroom stretch along a full length of wall, their rectangular panes set within large steel frames that open outwards from a hinged central point. When James first took her to visit the building, a mess of plasterboard and rubble sacks lining the corridors, she'd felt unnerved by the window's scale, their welcoming tilt offering too easy an oblivion.

Jenny pulls the covers over her head. There'd been a storm last night — a barrage of thunder and lightning just before sunrise; forty minutes of strained expulsions. Never easily disturbed, James had maintained slow and steady breathing. She'd watched his face, gerbil-like and puffy, nuzzle his pillow contentedly.

Usually it's quiet at night; in the streets around the park, she hears the occasional beats from a passing car, muscular pumping like a heart in a metal ribcage. The paths crisscrossing London Fields are lit intermittently by dim electric streetlamps, swarmed by pulsing clouds of insects, the space vanishing into green darkness between each halo of light. In the dark as she lies awake next to James, she pictures the deep basin of the lido on the far side of the park, as flat as glass. She feels the day's warmth seeping slowly from the water into the cold earth.

This morning, she can smell something being toasted, can hear the sound of news radio coming from James' phone. He can potter for hours like this, drinking tea and mooching around the packed up boxes that contained their lives. Three weeks had passed and still they remained, scattered throughout the living room. He was refilling the kettle. Noises travelled easily in the flat; the mezzanine's bedroom and ensuite were part of the new development, and clearly made of cardboard. James didn't like it when she said that. The structure clung to the ceiling, grafted like a wasp's nest, accessed by a spiral staircase in the corner of the flat's living-room-slash-kitchen.

Jenny hitches herself up onto her elbows, and leans back against the wall as hair falls around her face. She pulls at the limp strands and reaches for the plastic snaggle of a tortoiseshell clip. The clip's lower teeth, snapped short under the wheel of her office chair last Christmas, claw ineffectively at the base of her neck. Ten days ago she pulled a soapy tongue of clotted hair from the plughole, and hasn't washed her hair since. A grown woman shouldn't smell sour. James always smelt clean. Every night he got back from work late, the room filling with the synthetic menthol scent of the gym's complimentary shower gel. The same

routine, the same look of concern; the same big, imploring eyes. She stares at the end of the bed, and pictures the outline of his body unbuttoning his shirt. He always threw it near the laundry basket before coming to sit on the bed, and gingerly pat her thighs. He really had no idea. She'd been drawn to his avuncular way, but now he made her insides curdle. Like a pair of scales, they seemed never to find balance: as his fortunes improved, hers depleted.

Her hands work feverishly, digging a well in the duvet bunched at her crotch. She calms them in her lap, distracting them with her phone. Two new messages to add to the fifty unread.

Mum: *According to the paper early-bird exercisers experience a 50% boost to their feelings of wellbeing. Interesting hey…*

She opens up the notes app and types into 'Body Scan.doc': Fizzy armpits. Toxic paint. Hair loss. Despair. This listing of ailments was a habit she'd picked up from her mum — she liked to "cross the t's and dot the i's." From smear tests to dentist's appointments, nothing gave her mother more satisfaction than the maintenance of Jenny's body.

The second message is from Simon, her boss: *Manuelo has Norovirus. Yes, in summer! Poor chap, buT annoying also.will be difficult wk. Need you earl y on Mon, 8am?*

Poor Manuelo. Her long-suffering work mate, his mullet curling over the collar of his creased shiny suits. She had got the job through a temp agency. The recruiter had said: "No one's stuck this one for more than a summer — the guy is a bit of a twat." A traditional executive's secretary was needed for Polish to Perfection. IT skills a must, experience in commercial cleaning sector non-essential. Twelve years later, and she was still there. She'd wanted to be a writer,

but the praise she'd got from her tutors hadn't translated in the real world. Long-listed for competitions a few times, and then not listed at all. Her confidence had faltered. Maybe you needed to know people. At work, she feels useful. She has fun in a way, Manuelo arriving at the office each morning and calling to her 'chica, tea?', the two of them laughing together about Simon: the way he practiced his putt in the office, his rages, his love of faxing. Time passed ordering paper towels, filing invoices, colour coding the staff rota spreadsheet. It was easy, and she didn't have to think. And the main thing was money. Regular money every month, guaranteed.

Without the convenience of university, her relationship with James had collapsed quickly the first time round. At his parents' house the Christmas after graduation, she had failed in her performance of 'the girlfriend.' He had reprimanded her gently: she needed to smile, to act more grateful to his parents. She withdrew. Staring blankly at his mother over the table, she'd resolved to dump him. She remembered James sitting crying on the bed, begging her not to leave and ruin Christmas. So she'd stayed, and they'd driven back to London in silence, breaking up soon after that.

James had been shocked to discover she was still working at Polish for Perfection when they'd bumped into each other at Canada Water six years later.

"You're still in London." he'd exclaimed, looking horrified. "Funny how you don't bump into people."

"This is my work route," she said.

"Ah, you're in the city too?" he replied.

She had explained herself awkwardly; he was embarrassed on her behalf, but hid it kindly. They stood crushed together on the tube, him talking loudly and unselfconsciously like he always did, joking that his PR job was "damage limitation." He punched her number into his smartphone eagerly before she got off the train. He drifted back into her life quickly after that.

Her horoscope says: *Take note of who and what makes you feel most at home in your skin. This time is formative.* She cycles through Twitter and then Instagram a few times. She lies back down and places the phone on her chest. She can smell her armpits. She doesn't care about the day. She listens to the American drawl of a podcast host telling the story of a 13-year-old girl declared brain dead after complications following a routine tonsillectomy. For two years she had been kept alive by a ventilator and her mother's will. Jenny imagines the weight of the girl's body on the bed, her mother's hand lightly stroking her forearm. They should probably let the girl die: she wouldn't be feeling at home in her skin anymore.

4

James had spent the morning looking at Yelp reviews and despairing at the state of party politics. In the end, he'd turned the radio off to focus on finding the best coffee available in the vicinity. An hour had passed sitting at the kitchen table cross-checking Tripadvisor, crumbs itching his forearms. He doesn't take these sites too seriously, of course — he laughs, mostly, at the trolling comments — but Jenny can't go anywhere without obsessively checking star ratings. He has observed this impulse intensifying since their engagement, and he contemplates the lack of spontaneity in his life.

He stands in his dressing gown by the open window. He starts every day with builder's tea, milky, in the same mug. It's 11am on a Saturday in June, and London Fields is starting to fill with people. The tarmac footpath lacing its way around the perimeter of the green is damp; it must have rained during the night. Finally, an end to the drought. He fondles the hairy ridge of his left pectoral muscle and listens to the soothing squelch of joggers, the soles of their trainers compressing and decompressing with each forward thrust. He likes this view: *10 Martello Street, you're alright!* Setting the mug down on the kitchen counter, he inhales strongly through his nose. "Once more unto the breach," he says aloud.

How had they accumulated so much stuff? Thirty or so boxes teetered in the centre of the room near the kitchen island; unassembled flat pack furniture leant here and there, a large L-shaped sofa wrapped in plastic. Their drooping potted plants weren't doing so well — he wasn't green fingered. Each box had a

white sticky label, the typed words indicating contents and location. All the necessary details. James had thought a marker pen sufficient, but Jenny had insisted printed labels were more legible. She'd devised a system, Gantt charts and the like. He'd played along, discussed colour coding, bought the appropriate stationery. He'd tried his best, but she lost interest; the system had fallen apart, only serving to confuse him more.

"Tote bag, tote bag," he says to himself, shifting the cardboard boxes from side to side and reading their labels: "'Bedroom 1: furnishings,' no, 'Bathroom 2: toiletries,' no, 'Outdoor: Bibshorts, Climbing Ropes etc.' No…'Utility Room' — ah, yes, here they are: 'Totes'!" The upstairs toilet flushes, its contents moving through the pipes running through the building, passing through their neighbour Oliver's place right about now, giving that little dachshund a fright. Early on a weekday morning, James usually collided with them both on the stairs as they headed out for their morning constitutional, little Johannes sitting diligently at Oliver's feet and Oliver immaculate as always, gesturing politely for James to pass. Still not one-hundred-percent on what he does — an architect or a graphic designer? Something aesthetic, for sure. James noticed he had co-ordinated his shoes with his belt, dog lead, watch strap, and shopping bags.

At least the people moving into Hackney were professionals with interesting jobs. Reassuring! He had been nervous. Thank God for his parents as ever: his Dad's steady hand with the contracts, his mum lending an ear when he needed to vent. Jenny had been useless throughout the whole process. Yes he'd been fortunate — he still *is* fortunate! He'd lived in London all his life, and although they were close, Hackney and Highbury were like estranged siblings: connected by blood and nothing else. The guys at work had sealed the deal. "The

city is moving East," they told him. Exciting times. He was sad to say goodbye to his bolthole in Lambeth, but the fly-tipping at the end of the road had become worse, and there were only so many sodden mattresses one could take. James cracks his knuckles. He has never liked to dwell. When he was younger, he'd felt so positive and optimistic. He'd felt sure he could make a difference — he just didn't know in which field. Now he felt a bit tired, really. Apparently, he wasn't alone: the company he worked for had commissioned a lot of research, a lot of focus groups and questionnaires. They were calling it an apathy epidemic. He straps his Fitbit on.

"James?" Jenny calls from upstairs.

"Yes, love?"

Silence.

Her habit of shouting between rooms annoys him.

"Do you need something?"

Silence.

He clenches his jaw. "I'm off to get coffee."

"Where are you going?"

She's in the bedroom now, her voice muffled. James imagines her face covered by a large pillow.

"To get coffee."

"Yes I heard. Where?"

"I thought I might try that Bakehouse place round the corner, looks good online."

"Can you get bread? Nothing fancy, no spelt or walnut."

The Fitbit on his wrist beeps, his heart rate rising. Filling a ceramic tumbler, he drinks, making loud gulping sounds. James has never been depressed. Jenny was a down person, his mother said. He focuses on his father's advice. Stay positive, encourage her, she'll come round eventually. She had been all over the place in the months leading up to the house move. Something had happened with her friend Ally the last time she visited London. She had flown back to California three weeks early; Jenny met up with her only once, as far as he knew. *The way women treated each other!* "With best friends like these, who needs enemies," he'd said to Jenny, and she'd looked at him in what he thought was pity. He had kept his thoughts to himself after that. The Fitbit beeps. It was all well out of his jurisdiction, that was for sure. It beeps again. He clatters up the spiral staircase — definitely his favourite feature. Sure, 'loft living' will take some getting used to; it's hard to find your own space. But change is good. Jenny is belly down on the bed, buried under the covers.

"Good sleep?" he asks, peering at a fragment of cheek.

"Not really," Jenny replies. "The storm…"

"Surprised I didn't wake up."

"You snored the whole way through."

"Oh, sorry, you should have kicked me!"

His eyes flick to the exposed toes of her right foot.

"Well, on a positive note," he began.

"No more drought…"

She's still listening! "Exactly! Good for the crops! The farmers should be able to salvage something, and then the price of flour and bread, and the supermarkets…" he trails off, distracted by the curve of her pale foot. His eyes

trace the ridges of her big toenail. He thinks about taking the toe in his mouth and sucking. She used to like things like that. When they got back together, it had been intense. She hasn't even turned to look at him yet. He's forgotten what she looks like when she comes. He stares at the toe and imagines her pushing her entire foot into his mouth, squeezing each digit inside until he gags and his teeth crack into tiny splinters.

"Er, James?"

She's frowning.

Startled, he looks down. A tuft of black pubic hair and the pink shaft of his erection are poking from the slit in his pyjamas. He grabs his dressing gown around him and fumbles for his wallet in the pocket of his jeans.

"Oh dear," he mumbles, not wanting to meet her eye.
Hopping awkwardly on one leg, he pulls on a pair of paint-splattered joggers and a dusty hoodie. There's a musty smell to his weekend work wear. Clattering through the flat, he feels excited about the day ahead: it's all his.

Outside, James turns and looks proudly back at his new home standing on the corner. Sturdy, permanent, distinguished. The building wore its age well. Rows of windows in regimented lines. Red brick, mottled with a patina of soot. He imagines jovial immigrant workers filing out of its doors, tugging on caps, the women pulling tuffs of cotton from their hair and laughing, arm in arm. They'd all be dead now. The estate agents had been keen to emphasise its industrial heritage, their brochure full of grainy pictures of its time as a stocking factory,

and then — from the 1970s until fairly recently — artists' studios. James likes that his home is a place in which people have made things.

The image of bone as permanent, like a skeleton forever stuck in a cupboard, has created a false impression. Once formed bones change. Osteoblasts secrete fresh specklings and in turn digest old bone. What occurs is an ongoing process of replacement; this bone remodelling is occurring constantly within us. It is happening right now.

5

5 January 1975

11 months and 16 days before The Night

A three-and-a-half-tonne truck reverses into a set of steel gates. Hunched in the driver's seat is a big man in a flat cap, liver spotted hands gripping the steering wheel that is digging into his gut, his boot stomping on the accelerator. Outside a younger lad, visible in his mirror, beckons the truck backwards. Truck meets gate and sends a harsh message, bouncing off the railway arch, off the old factory, and out into the quiet dark of London Fields.

"Almost, almost! Hit it again!" the boy spits, sweating despite the cold.

The van lurches forward, the clutch crunches, rubber skids, it reverses again. The gate holds like a pair of pursed lips. The big man says nothing, mouth hidden by coarse white bristles, tips yellowed from years of pipe smoke. His tongue pokes at the pink rim of his toothless lower jaw in concentration. He has never lived in a house. The van, like the other vehicles in his care, seems part of him. The lad vibrates with the energy of young muscles undertaking their first job. These men live despite themselves.

Since their last visit, British Rail have reinforced the gate with a steel plate. The lad looks down nervously; the elder man fixes his gaze firmly ahead. One more go. The muscle at the corner of his bristled cheek pulses, and breath fogs up the windscreen. The gates sway mockingly, as though being tickled by a breeze. *No use. Have to try something else.*

Meters from the van, sleeping in a room on the ground floor of the old factory, Connie's eyes snap open. The pink tip of her nose pokes out from under heavy blankets. The noise shocks her into reality. Groggy, she strains to locate the source. Head hurts. So many restless nights lately. Another crash. Where's the danger? The makeshift warren of studios stretches and twists behind her. This structure distorts sound, something Connie, having arrived at 10 Martello Street three months prior, is only beginning to understand. But *this* sound. She struggles, shrugging off her covers. It's coming from the street. Chugging. Diesel. An engine running. The clock on the bedside flashes twenty to four. She should investigate. She isn't scared; there are others here, she isn't alone. Just, well — she peers through the dark for a glass of water. She edges towards the window, nudging her face through a slit in the curtains. A flash as the van drives past. Silence. The yard wasn't technically her responsibility. She considers her options. Two figures pass the window their shadows moving across her body. She holds her breath: they walk quickly and with purpose, a dog slinking softly behind them. The glare of a sodium light stretching above her window casts a queasy yolk across the scene. A fist thumps on the door.

"Fuck!"

She grips her chest.

"Connie, you awake?"

Jim. Of course. The banging continues.

"*Shhhh*. Alright, I'm coming!"

She grabs her keys from the table and opens the door. He hovers on the threshold, skinny and eager, now as always, his eyes moving like roving hands.

"Tinkers!"

"What?"

"Gypsies."

"And?"

"Oh give over. I've called the police," Jim says.

"Is that really necessary?"

"You see that bloody truck? Thought the whole wall was going with it."

As he spoke, his voice caught in the flapping folds of his throat.

"Calm down."

She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of being right.

"What they doing now?"

"They've got bolt cutters. Come on, there's a better view from my floor."

She grabs her winter coat from behind the door and stamps her feet into boots stiff with cold. Jim paces the courtyard, two fingers twiddling the thin black hair of his crown. He had a nose for other people's business; he was the first to complain at meetings, but the last to offer anyone help. As caretaker she'd learnt quickly about his habits: how he liked to sweep the corridors and leave small molehills of dust in each corner, or try and trap you in long, meandering conversations speculating on the whereabouts of members of the Red Army Faction. Judging by the monthly cheques Connie processed in the office, a wealthy aunt still paid the rent. Having trained as a printmaker at the Royal College, he was one of the first artists to move into the building three years ago. The other residents seemed to have built up an immunity to him — something she longed to develop quickly. He got under her skin.

They make their way towards the back staircase, passing through the courtyard into the main building and along the ground floor . All is quiet. Jim scampers quickly in front of her. They climb two flights, reaching a small landing with a window and a sink. Three doors lead into clusters of partitioned studios. Connie shimmies along the wall to the edge of the window. Despite the low light, she makes out the shadowy figures of both men through the gaps of the metal gate below. Jim disappears to his studio through the first of the three doors. The top floor of Connie's cottage is joined at the back to his space. Their physical proximity in what is otherwise a sprawling and illogical maze gives her the creeps.

In the street, the big man fumbles with a long handled pair of bolt cutters under his jacket. The lad wrangles with the chain, positioning it, holding it still. Their gloved hands moving awkwardly. *Shitting hell, it's cold.* The dog stands alert, its long face turning sharply between them, ears pinned back, a low growl squeezes from its jaw. The men, so engrossed in their act, do not hear the Black Maria, engine quiet, rolling slowly around the corner. The dog senses danger before they do, turning to look for the source. No sirens, no fanfare. The dog barks. Just once, sharply. The men freeze. "Coppers. Away!" But it's too late — they're on them.

The lad shoots like a rocket. Connie's mouth falls open How the hell? The clang of dropped tools, the muffled wrestling of thick jackets. Shouts and scuffles in the gloom. A twist of bodies and there, caught in the white beam of a police

torch, the boy's long limbs scrambling up the fence. Good on him. Wait. He's not going over. Shit. Higher. From the fence to the wall of the studios, clinging as though his hands secreted glue. *Shit.* Palms on the flat roof of the ground floor now. *Shit.* Heaving himself up, his chest and his arms pumping, she swears he's laughing at his own fight. On. *Shit.* Out of view. *Shit*. He's on her cottage.

Suddenly Jim reappears, a milk bottle of yellow liquid in his hand.

"What did I miss?" he says breathlessly, accompanied by a slosh from the bottle.

"He's on the roof," she sighs.

"Bloody cheek of 'em!"

"Jim, is that a bottle of piss?"

He taps his nose.

"It stinks."

"Well if they will insist on trespassing." His eyes glitter malevolently. In the street below, police radios crackle, interrupted by grunts from the old man. Connie and Jim stand in silence, listening for the sound of his footsteps on the roof.

"Bloody nuisance. This'll teach him," he says, gesturing at the bottle

Connie grimaces. "Maybe it's best you stay out of it."

"I'm not letting you have all the fun!"

Two more police cars arrive, lights flashing. She didn't wish the boy ill, but she wasn't going to harbour any fugitives, either.

"Need to check the second floor back stairwell, I keep finding it…"

"People leave it open, don't they!" he interrupted, proud as punch.

"Exactly, and that's the last thing we need," she says, brushing past him. His face is contorted with glee, illuminated by the rotating blue police lights.

The studios on the second floor are carved up randomly like a badly cut cake. L-shaped, a short dog-leg juts parallel to the railway line, almost level with the second floor, while the longer portion stretches to connect to the section of the building looking out onto London Fields. She's still not quite sure how many artists work on this floor. Officially ten, but people were always coming and going. Tonight, the central corridor is dark; she reaches for the light pull by the door. Nothing. Bulb dead. She listens. The faint sound of music swells from the end of the corridor. Turpentine and incense mingle in the air. A fire waiting to happen — they all ignore her warnings. She walks along slowly, feeling for the next switch. Here the roof is high and pitched, a canopy of steel girders criss-cross above her head. Most of this floor had 'real artists,' or a group of men who'd been to Saint Martin's at least. None of them lived here, of course. They were professionals. Neither did Annabel: her studio was second from the end, and she was the only woman on this floor, her performances derided by the men. Connie knew they were just intimidated; she heard them talking to each other in their studios. As the caretaker, Connie was the only one officially allowed to live on-site, but that was another rule that went ignored. She walked down the central corridor towards the sound of an undulating saxophone, its notes growing louder. A slither of light from under Kieran's door glows red like an ember.

"Not the first time they've come," Jim calls shrilly after her, his slippered feet tapping on the concrete floor.

Last summer, an unknown person had helped a group of travellers patch into the electricity via the second floor bathroom. They did it for a year before the management finally realised.

"Yes, I'm aware of that, Jim."

Kieran's door swings open.

"Evening Connie."

Tobacco and something else. Sugary, feminine, sickly like vanilla. Kieran leans against the doorframe, his shirt unbuttoned. The warmth of a gas heater flushes Connie's face.

"You here about our visitors?"

His hair is long and dark, a deep chestnut brown. It hangs thick in heavy angelic curls. His eyes are the same dark brown; he makes a lot of eye contact.

"I don't think you've got to worry. Apparently he's broken his leg."

"How do you know that?" Connie said, startled

"Idiots," Jim said, his body deflating.

"Save it for another day?" Connie gestures to the bottle of piss.

"He hasn't tried to get in up your stairwell? I just wanted to check…"

"No, I haven't heard a peep." His body blocked the view into his studio.

"Poor sod."

"Different bunch from last time, I reckon.'

"You would know," Jim says.

Jim's eyes meet Kieran's.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jim shrugs and scuttles off quickly, waving his bottle.

Connie looks after him, confused, unsure what has just passed between them.

"Anything else I can help you with, Connie?'"

"Well, if you hear anything, you know where I am."

He nods, but doesn't reply. At the sound of stifled giggles from within the room, he smiles and closes the door quickly. She has never been invited inside his studio. The hook in the spare key box with his name above it remains empty. She had nagged him at first, as it was a fire regulation, but he had feigned forgetfulness and she had given up. Very smooth. She stands in the darkness for a moment hearing nothing. As she walks away into the cold, the low of rumble of his voice resumes.

Connie makes her way back through each floor slowly, through the corridors and out into the courtyard. She yawns, feeling tired still, but too awake now to go back to bed. In the street, the sound of car doors slamming: the police rolling out. The young lad, did they have him? She hopes he's limping away somewhere. Connie always rooted for the underdog. Her nan had brought her up to respect the police, or fear them at least, but really, she didn't think anyone had a right to tell other people how to live. Sometimes she worries that's all she spends *her* time doing. She fishes for the bundle of keys in her pocket.

Stepping inside her cottage, her legs feel heavy. She shuffles towards the window, reaching to adjust the curtains against the streetlight, and is confronted by two dark eyes staring back. She holds her breath. The men's dog sits solemnly on the pavement watching, its eyes neither sad nor angry. Just forgotten. Her heart thumps in her chest. The animal, as though tuned into her frequency,

stands swiftly, pauses a moment and pads off towards the fields. Connie presses her face against the cold glass as the dog recedes into the darkness, the night taking it quickly.

There are some diseases where structural damage to the body's soft tissue re-grows as bone. Tendons, ligaments and muscle heal into a secondary skeleton. As with all things, this accrues over time. It can take forty years for disease to put a stop to suppleness, halt movement. Forty years until total ossification.

6

10 June 2017

41 years, 5 months, and 21 days after The Night

The smell of warm dough and ground coffee beans greets James upon entry. Clouds of hot air rise and condense on the corrugated metal of the cafe's railway arch ceiling. They're playing Human Behaviour by Bjork. A train rumbles slowly overhead, masking the hiss of the milk frother and the chatter of two Australian baristas, neither of whom have drawn breath since he walked in. He'd always loved the smell of bread in supermarkets, until Jenny told him it was sprayed from a can to make people buy more. He had felt violated. He always thinks about this when waiting in line at bakeries: the image of a man in a white coat and blue hair-net moving through the aisles, arms waving an aerosol aloft in a kind of half-baked semaphore distress signal. James chuckles at the image. The woman in front turns and makes a face like she's smelt a fart. He smiles falsely at her.

Jenny was right: he is very tempted by the walnut rugbrod and a rather bloated looking loaf called "The Stockholm." He opts for a wholemeal farmhouse and a small bag of AllPress Kenya Mwendi Wega. *Wow!* Expensive for the basics — but Tesco express didn't need his money, local businesses did.

A crow squawks from a cluster of CCTV cameras overlooking the park. Opposite Martello Street is a post-modern monstrosity, a nineties architectural disaster that almost deterred James from the sale. It's a jigsaw of coloured bricks: red,

grey and black with beige pointing. The top floor is timber clad with a roof of slate tiles slanted in opposing directions like a deconstructed Rubix cube. A metal spine of painted blue balconies clings onto one side of the building, each outdoor space a vertebra hosting practically identical parts: Ikea lanterns, deck chairs, a collapsible table. It transpired that the building was council housing. Fortunately their flat overlooked the park.

James is glad the conversion of Martello Street's fifteen flats has more depth. More patina. Not to say there weren't things that needed tweaking. Making the flat their own was all part of the process. His parents had concerns, as historically James hadn't displayed much of an aptitude for DIY. These things are different now, he'd explained to his mother — there were tutorials for literally everything on Youtube, it was easy! He was itching to take on some more practical challenges. He had a lot of ideas. There was the new shelving unit he had planned: the wood had been delivered, although he still hadn't quite figured out which way round to hold the biscuit jointer. Still, plenty of time! Exposing the brick wall. How hard could that be? Top of today's list! His purposeful footsteps echo in the communal stairwell.

The digital display on the cooker flashes 12:30. He navigates the assault course of boxes, swinging his tote bag bounty up onto the kitchen islands granite surface with a thump. No signs of life from upstairs. Unscrewing the stiff espresso maker, he spies his grey toolbox behind the box labelled Office: Council Tax and Utility Bills 2012/13 Misc paperwork. Coffee can wait for now.

Fifteen minutes of rummaging later, James taps the chisel handle to his pursed lips. Which of the four walls to tackle? They all look a bit big now he is

standing in front of them. It was just a feature, didn't want it to be too overbearing, just a nod to factory chic. Heritage. The one without windows or a light switch was probably the least fiddly. Hammering the chisel into the plaster, he begins to chip away at the layers. He feels the tension in his shoulders and neck release. Ah, the simple relaxation of noble manual labour. The brick underneath is soft and chalky; he rubs his hands over the surface, and the dust irritates his throat. He sneezes. *Boring through the material of time, yes!* Back to another reality, leaving his mark. The dust was coating the oiled brown floorboards like icing sugar sieved across a vegan tray bake. He should definitely get plastic sheeting. The floorboards were an original feature, and had only just been treated with an expensive eco varnish called "boner floor." Hilarious. Jenny hadn't laughed. Pawing handprints on the cardboard flaps of boxes until eventually finding the bundle of decorators polythene in a box marked Kitchen Implements, he wonders what the point of the labelling system is. Kneeling at the foot of the wall, he unfolds the flimsy sheeting and tapes it along the skirting. Roughly swiping away the settled powder, boards shift under the pressure of his hand. Strange. Tentatively he prods them again, fingering their splintered edges. They look out of place. Loose. He puts his face to the floor, trying to peer into the gap. He sniffs, a musty smell. He read an article once about a builder finding Nazi gold while renovating a bungalow. Imagine! He'd read another article about "rat kings," and recoils at the image of squirming rodents, bound together by their entwined tails. *Man up.* He jams the tip of the chisel into the gap and prises, and the board lifts easily.

James stares at the bundle. It's wrapped in what look like tea towels and tucked between the joists. It's small, about the size of a loaf of sourdough. A layer of dust, hair, and mouse droppings has settled on its surface. He looks from the staircase to the bundle and back again. There was no sound from upstairs, maybe she'd gone back to sleep. Should he get Jenny? No, he needs to find out what he's dealing with first.

The tea towels are brightly patterned, floral but ragged. What must have been bright orange and red was now a muted yellow, stiff with age, pocked with scorches and stains from old food. He reaches down into the cavity, working at a loose edge with his finger and thumb. The rigid fabric resists. Using both hands now he braces himself and unpeels it with a protracted dull crack. Underneath is another layer of towelling, softer, white terrycloth with dark, crimson stains each the size of a peony in bloom.

7

6 January 1975

11 months and 15 days before The Night

The next morning, Connie surveys the scene. Skid marks in the road point giant arrows at the gate. Frozen droplets of condensation collect in the steel links of the mangled chain. She crosses her arms and chews the inside of her mouth. She imagines the judder of the gearstick and the vibration of the pedal. No blood, so maybe he made it? She admires his gall. The van's backside has impressed itself into the gate's surface. She likes how it looks; she may make a rubbing, the way people do with trees. By cataloging the collision, she would make something of it. Right now, though, she has work to do.

The front door to the studios is one step up from the pavement. It should be double locked at all times, but no one ever remembers. Strutting past the cork board, she raps her knuckles along the dated display of yellowing gig posters. She drops the fist of keys into the pocket of her baggy overalls. The thick twill fabric of this uniform often doubled as a tea towel, or a rag, handprints in evidence across her thighs. It made winter in the studio's icy concrete climate bearable. She hadn't been able to get back to sleep after her encounter with the dog. Over a plate of fried eggs at Pellicci's early that morning, jostled between cabbies and barrow boys, she'd added "Travellers + Electricity?" to the growing list of mysteries in her notebook, underneath: "Who is Thurston Borkis?" She suspected Thurston Borkis was a pseudonym. The supposed author of a

photocopied circular sporadically posted under studio doors. Unlike genuine attempts to recover lost items, something which occurred with irritating frequency, these notices sought the useless and broken. Someone's idea of a joke. An artwork? She'd laughed at yesterday's mock earnest request for the return of three used tea bags.

Connie picks up the bundle of post from the floor, as the door to the courtyard swings open and a small man holding a rusty hand saw clatters through.

"Anything for me?" he asks, bobbing on the spot.

"Nice beret,' she says. "Hang on, let me check — what's your name again?"

He looks offended.

"Er, Roger. Roger Klassnok."

Jutting her hip to balance, she flicks clumsily through the stack in the nook of her arm. There were too many names to remember.

"Kla, double s for sugar, nok, n-o-k. Spend my whole life saying that."

She hands over a thick padded envelope with international stamps.

"They've spelt your name wrong."

He drops the saw clattering to the floor, bending down and ripping the envelope open with both hands, beret flopping from his head. She stoops to catch it. A furrow of scalp visible down the centre of his skull from which two black curtains hang heavy, poked behind jutting ears.

"A—ha!" he cries, springing up with one arm aloft, fist clenched. "Twelve yellow spools of cotton."

"Is that good?" she asks.

"It is!"

He's like a puppy.

"They're from my Polish contact, Jaroslaw, to add to my yellow object sculpture. I'm recreating it for the Open Studios."

"Why yellow?" she asks.

"Well, why not?" he smiles, baring both sets of teeth.

"Can't argue with that!" she laughs.

He fumbles to retrieve the saw, nods and turns towards the stairs.

"Remember," he says, "art is fine, food is good. Cheerio!"

Connie sorts the remainder of the post into the kennel of letterboxes. The same people always get post; she isn't one of them. Martello Street's main entrance opens out onto a small courtyard, daylight obscured by a metal walkway spanning overhead. It takes Connie ten steps to cross to her quarters, a squat, self-contained unit with a small kitchen, a bedroom on the ground floor and a work room upstairs. It was the place where the old factory foreman would have lived, though she referred to it as the cottage. Once inside, her poky rooms appear subdued; she needs to remember to open the curtains.

When she'd first moved in, the downstairs rooms were painted bright red, floor to ceiling. The colour had made her feel as though she were living inside an organ. The skirting boards were purple, and upstairs all sorts of patterned wallpapers — flowers and frills in delicate pink, orange and yellow — covered the rooms. She'd kept slivers of each paint layer and wallpaper sample in a small metal pin box like pressed flowers. Sanding had taken days and filled her mouth with metallic tasting dust. It was a relief to paint it white.

Connie fills the kettle and places it on the gas hob. Waiting for it to boil, she flops down into the single mattress, its springs squealing under her weight. The

cat-like eyes of Diana Ross gaze down at her from a tatty poster. She pulls her blankets up over her body and dangles her booted feet off the end of the bed. A macramé shawl with dip-dyed fuscia tassels stretches along the wall to conceal a forked crack in the plaster, and a collection of photographs are tacked around the shawl: one showing Connie as a child being pushed on the swings back in Crawley; one of Nan and Pop wedged into a beige sofa, red eyes like shocked rabbits caught in the flash. Things that are supposed to make you feel at home. Amongst these old family photos are the first pictures she had taken on her Leica, one showing the view from Primrose Hill at sunrise, and the other a dead bumblebee curled on a dusty windowsill. She'd was proud of that one — she'd really managed to find the light. She strokes the black and white silk scarf draped over the bedside lamp. It felt a long time since Camden. No prog band boyfriend either anymore, thank God. The old Dairy at Prince of Wales Crescent was another era, but it was the beginning of this life: living in old warehouses and factories, and artists' studios. She'd never lived anywhere as cold as the Dairy before. It was a big, clanking, metallic space. A place for chilled liquids, milking machines and chemicals, not human bodies. And certainly not warmth. She met Georgie at a party at a squat on Harmood street. He was a live-in caretaker at the Dairy — he described it to her as an old factory where artists and musicians lived. Lying on a purple shag pile carpet, black bombers melting under their tongues, the two of them had got acquainted; Connie tracing swirls of smoke with an outstretched finger, Georgie talking about his prog rock band Silverhead. She'd moved in with him a couple of weeks later. She'd been glad when Silverhead went on tour, and he asked her to take over his caretaker job. The last she heard they were the house band at a bierkeller in Dortmund.

One of the pictures tacked up on her wall is Georgie's — he took it the day the artists moved, before she was there. It was a picture of the loading bay taken from the first floor window. Council employees had made two mountains of furniture from house clearances: thin mattresses with coiled springs, broken cots, scraps of underlay, bed sheets, whole wardrobes upended. Lives knotted together in precarious formations. Living and working in buildings that were condemned, marked for demolition or refurbishment created a strange contract between occupant and host. Connie had come to realise how intimately involved she was in the entropy of her own habitat, constantly wrestling with nature, with decay, facing the facts of impermanence.

Having finished her tea, Connie is back up and out of her cottage. She finds these weekly rounds a reassuring habit. She beat the building's bounds like a medieval villager, working clockwise, moving up and down staircases, undulating through the floors like a wave. For many of the residents, all paths led to their studio and back, the rest remaining a mystery. Buildings only possess so many routes; there are the paths getting you in and out quickest, and the paths taken when you don't want to see anyone. Connie walks them all, noting things down in her pad, taking pleasure in noticing the smallest details — yellowing fag butts accumulating in the courtyard drain, or the persistence of a piece of balled up Sainsbury's till roll on the fourth step of the front staircase.

She climbs the stairs to the first floor, passing unskimmed plasterboard walls scrawled with pencil sums. The studios on each floor had been built in haste by two handy but inexperienced sculptors. The resulting partition walls intervened with the building's established electrics, messing with the logic of

their corresponding switches. Artists asked their neighbouring residents to turn on and off their lights; elsewhere patches of floor were illuminated indefinitely, switches never to be found. The rough renovation of the factory had created dead ends and aborted corridors. There were so many ways in which the building didn't make sense anymore.

First floor: clear. Ian, painter, coffee breath. Next to him Bill, Australian, recently returned from North America where, as explained to her at length in the pub last week, he'd reached a dead end artistically and emotionally. Jill, one along, does conceptual work — a stocky, self-described "environmentalist," her last sculpture used dry ice and light refracted through glass cubes of water. These atmospheric interruptions usually seeped into the corridor. Today, it smelt of lemon zest and leather.

She climbs the stairs another flight. Second floor: Clear but for one swollen bin bag outside Studio 15. Bert. She grabs it with both hands. Sometimes it was just easier to do things yourself. She imagines the spaces above, seeing through joists, pulling nails from their floorboards to expose huddles of men around canvasses. *Was painting dead?* they asked, thumbs tucked in the pockets of maroon corduroy trousers. *Who is art for?* they mused, hunched over stools. *Is God Dead?* Holding the bag away from her body, she sniggers to herself as she heads downstairs to the bins.

10 Martello Street is more like a city than a building. In this land of invisible borders there are districts and streets, quarters and turf, and each has its own atmosphere. Connie deposits the bag in the courtyard bins, and heads down to the basement to complete her walk round.

The basement, stemming from the courtyard, is her least favourite place. A dark, damp dog-leg, accessible from a set of rugged concrete steps that descend at uneven heights into a single narrow passageway. Disintegrating walls shed soggy plaster, clinging to Connie's overalls whenever she visits. The passageway is a feeder system for three large subterranean studios; two face the park, whilst the third is a long windowless bunker. At the bottom of the steps is Pierre, a French painter. Quiet and birdlike, his name pasted across the door in letters cut from a newspaper. Next to him are a collaborative couple, Arlo and Desey. They are harsh and Northern, performance artists and experimental musicians, and Connie is shy and awkward around them. In the bunker are Mexus, a group of Ukrainian kineticists, rarely seen in daylight. Connie worries about the pallid colour of their skin.

Lunchtime soon, the light of another day almost gone. The days were so short in winter. She checks her notebook. Yes — the rubbing of the damaged gate!

TREAD: Steps made of small square-faced blocks of pitch pine let into iron frames and known as Hawksley's Patent Treads, four remaining at entrance.

LINTEL: First soldier course brick lintel, ground floor facing London Fields.

STEEL: Steel truss, recently painted white, apex of roof, near railway line.

HYDRO: Decommissioned stainless steel hydroextractor used to dry stockings, basement.

GYPSUM: Sheet of British Gypsum Gyproc WallBoard Square Edge 2400mm x 1200mm x 12.5mm.

TREAD
terrier sprays tangerine piddle across our steps little shit

STEEL
damaged gutters and drainpipes direct water at the walls causing damp penetration.

LINTEL
dont like what theyre doing with us

TREAD
done worse thumbs caught third degree burns
whole arms mangled in rollers

LINTEL
we still got the scars to show for it
impressions stamped into our concrete imprints of table legs like the female side of a jacket stud

GYPSUM
remodelling is a natural process

HYDRO
a full fashion nylon stocking begins life as a blank

LINTEL
should be thankful not like number eight or twenty four rest in peace

STEEL
london yellows and essex reds mid flight

TREAD
blast felled spun jettison petrol stench and siren sounds

LINTEL
lord the mess

STEEL
obliterated

TREAD
our neighbours were spat into our two faces as dust and mortar

LINTEL
cinders smeared into our grooves still

GYPSUM
although brickwork is naturally porous it does not absorb much water because it builds a protective skin as it ages so as to allow for rainwater to run off

LINTEL
god bless em

TREAD
waited our turn never came wouldn't have minded going that way

HYDRO
careless talk costs lives

STEEL
patchy survival between the two north south axes of mare street and kingsland road

GYPSUM
the city can like a crowd be considered a living entity its complex processes modelled and predicted with a great deal of accuracy and usefulness

LINTEL
where did you pick that up

HYDRO
good listener

STEEL
long time yet till we regenerate

GYPSUM
the city cannot regenerate itself but relies on the active agents people policy makers to provoke change

LINTEL
boring boring boring

HYDRO
thick mascara fags dangling from pink lined lips

STEEL
the factory

HYDRO
you remember

LINTEL
hairnets pinching

HYDRO
I like kids, especially babies.

LINTEL
we do miss hearing those east london girls talk

HYDRO
what's to stop your hands wandering I say to him?

TREAD
bryl cream stain on the leatherette

STEEL
the stockings are constructed from knitted nylon

LINTEL
we don't have a bath love that shut her up

HYDRO
to make the most of their natural good looks every woman goes to considerable trouble to achieve the right effect

STEEL
stockings of sheer perfection

TREAD
them pulling nimbly at white synthetic cobwebs draped over muscular arms dainty gloves prevent skin snagging fabric

STEEL
dancing

LINTEL
catarrh, each winter.

HYDRO
thousands of interlocking loops to provide a high degree of strength and flexibility

LINTEL
sometimes twice a day I wipe the floor around the cat saucers.

TREAD
several hundred needles are employed barely the size of a shilling

HYDRO
miniature fish hooks catching each thread

LINTEL
no I cant today, Im going round me mother's for a fish supper.

STEEL
the needles beard

HYDRO
the yarn carrier the sinkers advance progressively

LINTEL
we're lost

STEEL
remember the rhythm youll find it again

TREAD
the clatter

LINTEL
feet raised off our floor to stop the cold generations unravelled in the same way

HYDRO
for the main leg panel the machine works at full speed

TREAD
50,000 stitches a minute

STEEL
knitters skill and hairbreadth accuracy of robot machines

LINTEL
no nylons grubby stinking coarse manish overalls

GYPSUM
new ways of working

LINTEL
is that what you'd call it

9

Later that afternoon, Connie sits in Sophie's studio, a tatty velvet cushion protecting her bum from the bare floorboards. She cups both hands to her mouth and huffs on them, trying to warm her pink fingertips.

"I wish you'd get a heater in here."

"I don't like the sensation," Sophie says, leaning her elbow on the brick ledge of the window, the cracked panes taped up and plugged with rags and cardboard.

"What, feeling warm?"

Sophie had been focussed when Connie blustered in. She hasn't left the building in four days. She closes her eyes and rubs the nape of her neck, trying to adjust to having company. Connie fidgets noisily with a bag of strawberry bonbons.

"I don't like those gas things you have here," replies Sophie. "They make my head ache — plus, I thought you would appreciate my conscientious approach to fire safety." She gestures to the piles of dry paper, the metal cabinet full of hydroquinone and ammonium thiosulphate.

"But *brrr*!" Connie says, chattering her teeth.

Sophie laughs, straightening herself gracefully and crossing the room to the sink.

Connie loved going to Sophie's studio. It was tucked into a corner overlooking the fields on the top floor of Martello Street. Some artists nested, their spaces

becoming glorified dens. Other studios were like science laboratories. One painter seemed to prepare canvasses without ever starting a single painting; blank rectangles piled up three deep lined his walls. Sophie's studio is all business. Her materials — cardboard, wood, metal, rope — are organised on an industrial shelving unit alongside crates and boxes with printed labels. Her photography equipment is clean. What she couldn't find new she sourced from trade meets and through classifieds. She cultivated contacts carefully, lenses smuggled from Russia wrapped in sheets of cyrillic newsprint. In contrast to this, the small concession to domesticity was dysfunctional. Dirty kitchen utensils filled the tea-stained enamel sink, beside which a mahogany dressing table served as ineffective storage for a dented aluminium pot, chipped plates and mismatched cutlery. The dressing table is how Connie and Sophie met. She'd helped Sophie rescue it from the tip one afternoon last October, not long after she moved in. They struggled with it across the fields and up three flights of stairs. Its scarred surface holds an electric kettle — one of the few in the building — and a battered double-burner stove. No sofa or armchair, only a bed, a slim tatami mat lying on the floor, hidden behind a bank of tubes storing large rolls of photographic paper.

Sophie scoops up the hot water bottle from her bed and peels off the straggly mint green knitted cover. Sophie got the bottle in Boots her first week in the East End, and it had symbolic value. It was the first thing she had bought after her divorce. Sleeping alone was cold. She fills the kettle and flicks it on.

"So you didn't hear anything last night?" Connie says.

"Ear plugs and a Valium. Forget it."

"Kieran said one of them broke their leg."

"Yes. How dramatic! Jim told me about it this morning," Sophie says.

"He was ok last night, actually."

"Kieran?" Sophie responds sharply.

"Yes, he was quite friendly."

"Hmm," she murmurs.

"Don't start with your community politics," Connie says. As the caretaker, she finds herself excluded from the building's artists' cliques. She is a faction of one, often the last to hear about gossip or controversies.

"'Community' isn't the word I'd choose," Sophie says.

The kettle pings and she fills the pink bottle, squeezing out puffs of rubberised air.

"Seems like one to me," Connie says, looking down. The Pirates and The Police. She'd found a piece of paper screwed up in an overflowing ashtray on a table as she was clearing up the empties left over after a late night drinking session. Smoothing it out, she had seen a scrawled list: the names of most of the studio residents grouped into tribes. "The Pirates" included self-defined renegades and maverick artists, people like Arlo and Desey. Under "The Police" there was one name. Hers.

"Oh, boo hoo. You're not missing anything," Sophie says. "You really want to sit around until 3am listening to all that hot air? Maybe it's time PC Connie let her hair down, anyway!" She tosses her the hot water bottle. Connie catches it with a thump, and snuggles it inside her overalls

"It's not studio politics, anyway," Sophie continues. "Kieran's charming enough. I just don't trust him, that's all. Watch out. He's got a mean streak."

Sophie's name had been written to one side of the paper, not in either tribe. She spun on her own micro-orbit. A few years older, she had a cool world-weariness, a determination. She was obsessive, her knowledge of art encyclopaedic. Her work was like nothing Connie had ever seen. She was in awe of her. Her strong, stern face was often unreadable. She gave harsh criticism, but unlike others at Martello Street, she took Connie seriously.

Sophie's studio is much lighter than Connie's — the ceilings are higher, the windows are bigger, and unlike her cottage, it isn't overshadowed by other buildings. You can look out over the fields. The wooden floor is worn and shiny in patches from years of feet shuffling in front of whirring machines. Now it is mostly empty, two walls are completely clear. These function as a stage for Sophie's photographs. She makes elaborate arrangements of things she finds nearby: patterned threadbare carpets, broken prams, and collapsed cardboard boxes collected from the fruit market. She scours the empty plots forensically for rusty tangles of wire and battered suitcases. Their condition doesn't matter, sometimes, it's what attracts her.

"There's a whole pile of boxes outside the butchers on Broadway Market — I saw it earlier on my way to the shop," Connie says. She looked out for things she thought Sophie might like.

"I saw that," Sophie says. "Not for me, I decided."

"Yeah, but the ones on the bottom have got bloodstains on them."

"Really?"

"From the meat, I thought." All the material she has found so far, Sophie hasn't used. She tries to act unfazed, but each rejection stings.

In recent weeks, Connie has started to arrive early for their photo shoots. Sophie finds it invasive, but she doesn't have the heart to say so. She was still thinking about how to finish the assembly when Connie arrived; she likes to work on this bit alone, and when she is being watched, she finds it difficult getting immersed in the process. She pulls a flattened packet of tobacco from her back pocket and pinches a tangle into a rizla, rolling it between her long fingers and licking its edge. Sophie tips her head back and exhales to the ceiling joists. Connie is hunched up like a gargoyle on the floor. Their friendship is new, being formed by the building; its walls could accommodate their differences.

Sophie misses the studio she had by Tower Bridge: St Katharine's Docks. It was her first taste of making art after art school. She'd felt at home in the old docks, the ghosts of its former use staining the walls and stairwells. It had been a big learning curve. Shared needs don't always amount to shared politics. It's always useful to remember that. In her memory the scene is bittersweet, blurred by the haze of summer and the building tension in her new marriage. On sunny afternoons, their legs dangling over the edge of the quay, skimming the muddy water of the Thames. Undisturbed by ships, the water stretched out inert in front of them. She had been in awe of the older artists, and she sat on the fringes listening intently to their heated arguments. One night, Bridget said the use of the term "community" to describe their activities was unfortunate. Unfortunate for you, Sophie thought at the time, because you don't need one. Since then Sophie had decided she didn't either. She was going to be like Bridget.

She had asked Connie to help her soon after they met. The two women have developed Sophie's photographs together for the last three months. Her assemblages had gotten bigger, and she had started working with large format

equipment, the entire room becoming the camera. It was too much for her to do alone now, she needed help with moving things around and reading the grain during the enlargement process. Connie has a burgeoning interest in photography, and Sophie is happy to teach her what she knew. Sophie rolls her head from side to side. It is only when she stops moving that she feels the build up of the day's work in her muscles.

Working with Sophie like this, Connie feels excited about art; she feels like she could do anything. One night, late last year, she had said absentmindedly:"There are three of us working in here."

"What do you mean?" Sophie had asked.

"You, me, and the building," Connie said quietly, embarrassed.

Sophie smiled. "I like that. I'm going to steal it for an interview." Connie remembers how she'd swelled with pride. She had worked in her cottage late into the night, making collages, immersed in the work, her confidence boosted by Sophie's praise.

Getting up from the floor, shaking her stiff legs and keeping the water bottle tucked under the waistband of her pants, Connie begins to drag the pieces of cardboard into the assemblage.

"You look tired." Connie says.

"Thank you, I've been up since five."

Sophie exists in "before" and "after" time: she takes photographs at dusk, and goes out hunting for materials before the city wakes. She likes to be outside when the light of the day begins. Connie has seen her silhouette moving at the window all hours, she's heard the pad of her footsteps from the corridor. Connie

can't imagine her being somebody's wife, and she never talks about it. She watches the bones in Sophie's jaw move as she smokes. Sophie retrieves wilted chrysanthemums, a crusted brown rim hovering above what remained of the urochromatic yellow water.

"You should throw them out,' Connie says. "It's bad luck to keep dead flowers around."

"I was going to use the water as a photographic tint," Sophie says, stubbing out her cigarette in the green marble ashtray and drinking water directly from the tap.

"Besides, I laugh in the face of bad luck." She winks.

Sophie walks back and forth scrutinising, slowly building up the thin brown protective coverings. Connie finds this protracted choreography captivating. Watching a person caught up in the their own mind.

"How's your work going?" Sophie asks abruptly.

"Money work or art work?"

"Well, art…"

"Erm. Slowly," Connie interrupts. "I've started some new collages. I keep getting distracted by things in the office." Alongside her caretaking work at the studio, Connie is the administrator for a new registry for artists called The Index.

"Maybe they're not so different," Sophie says.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's the same thing? What you do in the office, around the building. It is creative in a way. Systems, structures."

"It could be. Maybe it is, I'm sort of obsessed with it compiling it, to be honest. The Index is hectic, nine new artists a week!"

"Tick boxes, coloured shapes, a kind of diagrammatic poetry."

"The manual monster," Connie says.

"The what?"

"That's what I call it, The Index, it's like a giant rolodex. The metal cabinet which holds all the files will get as big as the room, it's going to be international. The more people are in it, the better it will work."

Peter, the founder of The Index, felt artists needed to be better connected, to work outside of the gallery system, and to reach the public on their own terms. His solution: a Doomsday Book for artists. Anyone could come and look at it: collectors, curators, punters off the street. Initially, it had gone down like a lead balloon with the Arts Council, who had said that an unselective Index would be a low quality one. Connie agreed with Peter; it was the only possible democratic approach.

Connie's favourite part of the manual monster were the Visirecords: pieces of white card printed in black to their specifications by CARTER-PARRATT Ltd. 'Top quality!' Peter had said proudly when they received the first delivery.

The Visirecords were the key to The Index: they helped you access slides of work, copies of any reviews, a CV. Each artist was assigned one when they joined. The cards had a complex coded system of categories, from biographical information to basic details concerning their preferred medium. It was Connie's idea to use coloured stickers for each category. She'd thought artists would appreciate this pictorial system. They wouldn't have wanted words describing their work.

Sophie pulls out a plastic fruit crate full of deflated balloons. She is interested in how the structure of the Visirecords provides containment for the emotional material of art. It makes her think about the slow bureaucracy of her divorce, and about the restrictiveness of architecture. It matters to her how different things interact, layer and align. It's how she works: organic processes and industrial mechanisms in unison. She uses the walls and floor of the building as her mould; pulped pressed matter stretched out like a skin over the bricks. Photography doesn't intimidate Sophie. Other female artists had said the same: it didn't have the baggage of painting, her first love. She can't shake the instinct, though, and it flows through her during the developing process. In the process of making photographs, painting serves a destructive purpose. It debases her images before they appear, tinting them with iron toner to create inky freezes. This will reduce the lifespan of the work, but she's not interested in it lasting forever.

It seems to Sophie that everyone around her is interested in destruction at the moment. Her most recent lover was making art by sawing apart fishing boats and exhibiting their splintered remains. But Sophie, sifting through waste, is interested in reconstitution, what happens after the destruction: which things are conserved, and what is erased.

In the studio, the last of the light catches the dust particles in the air. Ribbons of glitter shine through the room and across their faces. Sophie is still fiddling with the last touches of the arrangement. They can't start photographing until it's dark.

"Tea or wine?"

"Ok, yeah, please," Sophie replies.

"Which?"

"Both?"

"Together?"

"Sorry," Sophie laughs, "I'm stopping now! I'd like tea to warm me up then a glass of red wine."

Next door, clomping footsteps; an electric guitar shreds loudly from a tape deck. They look at each other and laugh.

"I've been thinking about what you were saying before," Sophie starts.

Connie holds out the hot mug, gingerly turning the handle towards Sophie. "I don't think they have to be separate. If all the men are making sculptures with steel-rivets and bricks, why can't administration be a valid material for your art?"

By five o'clock, it's dark enough to shoot. The red safe-light hangs from a hook in the ceiling. At one end of the room is the enlarger, resting on its side, levelled with wooden wedges. The room's entire three metre breadth is needed to create the scale of photographs Sophie requires.

"Lights," she says, and Connie flips off the switch.
Sophie slips the first negative in between the bellows. A large rectangle of light hits the wall.

"Here you go," Sophie murmurs, passing Connie the grain focusing scope. The small contraption is cold and surprisingly heavy. Connie's shadow interrupts the beam. She places the scope flat against the wall.

Sophie begins to pull the focus. The grains look like frizzy fabric fibres.

"Up a bit," Connie calls.

"How about now?"

"Yes almost, nearly, a bit more."

Now they look like heads of wheat.

"Too far now, back again slightly."

Sharp worms.

"Lock it."

Sophie has a pulley and rope system rigged in the corner to raise the paper — all she needs is an extra pair of hands to lift the roll from the sealed lightproof tube and attach it to the pulley. She uses a scalpel to slice the sheet away at her chosen size, leaving the edges slightly jagged. They hold the paper by its corners as they navigate the room, arms outstretched, careful not to touch its surface. They tack it up on the wall. Sophie presses the button and light floods the paper for a moment. Seconds later, and the memory of the afternoon is transferred like magic. It doesn't matter how many times they do it. To Connie, it never gets old.

Each bone is covered by a fibrous investment called the periosteum, a juicy sack of vessels carrying blood supply. This feeding shores up against a possible, future crisis. When examining bones they should feel smooth and moist, when struck with a probe they sound dull. Remove the periosteum and the surface will be hard and rough, when struck it will sound almost metallic. This aural difference indicates what is healthy from what is denuded or dead.

10

21 March 1975

9 months before the Night.

The girl had never broken anything, but she remembers wanting to very badly. Desperately. Her brothers Terry and Syd had broken an ankle, an arm and three fingers between them. From football and scrapping, just being boys. But how they'd done it was not the point; the point was that they'd come to school with limbs strapped up and dunked in plaster. She remembers the school yard, everyone gathering round and wanting to sign their names. Night after night she'd thrown herself from the end of the bed, crushing her shoulder into the carpet. Her mother banging on the ceiling with a broom handle, practically waking the whole bloody street! She didn't want to break anything serious; a collarbone would be just fine. She wanted people to gather around her, poking and pressing. How silly this all sounded now.

She sits on his bed, waiting for him to come back. The bruises she has now make her feel very grown up. She admires the patterns on her bare legs stretched out on the mattress before her. Each one is different: a florid purple tidemark, russet ink blots, and a row of sallow crescent moons. She knocks her knees together. He said they were a reminder for her. To tell her he loved her and he wanted her. That she was his. These reminders appear on her skin days later, when the memory of their issue begins to fade, delayed like love tokens sent in the post.

He cooed to her: “Come on baby, aren’t you sweet,” and “that’s right, baby.” It wasn’t that she’d lied. He hadn’t asked, so she hadn’t told him that it was the first time. Afterwards he’d said blood was normal, he said that he liked it. She had realised that he wasn’t as tall as she thought when she first saw him. She always thought she would be with a tall man. It’s his boots. Sally at school said anyone can wear heels, even boys. When he uses those long words, the ones she doesn’t know, he looks down at her over the bridge of his nose. His serious gaze makes her laugh the most, but she doesn't let on because he doesn’t like to be laughed at. He is horrid when he shouts. His curling eyelashes, the way he looks at her, makes her stomach flip.

She watches the last smoking stalk of incense droop and fall into a mound of ash on the ceramic saucer. He had just popped out, he said, and wouldn’t be long. Locked the studio door when he left. The first few nights she had been in there with him, she’d gone home and run into the bathroom quick. She washed her clothes in the bath for fear of stinking. She couldn’t keep that up. Now she hides her school clothes behind the bins in the back garden. She changes in the damp darkness amongst the rhododendrons before she goes inside.

She’s getting bored now. Won’t be a sec, he’d said. He didn’t ever leave her alone very long. She wraps herself in a scratchy wool blanket and sits up. The mattress lies on the floor, pushed into the far corner of the room. The studio is huge, twice as big as her mum’s front room but twice as empty. Not a stick of furniture. Well, except for the chair he gets her to sit on for his photographs. As far as she can tell, the heater and the metal cabinet were there already. They had other people’s names written on them. One wall is covered in pictures and news

clippings, all sorts of things, and another is completely clean — bright white clean. He uses it as the backdrop for his photographs.

He doesn't like her touching his work. He likes talking about it and he likes her to listen. All this being seen and not heard had taken some getting used to, but staying silent had taught her things: how to move, what he likes. One day she'd go to all the far flung cities he talked about and send him a postcard from every one.

Usually the cabinet is closed. Today, the door is slightly ajar. She fidgets, craning to see inside from her position on the bed. She's a right nosey parker, her mum says. "Curiosity killed the cat," says Sally. She gathers the blanket around her and tiptoes over to the cabinet.

Pushed to the back on the top shelf is a metal box. It's smaller and leaner than a shoebox with spring lock catches. It has some markings on the side, numbers stencilled. Like a secret, cold and heavy, so much heavier than it looks! She licks her lips; she's naughty. He would be angry at her going through his things. She unclips the lid. Inside are photographs of girls. Young like her. She twists her head, contemplating their angles. All naked. Wrapped in cloth, perching on her chair. Some are coy and some are not. Scared. Their bodies gangly, arms and legs still too long for them. Puffy nipples and bony hips. The photographs are black and white, their skins are all different shades. They have props: bricks between their legs or cushions over their faces or logs beneath their feet. Their eyes blink back at her. Some look in pain, their bodies twisted into configurations she can feel herself. Has felt. No need to imagine. She pictures him behind the camera. Pressing the shutter. Each girl waiting for his particular signal, an expression flickering in an instant across his face. The same signal

he'd given her that first day. She knows his power. She closes her eyes. Perhaps she always knew this box existed. Her mouth is dry. She puts the girls back inside carefully and clips the lid back down firmly. She nudges the box back into place on the cabinet's top shelf. He's been perfecting his craft on them, like tinkering with a machine. She couldn't rob him of this: his process, his gift. Every mechanic must have spare parts. She lies down on the mattress again and waits. He was no longer in training. He was ready for her. Every artist had to have someone to practice on, and maybe, who knows, he'd turn out to be hers?

11

20 July 1975

3 months and 26 days before The Night

Connie unchains her purple Raleigh Clarice from the gates outside the office. The sky is dark and heavy with clouds, the summer air dense and muggy. She stamps hard on the pedals, pelting it, fighting to beat the storm before it breaks. Through the gates and down Mile End road, she turns right at the junction. The Blind Beggar leers on the corner, the pub inside dark through the dirty glass panes. The East End still looks like the war just ended. She swerves to avoid kids playing football in the street, the white outline of goalposts daubed on the bricks. She zooms recklessly past the mechanics, and past the bombed-out houses and empty plots, some fenced off but most left open, crumbling piles of rubble overgrown with weeds. At the junction of Roman Road the street sweepers are cleaning up after the market. Misspelt graffiti saying 'BAYCITTYROLLERS' is painted in six foot letters under the bridge. A flash of the greengrocers' stripy blue awning, the old girls behind the counter who don't know what garlic is.

She turns off Mare Street just as the rain begins to spit, her tyres bouncing over potholes under the railway arches and the studio building coming into view. Three kids playing on the corner scatter squealing as thunder cracks. Connie props her bike against the wall, and fumbles for her keys. She sees a girl

with bright red hair trying to shelter under a big, broad-leaved tree on the edge of the park. *Unlucky, love.*

Summer had come early, and with it the temperament of the building changed. Places sealed off during the winter were blown open as the days grew longer and warmer. Holes were unstuffed, doors propped ajar, blinds pulled low to stop the light bleaching paper or drying out clay. Martello Street's top floor, with its skylit pitched roof, heated up like a greenhouse, while the thick concrete of the basement and Connie's cottage kept the atmosphere as cool as a fridge. The air circulated through the railway arch, dislodging the dust from windowsills lined with jam jars of mismatched screws, turpentine dregs, and dead flies. It swept through open doors, coiling around the grease coated thread of a printing press, carrying the fumes of mineral spirits down to the courtyard where they mingled with the scent of a rosemary bush she had planted in a bucket. Like a big, lumbering animal coming out of hibernation, the building's heart rate rose gradually. Music was heard through the plasterboard. At the back of the building, sweet hash smoke mingled with food turning putrid, baking in the black plastic of bin bags. Flies thumped at the windows; spilt puddles of beer coaxed ants, and tabby cats splayed their white bellies basking in the sun. Connie had been spending most of the summer evenings lounging in a sagging deckchair on the roof reading and drinking gin and sodas, the asphalt soft and sticky underfoot.

Connie swings the courtyard gate open and wheels her bike inside. Spring had been eventful. The National Front had come along the Whitechapel road, huddles of pudgy white men with hate-filled faces. She shouldn't have been shocked, considering the name the woman in the local shop called her black cat, but it still frightened her. She winced each time she heard her call it, willing the cat to never come back. The local press had begun to write articles about the delayed development of Broadway Market, encouraging claimants to know their rights. The Moodies, her friends' band, had played at the All Nations Club, shocking the audience by appearing in dresses made from strips of bacon. The club was over the road from the studios and opened Saturday nights, playing disco and soul until the early hours. She watched the African and Caribbean couples step gracefully out of their gleaming, claret-coloured Cortinas or mocha Cavaliers, shattering the dreary grey streets of Hackney with bright silk dresses and flared suits. *The Hackney Gazette* had reported on a series of deaths: pensioners dying alone in their flats, lying undiscovered for weeks. She'd cut these out and had them pinned to a board in her studio. She imagined their bodies curled up like those at Pompeii, the wireless droning on.

Inside her cottage, Connie grabs a bottle of milk from the fridge in the kitchen and swings her bag through the beaded curtain that screens her bedroom. She leaps up the narrow staircase two at a time. It is nine months since she moved in, and she feels just about settled in the room upstairs. It's the first time she's had her own studio. Spread out across the desk are the documents for the forthcoming Open Studios event, for which she is in charge of compiling the material for the catalogue. She has yet to go around the studios and chase up

artists who haven't provided statements, photographs, and biographies. Two of the artists she thought would give her the most problems, Arlo and Desey, had surprised her. Despite their anarchistic behaviour and their subversive tendencies, they'd promptly delivered a stack of neatly-typed pages, an extensive account of exhibition dates and details. Perhaps they weren't so radical after all. It was the other, more traditional artists who were dithering: men who made concrete block sculptures; painters and ceramicists who felt imposed upon by her request. Maybe the more immaterial the work was, the more it required all of this stuff, this administration, to support it — to exist, even. A few artists, led by Jim, had refused to participate altogether, boycotting the Open Studios in a childish protest: The very idea of their private spaces being seen by the public! One of the people she still needs to follow up with is Kieran.

For the rest of the afternoon, Connie works, leaning hunched over the typewriter. Her body feels fused to the chair, the typewriter feels attached to her chest. Piles of cigarette ends accumulate in the jam-jar lid she uses as an ashtray. Shifting in her seat, she pulls herself upright, arching her back to stretch it. Suddenly finding the fug of the room overwhelming, she goes over to the window to open it. The heavy rain continues. The green expanse of London Fields is empty of people, but in the street below, Connie is shocked to see the red-haired girl. She has moved out from under the tree's meagre shelter into the street immediately opposite the front door of the studios. The rain pounds down on her as she stands exposed, looking up.

TREAD: Steps made of small square-faced blocks of pitch-pine set into iron frames. Brand name Hawksley's Patent Treads, four remaining at entrance.

LINTEL: First soldier course brick lintel, basement facing London Fields.

STEEL: Steel truss, recently painted white, apex of roof, near railway line.

FLO: Taskmaster fluorescent strip light 180cm 60 Watts warm, white with white enamel flurolier.

TREAD
the way we bow like that needs seeing to

LINTEL
child no better than a puddle to be stepped over

FLO
sin sinner sinful devilry

LINTEL
making em stand in the rain

FLO
power up power down power play

STEEL
endurance

LINTEL
what do they know about time like a circle aint no beginning aint no end

TREAD
nasty piece of work this one

STEEL
whats the problem

TREAD
spitting on us slamming doors carving in our skin with rusty nails

LINTEL
not even thinking

STEEL
got a visitor

LINTEL
stay away love

STEEL
listen to that friend of yours

FLO
be bold be an electron free

(Kieran, is this a good time?)

LINTEL
uh deary

(Connie!)

FLO
pop pop explode

TREAD
amount of times we tried to make em listen dormer windows
waving chimney defecting the flashing no use

STEEL
even with sulphuric acid eating away at mortar

(I need your pages, for the Directory.)

(Oh yes. Got them right here, wait a second.)

LINTEL
finds words when has too

(Oh thanks. You've got a lot of space in here.)

STEEL
lucky one

(I didn't know you took photographs.)

LINTEL
not the half of it

(Just research.)

FLO
sibilant snake

(They're so different from your paintings.)

LINTEL
little one hasn't been here for while

(Depends how you look at them.)

TREAD
if only for dr jelly

(Where do you find these girls?)

STEEL
do you think its come to that

(They're not all real.)

LINTEL
oh the cheek

FLO
sis spontaneous pop pop human combustion pop

(It's a matter of training your mind.)

LINTEL
blimey not half

(She looks young.)

(Here you go, so sorry you had to chase me.)

STEEL
oh she he don't know the half of it

(Oh, thanks.)

LINTEL
nosey one missing it

STEEL
no no wait how to get the truth out

LINTEL
who says we want to

FLO
what are we anyway volatile ether

TREAD
who cares what we feel

(*Anyway, do you need anything else? It's just I'm late finishing some work.)*

LINTEL
we bet you are matey

(No — well, I think I'm ok.)

(Ok. Sure I'll be seeing you)

TREAD
if only little un had gone dr jelly.

STEEL
australian

LINTEL
well known kindness to the poor mums

TREAD
sixpence charge for consultation mackintosh lane kind of maternity ward eccentric often seen on a horse oldbanger, toot toot top hat

LINTEL
long gone now must be struck off the medical register and served a prison sentence

STEEL
its a legal act

LINTEL
poor mums.

13

The girl's pale woollen skirt is saturated with water. It sags and sticks to her thighs. Her thin raincoat is soaked too, creased and wrapped around her like a sodden parcel. The girl doesn't seem to feel it. She shifts from foot to foot, rocking her head back, beckoning the onslaught onto her upturned face. Connie smooths the crease between her brows with two fingers and watches. She's young; could be as young as fifteen, sixteen. Even in the gloom, her red hair gleams like copper. She'll make herself ill being out in this. Two women wheeling chequered shopping bags hobble past, their grey hair flattened by plastic triangular bonnets, the straps digging into the loose turkey skin of their necks. They tut at the girl, shaking their shrunken heads. The girl bows sarcastically in response, unfurling her arm and ushering them past. Connie smiles. The girl turns her plump pale face back to the front entrance of the studios, crossing her arms, her gaze steady. The rain beats against the windows.

Connie pulls her coat around her shoulders, walking briskly through the courtyard. She opens the front door and calls out across the street:

"Can I help you?"

The girl's eyes meet hers as though pulled from far away. She doesn't reply or move. Connie leaps across the puddles in the road, holding the collar of her coat up above her head. She stops in front of the girl and grimaces.

"*You're* all wet now," the girl says.

She narrows wide-set almond eyes. She speaks confidently, downy hair above her top lip. No bag or jewellery. Just the clothes she's standing in.

"So are you," Connie replies.

"Yes, but I'm meant to be."

She looks past Connie, eyes darting back and forth over Martello Street's windows. She's trying hard to disguise her accent, putting on her best telephone voice, but Connie can tell she's from around here. Hackney.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Connie asks trying to follow the direction of her gaze.

The girl opens her mouth and closes it again.

"You're Connie, aren't you."

The girl smiles. Her teeth are small with tiny gaps in between them, like milk teeth.

"Sorry, have we met?" Connie says.

"No, silly. He told me about you."

She pauses, unsure how to respond. Smiling back she says: "All good things I hope."

The girl looks at her with disinterest.

"What's your name?" Connie says, holding her coat vainly aloft above her head. The rain flows freely down the sleeves of her shirt pooling at her elbows.

"Are you looking for someone?" She tries again.

"Sort of. But I know he's gone."

"You want to wait inside?"

The girl is worrying her hands, interlacing her fingers mechanically.

"Do you want a cup of tea? I live just there." Connie says, gesturing to her cottage with a tilt of her chin. She wants to get her out of the rain. Talk to her. She reaches for her arm, the girl flinches, binding her body tighter with her coat.

"Or a biscuit? I've got some Penguins."

"It's not fair, is it? How things work."

"How do you mean?"

"I know what it's like in there," she says, gesturing at the building.

They both stare up at Martello Street's blank façade.

"Can I call someone for you?" Connie asks.

"I can take care of myself. How old are you anyway?" the girl says.

"Twenty-eight. How old are you?"

She pauses. "Do you like being an artist?"

"I'm not an artist."

"What are you then?"

"I don't know what I am."

"Neither do I," she says, looking down at her feet. "Anyway, *I* wont be living in Hackney when *I'm* twenty-eight."

"Oh yeah? Where will you be living?"

"Who knows. Maybe I'll travel the world. At school there are girls who don't know where Hyde Park is, can you believe that? I've been all over."

"I like to walk around the city too."

"Do you really?" the girl replies suspiciously. "Where do you go?"

"Around the East End, mostly."

"Not here!" she wails. "God, it's hideous. Do you have a camera?"

"Yes."

"Is it a Pentax or Leica?"

"A Leica," Connie answers, surprised by the girl's knowledge."Do you like photography?"

"Leica's are ladies' cameras."

"Who told you that?"

"Never you mind."

"People don't like women having cameras," Connie says. "You should see the looks I get."

"I'm used to getting nasty looks," the girl says. "Anyway, I don't need a camera. I've got everything stored up here,' she adds, tapping the side of her head.

"I've got mine in my studio — why don't we have a cup of tea and a penguin and you can have a go with it?"

"No,"

Before Connie can respond, the girl flashes her a weak smile and strides away towards Mare Street, her black patent lace ups squelching. Connie watches as she bounds away, the rest of the pavement empty. The girl reaches the corner, head bowed and shoulders rounded huddling against the weather. She looks back at Connie and the building and shouts. "What goes in must come out. That's the thing they don't tell you. There's no other way. It has to come out somehow."

She turns and breaks into a run, her figure blurring in the deluge of the afternoon.

Back in her cottage, a puddle forms on the linoleum at Connie's feet. It has to come out somehow? What did that mean? Connie is shaken by the strangeness of the exchange. Most of the time the artists kept themselves to themselves, the building more like an island; a last outpost before the expanse of the fields. Many of the artists lived elsewhere: Notting Hill, Archway, Hampstead. The few who stayed on site often never left, only scuttling off to Cork Street openings or late night dancing. They had little contact with the people of these streets. A city within a city. The encounter was a reminder: this was someone else's patch.

The girl's words had confused Connie. How did she know about photography? And "a ladies' camera" wasn't her, someone else had said that. The "he" is worrying her. Connie's head grows hot. She hates being the topic of some stranger's conversation. Who was talking about her? Suddenly she feels vulnerable, her defensive compound breeched. So what, some sad bloke in the studios was fooling around with a girl half his age? Nothing new there. But the girl was very young and she had seemed, well, manic.

She hangs her coat over the back of a chair and positions it in front of her heater. Unpeeling her jumper, jeans, socks, and pants, she plonks them in a soggy pile by the door. From her bed she pulls a patchwork blanket around her. She hadn't kept many of the previous occupants' things, but she is grateful for the pink slipper bath: an enamelled metal oyster clam stuck to a circular base, chipped around the rim, and worn in the seat from many rubbed bums. She fills the kettle, lights the stove, and waits shivering for the water to boil. She chews her fingernails.

Maybe it was good to learn the hard way — didn't we all have to? She thinks about her own youth growing up in suburban Crawley. The men she was with were the ones who pursued her; she had no time to think about what she wanted, who she might pursue. Her encounters defined by the desires of men. The squeaking pleather seats of a Hillman Imp, the limited roles available. She hopes the girl has got home, and is warming up out of the rain.

The kettle squeals, and she turns off the gas and pours the water into the bath. Steam rises from the shallow puddle. She fills the kettle again with cold water and pours. It's a poor excuse for a bath. She clambers in, folding her legs into her chest and scooping palmfuls of warm water over her goose pimpled skin.

How did she know about the building? How had she been inside? Connie reached from the bath stretching to retrieve her tattered notepad from the pocket of her overalls. She flicked back through her notes, lists, reminders. In January there'd been the attempted break in ("travellers + electricity"), so maybe the girl was scouting the place out for someone? No. The girl was too lost in her own thoughts, too distracted, not alert. Also, she wasn't trying to hide — she was brazen, she wanted to be seen. Connie should have pushed harder, asked more questions. She had been wrong-footed — felt threatened, even. She needs to find out who she is, and who "he" is. She cups the rapidly cooling water in her hands and splashes it over her face.

Dry in her overalls, wet clothes sizzling in front of the gas heater, she scrawls notes in her pad: *Photographers/Artists who used Photography. Any artists who had local connections? Check Directory.*

She resolves to do more rounds of the property; she had let things at Martello Street slip, become too distracted by the manual monster. She looks down at the evidence of her absence: stacks of paper in dishevelled piles across the desk, half-drunk mugs of cold tea and fag ends framing the typewriter. She picks up the pages she collected from Kieran earlier that afternoon. She had been surprised how many artists had chosen to use a portrait of themselves rather than a picture of their work in the catalogue; she wasn't surprised how flattering most of these head shots were. Kieran's photograph, however, showed a painting — a sheer surface of hard edged vertical stripes. A picture of control, precision, execution. *Smithey, S*. She files his papers.

She has mixed feelings about the Open Studios — she is excited, and also nervous about people seeing her work. She's conscious of the fact that most of the residents think of her as a busy-body, an organiser; not a proper artist like them. Standing in front of a trestle table, she takes paper, glue, and other bits of stationery from her bag, having lifted them from the office earlier that day. It isn't stealing: it's redistribution. She uses magazines as well as newspaper cuttings to make her collages, selecting them from "The Waste" on Kingsland Road: a street of market stalls full of girlie mags and second-hand paperbacks. Past the butchers and the eels. The men there exist on a sliding scale of wealth; the further down the road you go the less there is to buy. The loneliest among them sell a single watch, wireless, suit, or stack of long-playing records, cigarettes welded to their stained fingers.

The fragments of paper fanned out in front of her were mostly stories of woe. A man beating his wife to death with a hammer, the headline for the article reading: Husband's Tragic Story of Torment and Deceit. The story had affected

her — how was it, she had asked herself, that one minute a man can be making his morning tea, throwing out the leaves on the earth around his dahlia plant, and the next grabbing a hammer from the bushes, going inside, and without a thought — brain as empty as his china cup — beating his wife's head in? No premeditation, apparently. The jury let him off. The man walked free because "he loved her very much." She shudders.

Connie picks up *NOVA* magazine from the top of her pile. Its cover is emblazoned with a colour photograph featuring three female models chained to the steel bars of a gate: lilac eyes and crimped hair, otherworldly faces pouting. The words *Remembering May '68* vibrate in red bubble writing. She remembers *her* May '68, learning shorthand and losing her temper with the ink ribbon on a typewriter.

She flips to the cover feature. Photographs of students, their arms raised wielding painted banners. Heads dodging police batons, smoking, cars upturned in the streets. She flicks past these familiar images, wearily. The last page focuses on the aftermath of the protests in Paris. Among the images is a group photograph: trade unionists outside a factory building. Squinting in disbelief, she realises she knows a face in the crowd. How strange. His sideburns are longer, the hair cut shorter, but she is certain it is Kieran. She scrutinises the image for a moment longer before checking the caption, a list of names from left to right. "Kelly" instead of Kieran and "Stott" instead of Smithey. *What?* Probably just a mistake. She pauses. Something about the similarity in the names; too wrong to be a copywriting error, but too right to be a different person. Who was Kelly Stott? For that matter, who was Kieran Smithey?

Congenital abnormalities affect the intrauterine body and are noticeable at birth. These hardenings or misshapings happen during gestation, before the owner in possession of these defects has taken an independent breath. Developmental disorders are similar but become apparent some time after birth. They wait. Gene defects, inherited disorders, the by-products of a sickness passed by the host. These failures are defined by their appearance: dysplasia (abnormal), aplasia (absence), hypoplasia (underdevelopment) and hyperplasia (overdevelopment). Plasia the Latin for development, from the Greek plasis meaning 'moulding or formation'.

14

8 September 1975

3 months and 1 week before The Night

Sophie, fresh from her American odyssey, looks lean and vulpine. She nudges the soggy remains of a quiche Lorraine around her plate and recalls her summer on the road. Connie listens intently, hanging on her words. Sophie had driven from New York up the East coast in a rented car: Poughkeepsie and the Catskills, Saratoga Springs.

"Manchester! In America?" Connie says.

Sophie laughs. She had carried on going north, she loved the beautiful barren coast. Through Vermont and then Maine, crossing the Canadian border, hitchhiking when her money ran out. She had spent the remaining weeks in a cabin on Prince Edward Island. After so much time on her own, she was still adjusting to conversation.

Connie holds out the page cut from *NOVA*. "It is him, isn't it?" she asks.

Sophie lays it on the table, smoothing the crumpled paper with both hands. She takes a drag on her cigarette and sets it burning in the green glass ashtray.

"There," Connie says, pointing. "That one."

Sophie studies the picture. "It does look like him," she says eventually, pushing her plate to the side and reaching for her wine glass, blobs of egg and bacon wobbling.

Connie breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank you! Jesus. I wanted to check with you first."

Sophie laughs. “Wait, what do you mean first? What are you planning?” she says, sitting back in her chair, narrowing her eyes. She stubs out the burnt-out cigarette, and lights another.

“I’m not sure,” Connie says. She pauses. “Remember when you said you didn’t trust him? You told me to watch out. Why?”

“Do you really want me to go into it?”

‘’Yes !’’ Connie replies.

Sophie sighs. “Look, it’s ancient history.”

“I feel like it matters.”

Sophie let smoke curl out of her mouth slowly. “We met one night in a pub in the West End. It was after an opening at the ICA. A show of my paintings.”

Connie sits up. “When was this?”

“Years ago. Just before I moved into St Katharine’s. The show was in October ‘68. He just materialised one day.”

“From Paris!” Connie interjects, stabbing the page from the magazine with her finger.

“We got on immediately. He talked about finding death in photography.” She laughs. “I suppose his blackness suited my mood at the time. I was having trouble producing anything I cared about. I wasn’t working. My marriage was failing.”

“I can’t imagine you not working,” Connie says.

“He has these intense eyes. He cornered me, I told him about St Katharine’s and then somehow, before we knew it, he was there. He got in with Bridget and Peter. I don’t really know. I wasn’t paying attention; I had my own problems.”

“So he was an artist then?”

"Well, yes, it seemed so. But I never saw anything he made to begin with. He was around all the time. He asked a lot of questions, which, you know, is strange for a man. For them to ask you about yourself. He was interested."

"What did you talk about?"

"My despair over painting — I'd had enough of it by then. It felt meaningless, bourgeois. I was working on these striped canvasses, contrasting colour, optical effects." She took another long drag on her cigarette. "I guess that was quite strange. During all these conversations he never told me he painted. The first thing I knew about it was when I walked into his studio, there were stacks and stacks of them."

"What kind of paintings?" Connie asks.

Sophie fidgets in her seat, adjusting herself. "Well, they were abstract, geometric, repetitive, stripes. Contrasting colours."

"Optical effects." Connie finished.

"I know," Sophie laughs. "I sound ridiculous. Everyone was doing this stuff back then. But it was just that we had sat up talking late into the night, for weeks, going deep. And when I think about it now I learnt nothing about him. Not even that the whole time we were talking he was making the same kind of work."

"Jesus, what an arsehole."

"No but you see, he wasn't nasty — he just pretended like we hadn't had this connection, like I was stupid for finding it strange. I couldn't even say anything. I felt robbed," she smiles ruefully, her lips stained with wine.

"There's something else. I'm still confused about it. I don't even know what I saw exactly, I don't think I saw anything." Sophie shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

"What do you mean?"

"No one would have believed me. It was a split second."

"What was?"

She pulls her fingers roughly over her scalp, her hair shorn close in America so she didn't have to wash it.

"We were in an inflatable artwork at St Katharine's."

Connie nods.

"They were all the rage then — a lot of men making them, these huge phallic zeppelins that you could go inside."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the ones you mean," Connie says.

"Well, I remember it was hot. I was wearing a grey t-shirt and I had these great big rings of sweat under my armpits. The plastic of the inflatable was like a greenhouse magnifying the sun's rays. They had been working on this one floating out in the river basin for ages. It was moored to the docks while Greg, the artist, experimented with the air pressure, making sure the seams sealed properly. It was a giant plastic tapeworm bobbing on the black water like something from the future," Sophie says, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs. "He liked to pile people in and film it.'

"Sounds fun." Connie says, her eyes wide.

"Well, as you can imagine, it was always a bit of a riot — the plastic bobbing under your feet, bodies everywhere. You couldn't balance, not with the water like it was. There was a lot of trust involved. They were really quite dangerous. The plastic was heavy. I mean really heavy. Imagine if it collapsed on you? Death by vacuum pack." She shudders, putting a third cigarette to her lips and sparking the lighter.

"It was sexy, too, of course," she smiles, a stream of smoke mushrooming from her lips, "because you could touch each other. Well you *had* to; you fell into each other by accident, but also you wanted it for reassurance. It could be liberating: arms and legs colliding, hands everywhere. Some people used it as an excuse to feel you up. The further away from land you ventured, and the deeper into water, the whole thing sank."

"Amazing." Connie says, wishing she'd had the nerve to try out the one at Hackney Marshes festival last summer.

"Anyway, there must have been ten of us in there. I was at the back of the group, taking it steady, and Kieran was in front of me. We hadn't really spoken since, you know, but I was aware of him that day checking for me, checking where I was, that I hadn't snuck off. We caught each other's eye and he grinned, so I grinned back inanely, reacting more than anything. He still felt like a stranger to me. Suddenly he drops to his knees like *whoosh*, down, and I think, oh I get it, he's going to try and drag me with him. I can see him now, clear as day. The texture of his shirt, the hair around his face. Eventually I catch up, I touch his shoulder, he looks up, and then I see it: this glint of metal, this light in his hands, cupped, resting on his jeans. A pen knife, like the kind boy scouts have: red handle, short blade. It's shining, aimed at the plastic floor beneath our feet."

"Wait, what?"

"I don't know. I still don't know. He just kept looking up at me and laughing and then back down at the plastic. I've got goosebumps just thinking about it."

"What did you do?"

"I froze. I couldn't say anything, my mouth just sort of opened and closed like I was a fish."

"What did he do?"

"He just kept smiling. The blade poised. It felt like forever. I saw the whole thing: the structure collapsing, feet plunging into water, plastic pressing on our heads."

"Oh God," Connie says softly.

"I saw it all, and he laughed at me. I looked again at his hands. The blade was gone, and he was on his feet grabbing my hand and dragging me after the others." The cigarette sizzles as she stubs it out on the plate.

"Do you think he actually wanted to do it?"

"I think he wanted me to know he *could* do it."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"Tell them what? Nothing happened."

Connie doesn't reply.

"Why would people listen to me, anyway? He was so popular, and so charming. He still is. I stay away from him now. I don't know who he is. Can't trust him. I stay away, and I suggest you do, too." Sophie folds the paper and slides it across the table.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Plenty of people do strange things. I don't like gossip. I don't like thinking about all the things I failed at during that time. It's not me anymore. I tried to tell my ex, but he thought I was making it up, or, well, reading too much into it — being hysterical."

"I don't," Connie says.

"It's easier here — better managed, and we're creating our own spaces. At St Katharine's it was a free for all."

Connie feels a momentary surge of pride for Martello Street.

"I know I sound like a broken record, but my advice: stay away from him."

"I hear you. I just don't like not knowing things," Connie replies.

"Oof," Sophie exhales, noticing her empty wineglass. "Can we talk about something else now?"'

"Okay," Connie relents, her mind racing.

15

10 June 2017

41 years, 5 months, and 21 days after The Night

"Hasn't our friendship always been sexual?" Ally said that night, the first time they kissed. Jenny thinks about this most mornings. The smell of Ally's sheets; her legs twisting around her fingers; her pelvic bone pressing into her palm. Doing it over and over, and the heat of their skin as they did. She had wanted to tell him about Ally when they got back together. In the end she'd said nothing. It had been easy: James barely registered anything, oblivious to the possibility. Anyway, it didn't matter now. She'd fucked it. She'd never known how to say what she wanted, whereas Ally always said how she felt. Jenny kept quiet, only ever reacting to others, and now it was too late.

The room stands rigidly around their things, all packed into cardboard boxes, dotted around the bits of furniture wrapped in plastic. She runs her tongue across her furred teeth. It feels as if her body has run aground on the mattress**.** She met Ally at work. At the end of their first day together, Jenny's face hurt from laughing. Ally was getting ready to go to America; she had a place at an art school there the following September, and had a year to try and save as much money as she could. On the bus home Jenny had rubbed her sore cheeks, still grinning. She wishes she could call her now. The time difference was difficult even when they were on speaking terms. It made them feel like they were living in parallel worlds, even further out of reach. She could still feel Ally's strong body, the tang of her mouth a mixture of metal and biscuits. At work, on the bus,

in bed, Jenny thought about her constantly, obsessively. The waistband of Ally's jeans, the raised mole below her right nipple. Once, during a long and unsolicited explain-o-thon, James had told her that animals like sheep and cows were described as ruminants, meaning they regurgitate their food and chew it over and over again. This image comforted her, as if the memories she constantly replayed could be a form of nourishment.

Before moving to Hackney, James and Jenny had lived together only briefly, in a dingy ex-council flat in Lambeth, bought for him by his parents after graduation. The sale went through quicker than they expected: a cash buyer. The final weekend they spent packing up his crummy bloke furniture. Jenny didn't have enough things to fill one box. They pulled the wardrobe out to reveal clusters of dark furred spores along the wall. His mum had gasped and refused to go back inside, spending the remainder of the day locked in the Audi giving little waves and tight smiles to passing neighbours.

As long as Ally had been around, Jenny kept James at a distance, rebuffing his requests to move in together and staying instead in a series of lonely sublets. Just before Lambeth there'd been a year house-sitting for a friend of a friend in Bermondsey. One night she'd come home to a sink of pantry moth larvae, ivory blobs floating dead in the washing up bowl, hordes of others wriggling, clinging to the ceiling like stars. Before Bermondsey, nine months in the box room of a warehouse in Hackney Wick. Ally had affectionately called it "the lift shaft" because it had been, once. Silverfish scuttled through the mattress while they slept, curled into each other. One weekend, a sickly rotting smell permeated the flat; they'd searched everywhere for the source before giving up and collapsing,

sweating, on the fat blue sofa. The following day the Rentokil guy excavated a single dead rat that had chewed its way inside the threadbare cushions and into the base. “It probably crawled in there to die,” he said.

When Ally left for America, Jenny had allowed herself to be buried, capitulating more and more to James’ needs. She walked around Westfield looking for work trousers; she went on double dates, she even held his hand. Everything happened so quickly. The friend of a friend had returned to Bermondsey, and Jenny had been asked to leave. James, catching her at a weak moment, when finding a new place seemed impossible with rents as high as they were, asked again: “Why don’t you move in with me?” And so she had.

She swings her legs to the floor and stands, facing the window. Outside, middle aged hipsters gather loudly. She looks down over the crowds of men dressed like toddlers clutching biodegradable coffee cups and brown, grease spotted paper bags of pastry. Striped knitted jumpers, quirky socks, expensive brogues, yellow rubberised raincoats with big round buttons and little woolly hats rolled up on the top of their balding heads.

The bedroom was the only place in the flat she could spend any amount of time. According to James, the mezzanine as a whole had been a rushed job, the renovation of the block being three months behind schedule before they’d laid the first layer of its composite particle board floor — insulation stuffed between like a layer of whipped cream. James had lectured her on the process using the analogy of a trifle. Single shin girders in the roof partitioning formed the structural sponge, yellow mineral fibre quilt spooned between like dollops of custard, these soaking up sound and heat, not sherry. “I’ve never made a trifle,”

she'd said.

She remembers the night of the terrorist attacks the last summer they were at university, walking back home from work, the city a hazy, hot cloud. None of the Underground was running and people were everywhere. She went to meet James at Liverpool Street. "Fuck! It's like a festival," he'd said, and she'd grimaced at the insensitivity, but agreed, because it was. When the bombs went off that morning, she'd been on the tube but in a different tunnel, taking the Hammersmith and City line from Bow Road as far as Moorgate before they stopped the trains and cleared the stations. The looks on people's faces as they listened to the announcement; panicked half-runs in pencil skirts, the sudden awareness of being deep underground. They walked as a crowd to work over London Bridge. Did she feel shocked? Not really, mostly guiltily relieved. At the time, James' summer job on a council-backed energy commission had been sorted by a friend of his father's. "Character building." James was walking around Barking knocking on doors persuading people to consider discounted reinsulation packages. He had stories of people with no furniture in the house, because they had burnt it all for warmth. "Dickensian!" he'd said, shaking his head, over pints in the Drunken Monkey, the smell of the city — carbon monoxide, cooking oil and tobacco — lingering on his shirt.

Work gets into your body. Ally told her a story one morning about a hairdresser she knew who had found an ingrown hair in the pink areola of her nipple. Retrieving it with tweezers, she realised the coarse black hair belonged to one of her clients. Having fallen, clipped with blades, it had found her breast and taken root.

The bedroom floor is littered with crumpled clothes removed mechanically from their bodies over the course of the last week. On Sundays James returns these to the wardrobe or laundry basket, demonstrating his annoyance at her lack of co-operation with loud sighs and muttered curses. A windfall of black socks lies at the base of the bed, squirreled off by James' toes. Dust motes fall onto the bedsheets as she lifts one. The stiff folds smell strongly of old sweat, his skin, and the leather of his work shoes — musty and sweet. She stuffs it into her mouth and screams.

Bones are levers to be acted upon by muscles. They are protective cases for soft structures hanging in a divine arrangement of columns, cavities and extremities. They vary greatly in construction. In the form and structure of apparently unmeaning bone mass, there exists provisions for working; a power of whose nature remains elusive. Bones are storage devices, holding fats and minerals, for distribution: they always remember.

16

21 December 1975

The Night.

Connie stands in front of the mirror in her bedroom and manoeuvres her right tit into the black lace bra. The fabric is cool against her skin after a month spent mangled between her mattress and studio wall, discarded in the throes of a promising but disappointing liaison. Through her open curtains, the street lamp casts an orange glow into her bedroom. She considers her reflection. Her body is small and pale, her limbs slender and strong. She has a long thin scar between her toes on her right foot where a surgeon removed the bone of a sixth one when she was a baby. She wishes they had left it there. Her long dark hair is frizzy and tied back with a rubber band. She doesn't look at herself like this often. In the kitchen she runs a flannel under the tap and rubs it under her armpits, cold water dripping down her sides. She can't be bothered boiling the kettle for hot water. Back in the bedroom, she pours red wine into a chipped mug.

It was too early to be getting ready, but she was doing it anyway. She was nervous but excited. She couldn't focus on work. Parties in the basement could get wild. They didn't usually get under way until after eleven, and it was only eight: three hours stretched out ahead of her. She could feel the anticipation vibrating through the building, the stillness occasionally broken by distant swinging doors and rushing footsteps. In the weeks leading up to tonight, the organisers, Arlo and Desey, had threatened Connie with spectacles of nudity and

pain. She'd tried to appear tough and unfazed, but they'd sensed her anxiety and took pleasure goading her.

Connie sits on the little worn stool in front of the mirror, two creases from frowning carved between her brows like speech marks. She licks her fingers and smooths her bristling eyebrows with firm movements. She doesn't usually wear makeup, but Sophie has give her some cracked pans of eyeshadow. She picks up a lush, brooding shade called Green Smoke and dips in the tip of a brush, stroking it with gentle pressure along her lash lines. Next, she rubs a cracked silver eye shadow called Plunge, the colour of tinfoil, deep into her sockets. June Lackey always had beautiful makeup. Her husband Brian Lackey was Connie's predecessor as caretaker and June, along with their three children, had lived with him in the cottage. Connie had only met her once, during the handover— Brian wasting everyone's time by removing his collection of wacky key rings from the bundle of caretaker keys, pontificating about each one like a spoilt child. She can remember, distinctly, June's bottle green painted nails. Her eyebrows were plucked completely clean of hair, which gave her ethereal face a skeletal look.

Connie juts her chin towards the mirror and runs her tongue along the inside of her mouth to reveal a prickling of blackheads along the edges of her lips, like a dirty liner. People didn't look that close. Removing the rubber band, she tries to tame her hair, the thatch responding momentarily to her cajoling before unwinding lazily to settle at various angles around her shoulders.

There would be drugs at the party. She doesn't have anything against people getting high. She smokes grass with Sophie sometimes, but only after they finish working. Sophie says she doesn't like how it clouds her head, she

doesn't trust her ideas. Connie has done purple hearts at gigs a couple of times with Georgie. She tried mushrooms on the solstice in Dorset two summers ago, lying next to her friend and feeling the warm grass sprouting through her limbs. She'd also done cocaine. She first tried it during a weekend in Paris. Eighteen, her first trip abroad. As she and a friend from secretarial college wandered through the Louvre, bored and overwhelmed, a short man with grease slicked hair and a sharp creased navy suit approached them. They didn't have any money and only had a shared dorm in a hostel to go to, so it hadn't taken much persuasion to get them to spend the evening with him. Sitting on the metal chairs at a pavement café in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, he pulled out an ivory vial which dangled from a chain nestled in the thick hair of his chest. He coaxed their noses onto the silver tip of its tiny spoon. "Ah mes amis," he'd purred, and encouraged them to lick the white dust from their fingers. That first rush of blood, the desire to smoke endlessly, her interest in the world growing waywardly like a plant in the shade searching for sunlight. As the man went inside to pay they escaped, flinging napkins across discarded plates of chocolate gateaux, running through the cobbled streets back to their dingy hostel, laughing and sweating, reeling at their own power. Acid is the thing now. On her rounds she sometimes encounters people tripping, lost in the maze of corridors, their pupils dilated. To lose control like that scares her.

She touches the turntable needle gently onto the record, producing a crackle and a drum beat, and the eager, thrumming guitar of Marc Bolan. She finds her indigo flares thrown inside out under her clothes rail, shakes them out, shimmies into them, and pulls on a purple crochet vest. The black lace bra is visible behind the sparse woollen lattice. She lingers on her reflection. She pours

herself another mug of wine. She's drinking too fast. She plonks down on her unmade bed. Two hours to go.

LINTEL: First soldier course brick lintel, basement facing London Fields.

STEEL: Steel truss, recently painted white, apex of roof, near railway line.

PANE: Cracked glass pane, second floor studio window, flipped style.

STEEL
first stage occurred by the windows

LINTEL
little un looking out over railway

STEEL
grimace windpipe clamped teeth furrowed brow

PANE
we haven't seen this before but heard it talked about

STEEL
yes cervix beginning to thin out.

(Help me please, I can't wait.)

PANE
dilating pink doughnut.

STEEL
bearing down because it is all they can do

LINTEL
bringing little un to knees dearie

(Please.)

STEEL
meanwhile feel drilling down below

LINTEL
don't they know what time it is screwing together a picture frame
gordon bennet

(Look, lie here. You're ok. Bite down on this.)

STEEL
taps running

18

"Welcome to the death factory," Desey shouts at Connie with a smirk, her fingers clasped around the edge of the door. Connie opens her mouth to respond and inhales a hot gust of fag smoke and sweat, instead. Desey, laughing, slinks back through the crowd and disappears. The music is loud, the mood expectant. The bare bulbs overhead are dimmed by red filters, giving the room an aura of warm doom. Desey and Arlo painted the walls black immediately after moving in, so that they suck in all the light. Barely visible are statements scrawled in white chalk: "Thee in control of thee" and "quim." People push past as she stumbles across the threshold and into the basement. The party hasn't yet reached capacity, but it feels like it might be a big one. An empty PVC gimp suit hangs loosely, its gaping zippered mouth gawping at her from a damp corner. She brushes past oily latex, and teetering stacks of porn magazines of all kinds. A raised wooden platform stands, makeshift, in the middle of the room, with space around it cleared as a dancefloor.

She can see Desey's profile spotlit through the bobbing heads, her sharp angular nose jutting above the white shaft of a cigarette between her lips. Its cherry jitters like a wasp. Her bandmate Chris stands next to her, stooping over two turntables with focussed intent. His curly hair hangs heavy, already wet with sweat. Desey vibrates with amphetamine energy, her gaze darting, challenging the crowd. The room trembles with a droning beat.

Connie finds a wall and leans against it. She rolls a cigarette, her elbows digging into the cold brickwork.

People's chatter is disjointed, false, and self-conscious. She watches the room as she smokes. Against the walls are two sofas with bodies squeezed onto them, white fluff poking through their torn stitching. Connie recognises Rosalia, an Argentinean artist, sitting quietly and leaning forward, wedged between two friends who converse across her back. An ashtray has been upturned in the pot of a cheese plant, and Connie watches as Rosalia fingers the butts into the soil, pushing each one slowly under, flicking the earth from fingertips before proceeding to the next.

For Connie, these parties promised so much, but usually delivered little besides a lingering sense of dread and a latent anxiety that some sort of building related issue would unfold. She needs to stay alert, just in case. She's already thinking about when she'll be able to leave.

Oblivious to her presence, a group of three men huddle on the end of the sofa like vultures. The only one Connie knows is Brian Lackey. During her introductory walk round of the building, he described a ritual he performed called "the shitting." To Connie's disbelief, he had demonstrated it, marching her towards the stall and standing in the open doorway. He'd looked her dead in the eyes and gone through the whole process. First he must check for flies or bugs in the water; next he must take sheets of paper and place individual squares around the seat so as to ensure his bottom did not touch the seat. He called this "preparing the toilet with papers." He did a final check, to ensure that there were no flies swarming in the bowl, or ants ready to crawl up his behind. Tonight, Brian is in full flow.

“I want to make work about life! Not aesthetics and colour,” Brian is saying to the other two men.

“But Brian, painting keeps me sane,” the other man responds, frustrated, hitting his pudgy fists on the arm of the sofa.

“I understand that.” Brian says, reassuringly.

“I wouldn’t normally tell anyone this, Brian, but when I’m painting I’m getting into a sort of ritual,” the third confesses.

“Yes, yes — exactly, exactly. That’s it!” Brian replies, excited. All three are gesticulating wildly now, their heads — inches apart — poised in a triangle of mutual cock respect.

STEEL
body expressing

LINTEL
our basement party swinging

PANE
coal thrown down a metal shoot

LINTEL
try not to react to em bearing down on our floorboard stop creaking hold tight

(It's coming.)

PANE
red and wet across splintered grain gas released through back passage expulsion throughout whole being

(You've got to be quiet.)

STEEL
low wheeze hot spittle fingers scramble

(Hold my arms.)

PANE
a bloody show molasses

LINTEL
reaching down those sweet eyes wide

STEEL
its easing its easing.

LINTEL
wicked stands still and rigid a girder holding up this scene devouring it

(I hurts like nothing — I can't.)

(You will.)

(I don't want it to.)

STEEL
in these moments we try and act like we not here

(It's coming!)

PANE
the air of the inner organism monstrous heavy limbed
clutched its liquid head toes curling

STEEL
we cant leave

PANE
cracked attention is full

(Uh, guh, uh.)

(I'm going to put some music on.)

PANE
salty moist heels cracked with cold bleary organic recess

(We can't leave.)

LINTEL
push

20

Through the gloom, she spots Sophie sitting crossed-legged on top of a bank of filing cabinets in the far corner of the room. It's wedged between a Belfast sink, and the row of small barred windows high up in the wall looking out onto the fields. Tactical. From this elevated lookout, Sophie has a clear view of the party.

Connie sidesteps the vultures and picks her way through the bodies swaying around the stage. She spots Jim huddled around a table, commanding a group of people she hasn't seen before: posters in their satchels, berets and badges across their lapels. Students.

"Well, fancy seeing you here," Sophie yells over the music.

"Did I miss the performance?" Connie asks, grunting as she pulls herself up.

"Not yet."

"What's taking so long?" Sophie had a habit of finding the best angles in a room, places where she could see and not be seen.

"Arlo had an asthma attack," Sophie replies.

"Shit." Connie pulls a flask of gin from her pocket and takes a swig. "How you doing?" she asks, reaching for Sophie's cigarette and noting her dilated pupils.

"Fine. Still working through some things." Sophie replies.

Connie nods. Their weekly enlarging sessions hadn't resumed since Sophie returned from America. "How's it going?"

"I don't know. London feels so small."

Since the Open Studios, conversations with Sophie keep circling back to the threat of her departure. This restlessness was new, and reminded Connie that there was a lot she didn't know about Sophie.

"Uh oh. Incoming," Sophie says, nudging Connie.

A tug on the hem of her flares. She looks down at the egg-shaped clearing of Jim's bald patch. "I'm glad I caught you here," he says.

She knew what was coming. "Look, I know no one's been to see you about the leak, Jim, and I'm sorry about that. I have passed it onto management."

"Well, that's why I've not been paying the rent," Jim snaps.

Sophie yawns.

Connie stifles a laugh. "Right." Any excuse.

"I've had to put buckets down. It's not been right since those gypsies. That's almost a year Connie. A year."

"It's a party, Jim. Loosen the fuck up," says Sophie, patting his cheek roughly.

Jim's eyes flare with anger. The music stops. A harsh white light illuminates the stage, and a smoke machine hisses sharply. The sound of coughing disperses through the crowd. Arlo swaggers towards the microphone and points a Polaroid camera at the audience. A flash of light, and the shock of his crooked smile seared across Connie's retina in the afterimage. Jim shrinks back into the smog. Wordlessly, Sophie jumps down and moves to the front. Caught in the glare of the strobe her limbs moves mechanically. "How much do you love me?" Arlo bleats. Sniggers echo through the audience. Long, distorted whines streak from a cornet pressed to Desey's lips. The stuttering blips of a guitar riff build

steadily to form a rhythm. Bursts of electronic squawks from the turntable. Arlo, Desey and Chris retreat slowly, and a girl she doesn't recognise steps out on the studio floor, spotlit by a crisp beam. Silence descends. The crowd shuffles and realigns around the new performer.

The girl lies lifeless, a futuristic looking angel in a white and shiny spandex unitard. It's like the crowd are gathered in mourning to pay their respects. Horns sound; her cue, she starts to move. Slow and controlled, back arched, legs spread. She sways not to the beat but not against it either. Desey is in the corner, foot on the FX pedal, hands flexing around the body of a black guitar, fingers pulling at its strings. If the sounds had material form, they'd be sedimentary rock. The bass is strong and constant, pressurised air forced through metal. Waves of higher-frequency frosty synths follow for short bursts, and then they retreat. The girl appears moved by desire; it pulses from her body towards the crowd. Hips rise upwards and then flop down, the girl flat on her back, limp. No money shot, no climax. It's erotic to watch a body move to music, or be moved by music — Connie can't figure out which. Desey rocks slightly to keep the rhythm, to keep the beat. She speaks flatly into the microphone: *Beaded, jointed, nipple, replacement, phosphorus, calcium, salt, rust, sub, revolve, hydraulic, mechanism*. Her mantra fills the air like fuel vapors from industrial machinery. A brown stain grows in the centre of the girls kneecap, the blood rushing to form bruises underneath her skin. Connie scans the crowd momentarily; they appear transfixed, moving slowly towards the girl. She's unresponsive. She seems possessed. Connie thinks of physical things crumbling and glitching, tectonic plates shifting, buildings falling. The sound of echoing gunshots or an amplified metronome. The girl's hips buck up and down in acknowledgment of these reverberations.

The crowd begins to close in. Connie feels panic rising. Figures restrict her view of the girl. The windows have bars on them. The door is on the other side of the room. Her chest tightens. She can't breathe. The sounds from the stage recede into the distance. The room is disappearing. Spit pools in the corners of her mouth; she swallows, her mouth floods again. The bitter taste of gin coats her tongue. She's going to be sick.

STEEL
ripped rags in mouth

LINTEL
not surprised

(*Why, baby?)*

PANE
wicked brute searching through drawers looking for what

LINTEL
horrible racket

(Can you see the real me, doctor?
I went back to my mother
I said, "I'm crazy ma, help me."
She said, "I know how it feels son,
Cause it runs in the family.")

LINTEL
the din

STEEL
a caul of liquid exploding

PANE
oh not now clicky clicky click seen it all now we really have flash

LINTEL
watching not moving just waiting little un calling

PANE
backed up against us belt flapping opening internal hinges realigning

(I don't want it out.)

STEEL
bargework

LINTEL
gushing into us surface throbbing liquid warm

(It has to come.)

STEEL
a mess

(Push.)

PANE
getting weaker loosening grip

(You better push.)

STEEL
not helping

PANE
snap back a shiny conker cracked sprouting black hair

STEEL
pushing

PANE
slithering sausage string gulping down.

(Wahhh, wahhh.)

LINTEL
wicked one got it

STEEL
what in hand

PANE
cant see

STEEL
what

PANE
nothing

LINTEL
no

STEEL
quiet

LINTEL
no no no no no no no no no no

PANE
yes

(You got altered information
You were told to not take chances
You missed out on new dances
Now you're losing all your dimples.)

LINTEL
hows little un

PANE
limbs spent still leaking slow but steady

STEEL
sleeping

PANE
wrapping tea towels tightly swaddled package post

LINTEL
whats doing

PANE
sausage getting cool homing beacon

LINTEL
we cant keep it warm

PANE
jelly orbs folding blankly inside head flaps

22

"Connie, you ok?" Roger asks.

She's crouching unsteadily against the wall in the basement passage.

"Why are you dripping?" A puddle of water forms at his feet.

"I had to make a point."

"Huh?" she lifts her head from between her knees, nausea subsiding.

"I've been banned from the pub for not washing, so I came back to take a photograph of myself having a bath."

"Fully clothed?" she smiles weakly.

"They didn't stipulate!" He waves an outstretched arm in her face, a Polaroid between his fingers: "Proof!"

"Help me up…" she says.

He takes her hand and she rises unsteadily.

"Is the performance still going on?" she asks.

"I think it just finished. What happened?"

The crowd spills out into the passage, and new arrivals descend the basement steps. Connie collapses into Roger; bodies jostle around them as they squirm and fight for a way out. Pulled in opposite directions by the throng, they're separated, and she finds herself released into the bunker. Martello Street's ground zero. A pitch-black windowless space, usually the solitary domain of Mexus and their kinetic experiments, but tonight occupied for entirely different purposes. Low funk guitar and Jane Birkin's dulcet tones

emanate from the record player. The smell of Palo Santo. She breathes. She relaxes in the dark, safe in the knowledge she can't be seen. She steps forward. Waits. Fingers gently intertwine with hers. She lets them pull her deeper in.

Some time later, she emerges from the bunker through the back basement stairwell. This side of the building — the side closest to the railway line — is quiet. She looks around furtively, climbing the stairs but passing no one. She ties her hair, wipes her face, adjusts her clothes, and swallows the memory. She makes her way slowly up and through the building, in search of Martello Street's highest point; the roof had saved her during the summer, and she needs its perspective now.

Connie reaches the hatch at the top of the third floor stairwell. She budges the stiff door with her shoulder, and it swings open. She climbs out onto the small patch of cracked asphalt. Like all the building's common areas, the traces of past happenings remain: empty bottles, a deflated football, a woolly hat. The old deckchair creaks under her weight. Cold in her vest, she looks out across the empty fields — a swathe of black reaching into the distance, a tiny speckling of street lamps lining Broadway Market beyond. Her breath fogs. The distant blare of horns and passing cars sound from Mare Street, the buses shunting along Bethnal Green Road. From here, the basement is a low thrum. Her mouth tastes foreign with the combination of other people's spit. She smiles and takes another swig of gin from the flask, pulling her tobacco out of her pocket. *Who's counting?*

She shivers in the chill air and stamps her feet for warmth, sucking at the end of her cigarette and flicking it into the sand bin where it fizzles. She feels

tired, but there are too many strangers in her building for her to rest. She scrambles back through the hatch and begins her walk around.

The third floor is brightly lit, but deserted. As she moves through the passage, Connie reaches upwards and pulls the light cords, re-establishing the darkness. She lingers momentarily at Sophie's door, hearing animated conversation and a burst of her distinctive cackle.

As she descends through the building, the sounds from the basement become sharper, crooning piano, tambourine and ukulele telling her that the cabaret portion of the evening was underway. Everyone would be down there now.

She reaches the ground floor. A pattern of circular impressions from factory table legs are stamped into the concrete by the weight of the old machines. The circles stare back at her like frightened eyes. At the rear fire exit, she checks the push release bar. Secure. The door leads directly outside onto a steel fire escape that snakes up the back of the building. She would wait out the rest of the party in her cottage. Connie turns.

"Kieran, hi!" She hadn't heard him coming.

He stalls, clearing his throat. "Connie." Sweat beads on his forehead.

"Everything ok?" she asks.

"Grand. Busy. Got a deadline." He wipes his forehead and walks towards her, heading for the fire escape.

"All work and no play," she replies, and immediately regrets it.

"Something like that." He nods and starts off down the corridor.

"I've been meaning to ask you actually — have you got a minute?"

"Not really," he says, quickening his step.

"Oh come on," Connie calls after him, "it's almost Christmas. Let your hair down. Sophie loved it!"

At this, he stops. "Sophie?"

"I suppose I could do with a nightcap," he smiled.

Stepping in through the door of her cottage, she flips on the overhead light quickly. Standing next to Kieran she feels suddenly self conscious about her things: the poster and scarf tacked jauntily to the wall, the beaded necklaces dangling around her lamp. It all seems childish and affected. He stares at her photographs, both hands in his jean pockets.

"Do you want a drink?" she asks.

"Fine."

"It's gin," she replies.

"It'll do," he says, without turning to look at her.

She sets two mugs on the table and pours a generous measure into each. He has an energy about him. Alert. He tracks the perimeter of the room slowly, inspecting it. He fondles the corner of the closed curtains as though to remark on the fabric, flicking them apart instead with two long fingers.

"Looking for someone?" She feels the quick pulse of her heart in her chest.

He turns towards her, his face blank. "So how was the party?"

She holds his gaze and pulls out one of the two chairs from under the table, its legs scraping along the floor. She waits for him to take the seat next to her, but he moves past it and sits on the end of her bed, bouncing gently. The mattress springs wheeze softly under his weight. Seeing him now, captured in the

intensity of the overhead lamp, he looks older than she had thought. A network of fine lines spread out from the corners of his eyes.

"I just popped my head in," she replies. "It's busy down there." She sips her drink.

He reaches for the mug and knocks its contents back in one.

"So you were working tonight?" she asks.

"You could say that," he replies, still bouncing.

"I wouldn't do that. I made the bed base; not my best work.'

"Feels pretty sturdy," he shrugs. "What did you want to show me? I haven't got long."

She empties the last of the flask into his cup. "Wait here."

"I don't usually like surprises," he replies, as she races unsteadily up the stairs to her office and rips the NOVA cutting from her pinboard.

"So, he says, clapping his hands together as she returns. 'What have you found, Miss Busybody?" His voice is cold and hard.

She sits back down at the table. "I found this picture of a young Kieran."

He stops bouncing.

"Or should I say Kelly."

The vein in his right temple throbs.

She unfolds the paper and looks at him. "I didn't get it either. This is you isn't it?" She lays the page on the table, and swallows. He doesn't look at the paper. His dark eyes remain fixed on hers. His hand darts forward, but she's quicker, and his fingers grasp at nothing, curling into a fist.

"Give that to me," he hisses, standing. He leans on the table, the shadow of his body falling across her face.

"Why?" She hears her own voice, much quieter than she expected. She presses the piece of paper to her chest.

"I just want to look," he says, slowly.

He reaches his hand down to her face, and tucks a few strands of stray hair behind her ear. She smells chemicals — soap and ammonia. She flinches at his touch.

"You get me down here at two in the morning to see an old picture and then refuse to show me?" He crouches beside her, one arm wrapped around the back of her chair, the other flat on the table across her body, penning her in.

"Or did you want something else?" he asks, quietly. She can hear the menace in his voice. His eyes pass across the holes of her crocheted vest. He moves his hand from the table, pressing it firmly on her thigh.

"Get off me," she says.

"Give me the picture," he threatens, his grip tightening.

She flings it away from her.

He dives desperately, scrabbling for the scrap of paper. Righting himself, he flicks his hair. Breathing hard, he worms his hand into his pocket and pulls out a polished zippo lighter. He sparks the flint and holds the paper to the flame.

"Are you crazy?" Connie shouts, jumping to her feet.

He laughs, dropping the blazing ball and stamping on it sharply, grinding charred paper and ash into the linoleum with the toe of his boot.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Why did you do that?"

"What?" He sits back down on the bed, and resumes his bouncing. More slowly this time.

"Burn it! The photo — you didn't even look!"

"What photo?" He opens his arms like a magician completing a trick.

Their eyes meet.

"Well, back to it!" He slaps his thighs with both hands, jumps to his feet, and brushes her aside.

23

The morning after The Night.

She had slept fitfully, fully-clothed and buried under blankets, disturbed by voices and footsteps, doors slamming, people outside on the street. At each sound, she sat up rigid, gripping a pair of scissors she had put under her pillow for protection. At some point in the early hours she'd passed out, the scissors falling from her limp hand onto the rug.

She cracks her crusted eyes open, her mind racing, dreams confused with flashing memories from the night before. She had dreamt of small, scampering animals — tiny mice, scurrying and curling in cracks and cavities, dying, their bodies disappearing into a deep shag carpet that grew deeper and thicker as if fertilised by their decay.

She struggles out of bed, adjusting her clothes, and blunders into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Nescafe, six sugars. Sipping the dark brew, she massages her throbbing temples. Red wine and gin: a bad combination. Her encounter with Kieran configures hazily in her mind. Parties escalated things, she thought: they were an expulsion of collective tension, the kind built up whilst sharing space. She stands in the doorway of her bedroom. The footprint is there on the floor: smudges of ash, small scorch marks on the lino. Connie grabs her notebook from the bedside table. She looks through the pages of illegible notes drunkenly scrawled last night holed up in her cottage, certain Kieran

would return. She feels relieved, and last night's paranoia dissipates. She shakes her arms as if shrugging off a shiver, feeling that she had escaped something.

After a tepid bath and another cup of coffee, Connie is bundled up in her overalls. It's mid-morning, long after her usual start time, and she feels guilty at wasting the day. The thought of a cigarette makes her want to throw up, but she takes her tobacco anyway.

She steels herself before opening the front door; once out of the cottage, she would be fire-fighting. Whatever had cropped up, she would have to try and deal with — shoo off the stragglers, close doors, clear mess. Sophie had shown her an article about an American artist who did cleaning performances. She called them "maintenance works," and had written a manifesto: Who's Going to Clean up After the Revolution? She listens at the threshold. The building is dormant, as though struck by shame at having hosted so many bodies. Sometimes it took days to grind into gear after a big night, almost as if recovering from all it had witnessed. Connie, too, moved more slowly in these hours, trying to be sensitive to the building's revival. She savours the pain of her headache, still present but masked by caffeine. She's survived. She takes a deep breath and pushes open the door.

The sky above her is ice-blue and the day is dry and cold. First, she spots a grey, ghostly mass gleaming in mucus on the floor of the courtyard, its surface wrinkled with a bluish tinge; then a slick of fibrous tissue twirled around the handle of the bin. She follows the trail of blood some distance to the final, smallest portion — a chunk of matter threaded with vessels, caught on the railings near to the front gate, shrivelling in the drying air.

Connie retches, steadying herself against the wall with a hand. Arlo and Desey often used offal and blood — begged from the butchers — to make the latex fakery in their performances more convincing. She was angry they'd left all this out to spoil. She could smell the strong, musky odour of fox piss. Animal destruction had a specific quality; over the years she'd been a caretaker she'd become familiar with its different forms. The contents of the masticated bin bags had been scattered in a frenzy: dried paint tubes, shrivelled apple cores, tea bags, food waste and noxious chemicals mingled fusing together in decomposition. Begrudgingly, she's impressed by the realism of Arlo and Desey's stunt. It's a pity they hadn't considered who'd be doing the cleaning up, not that they ever did. She bends to rescue a punctured bin bag, its contents spilling from a hole the shape of a gurning mouth. The bag slips in her hands, tearing wide open, and a wine bottle falls, plinking loudly off the concrete, skidding but not breaking. Blood soaked, soggy matter plops out onto her shoes: tissues and rags soaked in dark red, newspapers wadded up.

"Bollocks! That's *it*," she says under her breath.

She strides down the stairs to the basement two at a time, carrying the disintegrating, bloody bin bag towards Arlo and Desey's door and dropping it on the step, her adrenaline pumping. She beats on the wood with the side of her fist. Muffled voices, a crash, hands fumbling at the bolts, hoarse arguing. The door creaks ajar to reveal Desey in a moth-eaten black silk dressing gown, her eyes puffy and her heavy mascara smudged across her cheeks. She squints at Connie.

"Uh hum," Desey sniffs.

"What do you mean 'uh hum'?" Connie barks.

"Everything ok?" Desey replies, her pupils like big black pennies.

"What the fuck happened here?" She gestures at the mess between her feet.

"Uh, that's a heavy flow," Desey laughs.

"Next time, do a better job of clearing up, Desey! You're taking the piss. I'm not your fucking servant," Connie says, gesturing into the basement.

Desey looks confused. "What you goin' on about, Con?"

She pulls the gown tighter around her bare chest, and clenches her teeth, trying to stop the grinding of her jaw.

"This stuff — this bloody mess! Chunks of it hanging off the fence! Do you think I'm in the mood? The foxes have thrown it all over the place."

"You *what*?" Desey looks genuinely shocked. "Connie, please, my head is raging, ok? Give us a few hours, and I'll help you later, I promise."

She closes the door.

Connie throws the ragged bin bag against the basement door. It splatters and drips down the chipped paint. Fine. If they didn't care, why should she? They can clear it up.

She picks her way back up the steps and through the courtyard, avoiding the bloody rags and a slick of curdled milk. She opens the door to her cottage and closes it hard behind her. A mouse's tail vanishes behind a tin of powdered custard on the kitchen shelf. She lets out a deep breath and slides down the back of the door to sit on her haunches. The cottage seemed smaller than it usually did. She sat there for a minute, her anger failing to subside, and then banged her head back on the door. She was sick of these people. In her head, she replayed last night's argument with Kieran. Things hadn't come out right. She wouldn't stand for it. She was angry that he had made her feel scared and unsafe in her

own bedroom, and she was angry that she couldn't make him feel like that. She hated that he'd made Sophie question herself, when she was usually so sure, so confident. How many other women was he terrorising? It was her building! He had to leave. She had to get him out.

Within minutes, she is mounting the stairs to the second floor. She raises her fist to knock on Kieran's door, when there's a sound at the end of the corridor.

"Not now, Jim, I'm busy," she snaps.

"Looking for Kieran?"

'Yes, I am, actually. Have you seen him?'

"Not today, no." He wobbles his chin flaps at her, fat tongue smacking.

Connie turns back to the door and hammers on it loudly. "Kieran!"

"I think he had a busy night," he titters.

"Jim, just fuck off, will you!"

She hammers again, louder. She forces the handle, slamming her shoulder into door. It swings open.

A thin mattress, yellow ringed splotches across its faded surface, stands stripped and tipped up against the wall. The narrow metal locker that each studio was required to have for flammable materials stood erect, its door hanging open. The floorboards are scrubbed clean, and the room smells strongly of chemicals: disinfectant, bleach. Cold air blows in through the window which yawns open. She shivers. The gas heater he had borrowed from the store stands disconnected in the corner; its hose neatly coiled. An exposed bulb swings

overhead, and she turns it on. Behind her she feels Jim retreating, she turns but he's gone.

Connie stands alone in the doorway. She walks into the studio and closes the window, snapping the latch closed. The sill is clean, as though recently wiped. She paces along the edge of the room, the floorboards creaking under her feet, and peers into the tall metal cabinet. Its insides are bare. She steps towards the mattress cautiously and pulls it away, letting it fall to the floor with a soft thump. Nothing. No dust or dirt or hair or anything to indicate it had been occupied only the night before. *Fuck!* She kicks the wall. She sits down on one end of the mattress and leans forward, elbows on knees,scanning the room. There are no clues, no traces, nothing to go on. She's staring into a vacuum. She sighs, exhaustion setting in as her adrenaline subsides. She would have to fill the studio — another thing for her to-do-list.

24

24 December 1975

3 days after The Night

First they dunk the fillets, sometimes three times, their fingers pinching the tail end firmly as the batter slides back into the bucket. Connie loves watching them fry the fish; the way the fillets tremble as though electrified in the hot fat.

Fish and chips might be a lonely dinner on Christmas Eve, but Connie prefers it to cooking a meal for one. She likes being out in the city when it's quiet, and the chippy is a good place to think. She has her pick of the empty booths, and she shuffles into one of them, the back of her legs squeaking on the leatherette. She plonks her sweating parcel of newsprint on the Formica table. The fluorescent light flickers. She unzips her jacket and pulls it off her shoulders as clouds of steam from the fryer plume upwards, giving everything a greasy sheen.

Kieran's departure had seemed to shock no-one. People shrugged; artists were coming and going all the time. Least surprised of all was Sophie — she'd just shaken her head and said "I warned you not to let him get to you." Connie's protests had been futile, with Sophie cutting her short and refusing to talk about it any further. But she couldn't let it drop. She knew she'd missed something. She kept thinking about the night of the party, in her cottage; about his anger. She knew there was more to it.

She had gone back up to the studio, and found nothing. She'd called Martin, the studio manager, from a telephone box on Mare Street, hopping from

foot to foot in the cold and straining to hear over the roar of the busses through the slush. He was annoyed to be bothered this close to Christmas. He told her not to worry: that the previous resident had already settled their rent in advance; that they'd fill the studio in no time, and would she mind awfully clearing it for the next resident? *Thanks muchly*. When she explained that it was already spotless, he'd said "Well, that saves you a job, doesn't it, then, dear?" and put the phone down, leaving her standing there in the cold with the dial tone ringing in her ear.

She begins to unpeel the outer layers of newspaper, the type still legible, before rolling the parcel over to find the next pages translucent with grease, the softened paper tearing easily between her fingers. Good riddance to him. The only person who wanted to talk to her about it was Jim. He delighted in telling her elaborate stories: how he'd met Kieran secretly in Wapping, or how he'd been sent a telegram from Istanbul signed "K." As per, it turned out he knew less than she did.

She stares out of the windows, their big panes of glass fogged up with steam, and pulls out the notebook she started almost a year ago, each page crammed with her small, scrawling writing: lists upon lists; dates and names and sums. She'd be needing to get a new one soon. 1976.

She peels back the last layer of newspaper. The fish and chips unfurl, and sit squashed and steaming. She shakes the salt liberally over the misshapen mound and drenches the hot chunks of fried potato with vinegar. Connie always asks for them wrapped because they give you more. She stabs through the crispy batter of the fish with a wooden fork, and lifts the flakes into her mouth, rubbery and hot. She reaches for a crusty bottle of HP sauce and shakes out a big

brown blob onto the newspaper wrapper. She looks through her notes for anything she might not remember. Something to jog her memory.

Two street cleaners park up brush trolleys, pulling woollen hats from their grime-rimed faces as they approach the counter and order two servings of pie and chips. They must be working a half day today. Stuffed, Connie pushes away her dinner and sinks back into the banquette. A handful of chips lie scattered across the paper, leaving sticky trails of brown sauce. She thinks about the celebrations in Crawley, with everyone crammed around the electric fire in Nan's front room having sherries. She doesn't mind that she's missing it.

Her eyes drift over the newspaper, her stomach distended; she's warm and satisfied. She reads the first few words of a narrow column partially obscured by splodges of brown sauce: Hackney Girl Bleeds to Death on Bus. Another tale of woe. Connie leans forward, and reads: "Mrs Smith, a hotel maid, was making her way home to Bromley-by-Bow after dinner service when she witnessed the terrible ordeal. 'She was collapsed on the floor of the top deck, poor child, oh it was awful, she passed away right there in my arms. Seats were a picture. They might never get all that blood out. I'm still very upset by it all, you know; things are getting worse these days. It's not right.'"

The text continues, rendered unreadable by a stabbing chip fork. Underneath is a photograph — a school portrait of a girl with long hair, a pale round face, and pretty almond eyes. Her head is cocked slightly to one side, showing off a slender neck. Connie recognises her. From the party? No. A soaked grey skirt. Underneath the photo the caption reads: Brenda Webb, 15, of Barnet Grove, Bethnal Green. It's her! She sits up quickly, knocking chips onto the table. The girl in the rain! That's her!

Bones differ in character according to age, the use to which they are put and the existence of disease. In early life they are not fully ossified, whereas in old age they lose their resilience. A much larger quantity of fatty constituents is present. Where the bones have not been used, they do not possess the same amount of compact tissue, and become porous with a much greater chance of fracture occurring. For perseverance, strength, elasticity and lightness is needed. Healthy bone has all three.

25

21 December 1975

The Night.

He pauses with the last floorboard in his gloved hand. The word going around his head is "lucky." He'd always been this way. A lucky person had the foresight to put paper down. No, wait — maybe that was good sense. But getting it down before the blood? *That* was lucky. Not a drop! The wood feels damp, the ammonia makes his eyes sting. It'll pass. His whole body vibrates. He spins around instinctively. *Ha!* Needs to relax. He opens the window, inhaling sharply through his nostrils, filling his lungs. Breathing, still breathing. He almost wishes he could stay. Painting in here would be a trip. He isn't a religious man, but he believes in certain energies.

It's a common misunderstanding all blood squirts. Sometimes it does, if you do real damage — if you nick an artery. More often, it's like a tap left running, just gently oozing. Seeing blood drain out of a person makes you wonder how a body could ever contain it in the first place. He takes one last look and then nudges the edge of the plank into the recess at the base of the wall, letting it down gently, smoothing the floorboard flush with a few knocks of his fist at each corner. The groove between the boards splinters; it's nothing. He wouldn't say he feels powerful. More than anything, he feels surprised by his instincts. When it was screaming like that. He'd held it in his hands, and watched it try to breathe. A mouth full of gunk that he hadn't bothered to empty. Simple. Yes,

later she would thank him. Eyes spinning in her skull. Hadn't known a thing. He pats the roll of film in the top pocket of his jacket. Going to be a corker. It was the only thing to do in a situation like that. It really was her finest performance. He'd miss her. One day he'd look her up. Maybe.

Timing was lucky too. A party! Of all the nights. He shakes his head in disbelief. He leans on the sink. Who would people believe anyway? Didn't matter. She didn't matter. His hands were shaking. The feeling of holding a dead weight. A wave of energy rippled through him. Outside the sky is a deep Payne's grey. Not morning yet. The pulsing sounds of the party audible still, carried through the open window. Will need to be careful avoiding the last dregs. The hands of his watch nudge four. He's not tired, he's ready. Tapping the floorboards with a bare foot, he realises he hadn't even looked to see if it were a boy or a girl? He pauses. No, the mess isn't worth it. Who cares, and he needs to get packing. He's used to going lightly, not leaving a trace. This time it had been close. That photograph: an error of judgment. He knew he shouldn't have posed for it, but vanity had gotten the better of him.

Learnt a valuable lesson there. He shakes his head. Dealt with that busybody bitch, hadn't he? Dealt with it all. Time to move on. He can settle wherever; he knows how to build things, he isn't workshy. Artists getting comfortable in cosy studio set ups? Not his thing. Women nosing in his business? Fuck off. It had only ever been somewhere to lay his head. Besides, the street is as good a studio as any; he always told people that. He needed to be amongst it, out there — in *real life*. Otherwise you go soft. Nice to get a bit of distance from this lot. He hated all the talk. He has always been interested in experiences, in confronting the actual thing, the moment: paint and skin, pain and flesh, life.

He'd heard Berlin was entertaining in the spring. Lakes. Museums. Nice girls.

This town is dead.

An infectious disease is the result of illness brought about through microbiological attacks from bacteria, viruses, fungi or parasites. The levels of virulence and contagion are important factors in the behaviour of a disease and key variables in the course it takes. Virulence is the ability of a pathogen to cause disease, while contagion is the capacity of a disease to spread. Pathogen as in germ - from the Greek 'suffering, passion'. Sickness can be suffered like a passion.

26

10 June 2017

41 years, 5 months and 21 days after The Night.

Upstairs, the toilet flushes, and James scrambles to his feet. What is he doing? He could put the board back. It's nothing probably: a dead pet. A cat? He could pretend he never found it. But it would be weird knowing it was there. He strains to make out the direction of Jenny's shuffling footsteps. Quiet resumes.

Ok. He squats beside the cavity in the floor. No denying it — they were blood stains. Old blood stains. He winces. Moving quickly, he fishes for a pair of marigolds from the cupboard underneath the sink. He needs to tackle this fast. In a seminar on crisis management he had attended with work, the speaker had emphasised that it was crucial to remain calm and confident in front of the client; to figure out the broadest paramaters of the scenario before devising a play. For the first time since they moved, he hopes Jenny stays in bed for a while. Gloved and sweating, he straddles the cavity at the base of the wall, cupping his hands under the bundle and agitating it gently. It's much lighter than he anticipated, its form giving slightly under the pressure of his fingers. Not soft exactly, tougher than that, more like leather. He winces again. A cat, surely. He tilts the bundle, its covering of silt dislodging and falling onto the plastic sheeting. He wrinkles his nose, the musty smell growing stronger. He'd always had a thing about dirt;

he remembers, with a fleeting, sinking shame, his father's face when as a child he'd cry if he got any on his clothes.

It's been quiet downstairs for a while, and Jenny wonders what it is that has distracted him? Sometimes she feels closer to James when they're physically apart, held at a safe distance by layers of new plaster. She should get up. She looks at the swatches on the wall opposite her bed: raw, fleshy colours with pervy names like Nancy's Blushes, Charlotte's Locks, and Eating Room Red. Their friends Candice and Dan had gone for a bright statement pink and a cool slate grey. James had pretended not to really care about colours, only to dismiss all of her suggestions. So the flat stayed white, pockmarked with tester pot daubs. Is she really about to paint her bedroom the colour of a cervix? Her stomach groaned.

Six months ago, the last time she saw Ally, she'd been so excited. James had even commented on it. Breezy. Jenny had met her at the airport, heart pounding, and they'd stopped in Pizza Express by Victoria Station. Ally asked "So you and James, did you talk?"

"We're buying a house," Jenny had replied, taking a gulp of wine.

"You *are* joking, aren't you, Jen?" Ally asked, her eyes widening. "Didn't you tell him about coming to America?"

"We just signed the lease on a flat — it's in London Fields. It's, erm, it used to be artists' studios."

Ally's face tightened. "Of course it did."

"It just makes sense."

"We've had so many conversations about this. What do you think it is you're doing?" Ally's voice broke as she folded her arms across her body.

"It just makes sense not to rent anymore," Jenny said, looking down at the pile of pizza crusts on her plate.

"What about gentrification? What about James? It doesn't make any sense at all, Jenny." She felt Ally's disappointment overriding her anger.

They didn't see each other for the rest of the trip. In the months that followed, they didn't speak. Moving to America had never felt like something fully real, but the fantasy had sustained her. Imagining a future with Ally allowed Jenny to endure all the disappointments. Now it was gone; the offer was withdrawn, and she was trapped. Since moving into Martello Street, her body had given up completely. Noises commenced again downstairs. She should eat, or at least go see what overpriced loaf he'd brought back.

She sees James from the fourth step, his body hunched over the kitchen island, arms outstretched like a general contemplating strategy. His hair is grey with dust. She steps down one more tread, and James reels around sharply.

"Jenny!"

He tries to block her view with his body.

It's too late; she's seen it.

Rags, peeled back like petals, and at the heart of it a tiny petrified trunk. Frozen, twisted in its first fidget; a hard cord, black and dry. Neither of them move.

"What the fuck is that?" Jenny says.

"Don't," James replies, his voice trembling. "It was under the floor."

"Under the floor? What were you doing with it?"

"I was going to — I don't know."

He looks scared. "It was hidden," she says, moving closer. It doesn't look real; the skin is spoilt, waxy, shrivelled. She counts toes: a baby. The face unformed, inverted. An expression of pain preserved.

"Don't touch it, for God's sake."

"These are old tea towels. My nan had something similar."

James starts to circle the table. "What if it's diseased?"

"Calm down."

"Well, I'm sorry, but it's bloody ghoulish, isn't it?"

"It's a baby," she says, softly.

"Fuck."

Their eyes meet for a moment.

"Are you ok?" Jenny asks.

He raises both hands behind his head, grimacing in pain as the yellow rubber from the gloves pulls at his hair.

"What are we going to do with you?" Jenny says, quietly, leaning in close to the tiny body.

"Er, we need to call the police," James says.

She marvels at its gnarled, peach stone face.

"This is clearly a crime scene," James says.

"Clearly? You don't know that — it could have died of natural causes."

“Oh yeah, sure. Natural to hide a baby among your water pipes is it?” He starts moving back and forth, patting his pockets, moving boxes around.

“James?”

“I’m trying to find my phone. What the hell does one do with a fossilised baby?”

“No, wait — don’t call anyone.”

“We need to do something!” he shouts.

“Wait.” she pauses.

James stops. He sits down on the sofa. He knows that she’s right to say he needs to calm down; he needs to get a hold on the situation. He looks at the rough, rectangular hole in the floor. Suppose they put it back — in two or three years’ time, they’d be sold up, and they’d have moved further out. To Surrey or Walthamstow. New owners none the wiser. What would his dad do? He clears his throat.

“Whoever did this was desperate,” Jenny says, before pausing. “We’ve basically disturbed a grave.”

She watches James turning the situation over in his head, face twitching. She looks back at the baby. Poor thing. Stuffed under the floor. All that time under there, and now in the light. Ally had been right: they were trampling all over the past. This discovery couldn't be anything but a bad omen, and yet Jenny isn't scared. It’s a confirmation of something she feels in her gut. Things not meant to be buried would always come back up. Two wretched births. It had to be confronted.

“This feels like history.”

“What does that mean?”

"Us. This." She gestures at the boxes of stuff. "And that," she adds, pointing to the baby.

He doesn't say anything.

"I need to leave, James."

He doesn't reply.

"I need to leave here," she repeats.

He puts his hands to his head, and looks at the table.

"But what about our plans?" he asks, suddenly flapping his arms. "What about all this stuff?"

"I don't want this. Take my bit of the mortgage. I'm sure your parents will help you out."

"*Fuck you*." He pulls the rubber gloves off and throws them in her face.

"Fine," Jenny says quietly, rising to her feet.

"No, wait!" James grabs her shoulders; pushes to her to sit back down. "I think we should just put it back. Look, we can get a rug?"

He jumps up, and with pinched fingers he begins folding the tea towels over the baby, retching as he brushes the skin of its exposed belly. The Fitbit on his wrist beeps and James snatches at it, tearing off the silicone rubber strap and throwing it across the room in one hard movement. Jenny watches as it hits the back of the front door and disintegrates, scattering in sharp fragments across the floor.

SOILBEND: Black cast iron soil bend, left of main entrance.

LINTEL: First soldier course brick lintel, basement facing London Fields.

STEEL: Steel truss, recently painted white, apex of roof, near railway line.

FIBREOPTIC: Fibre optic broadband cable entering termination box corridor reception area, ground floor.

TIMBER: New joists in loft conversion, flat 4, second floor, CLS treated, ext. grade.

STEEL
well well

SOILEBEND
today was the day

LINTEL
baby belongs to us

SOILBEND
we kept it hidden from crawlies kept it tight

STEEL
helped slow things down

LINTEL
good riddance canker to our soul

FIBREOPTIC
search shifting pallor acidic harden into clots thicken sink inferior livor

STEEL
a traumatic occupation

FIBREOPTIC
search algor wet settles pressure fizz react fuse and form gel stiffness

STEEL
our secret

FIBREOPTIC
search flaccid floopy flaccid lividity suggillation surface no agitation mean

SOILBEND
sinking purple rainbow

STEEL
had worse

LINTEL
this little thing swelled leaked a bit but no trouble at all

SOILBEND
not its fault

STEEL
but they put it back

LINTEL
told you they were a few rolls short of a picnic

TIMBER
tickled

STEEL
despite everything

LINTEL
no one ever puts anything back

TIMBER
always extracting

LINTEL
we never been hung up on death

TIMBER
what it mean to be living anyway

FIBREOPTIC
representing capital moral depravity interests productivity

STEEL
weve always worked with you

TIMBER
that’s why you made us

LINTEL
we fit in your hands

STEEL
truth is we think we’ve been dead for sometime

LINTEL
couldnt tell you how exactly but

STEEL
things just feel different

FIBREOPTIC
less dynamic

LINTEL
the fact of our death makes this charade all the more distasteful

STEEL
grisly we mean

LINTEL
yes grisly better

STEEL
dress us in a brand new outfit sure

LINTEL
big hands chipping away at us like nobody's business

STEEL
call it our duty

LINTEL
we could teach them a thing or two about agency

SOILBEND
calm down honestly what did we expect

STEEL
what we couldn’t figure out was why they’d be removing what we’d just put on

SOILBEND
does anything they do make sense

LINTEL
still glad they found it even if they putting it back

SOILBEND
give em a fright though didnt it

STEEL
for the dynamics

LINTEL
get out love

STEEL
we never wanted to be used in the first place

Those who suffer have limited options: die, survive or recover. Acute infections are rapid kinds of diseases, rare for their handiwork to reach bone; death arrives first. Meanwhile, a chronic infection lasts, recurring once or many times over a long period, even a lifetime. The basic response to an attack of pathogens is inflammation, a process of pain, heat, redness and swelling. Inflammation can lead to skeletal changes; from pitting of the bone surface to the growth of disorganised woven bone and compact bone. Shadows appear on X-Rays. In severe cases of infection new bone can actually form around dead bone like a rotten toffee apple. The bottom line: bone persists in whatever way it can.

28

14 October 1974

1 year, 2 months and 7 days before The Night.

The lip gloss label reads Kissing Potion, and it's the colour of rust. Sitting amongst eye shimmer and powdery blush, the lip gloss sparkles in its little glass roller applicator. The girl watches two shop assistants in white tunics assemble the display: Promise Richie your Raspberry Kisses, the slogan reads. Peeking through gaps between bottles of shampoo, she watches their candyfloss hair bobbing as they bend to unpack boxes, arranging the products into attractive clusters. Orange Crush was the one she wanted; it would go with her hair, it was sticky, as sweet as marzipan. She rolls the hard little ball over her lips, and her nose twitches, sniffles: it tickles!

Brenda is fourteen, but people say she's tall for her age. Early bloomer, her mum says. Some people say she's flighty, which she likes; others say bolshy, which she doesn't. Deep down, she doesn't care what they say. She lifts her dimpled chin. They're just jealous of you, her mum says. Sticks and stones. She wears her uniform in the evenings after school, folding her dowdy old blazer into her satchel. She does her best with what she's got.

Brenda gets out whenever she can. She wanders around Bethnal Green, sometimes walking with no destination at all, just following her nose. She knows all the short cuts, the fences with holes in; which curtains twitch, which

dogs bark. She likes to sit on the benches in London Fields and dream about being an air hostess. A trolley dolly, her mum says.

"That's not your colour, dear," the pharmacy worker says, gesturing to Kissing Potion.

Brenda shrugs and pretends to return it to the shelf, slipping it up her blouse sleeve instead. She lingers at Revlon touching as many tubes as she can, testing them all out until the back of her hand is shimmering like a peacock's tail. Over at the till, the shop assistants eye her uneasily. She heads to the perfume rack, spritzing a couple of squirts of Charlie Blue across her blouse before flicking her hair, smiling, and turning sharply on her heel. She's going places.

On the street outside the market, sellers are counting notes and loading vans. In less than twelve hours they'll be back unpacking everything again. She is already so bored with this horrid place. Maybe it's his hair; thick and curly, dark brown the colour of chestnuts. It hangs past his shoulders, just like the boys on Top of the Pops. Maybe it's his jeans: stone washed, and flared below the knee. Maybe it's the way he walks in them: hips first, snaking, ladies clutching their pearls as he passes. Maybe it's the camera swinging from his neck, like a fashion photographer, looking famous; or like a reporter, looking fearless. Maybe she's just bored.

She first sees him shouldering through the men outside the bookmakers, their pink balding heads a sea of thumbs, waving slips and shouting. Without thinking she follows him. She can hear the clip of his heels against the pavement ahead of her. She likes his boots, imagining them set down neatly in the hall next to her mother's flat pumps and her own patent leather lace ups.

He heads north towards Hackney. She has to rush to keep pace with his loping gait. She reaches the corner fewer than ten paces behind. Maybe he lives in the squats around the fields. “Hippies need to get proper jobs,” her mum says.

The work day is ending. Traffic shunts forward nose-to-tail, brakes squeaking. The shops thin out and so do the people. The pavement widens. She slows down. Exposed. She follows him past the mechanics in the railway arches; past the shell of a car, its parts splayed on the floor around its body. Three men in grubby overalls drink mugs of tea, their faces black with grease and the pinks of their mouths glistening wet.

By the canal, he turns from the main road, uphill towards Broadway Market. She’s relieved he hasn’t gone down to the towpath. She avoids the canal. No lights. It’s a place for rats and dredgers, stinking barges, all full of rubbish. She watches his jeans crease around his bum as he walks. She feels his rhythm feeding her own and imagines what it would be like to kiss him. She slips the lip-gloss roller out of her sleeve and re-applies it thickly.

For a moment she worries she’s lost him. Then he’s there, walking to the left of the Fields, towards the streets her mum warned her about: “Do not go down there! Never!” Full of grimy, brick houses. Squats and squatters, hippies, drunks and druggies, low-down dirty families kicked out of other places. The vacant terraces were “like broken teeth in a healthy mouth,” her mum said, rows and rows of them, their windows and doors bricked up, scorched boards and hoarding, corrugated metal nailed over.

He turns down Lansdale Road. She steadies herself, turning to look back over the green. Past the green lies the railway line, the grocer’s, the Queen’s Head, and then her own little bedroom with its purple sheets and cream walls.

She was further out of her territory with each nervous step. No people she could see now. No cars, no dogs, no washing lines fluttering. No windows! At the end of the street, a pile of broken furniture and rubber tyres. Footprints trail mud all over. The street has a dead end. She can't see him. Her mouth is dry, sickly with the fake orange flavour. He must be inside one of them. Is he watching her? She straightens her hair, tilts her head, stands up tall. She looks towards the entrance of one of the houses, its doorway in shadow. The corrugated metal sheeting has been peeled back like a scab. She walks up the path towards the door. Weeds up to her waist. She steps inside.

"Have you been following me?" His voice is quiet and deliberate. The layout of the house is just like her mum's. As her eyes adjust to the gloom, she sees the toes of his boots.