

# Sovereign

Sam Diamond



# I

There has not been a miracle in years.

On a rainy night in late September, an overpass collapses onto the M25. All five lanes are blocked by debris. Cars scream to a halt, a black BMW careers across the central reservation. A lorry carrying produce for a large supermarket chain attempts to avoid the pile-up, its wheels aquaplane over the puddled tarmac, its trailer traces a crescent around the cockpit, the driver battles to keep the vehicle upright, barely succeeds, the doors of its container swing open, crates of fruit and vegetables tumble out from within.

There are no injuries, a fact those present describe to the assembled television crews as an act of God, a blessing, a miracle. A few note seeing a brief flash of light prior to the collapse.

Despite Highways England's protestations that such a thing could not happen on its own, the incident is widely interpreted as a symptom of the dire state of the nation's infrastructure.

The security services begin looking into a series of railway malfunctions that British Rail insists are the result of sabotage: signalling mechanisms failing to fire; barriers at road crossings shortcircuiting; sections of track inexplicably eroding.

A few members of the national press take a passing interest but, citing a lack of credible evidence, are quick to conclude their investigations.

Flight delays, initially due to a tight labour market and a corresponding uptick in union activity, are compounded by a series of anonymous threats called in to airlines. There are cascading cancellations across the continent. The police are not able to trace the calls.

Soon there are too many incidents to put down to entropy. An explanation must be found. Commentators are hesitant to attribute a common theme. There is too much we don't yet know, they say. Amateur investigators, unbound by press standards guidelines, fill the speculation gap: It could be Russia or China, they suggest, Hamas or Brussels.

Those held in custody are between the ages of twenty and forty. They have clean criminal records. There is little to connect them. The police have managed to arrest only those who have handed themselves in, those who seemingly wanted to be caught, whose infractions are minor.

The suspects refuse to cooperate with investigations. They meet the police's questions with silence, decline to meet with the state legal counsels mandated to defend them.

For the next few weeks no one can talk about anything else. There are lines at the pumps, supermarket shelves lay barren. The government urges calm.

An unwieldy coalition of opposition MPs, activist lawyers, the Socialist Workers Party, concerned members of the professional class and an assortment of dreadlocked anarcho-primitivists marches on Westminster. They bang drums, chant slogans, leave peacefully.

A woman in her mid-forties applies the logic of the zodiac to what the papers have branded Britain's Winter of Chaos. She can predict when the next attack will happen, she tells the camera, gesturing to an animated map of the constellations suspended on a green screen behind her. Her videos are widely circulated in group chats and across social media platforms.

We live at a time when many events are difficult to comprehend, she says. Trying to understand them will only end in frustration.

With no new information forthcoming from the authorities and the attacks becoming a part of everyday life, the public apparently agrees.

This is just what it's like these days, they tell one another. This is what happens now.



## *Will*

Will winced as he scalded his lips on the remains of the previous evening's joint. A couple of burning rocks spilled onto his bare chest and were quickly extinguished by droplets of sweat that had begun to form in the shallow recesses separating his abdominal muscles. He had got out of bed to let some air in and found himself perched on the windowsill, observing the traffic below, smoking.

Kamal would still be asleep. Will didn't know much about Kamal's job. He suspected he lay on the living room sofa for most of the day, watching cricket and ignoring emails.

Will was out of the house before Kamal woke up, weaving through stationary cars and buses on his way to Soho. His high usually started to dissipate as he reached Elephant and Castle roundabout, so he often stopped at the apex of Waterloo Bridge to take a hit of his pen, squatting on the top bar of his frame as commuters made their way around him and exhaling a plume of strawberry-laced vapour over the Thames below.

Will collected packages, followed directions on his phone, handed over the packages. He repeated these steps each day until he reached the goal set for him by the app.

There were tiers of payment. If he managed to make more than thirty deliveries his compensation increased by twenty per cent. If he made more than seventy deliveries his compensation increased by fifty per cent. He had never reached either of these targets.

Once he had achieved his minimum delivery goal for the day he often went to a park or to a pub or to a pool hall, and from there on to someone's flat, where he and his friends stayed until they ran out of drugs or the sun began to rise, and the following day his body would feel slow and cumbersome while his mind would be liberated by the fatigue; an afterglow transforming everything he saw into a vector of potential bliss.

Brief snatches of conversations he'd had with strangers resurfaced as he went about his day, their faces blending into a single mass that seemed to him like a symbol of the vast potential afforded by the

city, where nothing could ever feel stale or old, although sometimes he felt like everything was too much, an intuition accompanied by the stirring of a dormant panic that he immediately repressed.

Sometimes he wondered what the packages contained. If he was delivering to a law firm or a media company he could assume he was transporting case documents or hard drives containing raw video footage, but for the most part the locations were nondescript, just offices guarded by inattentive receptionists who did all they could to avoid eye contact.

Most of the depot operators had once been couriers themselves. They spoke of a golden age when the money was good and they'd been rushed off their feet. They had abided by an unwritten code, followed maps in their heads, communicated via esoteric jargon that frothed forth from pocket radios.

All that was over now. Many of the clients that had once been their most lucrative, the media houses and the advertising agencies and the film production companies, had stopped giving them work. And everything had to go through the app.

Will liked doing what the app told him to do, following the directions on his phone and receiving payment as soon as a package was confirmed as delivered. He liked the simplicity of the system. It required minimal thought, leaving him free to concentrate on other things.

On the quieter days they hung around on the street outside the depot and smoked and talked. Sometimes his managers told him things he didn't know: how the Freemasons were behind the Vatican II reforms, where he could find entry points to London's labyrinthine network of subterranean byways, which pubs operated as fronts for underground political sects.

He thought about these things as he went about his deliveries, stoned and numb. It was pleasant just to think, and sometimes he wondered whether he was having truly original thoughts, thoughts which he soon forgot, although the feeling of being privy to information he alone possessed stayed with him.

Today he rode shirtless, his courier pack chafing against his bare skin. The app had no jobs available so he stopped in Soho Square, where he lay reading a book he'd taken from Kamal. It contained maps of

the city overlaid with ley lines that intersected churches and palaces and long-covered archaeological sites of Roman significance.

He ingested a few of Kamal's mushrooms, which he had found squirrelled between copies of two identical style magazines on the living room bookshelf, chewing the dry matter into an earthy pulp. He resolved to replace them and began to write a text to his dealer and a short while later the world began to melt, gently at first and then with more intensity as blades of charred grass began to ripple beneath him.

He met Sophie after she'd finished her shift at the gallery. They went down to the river with a couple of cans of gin and tonic and sat on a sun-warm concrete wall.

She was wearing a tan dress too thick for the heat, dim patches of sweat circled the armpits. Strands of her hair, light brown from the sun, stuck to her forehead.

The tide was out and there were a few people down on the sand below them. The mushrooms had all but worn off, leaving a pastel trace of euphoria in their wake.

Will tried to tell Sophie about the ley lines in Kamal's book and how they made him feel like there was a through line of shared meaning between him and those who'd come centuries before.

It's like we're at the same time as them, he said.

Sophie nodded, apparently considering this idea.

The sun was beginning to set below the jagged glass skyline, sending up an orange musk in its wake. Sophie swept a lock of fringe behind her ear. The last of the daylight caught a silver ring on her left index finger.

She is so beautiful, Will thought.

Sophie was tired and needed to go home. They hugged goodbye and Will cycled back south.

Shifting cubes of light bounced up at him from the river as he followed it a few miles west before crossing back over the bridge. He realised that he was clenching his jaw and tried to relax it.

Later, at a club, Kamal and James stood by the bar, failing to draw the attention of the bartender. Will leaned against a sweat-covered pillar and stared at an app on his phone, swiping right and left over the faces of women at the behest of a pre-semantic impulse that felt uncomfortably biological.

The music was bad and he could smell his own body and the bodies of others. Kamal and James eventually returned with three shots of tequila, a slice of faded lime balanced upon the salted rim of each glass. The three of them tapped their glasses together, licked the salt, threw down the noxious liquid and sucked the slices of lime before returning to the bar to repeat the ritual. Soon, objects began to lose their definition.

Kamal left them for a few minutes before reappearing flanked by two women Will recognised as Sophie's friends. Will told one of them, whose name he could not remember, that he'd seen Sophie earlier and asked her if she wanted to come out but she'd declined. Sophie had gone to the cinema with her boyfriend, Sophie's friend told him. Will nodded and looked down at his trainers. People were shuffling back and forth around him, no one had quite committed to dancing, it was still too early.

We know you like her by the way, said Sophie's friend. It's really obvious.

Is it now, he said, forcing a smile and taking out his phone. He went home soon after.

The next morning, his temples throbbing, he smoked the remainder of the arid joint he'd left on his windowsill.

He could hear Kamal whistling from the kitchen. He found him in his dressing gown, attempting to poach an egg, a thick white film covering the surface of a bubbling pan.

You should have stayed out last night, Kamal said, It was low-key quite sick.

When Will did not respond, he went on.

After you left we just went to that pub that stays open all night, the one that's usually a bit grim, but it's actually good if you have good people there. I feel like shit now though.

One of the egg yolks had ruptured, staining the white a pale yellow.

Cool, Will said, and went back up to his room, where he failed to sleep.

He tried to read but couldn't concentrate and found himself back on his phone, flicking between apps and willing someone to text him. He threw the device into his laundry basket and stared at the ceiling, resting his hands on the centre of his ribcage. He felt like he was back in the single bed of his childhood, before his parents had left, a warm breeze unsettling the curtains as the plastic stars his mother had affixed to the ceiling glowed dimly above.

His problem was that he had never had anyone to tell him what to do, he thought. He just did things and was never sure whether they were right or not. He knew that in a few minutes he would roll another joint and walk to McDonald's, and then maybe go to see the new Fast and Furious film at the cinema in the old shopping centre. But he only managed the first part; as soon as he'd had a few drags of the joint he fell into a deep sleep.

He awoke in the middle of the night to find the joint had extinguished itself in the ashtray, but not before its red-hot debris had burned a few holes in his bedsheets. He had dreamt he was sailing on a big ship, dark waves crashing all around.

The heatwave continued. Oceanic winds had carried sand up from the African subcontinent, spreading a thin ochre film over the daylight.

He took to wearing a mask while going about his deliveries but still found himself coughing up thick globules of grainy phlegm into the sink each morning. Everyone he interacted with seemed uncomfortable and tetchy.

On a Thursday evening in early July, he received a text from Sophie asking if he wanted to hang out. He asked her when and what she wanted to do and she told him that she was free now and to meet her in London Fields.

He was on a delivery south of the river, a small package destined for a flat in Bermondsey. He had never left a package undelivered and did not know what the repercussions would be.

He made a U-turn and started making his way north.

He found Sophie sitting on a patch of dead grass over by the lido. He locked his bike to the railings, tried to calm himself by focusing his attention on the shouts and splashes from beyond the fence as he did so.

He didn't know what to say at first, it was as if every word carried the potential for some grand failure.

It's been a little while, he said.

Sophie laughed politely and nodded.

The gallery she worked at was closing, she told him. It looked like she would soon be unemployed, and her parents were getting a divorce and had little liquid cash available to support her as a result, and her boyfriend, a fashion photographer, didn't have much money either, and they were having problems anyway, so she was trying to sign on with the government's unemployment benefits programme but was finding the process maddeningly obtuse.

Will tried to strike a tone that would make her understand that he really felt for her and would do everything he possibly could to help her.

Sorry to hear, he mumbled, That's tough.

I just want to get quite fucked up now, said Sophie, as if she was asking a question. I'm fine, I just want to not be me for a bit.

She took out a book and carefully leafed through it, pulling out a small envelope from between its pages. From inside she extracted two small squares of paper. She lay one on her tongue and held out the other for Will to take, which he did, hesitating briefly before placing it inside his cheek.

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It had been just over a year since Will had lost his job at the advertising agency.

In the weeks that followed he'd had a terrible feeling in his stomach that had often risen to become a burning sensation in his throat. It was the second time in his life he'd experienced this, a constellation

of stochastic physiological-emotional symptoms that descended at erratic intervals, triggered by factors that were often difficult to identify.

When he'd first started working at the agency he had told everyone he knew and changed all his social media profiles to reflect his new position. He had been extremely lucky, he thought; the economy was bad, many people he knew had moved back in with their parents until things picked up. On his CV he'd stated that he had a first-class degree in art history from University College London rather than an art foundation and a provisional two-two in graphic design from London College of Communication, a degree that technically he had never officially completed.

A few sections of the portfolio he'd submitted were not strictly his own work — he had used a cracked copy of Photoshop to edit and combine images from the websites of designers he admired and compiled them into a single PDF file, a process he felt merited recognition as a legitimate design practice. He experienced some guilt at his misrepresentations, but this, as he understood it, was what was required to get ahead, to succeed.

It had felt good to put on a shirt and take the bus to the office, the fifteenth floor of a glass-walled tower in a part of Shoreditch that bordered the financial district. Each morning he scanned his entrance card at the elevator and rearranged his hair in the bathroom mirror and sat in front of a company-issued MacBook Pro awaiting instruction from his colleagues.

After a few days it became clear that his daily tasks did not extend beyond resizing images into the dimensions specified on a multi-tabbed spreadsheet. His coworkers, whom he knew only by the names that hovered over olive- or fuchsia- or chartreuse-bordered cells in the document, added their requirements towards the end of each day before leaving the office, and he would follow them out shortly after, resolving to get to their requests first thing the next morning.

But it was soon made clear to him that this was not acceptable; his colleagues needed the files they'd asked for within three hours of making their requests. They could not afford to keep their clients waiting. This expectation was to be imminently outlined in something called a service-level agreement.

He was rarely able to leave the office before nine in the evening. On the bus home he closed his eyes to lubricate them only to be confronted with the outlines of rectangular shapes that corresponded to

the dimensions of images he'd edited that day. When he got back to the flat he immediately showered and went to bed for a few hours before his alarm went off and the day began again.

He comforted himself with the thought that he could pay his rent and was doing what he wanted to do, or at least had the job title he wanted to have. Surely it was only a matter of time before things changed. He was just putting in the time, gathering tales of early struggle that he would later recount at dinner parties to charm fellow members of the creative elite.

It was only a few weeks before he began to fuck up. Working on the images for more than fifteen minutes at a time took extreme mental commitment, and when he realised he had lost focus and the contents of his screen had merged into a flat blur he would tell himself that he just needed a short palette cleanser before he could return to his work in earnest.

He would close his design software and visit message boards where posters would recount their experiences with carefully calibrated doses of experimental drugs, detailing their hallucinations in breathless, unpunctuated prose and providing quantitative details with scientific rigour, and before he knew it a considerable amount of time had passed and he felt frustrated and regretful and knew that he would have to stay even later in an ill-fated attempt to keep himself from falling further behind.

He missed the deadline for a few tasks and his line manager messaged him to ask why the files had not been uploaded. On another occasion, he sent the wrong files to the wrong people and received an email containing a torrent of abuse so brutal that he had to retreat to the bathroom and stare at his reflection in the mirror until he could be sure he would not cry.

The *In progress* column on the spreadsheet that contained his tasks began to extend until there was no way he would be able to complete everything without working straight through consecutive weekends, but now his ability to concentrate had deteriorated to such an extent that the files came faster than he could complete them.

His online explorations led him to read more about the attacks.

People were very angry. They had been prevented from attending funerals and christenings and baby showers and football matches and weddings because an extended section of the M25 had been shut as a result of protestors crossing it, and no one knew what was happening or why, although that

did not stop them from speculating or blaming the government or the other side of the political spectrum or immigration or the foreclosure of an intracontinental trade arrangement. BBC News illustrated its story with a picture of a woman who looked just a little older than him. She smiled at the camera, her arms handcuffed tightly behind her back.

Unlike much of the public, Will did not feel angry at the protestors.

In fact, he wished he could join them.

One morning in late autumn, Will reached the entrance to the office and, rather than scan his card and pass through the rotating doors, turned back around and began to walk south.

When he reached the river he sat on a bench and watched boats stream by as skateboards popped and hissed behind him. Couples walked by holding hands before ducking into the shaded lobby of the Royal Festival Hall.

It did not seem like the office could be in the same universe as the world in which he now found himself, a picture of urban harmony insulated from the machinations of capital that enabled it, which were semi-concealed behind the glass walls of the buildings that now protruded over him. He needed to get away from them.

He decided to walk to the Tate Modern, which was just a few minutes away.

Perched on a leather-clad bench in front of a huge maroon canvas, he tried to regulate his breathing as he had seen in a video in which a man with a well-groomed beard and gleaming scalp explained how simple physical regulation techniques could unlock unbreachable inner resilience. Something strange happened with time and although there was no way for him to see outside the windowless halogen cube that contained him he knew that evening was beginning to fall, he could picture it in perfect detail, the blue sky darkening in hue, streetlights blinking on, queues beginning to form outside restaurants. He remembered visiting the gallery on a school trip with his art class a few weeks after his mother had died. Everyone had been nice to him in a way that had felt pressured, like it was a struggle for them to maintain.

Just as he was about to leave he heard a loud crash followed by a series of shouts. He looked around for its source and was drawn towards a room a few over from where he was. People were making their way out as fast as they could. A mother dragging a crying child behind her shouted for Will to get out of the way.

Inside, a security guard sat atop a body, pressing an elbow into the base of its spine while holding a walkie-talkie to his face with a raised shoulder. Will looked around the room, which was now empty but for himself, the guard, and the subdued figure beneath the guard.

He had been through the room before he'd found the bench to zone out on, he could remember glancing at the paintings but had paid little attention to them. Now he considered each in turn: large-scale, oil on canvas, loosely figurative. Splotches of heavy marine rendered the outline of a woman on a sparsely populated beach; a group of teenagers sat together under a window, bathed in supernal light.

The final canvas Will could remember having depicted the burgundy leather interior of a sports car, but now it was different — wet neon paint was sliding down its face, dripping into a pool that had formed at the foot of the wall. Will could just about decipher a couple of words that had been daubed across it, which started on the wall before continuing over the canvas and then back onto the wall on the other side. Block capitals, imperfect angle: NOT SACRED.

When he had passed the piece on his way to the next room it had done nothing for him, he could remember wondering who had painted it and how the curators had come to believe that it was an important enough work to merit inclusion in the modern canon as signified by its place in the gallery's permanent display collection. It did not totally lack merit, he could see that there was something to it, an aesthetic flourish that marked it out as at least interesting, but he had issued it a glance and not been impelled to stop and consider it further. In its new form, with the commotion going on around him, with the slogan scrawled across its body, he found it alive and present.

He stopped to consider the scene and felt a shiver pass through his vertebrae, as if someone was tracing a finger down his spine. He took a mental picture and closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

An alarm was sounding.

The person beneath the guard did not seem to be struggling. Will had gotten just close enough to be able to make out that it was a young woman. She was covered in the same shade of paint that had been smeared across the canvas, which struck a pleasant contrast with the purple pigment her face had adopted as a result of her acute state of asphyxiation.

The guard noticed Will and began to shout.

This is a bad place to be, Will thought, raising his arms and retreating backwards as more guards began to pour past him into the room. He turned around and quickened his pace, and by the time he reached the Agnes Martin room he was in full sprint, the canvases fusing into one block of impossible colour as he passed them.

There was no one to stop him. He felt weightless. It was like the whole gallery belonged to him, had been constructed for him alone.

It should always be like this, he thought.

He burst out through the Turbine Hall exit into the encroaching dusk. The air was moist and dewy. Sirens screamed, far away and then closer.

He located his bike and started making his way south.

A startup had erected obnoxiously large billboards at every major intersection to advertise for last-mile delivery couriers, and he found himself reading the list of benefits whenever he stopped at a red light; it was flexible work and good exercise and all it required was a bike and a smartphone and a functioning human body.

When he got back to the flat he checked the news. A few stories down he found it: Activist Vandalises Million-Pound Painting at Tate. The article did not offer much detail. The police had apprehended one suspect. They had not ascertained a motive. No one had been hurt.

It was not yet known whether the painting was salvageable.

Will did not go into work the next day or the day after that, and on the Friday night he went to a club with Sophie and Kamal and some of Kamal's friends.

He had been reluctant to join, he was tired and had started to feel uneasy about his run of truancy, but Kamal had told him that it would be a good opportunity to get closer to Sophie in a new context, a chance for him to remind her that he was cool and a fun person to be around. And so as midnight approached he found himself in the back of a cab with Kamal, his right nostril smarting from the alkali powder they had keyed before leaving, which Kamal had insisted he'd acquired from one of the most reputable dealers in town, who happened to be a friend of his.

It was too late before Will realised he had not eaten. The vodka Red Bulls he'd downed with Kamal soon after they'd got past the bouncers came up in the bathroom a deep shade of purple.

The following morning he could only remember a few details, among them Sophie consoling him as he wept on the night bus while spewing out a recursive monologue about how his father had left him and then his mother had left him and how nothing he did ever worked out, how he had got a good job but it was shit and he had got himself fired, although he did not yet know his fate because he had not checked his work email, he was too scared to do so.

He spent the next few days on Sophie's living room sofa, getting up only to piss and sometimes to puke once Sophie had left for work.

After his hangover had dissipated he started to feel worse still. Sophie intermittently asked him what was wrong and he didn't answer, not because he didn't want to but because he found he physically could not. She soon stopped asking.

Eventually he became cogent enough to recognise that he would look back on his behaviour with great embarrassment. He had lost control, ruined any chance of converting his friendship with Sophie into something more. Her friends would be laughing about him, he could feel it, they would ask Sophie why she persevered with him, he was always so weird, so distant, he lacked emotional continence. And it was worse still because she was so nice, she seemed always to be offering him a way in, but every time he felt he was getting closer to her he fucked everything up.

He forced himself to shower and dress, and when Sophie returned from work on the Tuesday evening he was gone, having left a note in his place on the sofa to thank her for letting him stay, he felt a lot better.

The days were growing shorter, darkness descended in the middle of the afternoon.

He did not return to work but went to a different gallery each day. He found that when he was sufficiently distracted the bad feeling eased. He allowed his cognition to skitter around, immersing himself in colours and lines and, in a logical leap that didn't feel like a leap at all, memories that carried a cinematic quality that marked them as artificial — his father's face disappearing into a crowd of blue football shirts; the glacial tone of his mother's heart monitor, wires draped over her thin arms like rosaries. More convincing were vague snatches of sensations that he was sure he had experienced before: sunlight refracting from the windshields of cars outside the supermarket as he passed by on the top deck of a bus, dead leaves blowing into the concourse of a dilapidated shopping complex, the scent of chlorine and stale sweat from a leisure centre lobby.

And his parents, if he could still his consciousness for long enough, at the fringes, disembodied but unmistakably there.

The first time he could remember feeling like he had then was long after his parents had departed.

As he'd progressed through the educational system he had managed their absence with a level of resilience that the professionals responsible for his wellbeing considered far beyond his years.

He had scraped through his GCSEs and A-Levels and on to a respected art foundation course, unmarked by the aura of tragedy he was conscious of emitting every time he was required to recount his personal history. At his university admission interview he tied the events of his mid-teens to the contents of his graphic design portfolio, drawing a parallel between his work's low-grade digital aesthetic and the trauma that he was still dealing with. The interviewers agreed that there were latent markers of pain contained in the identities he had designed for companies that did not exist and concluded that this was evidence of a singular approach to graphical work, a democratisation of the historically elitist practice of branding, a reassertion of the human into the visual architecture of capital. But really Will had just liked how his designs looked, he had enjoyed playing around with the software. He had not thought of his parents at all.

His university halls sat opposite a church on Camberwell Road. He shared a three-person unit with Jantina, a Polish chemistry student who spent long periods confined to her room, and Kamal. They had started off sharing cooking duties in a show of overbaked camaraderie that lasted just a few weeks. But Will and Kamal continued hanging out, going to lectures and drinking cans and smoking weed in the church's graveyard. And then, towards the end of the first semester, he had started to feel very bad.

It started gradually, with occasional bouts of sadness and fatigue, but soon he found it near impossible to extract himself from his bed. When he managed to get up he lay on the floor of the shower nursing body aches that had no obvious locus as a nausea rose from the pit of his stomach to his throat. Often his breathing would speed up and he would find himself lying face down on his single bed, his hands folded under his heart as it thudded against his wrists. He did not know what was happening or why.

In order to leave the flat he found it necessary to complete a series of arcane rituals that involved tapping, counting, repeating, checking and rechecking. It took him a long time to get through his morning bathroom routine, which required him to apply precisely the same amount of pressure to each tooth with his electric toothbrush, tap the head of the faucet twenty-four times with each of his forefingers and blink fifty times while staring at his reflection. Each of these processes required intense concentration. It was easier not to do anything at all, and soon he stopped attending lectures completely. He remained in his room, where he tried to sleep as much as he could so as to propel himself forward to a time when he'd feel well enough to resume his life.

He began having rabid fantasies in which he inserted a kitchen knife through his rib cage and deep into his chest. He drafted a suicide note in his notes app, editing it every time he felt particularly hopeless. It served as a therapeutic palimpsest; the transference of the thoughts in his head through his physical body into lines and symbols was a magic act. But the idea of saying goodbye — to the world but to no one in particular — brought with it the feeling that he did not really want to go anywhere, that he was not ready to meet God, was not destined to go the way of his mother just yet. He felt a maternal warmth radiate from the small of his back to the extremities of his limbs. He wanted to keep

on living, at least for now, at least until things got so bad that the note felt like a practical object rather than a melodramatic coping tool.

And eventually he'd found he could live again, in short bursts at first and then in longer stretches, and then he began to feel good, and the whole thing felt unreal, as if it had never happened at all.

Eventually he had gone back to work. He knew it would not be long until he was asked not to return. It happened after three days, and he speculated that the only reason it had taken that long was because no one had noticed he was there. His manager had at least summoned the energy to speak to him in person, and Will had sensed that it might have been possible to admit to a mental health crisis, to be vulnerable, to flatter his manager into believing that he could do something that would make him a good person, like one of the good people you read about on professional social media networks, where those with power liked to tell of the kindnesses they had visited upon their underlings.

But Will did not take this option; he nodded and said Yes and No and I understand and took the two weeks of severance pay he was offered without protesting and collected his coat from the rack and left without saying goodbye.

He planned not to work for a while and take some time for himself but looked at his bank account and made some projections about his financial obligations and read an article about the botched rollout of the Universal Credit scheme and concluded that he needed to find a job as soon as possible.

As he descended the escalator to the Northern Line he was confronted with another advertisement for the last-mile bike courier service. He took out his phone and scanned the QR code.

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Following Will's breakdown at the club, it had taken a year to get to a point where Sophie seemed comfortable around him again. And now here they were, walking down through the park, tripping.

They reached the north side of Broadway Market. Traders were packing away their stalls, the groups that had hovered around them having retreated to the awnings of pubs, where they stood nursing pints of craft IPA in plastic cups.

I am being normal and everything is fine, Will thought over and over as objects lost their definition and merged into masses of shifting colour. He was aware that Sophie was talking but couldn't focus on what she was saying. At some point she had grabbed his arm and was still holding it, her palm affixed to his elbow, which he now wanted to bend but was unable to in case it disturbed her. He managed to pay attention to her for long enough to understand that she was making no sense.

They took a cab to Sophie's place. As they crossed Tower Bridge Will followed the rippled lights down across the water and around the river's hairpin bend and through the docks and the Thames Barrier and finally to its estuary and out into the North Sea, where hundreds of container ships lingered, awaiting the value of the commodities they carried to appreciate.

Sophie had become very quiet. Once they'd ascended the stairs and entered the flat she'd headed immediately to the bathroom, leaving Will in the living room. He could hear her gagging and spitting.

For a while he lingered outside the bathroom door so that he'd hear her if she called for assistance, but after a few minutes he felt self-conscious and retreated back to the living room in case she suddenly reemerged and found him standing outside listening to her.

He couldn't remember there being art on the walls of Sophie's living room, but above the fireplace hung a huge canvas streaked with luminous oil. He got closer to it until his nose was nearly touching the paint.

The room dissolved into colour and he found himself on the sofa. The white ceiling above was the roof of the world. Below him, an object was forcing his spine into a curve. He shifted down from upon it into a seated position.

It was his courier bag, which he had not thought to remove before laying down.

He unclipped the straps and took out the package he'd left undelivered. It was very important that he examined its contents. He pulled his thumb down to open the envelope and extracted an alien substance, the membrane of which burst as he squeezed its gridded pustules. He visualised a huge

explosion, the package at its epicentre, himself and Sophie blown out of the room, their limbs ripped from their bodies. But nothing happened.

Inside the plastic he found two small white containers. He stared at each in turn but was unable to read the words scrawled across them.

He was still considering the containers when Sophie emerged from the bathroom, her face red and wet.

Will folded back into himself. He was in Sophie's living room, sitting on her sofa. Sophie didn't say anything but sat down next to him. Neither of them spoke for a while.

I'm so exhausted, said Sophie, her eyes shut.

Me too, said Will. Yeah.

Sophie lay back. Will understood that she didn't want him there anymore. He put his shoes on and returned to the living room to tell her that he thought it would be good for him to leave, but she had already passed out.

Back in his room, Will lay on his bed, his eyes closed. Sophie was at the corner of each thought he had until he permitted himself to think about her directly and when he did he felt an uncomfortable warmth spread from his chest down to his gut and settle in his fingertips, pulsing in waves.

As he began to drift off a voice entered his head that could have been his conscience or God or another part of himself that he was not well acquainted with: You have to keep trusting even though you might fall, even though you will fall, will fall and fall over and over again and will experience tremendous pain, pain so real and piercing you will not want to get up again. But you will always get up, because you don't have a choice, because that is living.

When he awoke it was morning and he lay on his back staring at the ceiling for a long time before eventually bringing himself upright.

The containers he'd removed from the package sat on his bedside table. He could see what they were now: pill cases labelled with Cyrillic lettering, neon-pink felt tip scrawled over the top indicating that the boxes contained Mixed Adderall Salts and Diazepam.

He returned them to the package and did his best to reseal it. It was addressed to someone called Laura Knight. Tomorrow he would deliver it like nothing had happened.

The evening had been stupid. He was confused and had probably made a fool of himself, although he couldn't put his finger on exactly what he'd done, and he needed the money from his courier job but had managed to fuck it up. He was always fucking things up, even when he was trying his best not to—at least that's how he felt, but when he really thought about it he was the only one making decisions, he chose what he did, no one else was controlling him. He wondered what it was inside him that was driving him to end up in these situations, whether there was some deeper layer that was compromising him, sabotaging his attempts to be a good and successful and stable and happy person.

He lay awake at night trying to commune with whatever this deeper presence was, reason with it, tell it to stop. But he felt no internal shift; there was nothing there.



## *Laura*

Laura had been awake for a long time. She had not been outside for weeks.

Sun streamed in through the skylight above. Blackout blinds covered the rest of the windows. She sat cross-legged on the floor, encircled by loose pages of A4 covered in cursive scrawl.

The pills were wearing off. The mania began to subside, an embryonic anxiety rising in its place. She shook the empty plastic container and closed her eyes to say a small prayer.

She awoke to an email from the courier agency indicating that the package would be delivered soon. It had left its final location. She could expect delivery before the end of the day.

She raised the blinds and looked out over the street, her eyes twitching in the light. Runners made their way into the park, young mothers pushed carbon-fibre prams and examined their phones. Her eyes egested a few teardrops, washing away detritus from the corners of her rose-tinged sclera.

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A few weeks earlier, waiting on the platform at Charing Cross, she had received a call from an anonymous number, cancelled it and continued crying. Streams of black mascara ossified into thin lines on her cheeks. A few strangers approached her to ask if she was OK. She ignored them until they left her alone.

She could recall the email word for word, she found herself mentally reciting sections of it whenever her mind was quiet enough. But she kept bringing it up on her phone to scan through it; there was an intimacy to the visual representation that made it superior to her mnemonic rendering, a further layer of meaning embedded in the grammar. The email consisted of four short paragraphs, each more devastating than the last, evincing a crescendo of discomfort that climaxed at the sign-off: *Victoria XX*.

That the Xs were capitalised suggested the influence of autocorrect. She imagined Victoria accepting the suggested alteration and sending the message without reading it back. Did this imply a

lack of care, or was it that the email had been so painful for Victoria to write that she had rushed through it, pressing send before throwing her phone across the room and diving back under the covers as if she'd depinned a grenade? Laura dwelled on these questions and their spiralling corollaries, reprocessing each tiny detail of the email in an act of hermeneutic self-harm, like she was etching each line into her skin.

No one had done anything wrong, insisted Victoria, neither of them was at fault, sometimes things just did not work out, she still loved Laura, she wanted the best for her, for both of them.

Laura clung to these lines like a liferaft in a storm, but they were not enough to counterbalance the weight of the message's crushing conclusion: their relationship was over.

She was alone.

The train was packed with commuters leaving for the weekend. There was no first-class carriage so she sat on the floor. After the train had made its way through the suburbs they passed fields ready for harvest, converted oast houses, new-build housing estates.

At a station a few stops from her destination it was announced that the train would be going no further, there was a problem on the line, some kind of incident that was out of the driver's control.

Laura made sure she was the first to disembark and speed-walked to secure the taxi at the front of the rank. They were about half an hour away from her destination, the cabbie told her. The air inside the car was fetid with the scent of synthetic orchids. She wound down a window in defiance of the driver's insistence that she respect the vehicle's air-conditioning system.

Her parents still lived in the house she had grown up in, although she had spent most of her young life away at boarding school. Her father was away on business, he always was, but she would still have to do her best to avoid her mother and the housekeeper, Bethany.

Victoria had asked for the weekend to clear her things from the flat, and although the email stated that it would be no problem at all if Laura chose to be there, a line she bristled at — the flat was hers, she owned it — it carried a strong implication that it would be better if she could find somewhere else to be.

The house was at the peak of a hill that overlooked a mid-sized town, a hotspot of high-society activity during the Victorian period that now served to offer commuters the illusion that they were the spiritual heirs of its bygone nobles rather than striving middle-Englanders who had needed to leave the confines of the city in order to find property they could afford to pay a mortgage on. The hill was an enclave for the genuine elite, who did all they could to steer clear of those who resided down in the valley. Tennis courts and swimming pools appeared with greater frequency as they climbed the hill until eventually the houses were obscured completely by the land around them.

She entered the pin into the pad on the gatepost; it had not changed, it was still her birthday. The gate eased hydraulically backwards. She got back into the cab and they continued down the cedar-lined drive.

She tipped the driver and went inside. Her room was just as she remembered it. She had texted her mother to tell her she was coming but hadn't received a reply, and yet there were two neatly folded towels hanging over the end of her bed.

She washed her face in the en-suite bathroom, her mascara leaving a pale grey trace on the gleaming porcelain. After scalding herself in the shower she found the single valium she'd had the foresight to salvage from Victoria's bountiful stash and washed it down with a palmful of water from the tap.

Wrapped in a towel as she lay prostrate on a chaise longue, she felt the drug combine with the exhaustion she now realised had been laying dormant all day, suppressed by the adrenaline of abjection, and began to drift off to sleep.

She stayed in her room for the next few days. Although the flat was likely safe to return to — Victoria had sent her a two-word text to tell her she had left — the thought of seeing it emptied of Victoria's belongings triggered in her an acute pang of loneliness.

Her mother knocked on the door to ask if she wanted to come down for dinner. She was dressed impeccably; she had always epitomised a specific mode of the English class system, a rung below the Habsburg descendants but elevated far above those considered subservient. When she was younger, Laura had tried to model herself on her, surreptitiously borrowing from her makeup draw. But she

didn't have her mother's eye for subtlety nor her years of experience; she always ended up looking clownish. And then had come the years of rebellion: cutting her own hair, belt-length skirts, no makeup at all, making out with girls. The latter point had stuck.

It is so nice to have you home, said her mother. I can't remember the last time we had the pleasure, although it is a shame that your father is away, he would have so loved to see you.

Laura, who lay on the floor enveloped in her bedsheets, the curtains closed, told her she wasn't feeling well and would appreciate being left alone.

Trays of food appeared outside her bedroom: pork terrine, steak cutlets, crème brûlée. Laura, who had been a vegetarian for as long as she could remember, edged the door ajar for long enough to consider what was on offer before easing it closed and retreating to her bathroom, where she gagged in the toilet, although by now there was nothing left to come up.

She charged her phone and reread the email from Victoria. There were messages from her friends asking where she was, what had happened, whether she was OK.

After a few days and several aborted attempts, Laura emerged from her room. She found her mother reading the paper in the living room. She seemed startled at Laura's presence, as if she'd been caught doing something illicit, but quickly regained her composure, folding the paper and placing it on her knee.

How did you sleep? she asked.

It was the afternoon. Laura blinked heavily.

Fine, thank you, she said. I'm going to go back to London soon.

Your father will miss you, then, said her mother. He would so love to see you. He's away at the moment.

You mentioned, said Laura.

He never tells me where he is, said her mother. He just disappears. But he always comes back. She laughed. It's good that he comes back.

After checking that the kitchen was empty, Laura opened the cupboards to dig out something savoury and settled for a few water crackers, which she washed down with some mineral water from the fridge, swigging directly from the bottle.

In the pantry she found an ancient pack of cigarettes that she had stashed behind the bread bin a few Christmases prior in an effort to conceal them from her parents. She had crept downstairs each night, a little woozy from the brandy that her father had served for them, and smoked in the cold night air, wind whistling through the trees in the valley below.

One night her father had come outside to smoke a cigar and noticed her crouched behind the woodshed. She had extinguished her cigarette too late, he had seen the orange glow in the darkness.

That had been the last time he had hit her. It had been more humiliating than painful, for him as much as for her; they had both known that she was no longer afraid of him, that in just a few months she could do whatever she wanted. Although when it came to it he had retained his dominance, albeit in a different mode, because she needed and perhaps always would need his money.

Laura found an old pair of running shoes at the bottom of her closet. She ran up and down the hill until she felt her body tire and her mind quieten.

On her penultimate descent a few cars passed by. The road up the hill ended in a cul-de-sac. Only those who lived there had a reason to venture up, but sometimes someone would take a wrong turn from the roundabout by the station and continue until they realised their mistake. By her final ascent she had passed too many for this to be the case. She could see the faces of a few of the drivers as they went by. Most were men in shirts unbuttoned to the chest, but there were a few women too, dressed more formally.

One of the cars slowed to a stop. Its driver wound down a window and dropped an arm down from within.

Can I give you a lift? he croaked in a broad east-end drawl. His breath smelled of petrol-station coffee and stale cigarettes. It's no trouble.

Thank you, no, panted Laura, keeping her eyes down on the road.

Just trying to do a good deed, said the driver, closing his window but slowing to match her pace.

Laura tried to run faster but couldn't sustain anything more than a laboured jog as the car hovered behind her. When she crested the hill she saw that the gate to the house was blocked by rows of parked vehicles.

Photographers were assembling tripods at the entrance, others stood around on their phones or paced back and forth like palace guards. A pulse of adrenaline shot around her body. She felt her jaw clench. There was no way back into the house that wouldn't take her past the press phalanx, and if she did manage to get inside there was no telling how long it would be until she could leave.

Once she'd passed the house the car could no longer follow her, there was no more road. She squeezed through a small gap in the shrubbery and caught her breath in the field on the other side. Her clothes and belongings were in the house, all she had was her phone and bank card.

On the way down to the station she tripped, grazing her knee. She could just check her phone and everything would be revealed to her. It would be something about her father. The thought made her feel nauseous.

Journalists had once turned up at her school. A couple had tried to scale the walls after being denied entry by security. The other girls had made a game of trying to guess who the journalists were trying to reach; the school had not been short of children whose parents were of interest to the press. But Laura had known it was her they were after. It always was.

Her father tried to frame it as a good thing, something to be flattered by. They care about us because we are important, he had said. You don't see the other girls being bothered because no one cares about them, they're nothing. We will never be nothing.

On the train, she gave in. The story was only now breaking. Most of the reporters seemed to have withdrawn from the house, likely after realising that her father was not there — there were no pictures, no live reports.

It had something to do with an oil pipeline project her father was involved in. People were unhappy because the pipeline would cut through an area of natural beauty and because it would deliver oil when

the world was warming and because her father held no elected political position but seemed to be able to bend government policy to his every whim.

People did not like Laura's father. Some had always hated him, but his image as a titan of British capitalism, which he had built through several aggressive acquisitions in the early nineties, had been tarnished in recent years by the exposure of certain strong-arm tactics that had left even the business establishment harbouring a sense of ambivalence.

Laura had thought that public opinion aligning with her own would feel validating. She had not anticipated that she would be implicated in each of her father's disgraces, that his actions could not be decoupled from her own.

It was interesting just how easily you could lose yourself, Laura thought as she opened the door to her flat. Being a person meant buying into the fiction that your selfhood was stable, that there was a set of unshifting and intuitive parameters that defined who you were. If you somehow became disconnected from them you risked falling apart. Everything worked automatically until it didn't, and then you were left scrambling to reassert the things you thought underpinned your personhood, desperately trying to reconstruct yourself.

She changed the sheets, opened the windows, rearranged the furniture, turned off the lights and lay down on the floor. She felt like a ship traversing a dark ocean. Parts of herself that had previously been so secure as to be unnoticeable were splintering off into discrete shards that she could not force back into a cohesive whole. She was not able to finish thoughts. She tried to slow them down and focus and garner some meaning from the fleeting images that were thrown up into her consciousness, but they refused to cohere.

She tried to ground herself by stilling her breathing and pressing her limbs into the floor and channelling her awareness into the supple ladder of her vertebrae.

The flat was newly austere. Without Victoria's belongings it felt sparse, an affect Laura decided to intensify further by moving many of her own possessions into the bedroom. She put books and vases and houseplants on the bed and dragged both of the sofas into the hallway.

The living room now consisted of just a desk, a chair and a mattress, the latter of which she had liberated from her bed and set in the corner. She lived in this room now; she moved from the kitchen to her desk to the mattress in a loop, engrossed in her laptop, ignoring her phone and email, eating dry crackers accompanied by some meal-replacement shakes she'd ordered online that ostensibly contained the optimum macro-caloric intake: synthetic vanilla, strawberry, chocolate; breakfast, lunch, dinner.

She rarely showered, did not brush her teeth. The scent of her body was not good but it didn't disgust her either; it was interesting. She could not remember a time when it had truly been her own, unmediated by cosmetic products; toners, antiperspirants, lotions, moisturisers, SPF creams, perfumes. But one morning, after the scent of her body had become so ripe she mistook it for something off in the fridge, she felt a desperate urge to be clean.

But she didn't make it as far as the shower. Behind the bathroom cabinet mirror, she found some of Victoria's pills. She made sure only to take one at first — she had no appetite to do herself any real harm, although she wondered why that was. When she woke up her head was slumped on her desk, her face crusted with saliva.

She continued taking the pills, but never looked at the labels so had no idea how she was about to feel. Those that didn't plunge her into sleep made her alert to the point of euphoria. It was when she felt like this that she started exploring.

Initially she spent most of her time on news sites. She became fixated on certain public scandals, searched for supplementary material on social media. It was easy to find the real truth, or at least another layer of it, in the gossip and rumour that circulated, and there were many websites that hosted things that the mainstream media organisations would never print.

She found the social media posts of a high-school shooter, GoPro footage of militia fighters dispatching a grenade through a hospital window, evidence of sex trafficking operations established to meet the niche fetish requirements of high-status public figures. The material felt radically impersonal,

each of the subjects were like characters from a book or film, it did not matter that what she was bearing witness to was as real as the floor under her feet, the glass of water she held to her lips, the walls that surrounded her.

Inevitably she found details about herself.

Anonymous accounts speculated about her father and his company. They found it unlikely that he had secured the pipeline deal based on business acumen alone. There was something else going on, they thought. They hypothesised on his motivation, argued over whether he hated the planet so much that he actively wanted to destroy it or was just in it for the money. They concluded that there was little conflict between these rationales, that they were in fact functionally the same. There were pictures of him with powerful people, mostly politicians but also media barons, senior members of the judiciary, prominent socialites.

Laura had possessed a peripheral awareness of all of this already, she had just decided not to indulge it. Now, however, she could not stop herself. Someone had found pictures of her from a few years ago — they must have been from someone else's social media account, Laura had never populated her profiles with real information, she just used them to lurk and to bear witness, as she was doing now.

There was a picture of her with Victoria taken from the print edition of a high-society magazine; they wore matching black dresses designed by one of Victoria's friends, they were holding hands. Laura's hair was long and lush and blonde, she remembered visiting the hairdresser a few days before, she had wanted to look perfect, for Victoria to be taken aback by her beauty, or maybe she had wanted to show her up, to outdo her — to win. Now, strands of her fringe batched in clumps, sticking to her damp forehead. She closed the tab before the emotional weight of the image had a chance to register.

The posters did not like her. Like father, like daughter, they said. They felt she was spoiled, found her face irritating. Some thought she deserved to die. Looking at herself in the pictures, she could not blame them. In fact, she felt an ambient solidarity fused with a disassociation so intense that she wondered if it was actually her in the pictures, and, in a sense, it was not really her at all.

When she eventually turned her phone back on, the messages of care from friends and acquaintances had dried up, confirming what she had suspected: the concern had all been superficial.

We love you and care about you deeply, read one of the last messages she had received, dated a few days prior. She glanced at it a few times, expecting a spark of recognition or comfort, but all that came was a question: Why would anyone love her? They had no reason to; when she reflected on herself she felt nothing, she was just a bundle of organs encased in flesh, she had done nothing with her life and it was likely she never would.

And did she even like them? They were fine, they provided what she had imagined friends were supposed to when she'd daydreamed about having them as a child: they checked in on her, invited her to gallery openings and bars, professed affection. When she reciprocated it was like she was following a script, committing an arbitrary amount of effort in return for a fleeting hit of oxytocin.

There was nothing from Victoria.

She opened her notes app to find the string of what her therapist termed grounding thoughts, which they had compiled together in an attempt to combat the rumination that always plagued her. She read them each in turn, harnessing all her remaining mental energy towards believing them: You are loved; You are valid; You are justified in feeling as you do; You will get through this; You will again be happy; Some things are not meant to last.

Her therapist had suggested she also try to distract herself by redirecting her attention towards something in the world whenever the bad thoughts occurred; a sound, a smell, an image. The more you feed your obsessive thoughts, the more powerful they will grow and the more real they will feel, she had said, You need to realise that they are not real, they are just thoughts. But what is real? Laura had countered. She could not imagine not loving Victoria; there was no possible future in which she could conceive being without her while still wanting to live; she missed the softness of her skin, her crooked front tooth, even the way she zoned out when Laura was recounting an anecdote and had to be bashfully reminded of her presence.

The anonymous calls persisted. Usually she missed them, but on a few occasions she saw her phone screen light up and chose not to answer. When the calls became more frequent she suspected that someone had leaked her number to the press.

It occurred to her that she had not spoken to anyone in a long time. It was now a few weeks since she'd returned from her parents', and, with the exception of a couple of late-night ventures she'd taken to buy cigarettes, she had not left the flat.

The stash of pills was running low; a cause for concern. Victoria had been the one who managed things like that. She had a way with people, she genuinely enjoyed them, even those Laura considered totally charmless.

Laura scanned through her phone contacts. She had the numbers of girls from school, doctor's surgeries, work contracts; detritus that had made its way from SIM card to SIM card, most of the numbers likely now deactivated or assigned to new people. There were a few that looked promising, single first names devoid of context. Towards the bottom of the list she found a number labelled *Xin Weed*.

She sent a simple text greeting and received a reply a few minutes later; *Who is this*. She replied as Victoria, asked if he could help her. He asked what she was looking for and she said she didn't know exactly but some pills, not the club kind, whatever he had. He asked where she was and she told him Bermondsey, near the station.

Three dots fidgeted on the screen and disappeared and reappeared and he said he would be there in an hour or so.

When Xin arrived Laura realised she had met him before, probably at a club she'd been to with Victoria.

You're not Victoria, he said as she opened the door, but he seemed to recognise her and she quickly told him that no, he was right, she was a friend of Victoria's and apologised for not telling him her real name but that she had thought he would not respond if she was just a random person whose name he didn't know.

It's alright, he said. Don't worry about it.

My name is Jane, she told him.

Xin was white and Xin was not his real name. He talked without pause in an accent she found difficult to place. It was unmistakably of a London borough but carried a yank lilt. He overpronounced the last word of each sentence, as if his mouth was being overrun by errant syllables.

Do you mind if I smoke in here? he asked.

Laura told him he could and pulled up one of the blinds and opened the window.

I don't have a lighter though, she said when she noticed him padding down his multiple pockets, a hand-rolled cigarette stuck to his lower lip. You can use the hob.

He bent down as she held in the knob and twisted it to ignition.

What did you want then, he said, making a theatrical attempt to syphon smoke out of the window. I have a lot of weed and some pills, uppers and downers.

I don't know, said Laura, walking to the bathroom, raising her voice to be heard as she went. I want what I had before, I just ran out.

She returned with the empty pill containers, their labels faded.

Xin inspected each, turning them over in his hands.

You think I'm in forensics or something? he said. These could be anything.

He opened his shoulder bag and withdrew a couple of similar-looking containers.

Here's something for when you want to stay up and something for when you want to switch off. I reckon that's what you're after.

He lay them on the kitchen counter and Laura gave him some cash, probably more than he needed, but money didn't matter to her and he'd been nice enough to come at such short notice, and she'd lied about her name. He folded the notes and tucked them into the breast pocket of his jacket.

What are you doing now? he asked. Do you want to watch something for a bit now that I'm here?

Laura noted something in his expression that she recognised from the ill-advised public advances she'd suffered from various men, a titillation she knew she would enjoy disappointing. But he also seemed distracted, as if he couldn't maintain his attention for long enough to fuel his libido. His eyes were weepy; he was stoned. She tried to come up with an excuse but could not think of one, and he

seemed sedated enough to be harmless, and maybe what she needed was some company, to be with someone who did not know her at all.

Sure, she said. I only have my laptop though.

She poured two glasses of the filtered water she kept in the fridge and swallowed a couple of the pills, the ones to keep her awake.

I can show you some mad stuff online, said Xin, scrolling through his phone.

Laura placed her laptop on the floor in front of her mattress and turned off the light.

They watched planes crash into the World Trade Center towers in stop motion while Xin explained how some of the pixel shards at the bottom of the frame demonstrated that a bomb had been detonated at the base of the buildings.

She thought about the attacks that had been in the news.

She wanted to ask Xin to choose something else but felt an alertness begin to assert itself and decided to let it lie. Xin, proving himself a connoisseur of manipulated digital paraphernalia, selected a video about a shadowy family who controlled global trade to the detriment of the common man. Laura's attention jumped around. She started to flick through Victoria's email on her phone. Xin tapped the space bar, pausing the video on a fade cut between a dollar bill and a pyramid.

You alright? he asked.

Yes, said Laura.

I bet there's something up, I'm good with this stuff, Xin said. Family trouble? Work? Something like that.

No, said Laura. I'm seriously fine.

Or a breakup? suggested Xin. That's it, isn't it.

Laura did not respond.

That's hard, Xin said. I felt like shit for weeks after I broke up with my ex. She was a narcissist though. You're better off without them. I can do whatever I want now. You'll learn that. They try to manipulate you, change who you are. It's not right.

Laura felt an undercurrent of pain and rage stir inside her. She pushed a thumbnail into the flesh at the base of her ring finger to stop it from rising to the level of speech.

Xin selected a video in which a monkish American man explained something he referred to as the twin flame theory. Xin talked over the man's skittish monologue, telling Laura that these were the videos she needed to avoid because they were dangerous and messed with your head, although there was definitely something to them, just look at the views. He pointed to the video's view count; it had been watched almost a million times.

Laura stopped paying attention but Xin kept talking, and she found herself automatically nodding along to what he was saying and soon they were watching videos about the Kabbalah and numerology and quantum energy, and she could see what Xin got from these videos, they were very different to the world as she experienced it, they were not bland and were not trying to sell anything other than their own warped version of the world, and although she did not understand them, in fact she thought they were bullshit, she found herself drifting into a universe where the laws of physics operated differently. She could choose how things worked, there was nothing to stop her, once you went against the logic of the metaphysics you found yourself at the mercy of you realised you could do it again and again, and soon you found yourself in a world of your own making.

After Xin left in the early hours of the morning Laura took a couple of pills so she could drift off. She awoke in the late afternoon to the sound of a police van passing by outside. She felt very calm, like she was floating in a swimming pool on the rooftop of a hotel. The sirens faded and she tried to go back to sleep but couldn't.

She opened her laptop to find that some of the videos Xin had queued up were still open. She brought up one of the numerous tabs at random and skipped to halfway through and lay back down and closed her eyes.

A woman was speaking: Love is pain, but it's a necessary pain, and pain signals to us that whatever is triggering it means something, that it's worth it. Money and love are not the same, although they share

many principles. Confusing the two can be very dangerous. The love of God is the only love unspoiled by desire, and that is why it's the only form of love that promises eternal life.

She could feel the friction between two conflicting sides of herself. She was aware of an urge to scream, shout, weep, to let go completely, to surrender; she wanted to remain in the part of her consciousness that felt nothing at all. Whenever the drugs began to recede, the former impulse began to rise. It felt primal, terrifying. She had to move urgently to stop it from taking hold.

Another of the videos Xin had left open covered the recent spate of sabotage to the railways. It had something to do with senior figures in the government who had extensive business dealings with foreign powers through asset management firms they ran, stated a detached voice.

Laura took another pill and closed the tab.

She stopped dividing time into minutes and hours and days and weeks. She did not care what was happening outside or what other people were doing. She wanted to be either on or off, wide awake or dead to the world.

It was difficult for her to remember exactly what she did on a daily basis. Her laptop was the focal point of her consciousness, its screen a boundless vista. The images it displayed stayed with her long after she'd closed it.

The pills were beginning to have less of an effect. She started taking more. She split each of the tablets in half with a Coutts card her father had given her and took two and a half at a time. Then she upped her dose to three.

The press moved on from her father. The front pages were focused on a war and an election and a sexual harassment trial involving a celebrity.

How farcically short the attention span of the general public, she thought, they're not looking for anything real, just for something to keep them angry enough to stop them from falling asleep on their commute.

She could no longer interest herself in the intricacies of what her father had done, what people thought he had done, their reactions to what they thought he had done. It bored her.

She retreated inward, filled a notepad with an unpunctuated wall of text, not stopping to correct mistakes or read what she had written. Her fingers ached, her wrists spasmed, her tendons contracted.

A series of theories occurred to her as she wrote. Victoria had been using her, if not for her money then for her apartment, for which she had paid Laura a symbolic amount well below the market rate on a monthly basis. They had been together for Victoria's years of struggle, from an unpaid gallery internship after they'd graduated to her high-status job as the assistant to a sculpture dealer. And then Victoria had ceased to need Laura. She had got everything she needed and left.

One evening Laura scanned back through what she had written, ripping out each page as she went until she was surrounded by a crescent of paper. Her eyes were caught by the occasional phrase. The words were alien, she could not remember writing them.

With the amphetamine receding and the benzodiazepine yet to kick in, she was overcome by a great shame. Her testimony was cut through with a self-pity that registered as narcissism, a realisation that no one else cared about what she thought or how she felt, her parents never had, neither had her friends, and now Victoria never would again.

But that was the nature of human relationships, they were arbitrary, transactional, people got what they wanted and you tried to take what you could and when one party no longer felt that the energy they were expending was providing an adequate return they disappeared. This was the foundation of all her friendships and, it dawned on her now, her relationship with her parents. She had once served to signify to the public that her father was a real person with a heart and a soul, that he cared about something other than himself, but the reality was that she had only ever been an appendage, a vessel designed to attract sympathy, fit to be discarded as soon as she ceased to be effective.

She went to the bathroom and considered herself in the mirror. Her eyes were beset by heavy purple patches. A pair of veins were visible at the base of her cheekbone. A wave of something like sadness pulsed up from her gut and threatened to manifest itself in a sob.

She splashed her face with cold water to dilute any teardrops that might have escaped. Light from two halogen strips concealed beneath the cabinet refracted up from the sink to form a halo above her crown.

It was time for her final dose of the day. Tomorrow she would go outside, begin to taper, because she could not live like this forever. But then maybe she could, maybe she would never again have to be a person in the world, nothing had to happen to her, she could live out the rest of her life in a self-imposed enclosure of managed comfort.

She found the pill boxes and shook them. There were only a couple left in each. There was no way she could have got through them that quickly, she thought, before recognising that in fact it was entirely possible; she had not counted how many were in the box before starting, it had not been a detail that had felt relevant to address, each dose had felt like a one-off, a temporary aberration, rather than constitutive of a pattern of habitual behaviour.

She took one and texted Xin to ask if he could bring some round some more, dismissing a notification that she had missed another call from an anonymous number. The reply came within a few minutes: Sorry cant help none left.

Laura returned to her laptop. All she needed were a few pills to tide her over. She would take half doses and everything would be OK, then she could return to her life. She had a rough idea of how to get them, there was a special browser she could use, websites where you could pay people to send you whatever you wanted.

It wasn't hard to find what she was looking for. She selected what she wanted, something roughly equivalent to the pills Xin had recommended, chose the express courier delivery option and sent the required funds from a crypto wallet Victoria had set up for her. The pills would be with her either the next day or the day after.

She closed the window and lowered the blinds. She could hold out until then, she thought, as everything turned soft.

•

The package had still not arrived. She registered a fatigue that had an airport lounge layover quality, like being outside of time. It could have been days or months later but the date field in the top right of her laptop's menu bar informed her that only twenty-four hours had passed.

Outside, evening was beginning to fall. She massaged her temples and refreshed the tracking link once and again and once more.

There was a knock at the door. She barely registered it at first, it was as if it was happening in a world that was not her own. She had not seen anyone come in from the street, so it was likely to be a neighbour, not the package. She sighed and got up to answer.

She couldn't see anyone outside the door or on the feed from the camera she had discretely mounted above the downstairs entrance. She slid the latch open and pulled the door back towards her and peered out, and she saw something, although she could not be sure what, before everything disappeared.



## *Will*

Saturday mornings were when nothing happened, an intense kind of nothing, a sense of anticipation that could be freeing or claustrophobic or lonely depending on what he was doing.

It felt good to be out of the house and on his bike. It was easy to settle back into thinking nothing and feeling even less, particularly now that he was expending the little mental energy he still had on weaving between the buses and taxis that were clotting the Old Kent Road bus lane.

Before he'd left he had willed Sophie to text him, or if not Sophie then someone from his past with the potential to lend a new wind of narrative momentum to his life. But no one had texted him; all he'd received were a couple of notifications: an alert from a news app concerning a fresh act of industrial sabotage and an email from his bank suggesting he extend his overdraft in order to meet an imminent direct debit payment.

Laura Knight lived in an area of Bermondsey that Will knew from a warehouse party he and Kamal had attended a few times as students, the venue of which, he now discovered, had been demolished and replaced by four asymmetrical towers bookended by terraced houses, a few now home to down-on-their-luck businesses — a laundry, a Chinese takeaway, a minicab company — while others had been refurbished in neo-Georgian style and subdivided into flats. The map on his phone indicated that Laura Knight lived in one of these apartments.

An alert on the courier app indicated that the package needed to be delivered within the next few hours or else he would incur a penalty. It was not clear what this penalty would be.

The recipient had requested he take the delivery up rather than leave it in the mail room. The front door was open. He went in and made his way up the stairs.

He checked the name on each door as he ascended. By the time he'd reached the top floor he was out of breath. He registered an acute pang of hunger in his stomach. He had smoked a joint before he'd left and had not eaten since the previous evening. He would just place the package on the doorstep and

leave and go home and eat and try to get through the weekend without Kamal dragging him out anywhere.

The door was ajar. He tried to soften his steps as he approached in case he disturbed the recipient and had to interact with them; even so much as a murmured greeting felt beyond him.

When he bent down to lay the package on the doorstep he saw that the lock had been removed from the door, a thatch of splintered wood fraying out from where it had once been. As he rose to his feet the door creaked open. He picked up the package and stepped inside.

The floor of the hallway was covered in detritus, shards of wine glass were interspersed with fragments of wood from what had once been a cabinet. Will was not thinking at all now, his feet and eyes moved around autonomously, registering each new facet of destruction without emotion.

He picked up an orange keycard from a shelf that was still intact and turned it over in his hands. It seemed odd that whoever lived there had left it inside if they had gone out.

The furniture looked expensive and there was a cluster of abstract paintings on the wall. A few canvases now lay about the floor, ripped and soiled. He went through to the living room, which was pitch dark, a blackout blind drawn over the front window, and found a light switch.

Very little had been left intact. Books had been ripped up, a desk had been upturned, a lamp had been smashed and lay blinking on a ripped-open mattress in the corner of the room, a hernia of memory foam protruding outwards. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled.

He noticed his breathing had grown irregular, it was as if he couldn't pull enough oxygen into his lungs. He was outside his body, watching himself consider the wreckage, his perspective that of someone controlling a character in a video game. He could do anything he wanted to; nothing was real so nothing could hurt him.

He lay down on the mattress and extended his torso until he lay horizontal and closed his eyes. He wondered what would happen if he were to fall asleep right there, imagined explaining to whoever discovered him that he had no idea what had got into him, that passing out had been his body's natural response to the chaos he'd discovered. This thought brought him back inside himself. He got up and

continued exploring but felt a rising anxiety, as if he had crossed a line that would lead him to a terrible fate.

The other rooms were in a similar state. There was no one in the flat. Someone had probably broken in while the occupant was out. Maybe they would return soon, in which case Will did not want to be found there. For a moment he considered calling the police before concluding it was easier not to. It wasn't his responsibility. It was just some rich woman who would ultimately be fine. She could call them herself when she got back, it would be easier that way. He went back to the entrance and tried to remove the debris from the soles of his shoes.

It wasn't until he got back to his bike that he realised the package was still in his hands, the orange keycard in his left pocket.

The next week he spent trying to forget everything he could. He did not think about the trashed apartment or the night with Sophie. He stowed the package in the bottom drawer of his bedside table, where it joined years-old birthday cards from his foster parents and a bottle of lube long past its sell-by date. He considered reporting it as undeliverable but thought about how this might trigger an investigation or a redelivery attempt, something that might draw him further into whatever it was that had happened. He would wait and incur the penalty.

He worked harder than ever before, persuaded himself that the likelihood of him being found out for not delivering the package was slim, a conviction that grew with every delivery he made. And so he arrived at the depot early and tore around the city completing every job the app presented to him, returning to the flat so exhausted that he forwent showering and fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow only to wake up what felt like seconds later and begin again.

He stopped smoking, did not drink, committed himself again to becoming a good person, someone who paid rent on time, someone in control of his life. If Kamal had caught him during the brief window between work and sleep he would have found Will the most cogent he'd been in months. Will noticed this in himself when he had to interact with people at the depot or with those he was delivering

to. He had real conversations with office receptionists, gave full answers and asked follow-up questions and smiled and wished them a pleasant day as he left.

Sophie intruded on his thoughts less and less. They were two independent people with different lives, each of them responsible only for themselves. He needed to give her time and space and all would be well, or it would not be well, but that was its own form of ending, one he decided to welcome if it came to it.

One evening Will and Kamal shared a pizza out on the balcony. They talked about Kamal's dad, who was sick, and their time at university, and the people at Kamal's work he found most annoying. Will wanted to talk about Sophie but stopped himself, and when Kamal brought her up in a manner he seemed to think was subtle Will said We're friends, it's fine, and swiftly changed the subject to how he thought London was perhaps becoming a bad place, how it was growing more innocuous by the day, all the clubs were closing, noise complaints were lodged by new restaurants that had taken leases with full knowledge of the fixtures of nightlife that resided beneath them. And people didn't want to do fun things or make stuff anyway, they wanted to go to former pubs that had been converted into venues for axe throwing, they wanted to have experiences, they wanted to dress up as Belle Époque Parisians and go to a warehouse that had been converted to a film set but with no cameras, they wanted to find the best avocado toast in the city, which they wanted to rate on a spreadsheet against the offerings of other popup brunch establishments. They wanted to queue up for several hours to eat churros and drink espresso martinis. Will hated this impulse, hated what the city was becoming, wanted to continue venting until Kamal truly understood how he felt but noticed that he had ceased to pay attention, was looking at him with an expression that suggested he didn't understand what Will was so concerned about, and Will remembered that Kamal had been axe throwing with some work colleagues the previous month. Maybe he had liked it.

Perhaps there was nothing wrong with the things Will hated anyway. Perhaps it was him who was the problem, what was wrong with letting people enjoy things, what business was it of his what they did with their time?

What made him different was that he was resolved to actually do things, he thought, he did not want to be a passive spectator, a consumer of whatever new fad a marketing agency had cooked up to meet their KPIs for the quarter, but when it came to it it was too easy to do the wrong things, or things that you thought were right but which turned out to make you unhappy. It was difficult to tell the difference between what you wanted for yourself and what people wanted you to do, and sometimes he felt as if he didn't have a choice, that he was just following the only path available to him, and that path would only take him so far anyway; he was being constantly told to earn more money and start an ISA and save for a deposit on a house, but he didn't know how to do any of these things, his brief period of moonlighting as a person with a real job had ended in abject failure. Everything suggested to him that the world was full of potential, that he could do great things and live a wonderful life, but that had never been his experience. It felt as if everything was permitted but nothing was possible.

Sometimes the image of the trashed flat still impinged on the fringes of his thoughts, and it took considerable effort for him to push it out, because seeing the wreckage triggered a feeling he could not quite place, something both exciting and calming, as if his mind had reached its capacity for processing information and could not think of anything more.

The image asserted itself at moments in which he was doing nothing else, brushing his teeth or waiting for the kettle to boil, and when it came he had to do everything he could to divert his attention, because although it was pleasant there was something dangerous about it too, it was as if allowing it to take hold would render him unable to regain control, it was not what he was supposed to be doing, it was not healthy, and being sober made him more vulnerable, less able to distract himself when the feeling descended.

The email Will received made it very clear that he was not being fired. A war and supply chain issues and the central bank's response to rampant inflation meant that money was no longer cheap, and any well-run company had a duty to protect itself in such circumstances, and naturally that meant living within its means while recognising that its people were its most valuable commodity, more valuable even than actual commodities like natural gas, the high price of which was a key driver of the adverse

conditions the world was facing. With this in mind, it was with great regret that the company had taken the decision that its courier fleet was surplus to requirements for the time being, and, because couriers were not contracted employees, nothing needed to be done by either party. The company would see what the next weeks and months brought and assess reopening opportunities to riders when the circumstances changed. The company thanked him for all his hard work and looked forward to welcoming him back at an unspecified time in the future.

With no work to do, Will continued biking around but without a goal or a destination. He traced laps of the city, ascended its hills and gazed down from on high over the mass of people and buildings and capital below.

He started smoking again and welcomed the familiar distance between himself and the objects of his immediate experience.

He returned to the flat at around midnight and couldn't sleep and tried to stop himself from panicking about his looming cash flow issues but instead found himself thinking about the apartment break-in. He wondered when the tenant had discovered the break-in and whether the perpetrators had been captured. He still had the package he'd failed to deliver. He pulled it out from the depths of his bedside cabinet.

Washing a pill down with the last flat inch of a can of sun-warm Fanta, Will thought to search the name of the intended recipient in case he could find out what had happened.

He blinked heavily; there was a string of results from mainstream news sites. The daughter of billionaire energy magnate Richard Knight was missing. Her family had appealed for help, offering a considerable reward to anyone who gave information that contributed to her safe return, reported the BBC. The article went on to note that her father had recently overseen a controversial oil pipeline project on the east coast, although here the details were vague, which suggested that the journalist was trying not to draw a causal link or insinuate that his daughter's disappearance was in any sense deserved.

Other articles were less discerning; multiple right-wing tabloids intimated that several ecoactivist groups were being looked into due to inflammatory statements they had previously made regarding the family, while comment pieces in the liberal press took issue with what they described as baseless speculation brewed up by dark money groups and unscrupulous media barons, aimed at fomenting popular anger towards those whose only crime was trying to secure a sustainable planetary future free of mass-scale suffering.

Will inspected what was left of the packaging, but before he could examine it in more depth he started to feel a warm exhaustion spread through his body that fused with a vague sympathy for the missing girl he was unable to locate the genesis of, and when he awoke it was dark outside and his bedside lamp was still on, extending a shard of light across the pill-covered floor.

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Will had stopped seeing his foster parents when he was sixteen years old.

His father had left and then his mother had died. He had never met his grandparents and he had no close relatives he could stay with. His mother had been too preoccupied with the hard fact of her own imminent death to make arrangements for his care after her passing. He had been fourteen.

One day he was living with his parents in their semi-detached three-bedroom and then a few months later he was alone, boiling shoplifted cans of beans and hoping no one from his school caught wind and alerted the authorities. And then they did catch wind and alert the authorities and the house was sold, the small percentage of equity his parents had put down on it requisitioned to pay for his mother's hospice care.

His foster parents were not bad people. They wanted him to accompany them to church on Sundays, but otherwise they encouraged him to do what he wanted. They did not try to stop him from going out at night, though sometimes as a matter of politeness he climbed out of his room's bay window and dropped down onto the supple turf of the front garden, flattening the wildflowers that

grew there. He hung out with older boys from his school in dimly lit playgrounds and under damp bus shelters, where they sipped cans of warm cider and passed around crumpled joints.

His school offered him extra time on exams and extended his homework deadlines, but he wouldn't have done well on either even if he'd had eternity to complete them. There was nothing wrong with him. Some things had happened and no one talked to him about them apart from a councillor whose flagrant attempts to make him cry in front of her elicited in him a rage he had hitherto not experienced and found difficult to control, which excited the councillor, who asked him to describe his anger as if it was an animal or a teacher at his school, aggravating him further and causing him to sit silently through the sessions until eventually his councillor reported to the school that he was not making any progress, leading to a gentle reprimand from his head of year, who told him that people cared about him and wanted him to succeed but that he needed to keep up his side of the bargain; he needed to help them help him.

His councillor tried a new approach, which involved describing how he felt using a visual simile.

I might say I feel like the first day of spring, said his councillor, or maybe I feel like a newborn kitten.

Will did know what he felt like. He said the first thing that came into his head: I feel like a ship out at sea.

And what's the weather this ship is sailing in like? asked the councillor. Is it stormy, perhaps? Is it a clear day?

It's a bit windy, said Will. And the waters are dark.

The counsellor nodded and wrote something down on her notepad.

After the session he was informed by his tutor that he would be required to stay in counselling indefinitely. He learned to moderate his answers until he was able to convincingly tell his councillor that he felt like a summer afternoon, and a few weeks later he was no longer required to attend the sessions.

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Will looked around for other courier jobs. He tried the grocery delivery companies, but they were also struggling in the fallout from tightening monetary conditions and had recently been through their own rounds of layoffs. The thought of finding another office job made him feel physically sick. He checked his bank balance compulsively, calculating how many days he had until he reached the limit of his overdraft and had to ask Kamal for more time to make rent.

He wondered if this might be the start of something good and necessary, because now he could be free, having nothing could be freeing, it afforded the opportunity to reevaluate what you wanted. It offered a clean slate. Perhaps now he could step outside of the byzantine system of money and time and transactional social relationships he found himself in. Uninstalling the courier app from his phone was the first step, the second could be deleting Sophie's number and moving away, because she would never love him and he was doomed to repeat the same pathetic loop forever like an injured animal that needed to be put out of its misery. He could look for beauty and return to a time before all that restricted him existed, because surely it had not always been as it was, with everything so hollow and inert, with everything he cared about inevitably revealed as fake, as decoration, as an avatar for a financial asset or liability.

But he did not know where to go or what to do. There was no decision he could take that would enable him to make his exit, and he found that not having money was not in fact liberating but restricted his options even further.

All he had were the mental images of the vandalised painting and Laura Knight's flat. He came to regard the discomfort they triggered as a symptom of his entrapment, and when he was able to temper this instinct he found the excitement he felt was a sensation akin to freedom, and he sat up late into the night replaying the scenes in his head, supplementing them with news stories of fresh attacks and languishing in the chaos and disorder and beauty of the images until his mind reached a state of calm he had never before experienced.

Kamal had uncovered the location of a squat party in an area of the Docklands untouched by the regeneration drive that had transformed the surrounding territory. Will had forgotten all about it until

he'd received a text from Kamal asking if he was still coming. He was over the other side of town on Primrose Hill, lounging on one of the few patches of grass not totally overrun with after-work revellers. He watched the sunset without interest and failed to meditate, the vocal timbre of the guide in the YouTube video he had selected pulling him back into the world whenever he began to drift into stillness.

Note what you're thinking or feeling, she said, and if that's nothing, note that too.

He cycled east, hauled his bike onto the DLR and stood at the front of the first carriage as the train weaved its way between the glass towers of multinational investment banks. He disembarked and locked his bike to a lamppost in an empty car park. A diffuse stream of young people who looked like they might be heading to his destination made their way past him. He waded into their midst.

He found Kamal at the front of the venue, a dilapidated former factory surrounded by a moat of cracked dirt. People swarmed around the entrance. Bass rattled the building's walls from inside, strobe lights caught the contours of shattered windows and shot up into the night sky.

Thanks for turning up, said Kamal, issuing a firm wink. It's not like I've been waiting an hour or anything.

At the door a shaven-headed girl took their money and inked a smudged outline of the sefirot onto their wrists. Inside, the dance floor was almost empty, the makeshift bar packed. Will and Kamal climbed a ladder to a mezzanine level that overlooked the dance floor and slumped themselves down on a water-stained sofa.

Kamal delicately unfolded a train ticket and flattened it on the sticky table in front of them, revealing a white powder that carried a faint piss-yellow tinge. He scooped some up with his house key and dispatched it into his left nostril, which he then padded with the back of his hand.

That fucking sucked, said Kamal, his eyes watering.

Will took the key and the wrapper from Kamal and soon they were talking to one another at great speed, those around them dissipating into trails of vapour.

After an indefinite period of time they went back down to the dance floor, now full. Will noticed some of Sophie's friends and went over to speak to them and Kamal brought back a couple of beers

and then they were all outside in a circle laughing, their hands all over one another, jaws extended, eyes rolling back.

Will found himself asking a girl who looked familiar to him where Sophie was.

She shrugged.

It doesn't matter, he mumbled to himself, taking another breathless swig from his can.

They went inside and danced, Will swaying back and forth, propped up by one of the subs next to the DJ booth.

Fear began to encroach at the edges of his euphoria, as if something terrible that he couldn't name was about to happen. He couldn't see the faces of those dancing, they all looked the same, gyrating in a uniform rhythm that made him feel seasick.

He tried to attract Kamal's attention; he was on the other side of the speaker stack, screaming in the ear of a mulleted girl who did not appear to be interested in what he was saying. Will went over and whispered in Kamal's ear, creating a chain of unwanted communication. The girl took advantage of a lull in Kamal's attention and ducked away.

Have you got any more? asked Will.

Outside they took turns dipping a key into the wrapper. Will's fear was replaced by a manic relief accompanied by a cold burn at the back of his nasal cavity. Sophie's friends joined them and Kamal offered up his key and soon they were all talking over one another, one of the girls clutching Will's forearm with so much pressure that his hand started to go numb.

I just really miss her, he found himself saying, But not in, like, a desperate way, she's just important to me, I care for her so much. And it's not like she even needs to feel the same, sometimes it can just be something that you feel, you can hold it and feel it and no one can take it away from you.

Sophie's friend was nodding with apparent empathy while dancing to the muffled rumble of the music from inside, her arms spinning symmetrically around her torso, and Will wanted to persuade her further that he wasn't being pathetic, that he and Sophie were actually close and that he was totally fine, and he was sure that this was really how he felt, although it was not how he remembered feeling before he'd come up.

The girl interpreted one of the words he'd said as a prompt to talk about her own relationship. She was in love with three people at the same time and all of them were in love with her, but they were not in love with each other, and she was therefore finding it difficult to manage the situation and hold space for each party's feelings.

I just think love is so horrible as, like, an experience? she said. I hate love so much. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

Yeah, totally, said Will, although he didn't really understand what she meant.

Will and Kamal performed the same loop throughout the night, progressing from the dance floor to the smoking area to the mezzanine to the bathroom and back to the dance floor. The drugs ran out and Will pretended not to register Kamal's strong suggestions that it was his turn to buy more.

They left and walked down to a newly constructed walkway along the river beset by white-walled condominiums lit a dim shade of purple neon. The silhouette of a cable car emblazoned with the branding of an Emirati airline was suspended in midair above the water.

The sun began to rise. Will felt a familiar wall of fear accelerating towards him. He felt completely alone. Perhaps this was the trigger he needed to change his life, he had needed to hit the bottom before he could really start to move on.

Do you have any weed? he asked Kamal and the group that had gathered around him. No one responded.

Sophie's friends and a few others neither Will nor Kamal knew came back to their flat. They sat out on the decking of Kamal's balcony and racked up some lines.

Will had depleted his reserve stash of cigarettes. He covertly siphoned some tobacco from a packet he found protruding from a jacket pocket someone had left hanging over the end of the bannister.

At some point everyone left, leaving Will and Kamal alone. Will thought back to how they had once spent hours and hours talking without pause, disclosed things to one another that they had never told anyone else. He remembered the pills in his drawer, took a couple, and offered one to Kamal. They

retreated inside and passed out on the living room's parallel sofas and when Will awoke it was evening and he was alone.

Sitting under a tree by a canal a few days later, Will found himself thinking of his mother and father again. He missed them both. It was likely he just needed to replenish his serotonin supply, he told himself. Then he'd be fine.

But he found himself crying in Tesco, in the shower, in front of Kamal, who, mercifully, pretended not to notice. He couldn't identify a single trigger but was aware of a universe of interlinked ambient meaning beyond language that he was unable to access or control or understand. He felt as bad as he had back at university, maybe worse.

He spent hours on his phone, enjoying brief periods of respite upon receiving text messages or social media replies as his dopamine momentarily spiked before scrambling for another source of stimuli to extend the feeling.

He sent messages to people he had not spoken to in a long time, old friends from school and university. He emailed ex-girlfriends, told them he was just checking in and that he wished them well. A couple replied and seemed genuinely pleased to hear from him, but the correspondence soon died out as Will's extended epistles strayed into contested emotional territory. He posted tweets calculated to elicit responses from specific demographics among his low-hundreds follower count, opinions that he barely held calibrated to attract maximum engagement.

On one of these spirals, Will found himself reading about Laura Knight's disappearance. It had been a couple of weeks; the story had briefly gripped the public consciousness before gradually dropping down the news hierarchy until there was little new information at all.

The press had settled on the conclusion that she'd had something to do with her own kidnap; they never said so explicitly, but the details they chose to include — they were scandalised at her queerness, which they presented as a weapon she had brandished against her parents, with whom she apparently did not enjoy a good relationship, with whom she had argued about money — painted the picture of a rich, spoiled girl who had been given everything but still chosen to rebel.

The papers extended sympathy to her parents, who would surely be going through hell right now, and one had to admit her father, Richard, was conducting himself with grace and strength and did not deserve what was happening to his family, even if one found his politics and his business pursuits unsavoury.

After the mainstream media had lost interest the story had been adopted by the more conspiratorial corners of the internet. Social media accounts with pictures of a teenaged Laura Knight as their avatars posted incessantly about the case, extrapolating meaning from the smallest of details, reading the Companies House records of her father's firm like tea leaves. Many thought it likely that the whole thing was a set-up, a plot to garner sympathy for her father, distract from the disastrous impact his company's pipeline would have on the environment. It all made perfect sense if you thought about it. Laura Knight may well have been in on it herself.

It was so easy to get drawn into things, thought Will. When people grouped together their energy multiplied, they copied one another, added, adapted, warped. There was just one conversation with thousands of participants, who spoke with one voice. And Will felt himself becoming part of this mass, began to believe the most tenuous of theories and supplement them with his own speculation. He had been there, he had been in the flat, revelled in the image of its disorder. He knew more than almost everyone.

And so he joined them, created an anonymous account from which he poured forth on the motives of the kidnappers, on Laura Knight and her relationship with her father, the possible link between what had happened and the ongoing attacks on the country's core infrastructure. He constantly contradicted himself, his thoughts flowing without restriction, with no recourse to logic. When other posters countered that what he was saying did not make sense he told them that they were wrong, that he knew more, that he had been there.

They asked him for proof and one night, towards the end of a marathon smoking session, he took a picture of the packaging that had held the pills, Laura Knight's name and address scrawled across the front in thick black marker, the orange keycard by its side.

The next morning there were stories in the tabloids asserting that Laura Knight's kidnapping was drug-related, that she had been addicted to prescription pills she'd ordered off the dark web. He read each one in search of definitive proof that he was not the only source for the stories, but the same details appeared in all of them. The last one he read included the picture of the package he'd shared.

He doused the packaging in lighter fluid and burned it in the bathtub, but disposing of the evidence did little to calm him; the damage was done.

He logged back into the account with the intention of deleting it but decided to flick through the glut of direct messages he had received overnight before he did so. Reporters wanting to talk, conspiracy accounts issuing death threats, anonymous posters whose messages made no sense at all.

Just as he was about to delete the account he received a new message. It contained a series of GPS coordinates. Intrigued, he entered them into a mapping app. They pointed to a location on the Suffolk coast.

What does this mean? he asked. What's this got to do with Laura Knight? Why did you message me?

The account did not reply for a while and Will assumed whoever it was had gotten bored of playing around, but upon returning from the kitchen after making a cup of tea he found a new message: You'll find out more when the time is right.

Will sat back in his chair, sighed and blew on his tea to cool it.

Who are you? he wrote.

We're a group of concerned citizens who share a set of common interests.

I don't know who you are, Will replied. I have no idea what yr talking about.

They continued to go back and forth over the next few days. He treated each message like a chess move, tried to glean more information without exposing his own position. He knew there was no reason to keep responding, the whole thing was likely an elaborate prank or, he thought in his more paranoid moments, a honeytrap set by an intelligence agency.

He knew he was making a mistake, that he should do what he had originally intended: delete the account and try to forget about what had happened. But whoever it was he was talking to had a way of

exposing just enough information that every time he resolved to end the conversation and delete the account he could not help but send another reply, and once he'd sent a reply he needed to know what the reaction would be.

He hinted at knowing more than he did, shared specific details of the interior of Laura Knight's apartment that no one could know without having visited it. The account reciprocated with details of its own: the colour of the bedroom walls, the position of the mattress in the corner of the living room.

But mostly whoever it was talked about the group they wanted him to join. They asked him a series of personal questions that he either ignored or met with ridicule. But then the account said: What does it feel like to be you? and rather than issue a sardonic retort he found himself pondering the question's meaning, and without warning he was engulfed by a wave of sadness so intense that he could not think his way out of it. He began to weep and could not stop and eventually he ceased resisting. He had not been the subject of such inquiry for a long time, perhaps not ever in his life. The therapy he had received as a teenager had not felt the same, the attention and care had been forced upon him in order to coerce him back into his role as a compliant subject; the wrong answers would have negative consequences — more therapy, more supervision, perhaps a different school, medication. But now the veil of anonymity had granted him permission to let go, to fall apart.

He did not respond for a long time, and when he returned to the chat window there was a list of further questions, each of which intensified his emotional lapse. When he was finally able to reassert control he began typing manically, a stream of barely sensible confessions, realisations that had hitherto remained hidden even to himself.

He felt lonely and abandoned, he wrote, he didn't know what to do and his life was fucked and he did not know how to fix it, and it was all his fault but it was also not his fault at all, he had been dealt a bad hand, he'd had to deal with circumstances that no one should be subject to, and although people in his life said they cared they could never really understand, and this made him feel lonely and worthless, and now it had come to this, he wrote, not bothering to correct the typing errors he made several times each sentence: he was confiding in an anonymous stranger.

He left his laptop and brought his empty mug to the kitchen, where he rinsed it in the sink and filled it with water from the tap.

He brought up the message on his phone. There were a few replies.

We're sorry that you feel this way. Many people do. You are not alone. We believe that healing starts with ourselves and that if we can heal ourselves we can teach others how to heal. The world is no longer beautiful, it has been buried beneath false representations of itself. This must change.

Will's first instinct was to scoff, but it was such an attitude that had landed him where he was, at this new nadir.

We will pay for your travel, we will give you a stipend. We will provide food, companionship, structure. You will contribute to something worthwhile, something larger than yourself.

Will stared at the screen and tried to think, but before he'd made a conscious decision his fingers had started to type.

Tell me what I need to do, he wrote.



## II

The sea is very still. Grey waves lap up against the base of the cliff face at high tide before receding to reveal a patchwork of glassy pebbles. Out past the algaed groynes to the south a large white sphere hovers above the sea. The tide keeps its atomic contents at a safe temperature. Armed guards patrol its periphery from the shore, the light from their torches faintly visible from atop the cliffs at night. Further out, a cluster of oil tankers lines the horizon.

Young families with dogs and retired couples traverse the beach. Fishermen crouch inside small tents, their rods extending over the foamy break. Behind grass-broken dunes, a car park plays host to an ice cream van, a small fleet of tourist coaches and a mobile cafe that serves instant coffee and newspaper-wrapped fish and chips. The road that leads to the car park, wide enough to accommodate a single vehicle at a time, passes through a small village built around a fourteenth-century Anglican church, its weathered brick punctuated by tufts of moss.

After the village the road curves back to the coast. The cliff that marks its eastern border is veiled by ancient woodland. Pine, cedar, briar, rosemary, lavender, nettle. Uncertain soil. On the other side of the forest lie the ruins of a monastery, a few stone walls marking what were once the living quarters of its residents. A dilapidated chapel crumbles at its centre.

Along the cliff from the monastery, more woodland. Behind the woodland, a large glass structure intersected by wooden beams and heavy oak flooring. A single dirt path runs up to the building. No one finds it unless they are looking for it. Villagers and rambling tourists never intrude. The building radiates a halogen warmth against the summer dusk. The sky above glows a deep blue.

Inside, people talk and sleep and eat and plot and debate every night until the early hours and rise again with the sun.



## *Laura*

Laura awoke in a white-walled room, drowsy and alone. She did not know where she was or what had happened. The last thing she remembered was opening the door and things going dark, unfamiliar voices: hush, you're safe, they had told her.

A glass of water had been placed on a table next to the bed. Her mouth was so dry that she took it down in a few breathless gulps.

There was a knock at the door. She found herself too spaced out and desperate to do anything but acquiesce and grant whoever it was permission to enter. As the door eased open she grasped the empty water glass in case she needed to defend herself.

A man in a crisp white t-shirt and thick-rimmed glasses entered, his mid-length brown hair neatly parted, fringe tucked behind one of his ears. Laura pushed herself back against the headboard of the bed.

Good morning, said the man. The first thing I want to make clear is that we mean you no harm. I want to ask for some time to explain, if not today then whenever you feel comfortable. If there's anything you need, please let us know.

He paused for a few seconds as if awaiting a response and when none was forthcoming took a few steps backwards and left the room.

She registered activity outside. Footsteps, soft voices. A breeze through the tiny open window above the bed carried in the scent of salt and pine. She passed out and when she came to there was a plate of food on a small table at the end of her bed, slices of aubergine with passion fruit seeds, a smear of tahini, a fine slice of lime.

Her drowsiness continued for the next few days. She left the first few meals delivered to her untouched but began to feel so hungry she couldn't help herself and when she started to eat it was as if she was coming back to life.

She wondered whether she would feel different once the pills had left her system. Her body twitched, taking her by surprise as she drifted off to sleep, but generally she was unpanicked. The room was a cell but she could close her eyes and turn it into a cabin on a ship, the interior of a private jet, whatever else she could imagine. Choosing the trajectory of her fantasy world was the only decision she had to make.

Her dreams became more vivid, the border between consciousness and dream state more porous. The meals that appeared seemed to materialise from nothing. She felt the presence of figures close to her but could not be sure if they were real, could not reach out to touch them.

The room turned from the engine room of a grand cruise ship to a lush palazzo. She was in Venice and in the Arctic and back in her flat, Victoria stroking her hair as Laura told her about the strange dream she'd had, which had been horrible because they were no longer together and she had been taken away to a strange place by people she didn't know.

What a terrible thought, said Victoria. You're safe here with me.

The man visited a few more times and as her energy returned she was able to scream at him, glossolalic explosions of fear and anger he responded to by gravely nodding as if he understood before making his way out of the room.

One morning when he entered she calmly asked for her phone. He seemed taken aback.

We can't do that, he said. We have no intention of restricting your freedom, but please be patient.

That's funny, she said, because my freedom feels quite restricted.

We just need to talk a few things over, we owe you an explanation.

Laura did not have the energy to launch into another round of expletives. The man smiled and left the room.

For the next few days, the man did not come in to check on her. When she slept she did not dream. She took a cold shower and dressed and went back to bed and cried. The room felt very real.

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She had been a young girl when was first sent away to school. Before then she had experienced limited social interaction. Magda, the Czech au pair her parents had tasked with her care, had been the source of the majority of her human contact, her father always away and her mother either travelling with him or up in London playing tennis, seeing friends, attending social engagements.

Laura had created a private language that she used to communicate with Magda, a mongrel dialect of Czech and guttural noises that supplemented her incipient English. She used it to name her toys and her clothes and various objects and feelings that she felt did not fit the English words assigned to them.

Speaking with Magda in their idiolect made her feel very safe. It was as if they knew something no one else did. They had their own hermetic world into which they could escape whenever they needed to.

The September before her eighth birthday, Laura's mother took her on a series of shopping trips to London. Magda did not accompany them. Laura was required to try on a selection of formal clothing: hats, blazers, blouses, summer dresses, skirts. Once they had found her size, her mother took her to a cafe with pale green walls where they sipped honeyed tea from bone china cups.

Laura missed Magda, and when she asked her mother why Magda hadn't been invited to join them she snapped back that one day Magda would not be there, she would have to learn to do things for herself. And then the next week she had waved goodbye to Magda and been driven a few hours away to preparatory school.

She was assigned a bed in a dormitory full of other girls of her age, who talked incessantly and did not pay attention to her, and she was very scared and missed Magda and when she went to bed each night tried to build in her head an exhaustive compendium of their made-up language, and woke up and was again scared and did not know what to say to the other girls, who seemed to be settling into a complex social constellation from which she appeared to have been excluded.

She took to going to bed as early as permitted by the rigidly defined schedule set by the adults in charge, who kept a close watch on her, although they seldom asked how she was or if she was having any trouble. She pulled the sheets over herself to block out the lights, which remained on for hours,

until the designated lights-off time. She did not sleep but she was not fully conscious either; she was wholly inside herself, exploring what her mind was capable of.

She imagined being at home, with Magda, in her room, being alone again, truly alone in the sense of knowing that there was no one else within a large radius of her, laying on lush grass in the summer or wading through the winter snow.

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Now, in the room, she emerged from a similar state. In the en-suite bathroom, she looked in the mirror and noticed the purple patches that had surrounded her eyes had disappeared. She tried the handle of the door to her room. As she'd expected, it was locked.

She returned to bed and shut her eyes and imagined stepping out of the door, and she couldn't be sure if what she was picturing was a complete fabrication or something she had seen when she'd been brought there, dizzy and sedated.

Her room was just one of many laid out around the circumference of a larger structure, a glass encasement. A huge wood-floored space took up the entire ground level of the building. People lay around on sofas, some with laptops rested upon their stomachs. A woman looked up at her, stood up and walked across the room. Laura traced her path and saw someone who looked like the man who'd entered her room. The woman whispered something in his ear. He turned around and looked up at Laura and made a gesture that was halfway between a wave and an instruction for her to come to him. Laura sharply exhaled and stumbled over her feet as she retreated back into the room, slamming the door shut behind her, but she did not feel scared, she felt safe and comfortable. And then she was asleep.



## *Natalie*

Natalie was on gardening duty, which she preferred to cooking duty but liked less than administrative duty.

It was good to be outside, feeling cool soil on her hands in the summer heat. The growth of the plants and vegetables and fruits was not perceptible on a day-to-day basis, but she took pleasure in their covert evolution, which always seemed to dawn on her in a sudden epiphany.

She liked the tomatoes best, the way they were green and withered at first but transformed into lush spheres of deep red always felt like a miracle, one which she, in her own small way, was responsible for.

She liked the silence, too. And the space. She liked everyone, loved them. But sometimes she needed to be alone.

Maxim came out into the garden. He asked how the aubergines were doing and although she did not know, had not looked at them for a few days, told him that they were in a good state.

Good, Maxim said, I've missed them recently, maybe we can use them next week.

Natalie nodded and said yes, that would be nice.

And how are you? Maxim asked.

She told him she was doing well and tried to think of how she could elaborate or continue the conversation and asked Maxim how the girl was doing.

Maxim bit gently on his upper lip.

She's well, he said. She just needs time. She needs our patience.

Natalie had not seen the girl, Maxim was the only one who had since they'd brought her back. Her presence made Natalie nervous. The group had been quieter since her arrival, the conversation at dinner had felt more forced than usual.

But Maxim was as calm as ever. One evening he had gathered them together outside on the decking and made a point of addressing the issue that he said he was sure they were all thinking about.

I can assure you everything is going to plan, he said. This is what we were always meant to do.

He smiled and Natalie noticed everyone else smile in response, reflecting Maxim's expression back to him. And then she herself had started to smile.

That night had been the first time it had happened. She had begun to think it never would, and she still did not know why it had been then; there had been so many other opportunities, times when she'd thought it would happen and it just had not.

They had been in his office, facing one another as they had a million times before, and then he had stood up and come to her side of the desk, and she had taken pleasure in her total submission.

Time passed in bursts. Soon after she'd arrived, Natalie had begun to mark its passage not in days or weeks or months or seasons but by the start and conclusion of work streams, the intake of new recruits, feedback councils and group presentations. And then one day she had realised it had been almost a year, and then another year, and now they were in year three.

They were constantly restructuring the group, updating its form or destroying it and building it anew. It was a perpetual process of evolution. Nothing stayed the same from one week to the next, a dynamic that served to further establish Maxim's position as the singular constant as everything changed around him.

The group was ostensibly a direct democracy. Topics were discussed in a weekly assembly. Proposals were tabled, debates were had, decisions were taken with the backing of a simple majority. Each member technically had a veto, but no one had ever chosen to use theirs. Maxim had pinned up diagrams that illustrated how their system of governance worked prominently in the meeting room for anyone to consult, but its real power lay outside its material mechanisms. That there had been very few instances of dissenting votes was seen by Maxim not as evidence of the system's failure as a vessel for democracy but as indicative of its success; the frequent debates they held, the constant discourse on what they should be doing, Maxim's strong advocacy and the fact that people had joined the group because they agreed with him — these factors ironed out any disagreements long before they had to rely on an arbitrary and inflexible process, even one so well designed. They reached consensus before the governance system even came into effect.

Maxim often spoke about what he called real fictions, things that appeared self-evidently sound and underpinned much of the operation of contemporary life but were in fact a lie. These lies were accepted without question because they were so fundamental to the operation of the system they supported. Central banking, representative democracy, industrial agriculture, all were instances of this phenomenon: if everyone decided to see them for what they were they would collapse in an instant, but doing so was not within the interests of the masses, or, in some instances, of a small elite. Societies that accepted reality risked large-scale collapse, and so the fictions were upheld. In many cases this was a great travesty and these fictions should be exposed for what they were, argued Maxim, but encouraging delusion was incredibly powerful and, if it was employed in service of the right cause, morally defensible. Although Maxim had not acknowledged it explicitly, Natalie saw the governance system he had architected as exemplary of this principle.

He made sure to include at least one of the group members he trusted most in the weekly excursions to the supermarket, which were only necessary to pick up the few items they could not grow themselves. They tolerated the requests of those who wanted cigarettes and alcohol. While nothing was banned, discouraged behaviour was regulated by a carefully cultivated impression of natural scarcity.

We are able to create our own abundance by growing, making, designing, building, said Maxim, anything that we cannot create ourselves is either unnecessary or a vulnerability.

This imperative was reflected onto the items themselves; synthetic substances like pills and acid were anathema, but they could grow marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms in the garden, and so their usage was commonplace.

Each member was assigned what was termed a twin, someone they held reciprocal responsibility for. Natalie's twin was Alice.

They met once a week, taking turns as mentor and mentee, analyst and analysand. Despite a veneer of care and concern, their relationship had grown increasingly strained. Sessions meant to aid personal goal-setting were now an opportunity to launch thinly veiled criticism crafted to exploit areas of vulnerability identified in previous meetings.

Then there were daily stand-ups, monthly accountability sessions, quarterly reflection councils. Every six months they were required to solicit feedback from three peers with whom they had worked closely. They were encouraged to ask for input on specific areas of performance, which ranged from the amount of effort they had invested in developing a new skill to how well they had communicated with the others in the group. There were no grades. The feedback was, as Maxim painstakingly emphasised at the start of each cycle, for the purpose of helping them improve as people and as a group.

We need to become an elite unit, he said, and for this to happen everyone has to be getting better all the time. If one person improves, that's powerful. If the entire group improves, the effects are multiplied by the number of people the group contains. Progress is exponential.

In practice, the process reflected the group's interpersonal dynamics. One piece of pointed criticism would often lead to retaliation in the following round; they were required to nominate new assessors each quarter, meaning no one could escape feedback from those they had criticised. Eventually, Maxim theorised, this would lead to a state of equilibrium, with the incentive for retribution and reaction diminishing each round. There would be no reason to criticise in bad faith, everything would be transparent, and transparency was to be embraced at whatever cost, because it resulted in strength.

People responded to the control and the quantification, Natalie noticed them do their best to comply and sometimes to front-run Maxim's initiatives, to try to guess what he was thinking and implement whatever it was in anticipation. But they only responded to this form of discipline because of what the group promised.

Maxim constantly talked about beauty and how they could bring it back to the world. He reminded Natalie of a preacher, he spoke with such conviction that there was no room for irony, his words were gospel. In her more lucid moments, it was not difficult for Natalie to see why this was the case; each of them had self-selected to join because they felt lost and because they agreed with Maxim's core thesis, that they were fundamentally unfree, lacked sovereignty over their own lives, and they had all at some point felt, even if only for a moment, that there was another way of living, and they wanted to meditate

on this feeling and expand it, bring it to the wider world. This was how the specular regime, as Maxim termed it, would fall.

And the building and its surroundings were so beautiful, the feeling of living with one another, ostensibly without hierarchy, as if they were the first adopters of a new way of living, compounded their commitment until they were willing to follow Maxim in whatever it was he had planned for them.

There was an aesthetic element to it, too. Maxim carefully calibrated every aspect of the group's collective persona, making sure to reveal only what was strictly necessary and nothing more. He chose his phrases with immaculate care, wore the same outfit every day: a crisp white shirt, pressed navy chinos, sometimes a loose-fitting grey sweatshirt. The group took to emulating him. He created an assemblage of floating signifiers that, when combined, created a cohesive impression that Natalie found she could not explain but which carried an unmistakable weight, endowing those drawn to it with an identity that they became committed to reproducing, a mimetic dynamic that could only be experienced or felt was transmitted through images and words and suggestion, impossible to pin down or sum up. Natalie witnessed it in the way the group spoke to one another, in their knowing smiles and the glances they shared; they spoke like Maxim, dressed like him, delivered unprompted opinions that could easily have been his.

The cumulative effect was something beyond language, something they had all been lacking in their previous lives. It was as if, by submitting to something they did not control, they could finally become themselves.

You could change the world with a small group of dedicated people. Maxim repeated this mantra until they all believed it.

The group shared an enthusiasm underpinned by naivety. They were excitable, full of energy. Natalie observed Maxim exploiting these qualities and bore witness as each of the recruits transformed.

They obeyed a few of his commands and saw others do the same, which made them want to commit to him more, and this led to a recursive dynamic of reinforcement that culminated in a complete and unquestioning dedication to whatever he required of them.

Being aware of this dynamic did not make Natalie immune to it. She did not want to be immune to it. She believed what he said, his arguments made sense to her, she felt a probity underpinned by a sense of belonging she had only fleetingly experienced prior, in short-lived romantic relationships that had left her devastated when they had ended. But now there was not just one person but many; there was no single point of failure. And her relationship with Maxim was special, she could feel it. She loved him more than anything.

There was another sentiment Maxim repeated often: if you wanted to achieve something it didn't matter how you went about it. The ends always justified the means. This felt unimpeachably true.

She was sure what they were doing was right. She trusted that Maxim was telling the truth and that the girl understood what they were doing and was, slowly but surely, coming to understand their perspective, that they did not wish her harm, that their goals were just and so the tactics they were deploying in service of them were also just. But the longer they went without seeing her the greater the level of ambient discomfort grew — you could see it on people's faces, despite their unfailing commitment they were more subdued, took things more seriously, told fewer jokes.

They were keeping her captive, by definition that was what they were doing. It was different from the other actions, this was something altogether different. But when you were working towards something bigger, when you were operating on a grander scale than the individual, words took on different meanings, their definitions changed.

She had tried talking with Alice about it in their meetings. She had not intended to raise the point, but the format of the sessions, which began with a brief period of meditation followed by forty-five minutes in which the subject was required to talk in a free-associative manner, lent itself to oversharing. Natalie knew that the sessions had been designed with this in mind; Maxim had been clear in his explanation of the new therapeutic programme they had introduced — the group should have no secrets, and the relationship between twins had to be exemplary of this principle.

And so when Natalie had said that she was struggling a little with the moral questions raised by their position, Alice had asked a series of questions that pushed her towards the logical conclusion that

considering the fate of an individual, particularly one so privileged and compromised by association, was a symptom of the indoctrination the hegemonic system had enacted upon her.

She was beginning to resent Alice, she bristled at her matronly tone and moral certainty and unblemished skin and the close proximity to Maxim that she was so obviously trying to secure. But Alice delivered her argument with such stoic assurance that Natalie repeated the lines she was fed with increasing conviction; come the final statement she had been close to shouting.

But that night she was still unable to sleep, and the lines she had recited came back to her, warped by her consciousness to mock her in a voice that was recognisably her own but also not her at all.

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It had been almost three years since she'd first met Maxim.

She was living with her parents then, subsisting on the little money she'd saved from the part-time barista job she'd worked for a few months after graduating. As soon as she'd moved back in she had been struck by a series of intense crying spells that she had failed to conceal from her parents, who immediately took her to their GP, who swiftly diagnosed her with depression and prescribed SSRIs and a short course of cognitive behavioural therapy, the latter of which she would not be able to start for a few months due to high demand for the service.

Everyone goes through this phase, her parents told her, all you're doing by worrying is making it worse, as soon as you have a job and some purpose in your life you'll feel fine again.

She tried to explain to them that what she was most scared of was ending up in a job that she did not like but had to do to live, selling insurance from an unheated warehouse on the industrial estate like her brother, to give one example.

As soon as she had made this confession her parents rescinded their sympathy; Your brother is doing honest work and earning an honest living, they said, you could learn a lot from him, he might actually be able to help you, you know.

They told her she needed to sign on at the Job Centre or they would start charging her rent, and so she walked there every week and submitted applications for entry-level roles she rarely bothered to read the job description for. She prayed for rejection, imagining herself taking an administrative role at a company that made paperclips or sold widgets to industry where she would be tasked with entering data into spreadsheets until retiring on a meagre pension deep into middle age. But when the rejections came they made her feel bad in a different way, as if she was not even good enough to do something she would hate.

Between these applications, she applied for internships she desperately wanted but knew she would not get and cold-emailed the *info@* addresses of newspapers, advertising firms and technology companies. She did not hear back from most of them, and when she did it was in the form of an automated email reply thanking her for her time and informing her that unfortunately she was not what they were looking for, but to please keep checking back because new roles were being added all the time. These rejections were less painful: the company logos in the footers of the emails at least suggested that real careers did actually exist, that some people's lives actually did unfold like this. All she needed was a little luck. If someone happened to decide they liked her name and went to check out the articles she'd written for the student paper and were impressed and invited her to interview and were not immediately disgusted by her cheap, shapeless clothes then maybe she would be able to get her foot on the ladder, and from there work her way into an interesting and well-compensated career.

On Monday nights she often went out with the only two school friends who still lived in the town. They smoked cigarettes and shared bottles of the second-cheapest off-licence rosé in the back of a boyfriend's car. It was like she was sixteen again, as if she'd never left. She saw her life unfolding like this forever, felt a deep horror, considered her friends with empathy and disgust.

She snuck in just after eleven, liberating a few slices of cold ham from the fridge and drifting into an unsettled sleep after firing off a few muddled prayers in the darkness.

And one day her luck did change. She received an email from someone called Maxim Kellerman asking if she had time in her schedule to meet him at his office. He was apparently following up on a response

she'd sent to a social media post. She could vaguely remember what Kellerman was referencing but had to check her outbox to prove to herself that his message was genuine.

I'm not sure what you're looking for, Kellerman said in his email, but I need someone to work closely with myself on building something I deem to be of epochal importance.

Natalie searched the internet for references to Kellerman but could not find him, there were multiple Maxim Kellermans, private equity managers and sales representatives, a prominent water polo player, a mid-level chess champion.

She found the social media post she had responded to in her browser history. It seemed she had come across it after returning home from one of her Monday evenings out. An account with the handle @SOVEREIGN had posted a black image, text emblazoned across its centre in a white, serif font: This World Was Built For You. You Just Need To Find It. The image was accompanied by an address from a privacy-preserving email masking service. The account had a few hundred followers, many of them bots. The rest of the posts were similar, abstract slogans on image cards: HISTORY IS UP TO YOU; AGAINST REASON, FOR A NEW WORLD; NOTHING IS SACRED.

She had become an expert in radically limiting her expectations. She considered deleting the email and forgetting all about it but told herself that there was no harm in at least replying even if it turned out to be a scam. Kellerman wrote back and suggested a time for her to come in.

She continued to play it down to herself, although the frisson of excitement she felt whenever an email notification presented itself on her phone indicated to her that on some deeper level she was cultivating a kernel of hope that her life really was about to change. She wanted to hold onto the possibility, no matter how ephemeral, that it might be real.

On the day of the meeting her stomach felt raw and unsettled. She did not eat. She reached the address Kellerman had provided, an office in Farringdon, twenty minutes before they were scheduled to meet, bought a bottle of sparkling water she couldn't afford from a ubiquitous sandwich shop franchise and paced back and forth along the street, passing her destination countless times.

She entered the building five minutes before the meeting was due to start and took the elevator up to the office, which was real, at least, entering through two glass doors, each embossed with an abstract matte rendering of what might have been Earth as viewed from space.

There was no receptionist and no one to greet her, so she hovered just inside, suddenly conscious of the exact placement of her arms, the way they were pulled down by gravity and how she needed to expend effort so they didn't drop straight towards the ground, making her look like a lifeless puppet, but how activating her muscles so this did not happen required her to make a decision as to where to put them, whether to fold them or clasp her hands together or put them behind her back.

She waited a few minutes and eventually someone came, a woman who looked like no one Natalie had ever seen. She wore thick brown-rimmed glasses and was dressed head to toe in a deep shade of burnt caramel that matched the tone of her hair and the pigment of her skin. Natalie was reminded of the Etruscan artefacts she had seen on a school trip to Tuscany, shards of terracotta pots, weathered sculptures, faded etchings.

The woman shook Natalie's hand and gestured for her to follow her through the office, a huge open-plan space bathed in natural light and intersected by three long pine tables. A man sat hunched over a laptop by the window.

Maxim, Elena said, Natalie is here for you.

He looked up, seemingly dazed, before his face changed to indicate something had registered with him.

Hello, he said, sweeping his hair out of his bespectacled eyes. It's lovely to meet you Natalie. Thank you, Elena.

Elena smiled and left them. Natalie could not place his accent. It had a public school cadence that sounded affected, as if it concealed something beneath.

Natalie sat facing Maxim, still hyper-conscious of the weight of her arms, as he tapped at his laptop, his brow furrowed. After a few more seconds he lowered its screen and looked Natalie directly in the eyes. She felt a bead of sweat make its way down her spine.

I'm sorry, he said. Now let's begin.

She had assumed he would ask her how she had come across the account and why she had responded, or perhaps start with a rudimentary exploration of her limited professional history; she had memorised a list of bullet points in preparation.

If you saw someone drowning in dangerous waters, would you risk your life to save them? he asked.

Natalie hesitated, felt dizzy.

I think I would want to try? she said. I'm not a particularly strong swimmer, but in principle, I would like to think I would, yes.

And what if you knew your attempt at saving them would certainly result in your own death?

I don't...I guess it would depend on who it was. Is that bad?

What would determine your choice?

If it was someone younger than me, maybe, someone who had more of their life left to live, or if it was someone I loved.

Good, said Maxim. And who do you love?

My grandparents, my friends I guess? I don't know.

Maxim took this answer as a prompt to ask her a series of increasingly personal questions about her family, her childhood, her school and her past relationships. His first questions had unsettled her to such an extent that the inappropriateness of this second round did not register, and by the time she'd become aware of how odd it was to be sharing intimate personal details with a complete stranger the answers had begun to flow. She was starting to feel at ease.

It had been a very long time since she'd talked about herself or her feelings. Even the doctor had not ventured beyond asking her to rate her mood on a one-to-ten scale. She'd often had hours-long conversations with her friend Jessica before Jessica had moved to rural France with her fiancé a few years before, but now they rarely spoke directly, just shared posts from meme accounts and sent one another heart-emoji reactions. She had sometimes stayed up late into the night with her university boyfriend in a haze of post-coital confession, but she now suspected he had not really cared at all, that he'd just been extending a facade of interest in order to encourage her to maintain their physical

relationship, which he had eventually lost interest in anyway. Now, she was imparting details of her life she had not thought about in a long time.

Maxim appeared to really be listening. Each of her answers led to another question, to another answer, to another question. She told him of her frustration at not being able to find work, of the condescension she felt from the jobsworth bureaucrats at the Job Centre, who applied an enthusiasm that bordered on sadism whenever they informed her that she had not secured the requisite number of interviews and that as a result they would soon be forced to cap her Universal Credit payments, although she knew they had no choice, they were just doing their jobs.

And what do you feel is missing from your life? asked Maxim. How might you go about changing your situation?

What do you mean? said Natalie, stalling for time as she tried to think of an answer that might resemble something he would want to hear.

You've talked with great passion about how you feel. I sympathise, and I know many people feel as you do. I am wondering if you've thought about how you might overcome these issues. How is it that you want to feel?

I don't know, said Natalie. I want to feel like I'm not wasting my life, like I can experience something real, because everything feels fake.

She paused, but Maxim said nothing. She continued.

Just that sometimes life can be so perfect and beautiful, but I spend my time doing bullshit for other people, or I think that what I'm doing is worthwhile only to realise that I'm just doing what someone else wants. I feel nothing, I find everything so ugly, the world is hollow and gauche. Nothing means anything.

You want to do something but you don't know what, you know that life can be incredible but something's missing, you're trapped somehow. But you don't know how to escape.

Yes, said Natalie. Yes, that's exactly it.

When Maxim drew their conversation to a close Natalie felt a wave of disappointment, but then he asked if she would be interested in joining him, and without hesitation she said that yes, she would love to, before asking him if he could tell her more about what he did.

Of course, said Maxim, but I'm afraid I have a call to take in a few minutes. Let's have you come back next week. Find Elena on your way out, she will arrange it.

Natalie scanned Maxim's face to try to get a read on how she'd done, but his expression betrayed nothing, his attention had receded from her as quickly as it had descended. She wanted nothing more than for him to return his gaze to her. He stood up and directed her back towards the entrance.

Natalie spent the next week confused and energised in equal measure. She dared to venture to her parents that she might have found a job, not through the Job Centre but as a result of her own guile and initiative. She chose to interpret their muted reaction as a sign they were quietly impressed, even as they encouraged her not to get carried away, because a lot of things nowadays were too good to be true.

The days before her next meeting with Maxim crawled by. She repeatedly looked him up online but was only able to find a single picture of him as a younger man, grinning in what she guessed was a scan from a university yearbook that contained his name in the metadata. It seemed he kept no social media profiles, at least not under his own name, it was as if someone had deliberately erased all record of him, there was so little as to be conspicuous; surely no one of his generation could have got this far without leaving at least a faint digital trace. She saved the picture to her phone, was overcome by a guilt-laced exhilaration when she opened it in bathroom breaks, as she ate lunch, in the minutes before she drifted off to sleep.

The company did not have much more of a footprint either. After looking up the email domain and the address of the office all she could find was a filing for a community interest company called SOVEREIGN, for which Maxim Kellerman was the only listed shareholder. There was nothing else.

The following week she arrived at the office and again followed Elena through the large open-plan room at its centre, which was still empty of people, and this time was taken into one of the side rooms, where she found Maxim lying on a sofa, his eyes closed, over-ear headphones affixed to the sides of his

head. He looked beautiful, like a martyred saint in a Renaissance fresco. Natalie was worried that Elena would leave her to wake him up herself, but she went over and lightly pressed his shoulder until he came to.

Natalie is here for you, said Elena.

He blinked a few times, smiled and raised his hand to greet her.

Maxim did not seem to Natalie like someone with a backstory. It was as if he had one day materialised out of nothing as exactly the person he was. She couldn't imagine him going through a period of growing up, because that would imply that there had been a time at which he'd been unsure of himself. The idea of him making a mistake felt absurd, everything he said felt to her like gospel, he delivered each sentence with an authority that suggested he was incapable of misspeaking. He maintained constant eye contact. She found his attention painful, at once validating and pressurised, like a piano recital where one false note would spell disaster while a perfect performance would bring intense gratification.

I want to start from the beginning if that's OK, said Maxim. We've got some time.

He had grown up without much at all, he told her. His mother had been a paediatric nurse, his father had not had a job for as long as Maxim had been alive. Maxim had often sat up waiting for his father to return from nights of drinking, quivering at the prospect of hearing the key turn in the lock.

Sometimes his father would not return at all. This was welcome, although then Maxim was required to comfort his mother as she paced laps around the kitchen. His father would always eventually reappear days later, just as his mother was about to call the emergency services. He would act as if nothing had happened and reunite with Maxim's mother and they would live for a few days as a picture of domestic bliss before things would inevitably begin to deteriorate anew.

Then there were the nights when he did return, slurring and shouting and spitting as Maxim lay in the darkness, holding a pillow over his head in an attempt to block out the sound of flesh against flesh, objects against walls, screaming.

This had been an early lesson, Maxim had told Natalie, his expression stoic. It had made him aware of the power of his own mind. He had learned how to go places in his head, create an emotional and cognitive buffer that made him resilient against whatever was taking place outside himself. Everyone was the architect of their own perception, he said, this was a universal truth. But few were aware of their own power. They allowed themselves to be buffeted back and forth by external events and the actions of others. They thought they had no choice or, worse, blamed external factors for their misfortune. They refused to take responsibility for their own lives.

He had not found it easy to make friends at school, he told her. No one cared for the things he cared for. A few teachers had taken a liking to him after they'd noticed his natural aptitude for their subject and recognised his commitment to academic progress. But this validation came at a cost. His fellow students, who had up until that point largely ignored him, now had a reason to pay him the wrong kind of attention. Natalie noticed he did not use the word bullying, although what he was describing squarely fit that definition, and found herself breaking eye contact in case she began to cry. He had learned to tolerate pain, physical and emotional, he said. He had pitied the other boys. He could tell that they were acting not out of genuine malice but out of a misplacement of their own pain. Like him, they did not come from families with money, they had not been blessed by good fortune. But while Maxim's tormentors were at the mercy of emotions they ill understood, he was in control of his life.

He had not understood how unhappy he was until one summer in his early teens he had joined a church camp out on the coast. There he had read and talked and swum in the sea, and it was as if for the first time he was truly alive, he saw the beauty of the world, he felt it deep within himself, and although the councillors at the compulsory Bible study sessions attempted to persuade him that what he was feeling was the presence of God, he knew this not to be the case, or if it was God then it was a different version to the God they described, who exerted authority over the universe and every living thing. He returned to his life, changed in the knowledge that beyond the drudgery of the everyday there was something more.

He described his admittance to study philosophy at Cambridge as if it had been inevitable. He had not found much of interest there, academically or otherwise. The people were nicer than they had been

at his school, although he quickly learned to avoid the tier of aristos who made it clear that they would not socialise with the non-elect. He was already well acquainted with the Greeks and the German Idealists and Machiavelli and most of the other assigned texts on the curriculum. He soon began to lose interest. He longed for something more tangible, applicable to the world, something that went beyond theory. He did not know where to look. For the first time in his life, he could feel his motivation failing.

That period had been the darkest of his life, he told Natalie. Battling against adversity was to be expected, he found it energising, he relished the challenge of overcoming obstacles. But now there was nothing to be overcome. He saw his life unfolding before him, dull and arbitrary. It would be the bar or an NGO or finance or politics or public relations, and while these fields were ostensibly diverse, they created the same kind of person.

These careers all sounded perfectly acceptable to Natalie, but she understood from Maxim's tone that this was the wrong thing to think.

His peers did not seem to care about what was happening beyond the limits of their social bubbles. In those who expressed dismay at a range of injustices and professed an intention to work in service of select social and political causes, from Palestine to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to financial inclusion, Maxim identified an egoism that presented as commitment but was, in reality, a hindrance to any real progress that might be made. The discussion groups he sometimes attended consisted mostly of critique, never failing to reach the preordained conclusion that what was required was not a solution that existed but another thing that did not. He came to notice how frequently these rhetorical devices appeared in the discourse around every subject; the status quo was terrible, but the proposed solutions were also deeply flawed — what we need is a new way of looking at the problem, they said. At this point, the group would earnestly nod and sometimes break into applause, as if the person who had made the proposition possessed a diamond-edged intellect and had stumbled upon the secret to solving the world's problems. And Maxim would feel confused and angry, his attempts to point out that while it might be nice to think that if enough speculative essays were written then the problem would disappear, there were real consequences to every action, points of contradiction that could not be ameliorated by discourse alone, were met with disdain — he was reflecting the tendency, rife since the

enlightenment, to rationalise, to enclose, to empiricise at the expense of non-linear perspectives that might provide a new path forward, although forward progress was also a problematic tendency that had colonised the discourse around these issues. He was accused of perpetuating epistemic violence. Also, they said, it's not like the hegemonic options you've outlined have made anything any better, in fact, things just keep getting worse. He was forced to concede that here, at least, they had a point.

Inspired by a course on utilitarianism that he had taken in addition to the standard curriculum, Maxim began to sketch out a more comprehensive critique of his peers' arguments that went beyond his gut-level misgivings. He wanted to build a concrete framework, something that would provide an objective benchmark or schema that transcended ego. In retrospect, he could see that he'd been doubling down on his arguments. He drew up a hypothesis: if you could quantify the impact of any individual activity and offset it against the effort or capital expended to achieve it along with the opportunity cost of what that effort or capital could have been better spent doing, you could arrive at the optimal way of assigning resources. There would be no more ego, no more excuses. Everything would be countable. There would be a final, correct answer on the best course of action.

He chose to stay in Cambridge after graduating with a first. His peers moved to London, took fast-track positions at leading management consultancy firms, entry-level jobs at prestigious publishers, newsroom internships at notable broadsheets. He found a cheap room in a houseshare with a group of second years and a job at a bar that paid just enough to cover his minimal expenses.

Each morning he awoke close to dawn and ran through the countryside until he reached a section of the river where the current was mild, stripped off his clothes, blanched himself in the freezing water and ran back to his room to begin his work. He followed a strict fasting regimen on the advice of a few bloggers he respected that was also compatible with his tight budget — he ate for the first time at two in the afternoon each day, sliced carrots, celery and cucumber dipped into the huge Tupperware container of hummus he made himself each Sunday.

He became extremely thin, his ribs tented the flesh of his torso. He ignored his housemates' invitations to eat dinner with them until they stopped asking. He wrapped up his research at around six each day and was due at the pub to start his shift at seven.

At first the work came easily. He felt charged with righteous energy. He set himself the goal of creating a single metric that would represent the impact of an initiative based on a series of secondary quantitative criteria. Once he'd settled on the methodology for this metric he would build software that enabled anyone to compare the impact of the initiatives against one another. He put together an early prototype using data scraped from UN agency websites: carbon output, GDP per capita, educational progress. In the long term, he imagined the data would be pulled in through sensors and APIs from global statistics agencies. He would make the software available on an open-source basis and start a foundation to ensure its neutrality.

He soon encountered complications. There were externalities that could not be accounted for, conflicts within each individual initiative that rendered a final conclusion impossible. A renewable energy project might save carbon and therefore be given a positive score, but extracting the rare-earth metals necessary to build this infrastructure required constructing environmentally damaging mining projects in regions rife with political instability, and while it was possible to factor this into the final metric, these second-order issues then necessitated other initiatives, such as democratic education programmes and supply chain lubrication policies, each of which carried its own second-order effects, which soon became tenth- and then fiftieth-order effects. Offsetting any issue created a new issue that itself needed to be offset.

He tried to factor these interdependencies into the formula, but the initiatives were all so interconnected that their rankings changed whenever one of them received investment. Every time he gave the model fresh data its output grew increasingly complicated and continued to deteriorate until eventually it became a recursive, entropic loop.

As winter began to draw in he fell into another period of depression. Where before everything had felt like the conclusion of logical process, every experience the result of a chain of events and matter underpinned by physics that could, given the right approach and adequate resources, be traced and understood, now nothing made sense at all. He could no longer draw a direct link between cause and effect. He was adrift.

And still there were so many problems, so much suffering. He watched the six-o'clock news most evenings, bore witness to a new disaster each day, flooding, droughts, heatwaves, tsunamis, civil wars, species extinctions, pandemics, each accompanied as if in ironic contrast with explication from feckless experts; politicians, economists, academics, none of whom possessed a workable solution or gave the impression that they might one day stumble upon one.

And what was worse was that he was sure many of these people were approaching the issues in the same way that he was, they were coming up with models for the world that were categorically flawed because they could not begin to comprehend the infinite complexity at play. And the world was being destroyed by this mode of thinking, a net of inadequate representations was being spread over life itself, you could feel it every time you came across an advertisement or paid with a credit card or saw a social media post or used a smartphone, it was all numbers and targets and equations and algorithms, profit and loss, capital appreciation, accounting, optimisation, control.

He deleted his models and disposed of his notebooks, disassembled the cork board that he had kept above his desk. Each day he left the house early and walked for hours through fields and marshland, turning back only when the day began to fade, and by the time he reached home he was exhausted but his mind was quiet, and every evening he watched the sunset from his bedroom window and wept at its beauty.

It is possible to do truly beautiful things, and these things are what will save us, he told Natalie. People say that the world has become disenchanting, and I am inclined to agree. But I believe it does not have to be this way.

If someone had asked Natalie to explain to them what Maxim meant by this she could not have done so, but on some pre-verbal level she knew he was right, that she had no choice but to follow him in whatever he did.

He had not quite been sure how to act on his revelation, and he was worried that it would bring him to the same conclusion as those with whom he'd argued, who talked and talked and talked and never acted. He would be different, he would build something.

He did not know where to start but resolved to acquire resources. He arranged calls with a few of his university peers. His friend Marcus set him up with an entry-level position at his father's hedge fund.

Maxim paused to take a sip of mineral water, picking up the glass that Elena had poured for Natalie. She did not point out his error, captured the image of his lips on the glass where hers had been in her mind like a polaroid, felt the hairs on her forearm stand on end.

Maxim had expected to find London stressful and overstimulating, he told her. He'd worried that being in the city would restrict his capacity to think. But when he got there he found the stimulation to be generative; the silences he had cherished in Cambridge, his daily cold-water-submersion ritual, the intensity of the concentration he settled into when he worked hard, he realised, served to create a calmness that had transfigured into expectation before ossifying into stress, self-loathing, a corrosive sense of failure and abjection.

In London, the oppressive quiet was replaced by the steady hum of traffic. He was required to calculate transportation routes and engage in near-constant social interaction. The city functioned like a white noise machine, piping in a wall of static hiss that chased out the claustrophobic silence and facilitated concentration.

He stayed in the guest bedroom of a flat in Marylebone his college friend Mary had been bought by her parents. Every weekday he walked to the hedge fund's Green Park offices, welcoming the anonymity of the crowd as he weaved his way through the mass of suited bodies.

The work was straightforward. His manager instructed him to compile research on companies and markets, analyse earnings reports and keep tabs on investment targets or short opportunities. Most of this could be done by watching the twenty-four-hour news channel on mute and monitoring tickers on Bloomberg Terminal. After a few months, he was given greater autonomy and invited to make suggestions in strategy meetings.

He developed a modest but passable social life, attended dinners and gallery openings and house parties with Mary's friends and some of their fellow alumni. Perhaps this is what it's like to be happy, he thought.

But happiness was not the same as contentment. The pleasurable evenings spent smoking and drinking and fraternising, the praise from senior colleagues, the considerable bonus he received at the end of the year — all were undermined by his restless nature, the sense that he was not really doing anything, that time was passing but nothing was changing.

One day at work he came across a promising arbitrage opportunity. A series of market inefficiencies established by political intransigence and asymmetric regulation had caused certain commodity derivative contracts to be more expensive in South Korea, Japan and a few other Asian markets than they were in the UK. The margin was small, but trades could be repeated indefinitely until the rest of the market caught up. He had reported a few similar opportunities to the fund's partners in the past only to be told that they would take too much work to exploit, or that such flagrant opportunism was not how they had built the fund's reputation, it was just not what they did. He withdrew the majority of his bonus from a savings account and began ploughing it into trades. Soon he had enough money to quit.

He politely declined consecutive offers of increased compensation and thanked his colleagues for all they had taught him. The trades that had made him his money closed, but he found it easy to identify new opportunities, and it wasn't long before he had more money than he needed to cover his expenses, and then more money than that, and soon he calculated that he would not have to work for a very long time.

It might be hard for you to imagine now, he said to Natalie, but you could borrow money for nothing back then. The financial crisis was easing and central banks were scared of deflation and you could ask for money and get it, and I had money of my own and could use it as leverage to borrow more without interest.

He paused, frowning.

The point I'm trying to make, the only point you should take from this, is that I have capital and I aim to deploy it towards the reenchantment of the world. I believe this is possible through undertaking discrete actions, anything that has the effect of making us feel something again, because I think we all

know deep down inside ourselves that we are of this world and we must uncover it again. We must restore what we have lost.

They took a break for lunch. Natalie did not want to mention that she had spent the last of her money on a return train ticket and wouldn't receive her next Jobseeker's Allowance payment until the next week, so instead of finding something to eat she walked aimlessly around, striding through the Barbican in an attempt to rid herself of the surfeit of energy talking with Maxim had given her.

They reconvened in a conference room. Natalie selected an apple from a bowl of fresh fruit and nibbled at it as covertly as she could.

She found it difficult to follow all that Maxim was telling her. He talked about changing the world and uncovering new knowledge, but also about how the group he was assembling would undertake a series of actions that would have the effect of cutting through the artificial facade of the current hegemonic social order. He mentioned political parties and banks and international organisations, the infrastructure of capital, the specular economy, how each of these incumbent loci of power could only be disrupted by a restoration of the real, the rediscovery of the beauty of the world.

And she found it convincing, he stacked up his arguments until any possible vector of scepticism was foreclosed, and she did not want to question him anyway.

She wanted to follow him. She would go wherever he took her.

It is impossible to describe exactly what I mean because it transcends language, he said. But I am sure you have experienced what I'm talking about, these moments when you feel truly free and a part of the world, you are one with the infinite.

All Natalie could say was yes, she knew exactly, in fact she felt it then as they spoke.

Maxim turned off the lights and fired up a projector. An animated three-dimensional rendering appeared on the blank wall opposite, a huge building in sparse, late-modernist style perched near the edge of a cliff, solar panels lining its flat roof. The camera zoomed in, passing through the structure's glass facade and into a cavernous open-plan room before ascending some stairs and entering a series of bedrooms and bathrooms before day turned to night and it returned outside to show the building lit

up a warm amber as stars appeared in the sky above. The animation ended, settling on a landscape shot of the building at sunrise.

I've owned this land for a while, said Maxim. I commissioned an architectural firm to put this animation together. That was two years ago now.

He returned to his laptop and pressed a key. At first, Natalie thought he had brought up a duplicate slide, but then she noticed that the definition was higher, the colour palette more complex. It was a photograph.

This is what the land looks like today, said Maxim. We'll move there once we've finished the recruiting process. We are looking for thirty people. Elena is the first member. You would be the second. I've interviewed some others. It's all starting to come together. I'll need your help with preparation over the next few months, the next round of recruiting, organising the move, helping the group settle. Then the real work can begin.

He had asked if she had any questions, and she said that she didn't, although she had so many that she wouldn't have known where to start, and she worried that asking him to clarify even a single point would dilute the enthusiasm with which she told him that she was in, she would do whatever he asked of her, she could start immediately.

For the first few months she had been alone with Maxim and Elena. They spent their waking hours together, working from futons on the floor and then at the long oak table once it had finally been delivered; Natalie had felt the full force of Maxim's disappointment when she'd informed him of the shipping delay. They cooked together and ate together and took trips to the supermarket and, when they could carve out the time, ventured out along the cliff and down to the beach below.

She had come close to leaving several times. There had been so much to do. She had not stopped. Maxim did not pressure her directly, but whenever something went wrong his disappointment weighed upon her until she was able to do something to alleviate it, and when she did Maxim would thank her and she would feel a warm glow that would soothe her agitation.

At first she had been homesick, which didn't make sense, because she had wanted nothing more than to leave. Her new life was strange, intense. She felt like she was playing a role, trying to manifest a version of herself who knew how things worked. She did all she could to project an aura of competence and reliability. The stress and the hardship were worth it, because of the importance of their mission and because of the closeness to Maxim that her work necessitated.

In the final few weeks before the recruits arrived she had subsisted on pure adrenaline. She marshalled construction workers and carpenters, gardeners and cleaners in all directions, waving her arms like an air traffic controller. She worked with Maxim to sketch out the schedule, arranged transport for those they'd recruited and responded to their queries, tried to project how things would run once they arrived. She did not know the answer to most of the questions she received — where the meeting rooms should go, the type of wood they should use for the sauna, how they'd manage security — and after depleting Maxim's reserves of goodwill with requests for his input she began to heed his calls to take more responsibility. She made decisions on his behalf, produced plans and protocols where Maxim did not have time to.

And eventually the character she had been playing merged with her real self, the decisions she took in lieu of direct instruction from Maxim made her feel like she was in his head, an intimacy she had never before experienced, had not thought possible. She began to feel if not in control then at least comfortable that the unstemmable progression of time would flatten all her issues to a conclusion, a mode of thinking Maxim had taught her.

It had taken her a while to get a feel for who they should bring in. She spent hours trawling various social media platforms for suitable candidates. It was difficult to know the exact profile of those they were looking for, Maxim was unable to provide her with a clear set of professional traits, a work history or educational background that she should seek. They were looking for idealists with a strong intellectual grounding who were also practical and grounded. She reached out to the few profiles Maxim had told her were exemplary of what she should be looking for, but when she had been through this list she found herself back where she'd started.

She created a profile with a fake name and started sending messages to everyone she thought might be a fit, iterating upon her three-line message to suit the profile of whoever it was she was reaching out to. She focused on those who seemed like her: those who were young, at the start of their careers, who professed a will to do something good, shared petitions and criticised the government and asked why someone was not doing something about the myriad problems the world was faced with. Those who seemed lost.

Some immediately blocked her. Many more did not reply. A few asked for more information. She sent them the paragraph she had drafted with Maxim and gave them details of what was on offer: a generous stipend, accommodation, full board, the chance to do something about the problems they were all so exercised by. And then they stopped replying.

Maxim took a look at a few of her messages and told her she had to cultivate an understanding of what was really driving them. She needed to stop shying away from the personal, he told her, because what motivates people is rarely professional or material, it is emotional, that is how you get people to do things.

She began to ask how they felt, what scared them, what made them angry. She feared she was being intrusive, but while most of her messages still went unmarked, a few replies began to trickle in. People talked about how they felt like they were wasting their lives; when they weren't doing shit work that made someone else rich they were on their phones, they couldn't look away even if they wanted to, they had burned out their dopamine receptors, they were pornsick and lonely, everything was so hollow, it was nothing but air, and they looked at pictures of cute animals and at footage of the rainforest burning and people being murdered by faceless regimes and at flesh pumped full of viagra and steroids and silicone and at the same jokes reformatted over and over and over until it was unclear what they had been laughing at in the first place and felt nothing. And they would never have money or own property, everything was controlled by some invisible thing that they didn't understand yet were nonetheless subject to, whether it was a credit card company or a government or a landlord. And they were lonely, too, they struggled to find time to see friends, people just seemed less available nowadays, and it was difficult to meet new people, you could only really date through apps, which she

found soulless, and there were advertisements everywhere and you could not really see the world anymore, it was drowning under representations of itself created by the banks and the technology companies and the trading conglomerates.

Natalie told them that she knew exactly how they felt, and she really did, she did not have to lie.

What if things could be different? she asked them. What if things could change?

What we are building is an organism, Maxim had often said. Right now we are selecting the cells, the amino acids, the proteins — the building blocks of life. And then, once the structure is in place, we can take a step back and watch things grow.

As soon as the first recruits arrived, time had accelerated exponentially. If Natalie had not had enough time before, now she had no autonomy over what she chose to do at all. She could only react.

Maxim spent long periods barricaded in his office, the door locked. He needed time to think, he told Natalie, and so she informed the group that he was not available but that if there was anything they needed she could help. There was a lot they needed: fresh bedsheets, food items devoid of gluten or dairy, particular flavours of herbal tea. Her phone vibrated constantly. She ran multiple errands at once, taking on further requests as she went.

When people realised she didn't have all the answers, they began to find their own. They made suggestions about the schedule, assigned one another tasks. One morning at breakfast she got caught up in a conversation about permaculture with Michael, one of the recent joiners, and before she knew it the table had been cleared around her without anyone requiring instruction or asking for guidance.

It had been that way ever since, the diligence and rigour was foundational to how the group operated. It came straight from Maxim; how we do the small things is how we will do the big things, he had told her. Fall short in one part of your life and you compromise the whole, and in a group this principle is more important still, because ill discipline spreads like a virus.

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Making her way in from the garden a couple of days after her conversation with Alice, Natalie caught her reflection in the patio doors. There was a new vein on her temple, a shade of purple so pale she was unsure how it had caught her attention.

She sat down at the kitchen table and closed her eyes for a few seconds and thought about how nice it would be to fall asleep for a while; she had been feeling increasingly tired recently, her bouts of exhaustion accompanied by a nausea she was finding it difficult to ignore.

Maxim had not explicitly forbidden them from going to the doctor, but he sometimes talked about how, just as forest fires were an organic mechanism for retaining equilibrium in the natural world, the human body sometimes had to suffer in order to learn how to retain balance. Sometimes the understorey had to burn. And so, unable to renew her prescriptions, she had come off her SSRIs and discontinued her course of birth control pills.

She was contemplating whether there was time to escape to her room for a few minutes before the group assembled for dinner when Michael asked her where he could find the car keys.

Elena and I are going to pick up the new recruit from the station, he said. If we're quick we might be able to get back in time for dinner.



## *Will*

The train had been delayed and Will had missed his connection and now he had an hour and a half to wait until the next one.

Schoolchildren swarmed the platform. He managed to escape into the waiting room, where he attempted to dislodge a bottle of water from a vending machine by rocking it back and forth. He gave up and considered trying his card but he was already at the limit of his overdraft.

When the train finally arrived he managed to secure a spot by the window. He rested his head on the glass as the train made its way through the Broads, the late-August sun reflecting up at him from the water.

The seam of his seat had split so he sat directly on its discoloured foam stuffing. If passengers wished to disembark at the less trafficked stops they were required to signal to the driver by tugging on one of the metal chains that hung from the ceiling.

He had been told to alight at a small station by the coast. A few passengers disembarked at each stop until eventually he found himself alone with the ticket inspector, who sat a few rows in front, engrossed in his phone. The train slowed to a halt and he glanced at the name of the stop and scanned his seat to check he hadn't left anything behind before hopping down onto the platform.

He had brought a single backpack containing a few changes of clothes, a book, his toilet bag, a notepad and a plastic crucifix that had been his mother's. He had left his laptop in his room. The last thing he had done before leaving was email Kamal to tell him he was going away for a while and would not be paying rent and was sorry. He noted down the details the account had given him, shut off his laptop and placed it under his bed along with the rest of the belongings he intended to leave behind. He had left his keys on the bed and when he'd closed the door behind him and heard the automatic lock click into place he had cringed at the baseness of the symbolism.

Streetlights clicked on in the car park. He had been told to wait on the bench, someone would be along to pick him up. He'd made sure not to buy any more data for his phone so that he couldn't see Kamal's reply to his email or anything from Sophie or anyone else he knew.

He waited on the bench for what felt like a long time. He got up and went back to the platform to check the shattered digital clock face above the ticketing booth. It had been forty-five minutes. It was getting cold. He returned to the bench and pulled his knees up to his chest and held them there, unwilling to open his bag to locate a sweatshirt in case he upset the balance of the delicately compressed formation of items inside and was unable to push them back in.

It was another half hour before a Range Rover pulled into the lot, its engine humming as it swerved into a nearby parking space. A couple got out, a tall man in a grey sweater with a pair of asterisks on its left breast and a woman draped in a loose-fitting waxed jacket.

Are you going to kill me? said Will, a question he had told himself he would not ask, but now, with two strangers driving him to an unknown location, he was not able to stop himself.

Back in the flat, in front of his laptop, it had been easy to trust his mania's assurances that he had nothing to lose, that the real danger was to stay where he was. But, as he'd boarded the train at Liverpool Street, this instinct had been confronted by the hard physical reality of what he was doing, that his body actually had to move through space, navigate its way through the material world; it had dawned on him that the person he had talked with online was not just a series of messages accompanied by an avatar but a fusion of flesh, blood and organs who, if they wanted to, could do real damage to his very real body.

No, the man replied, his tone deadpan. We are not going to kill you.

Will imagined him exchanging a knowing look with the woman, but he couldn't see either of their faces.

OK, said Will. Did I talk to either of you online?

We'll be there soon, the man said, ignoring Will's question. We'll have dinner. My name's Michael, this is Elena. You're fine, just chill the fuck out.

They passed waterlogged fields, dilapidated farmhouses, sleepy hamlets just about visible in the encroaching darkness. After a while they left the road, the vehicle slowing to navigate a narrow dirt track shaded by foliage.

We're almost there, said Elena, swinging her head around to face him.

Will bounced around in the backseat, tightly gripping a handle affixed to the roof. They slowed to a crawl and squeezed between two large oak trees, Michael careful to check each wing mirror made its way through unscathed, and emerged into a clearing. In the centre, a large, brightly lit glass building radiated against the dusk. Will could see a scattering of people-shaped silhouettes moving around inside.

Michael yanked up the handbrake and opened the door. Will pulled on his door handle but nothing happened. He tried it again. It didn't shift.

Calm down, we're not trying to lock you in, said Michael, opening the door from the outside.

Will followed Michael and Elena to the building. They paused by the door while Michael rummaged through his pockets in search of something to open it with, but while he was looking Elena pulled out an orange keycard and held it against a panel next to the door, which emitted a three-note monophonic jingle.

The door opened out into a large foyer lined with a teeming shoe rack. A mass of coats and jackets hung from the wall. He set his bag down on an empty shelf and followed Michael and Elena through into a massive open space, its walls part brut concrete, part glass. People milled around, some talking, some immersed in laptops. An opening in the wall led out to a garden, strips of halogen propped up vertically against trees lit it a cool neon.

Will didn't know what to do, who to talk to, where to stand. Michael and Elena pulled him into conversations with others. They introduced him briefly using just his first name. He shook many hands, tried to remember names and faces. Eventually he found himself alone, leaning against the marble surface of a kitchen island.

This had not been what he had expected. He'd imagined some kind of campsite, people living off the grid, an anonymous environment in which he could disappear. The person he had talked to had given him limited details: everything he needed would be provided for him in return for a few hours of basic work each day; he would be joining an incredible group of people with whom he would have much in common; he would be working towards something important and worthwhile.

How could you know what I have in common with anyone, he had asked.

We all share a set of common beliefs, came the reply. They just need to be brought to the surface of our consciousness.



## *Natalie*

Elena and Michael arrived back with the new recruit just as they were about to start dinner. Natalie had argued with Maxim about him. He knows too much, she had said, it's dangerous, an unnecessary risk, potentially compromising. Hubristic.

That's exactly why we need to do it, Maxim said. It's an exercise. It's important always to test yourself, it's the only way to build strength. And better to have him with us than on the outside, he has the keycard that was left, it would be careless to trivialise that fact. Besides, he fits the profile perfectly, you said so yourself.

They lined the dining table, which stretched from the garden all the way to the front of the house.

Graeme, a Scottish man in his late thirties, was in charge of food. Prior to joining he had worked in a string of Michelinised London restaurants, where he had grown steadily disillusioned by the wasteful food practices employed and started a social media account where he'd documented the huge volume of unspoiled ingredients discarded each night, even at establishments that loudly espoused their sustainable credentials. Every evening he corralled a rotating formation of makeshift sous chefs to follow his instructions, sautéing and grilling and chopping and seasoning.

When dinner was ready the group assembled and ate and talked. Maxim considered these nightly dinners a sacred ritual, a synecdoche of the kind of world he wanted to build, everyone coming together to converse and debate and seek support and, if the requisite level of intimacy could be established over a long enough period, to open up, to become vulnerable, to live together in a new way.

The new recruit sat between Elena and Michael. His name was Will, Natalie remembered. A baggy t-shirt swamped his slight frame, deep black lines traced his eyes. There was a femininity about him she couldn't quite place. Michael was recounting an anecdote, seemingly at his expense, and laughing, attempting to involve a reluctant Elena in the story.

Imagine it from my perspective though, said Will. I don't know if you've ever just started talking to a random account online and ended up in the back of a Range Rover in the middle of nowhere with two people you've never met before.

This attracted a few sympathetic laughs. Maxim was listening from a few seats down, his hand cradling his jaw.

Tonight they were served fish bought directly from the amateur fishermen who crouched in tents along the beach. After Graeme had plated up the filets and each of them had taken a share of roasted vegetables, which they grew in the garden, Maxim raised his hand to get the group's attention. The conversation continued for a few seconds before petering out, and when he had quiet he lowered his hand and looked down the table.

It's important to learn to enjoy silence, he said. I think many in our culture have come to see silence as something that should be avoided at all costs, as a mark of discomfort. But there's nothing uncomfortable about silence in itself. In fact, it is the most comfortable mode of stimulus we have available to us, it calms our nervous system, soothes us.

Natalie registered a few nods. Will was looking down at the floor, his hands clasped together in his lap.

Maxim continued: I know my little sermons might feel a little aggrandising, a touch preachy. I invite you to discard whatever you deem to be irrelevant to you, to tell me should you disagree with anything I say or do, or anything we do as a group. And so if I have a lesson to impart before we enjoy this delicious meal together it's that everything is about balance. As much as silence is important, so is dissent.

They raised their glasses.

Natalie didn't feel like talking. She didn't feel like eating either, she was still nauseous. She let herself be talked at, shifted the food on her plate around with her cutlery while acknowledging each point that was made by those who sat near her.

But what do you think, Natalie? said Lisa, one of the newer members, who Natalie had noticed making a forced attempt to cultivate a relationship with her despite her curt responses and discouraging body language.

Natalie had been thinking about the dog her family had adopted and then given away shortly thereafter. She had loved the dog more than anything, had cried for days when he had been taken away,

she could still see the look of confusion in his eyes, or perhaps this was an image her mind had created after the fact as a memento of her sadness.

I think it's complicated, said Natalie, pulling apart a flake of fish with her knife and fork. It's just complicated.

She looked up from her plate to see Lisa and a few others nod, their faces fixed to suggest they were processing what she'd just said.

Is it that complicated, though? Michael interjected, leaning over to make himself heard. A thin red wine stain coated the left side of his upper lip. It's clearly just a bad thing to do and we shouldn't do it.

Natalie over-chewed a piece of bread, making a show of not being finished until it began to taste sweet, at which point she buried it behind her molars with the intention of discretely spitting it out when no one was looking. But her delay tactics had not left her with a better idea of how to respond.

Just as she was about to open her mouth to deliver another vague deflecting statement she heard a voice from a few places down.

Some things are really complicated and hard to deal with though, said Will. Not everything has an easy answer.

Natalie looked over and caught his eye before she could stop herself.

Michael looked like he might say something but instead picked up his wine glass and knocked back the last dregs before scanning the table for the bottle.

Following dinner the conversations spiralled, increasing in volume and intensity. After those designated to clean up had taken the plates and cutlery to the kitchen and done away with the rest of the detritus they left the table and spilt out through the glass doors into the garden.

Wine was imbibed directly from the bottle. A joint was assembled. Someone turned off the lights from inside the house and their attention was directed to the sky above, which was turning darker by the minute, revealing clusters of faint stars.

You can see Jupiter, Maxim said, pointing to an orange dot brighter than the rest.

They followed a desire line through the foliage until they reached the cliff edge, turning right and walking one after another. They held hands to guide themselves through the darkness, creating a single chain of bodies.

Natalie was no longer tired, she felt wide awake, although the nausea stayed. The group, which she had helped bring together, was behaving like a unified organism. They all loved one another, she felt, they were moving as one and working as one and soon they would begin to mould the world into a reflection of themselves, just as Maxim had promised.

She lost track of time. She was focused only on walking, aware of the biomechanics of her body and the resistance of the ground and the sensation of another's hand in hers. Sweat had affixed her t-shirt to the small of her back.

They reached a clearing. She could see their faces better now, the moon had appeared from behind the trees, waxing almost full. The constellations spread like a net over the sea at the foot of the cliff. She could hear surf undulate over the stony beach. She noticed Will next to her, the light catching the edges of his features, cheekbones, forehead, jawline.

Someone started talking and was immediately hushed by those around. They sat in silence for a while, looking up at the stars, and then she heard a hum, quiet at first before rising in volume, and she began to hum herself, her voice fusing with the tone around her.

She closed her eyes and found herself fully immersed in the sound, her sense of herself as an individual falling away as she became one with the mass, and then at some point they were again silent and a few minutes later Maxim stood up and they followed him back to the house.

When they got back most of the group went to bed, but a few sat out smoking in the garden. On her way back from the bathroom Natalie noticed Will lingering at the top of the stairs. His slim frame sent a long shadow across the landing. He had no idea how much she knew about him, about his life, his pain, a fact she was only realising now. She became aware of the power she held over him as a result.

Can I help you? she said.

I'm quite tired and I don't have a room, said Will. Sorry to trouble you.

Natalie tried to remember who was responsible for onboarding new members.

I'm sorry, someone should have set you up, she said. Come with me.

They went down the stairs and found Elena on the back porch.

Do you think you could help arrange a room for Will? Natalie asked her. Or just tell me which is free?

Elena stubbed out her cigarette and led them back up the stairs, holding the bannister for support, stumbling slightly as they reached the top. Will followed directly behind, Natalie monitoring from a distance.

As Natalie opened the door to her room she glanced over at Elena and Will. She called out but it was too late, the door was open and they had gone in. She darted towards the door but Elena had already pushed Will back out and was pulling the door shut behind her.

Sorry, wrong room! Elena said, breathless, looking at Natalie as if attempting to stare her into forgetting what had just happened.

Breakfast was served between seven and nine on weekdays and an hour later on weekends. Natalie liked to get there for the opening of the buffet. Each day she requested a couple of soft-boiled eggs, freshly laid by the chickens they kept in a coop in the garden, and assembled a fruit salad of kiwi, mango and banana for herself while she waited. This morning the table was sparser than usual. She ate slowly and read the news on her phone and watched people trickle down from upstairs.

She kept a lookout for Elena, who was often one of the first at breakfast after Natalie, but didn't spot her until almost nine. When Elena eventually appeared at the top of the stairs Natalie attempted to catch her eye, but she walked straight past, looking straight ahead, until she reached a spot at the table farthest from where Natalie sat.

Will had joined a small group by the entrance to the garden. He seemed animated, laughing and gesturing with his cutlery as if performing for an audience.

Maxim was on his own in his usual spot at the head of the table, a laptop and a notepad and a thick volume on developmental economics stacked next to a plate of grilled vegetables and a shot of espresso.

He had made it clear that anyone was welcome to approach him whenever they saw fit, but he transmitted an aura of concentration so dense that people tended to stay away. When he came down without his laptop and notepad and book this was interpreted as a signal that he was open for conversation. He would often end up holding council, an audience assembled in a horse-shoe formation around him. Newer members often made the mistake of asking him for his opinion on the day's headlines or political or economic developments, and he would tell them that he did not think about these things; politicians were just avatars for ideas, economists were just weathermen for capital, and whoever had asked would look sheepish and chastened and tell him that of course they agreed, but wasn't there something interesting about this particular story, perhaps it told them something about what they were working towards? No, Maxim would tell them, adopting a tone of devastating politeness, he did not see how that was the case.

Breakfast was followed by a few hours of chores, which were assigned via a heavily determined lottery system: members could volunteer for specialised tasks, but a certain number of people were required to clean, weed the garden, do the laundry. Maxim did not exempt himself from this work, making sure to be particularly visible when cleaning the bathrooms or taking out the trash.

Will had been assigned to the gardening group. Natalie, who still had a few days of tending to the fruit and vegetable patch left before she returned to her usual administrative role, watered the fennel they had recently begun cultivating and monitored Will in her periphery. He was struggling, arching his back, keeping his legs straight and bending over rather than squatting, a mistake born of inexperience. After twenty minutes, Agata, who was leading the shift, went over to see how he was doing.

You need to move a little faster, Will, she said. Look at what the others are doing, they are much quicker than you.

Will acknowledged Agata and continued in the dirt. Natalie considered going over to give him some pointers and probe to see if he had seen anything the night before but stopped herself; it was important for him to learn, and if he'd seen anything they'd know soon enough.

•

A year earlier Natalie had noticed a few people missing at dinner. No one had remarked upon their absence, and she had decided to assume there was a reading group taking place that she wasn't aware of. A few days later as she was passing the main meeting room she saw almost half the group gathered around a television. She stopped to see what it was they were so captivated by.

They were watching a twenty-four-hour news channel. An anchor narrated as people charged across a five-lane motorway, running back and forth until traffic was stopped and they were taken away by the police. A camera caught the face of one of the apprehended.

It was Alexis, a girl in her early twenties who had been one of Natalie's first recruits. She was being guided into a van by a police officer, her hands cuffed behind her back. As the frame zoomed in close to her face, Natalie could see that she was laughing.

The hurt Natalie felt at not having been informed or involved in the planning had lasted only as long as it took for the jubilation of the group to become apparent to her. They were celebrating, hugging one another. A few people were crying, and soon she was too. It was exactly what Maxim had promised. She could only imagine how Alexis felt; Natalie herself was euphoric.

It was obvious that this was what they had been working up to for so long. Maxim had made sure to maintain secrecy to protect them and keep them focused. This was how they would do it, she could feel it now, they would become the change they had always dreamed of.

At dinner, Maxim had addressed the group.

No one has to do anything they do not want to do, he said. Anyone who wants to leave can leave. But I am proud of anyone who seeks to break through to the real.

No one left.

The actions became more ambitious and more frequent. Natalie and Elena redoubled their recruiting efforts to replace those arrested. When they conducted interviews their subjects cited the same issues:

they did not know what to do with themselves, they had no money and no future, they were constantly being ripped off by landlords and the government and their bosses. They wanted something to change.

And then they had taken the girl.



## *Laura*

Light passed into the room through a shallow window just below the ceiling. Laura had stood on the bed to try to see what was outside but could not quite reach; all she could see was the sky.

She had been semi-lucid when she'd been disturbed, someone tripping through the door and moving towards her before hastily retreating. Something separated it from her dreams; the shapes bore definition, the sounds carried the unmistakable texture of the real. She couldn't see who it was, although she was sure it had not been the man who'd come to check in on her. The door had closed but she had not heard a key in the lock, and so she had lain awake with her eyes closed until she was sure there was no one outside, got out of bed and slipped on some clothes and left the room.

At school she had often awoken in the early hours and been unable to get back to sleep. She had made a game of seeing how far from the dormitory she could get, sneaking downstairs and through the halls and darkened classrooms until she reached the grounds, and then down over the sports pitches to the edge of the woods, where she sat for a while, trying to scare herself by staring into the darkness between the trees. Then she'd run back, feeling the dew on her ankles as the sky began to lighten, pass through the sleeping bodies of the dormitory and return to her bed.

Tonight she tiptoed down the landing and looked down over the space where the man had waved to her and descended the stairs.

The space was huge and minimally furnished, its corners were lit a dim shade of violet. She looked around for an exit, trying a few doors that wouldn't budge before finding a foyer that looked promising. As she lent forward to grip the handle she noticed a panel to its left, LEDs flashing as if in warning, and decided not to try it.

There was not much more to discover. Two internal doors led to bathrooms, another to a pantry. At the end of the main space lay an annexe that extended around a corner. Bookshelves lined the walls. She scanned through their contents; material that would have been more suited to a university library than a home: cybernetics textbooks, academic primers on the economics of debt forgiveness, lengthy tomes

on aesthetic philosophy, coding manuals. She leafed through a few of the books before carefully returning them to their places.

A huge glass pane made up a long section of the building's outer wall. In the moonlight Laura could make out a garden and a greenhouse beset by dense foliage. She went to the kitchen area and extracted a knife from a magnetic rack, a mid-sized paring blade that she could slip into the waist of her jeans. A heavy kettle sat on the hob. She looked from it to the glass, considered the darkness beyond.

She just had to get a few things. She turned back towards the stairs.

Someone was standing by the long table in the middle of the room.

I couldn't sleep either, the figure said. I don't think we've met yet. I'm Will.

Laura gripped the handle of the knife. A man around her age in a white vest. His presence felt familiar although she was sure she had never seen him before.

Sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you, said the figure. I just wanted to get a glass of water.

He walked towards Laura, stood by the kitchen island, looked up at her and stopped suddenly.

Wait, he said.

She did not move.

I knew you'd be here, said Will. I just got here. I went to your flat, I was delivering something. You're in the news. It's not like I came here to find you but I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. I don't know if that makes sense.

Laura loosened her grip on the knife.

Will continued: Everyone's treating you like this big mystery. And you were just here all along.

They took me and brought me here, said Laura. Who are you?

I don't really know who they are. Like I said, I was just in your flat, delivering a package, and someone had broken in. I didn't stick around. I read the news, obviously, but it was all wrong so I posted something about it online and then these people contacted me. He paused. I know it doesn't make much sense but they're very persuasive, and I didn't have anything else going for me. I don't know why you're here, they haven't said anything. You don't really look like your picture. I guess the papers are using old ones.

Laura could still run. She could hurt this man and then run.

I don't know what the group is, really, he continued. I haven't been here that long though. Everyone seems nice. They're trying to do good stuff, I think. I don't know where you fit into it.

Laura cut him off. What are they saying about me? In the papers?

Loads of different stuff. It's not as much of an issue anymore, but some people really cared about it a lot a few weeks ago, like when you first went missing. Or at least they seemed to. But it's the British press, you know? They're not nice.

What are they saying?

There are different theories. Some people are really sympathetic and think someone's taken you, that's what your parents have been saying. They used to give interviews on TV most days but they haven't been on that much recently. Other people think you just want to—

What?

They think it's something about your inheritance or something like that. Because your dad has a lot of money. They think you want money. They think it's something to do with that.

Laura could not imagine her parents prostrating themselves before an ambivalent public on the morning programmes, making maudlin appeals for her safe return. She could not imagine them caring about her at all.

And you don't know why you're here? asked Will. They haven't told you anything?

She shook her head.

But you're safe, they haven't hurt you or anything?

No.

They stood in silence. If Laura was going to run she would have done so by now. She kept visualising herself outside, making her way through woodland until she reached a road, flagging someone down, but her body refused to act on what her mind was impelling it to do. And Will was right: there had been no pressure, no ill treatment, and leaving would mean reentering the world, presenting herself at a police station, it would mean being reunited with her parents, who would make

a show for the cameras, forced tears, flash photography, an ordeal that had the potential to be worse than her current state of uncertainty. Both options involved coercion, but she knew how one ended.

And the people out there hated her, just as she'd always suspected. She had sometimes imagined a great tragedy befalling her, one that would attract pity and empathy, or at least neutralise the stain of her wealth, because deep down everyone surely knew that money meant nothing in the face of trauma, although maybe they didn't, she had no way of knowing. And maybe her present situation could be the tragedy, but she knew that even being taken against her will would not be enough to persuade people that she was not a bad person and did not deserve the animus she attracted. Even if they killed her there would still be those who thought justice had been served.

Are you going to stay here? she said.

I don't know, said Will. I mean, I'm here now.

I was going to run away. I was about to smash that glass panel and run when I saw you there.

You could still do that.

I'm not sure I want to anymore, she said.

Her head was muddled, she had no idea what she wanted besides not having to make a decision.

You're sure you haven't heard them talk about executing me? There's not a stake out there in the garden with my name on it?

Not as far as I've seen, the garden is mostly vegetables.

Good to know.

Laura heard a creak from the landing. They looked towards the stairs and then back at one another.

I'm going to go back to bed, said Will. If you're not here when I wake up I wish you well. It was nice to meet you.

Laura smiled, although she wasn't sure Will could see her in the darkness. He turned and ascended the stairs without looking back, leaving Laura in the middle of the room, her arms folded.

She let some time pass, listening for any other noises in case she had to hide, and then after a while followed Will up the stairs and returned to her room. She wrapped the knife in a t-shirt and placed it under her pillow.

She wanted the man to return. But for the next few days nothing happened.

No one had relocked her door. She had gone downstairs again the following night. She liked the space, which was sparse and geometrically pleasing, as if every inch had been apportioned after great deliberation. Despite its size, it did not feel overbearing; that the sibilant slap of her footsteps on the warm concrete dissipated without reverberation suggested the walls had received acoustic treatment. She felt the urge to venture outside but only in order to dissolve the border between the building and the world, to merge the latter into the former.

Placing her full weight against one of the concrete pillars that divided the room, she realised she felt as safe as she had done in a long time. Anything that might harm her was outside her control, it had not been the threat of pain that worried her — that had been a fixture of her life since as long as she could remember — but the possibility that she might a decision she'd taken herself that would lead her to it. Now, liberated from responsibility, genuflecting in submission to whatever would be visited upon her, she felt settled, calm.

She made herself a sandwich, running the tap as gently as she could so as not to alert anyone to her presence as she washed up. She took the kettle into one of the downstairs bathrooms, where she plugged it into a socket meant for electric razors and closed the door, muting it with a hand towel as it boiled.

Whenever she heard a noise she scampered to one of the bathrooms or found another hiding spot and hoped it was Will.

And then one night it was Will.

She had been crouching behind the sofa in the library, peering out whenever the figure seemed far enough away that they wouldn't be able to see her. At first, she could only see a pair of legs standing at the kitchen counter, but then she recognised his boxer shorts and vest. She eased her body up and crept to the edge of the room until she could be sure it was him.

Fuck, Will exhaled, clasping a hand to the base of his ribs. Sorry, I didn't know anyone was down here. So you didn't leave then.

Evidently I did not leave.

Well, good.

Good?

I don't know, it's something to say. I don't really have an opinion on whether you should leave or stay. But it's pretty nice here.

Is it?

We're on the coast somewhere. Still England, obviously. It's beautiful. Barren, windswept, bleak. I think there's a bird sanctuary a few miles away. And you've obviously seen where we're staying.

I've seen the inside of the room they put me in and wherever we are right now.

It's pretty nice.

And how many people are here?

I think thirty, maybe forty.

I've only seen the one guy. He comes into my room every now and tries to talk.

But you don't talk to him.

I am being held captive.

But you're talking to me.

I am talking to you. And why are you here?

I didn't have anywhere else to go. Things weren't so good.

And they recruited you? How?

I just got a few messages. They made sense to me. The whole thing feels like a blur to be honest. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you though. But not in the way you might think.

I guess we're kinda similar then, said Laura. I can't stop thinking about leaving, it's so obvious, but when it comes to it I can't bring myself to do it. There's nothing for me out there. I can't face it.

I wasn't brought here against my will, but it's the same thing. There's a limit on what you can tolerate, how much shit can land on you before you're fine with just not trying anymore, or you have to get away from everything.

They sat at the kitchen table and talked for a long time, pausing only when Will got up to make more tea. It began to get light outside and they said goodnight and went back to their rooms. Laura slept soundly and dreamt of a deep and placid ocean.

The next day, the man returned. She was sitting on her bed reading a book on eastern philosophy that she had chosen blindly from the library. She stashed it under the covers when she heard the knock.

Good afternoon, said the man.

When she greeted him in kind he seemed taken aback, but quickly gathered himself.

I'd like to introduce myself, he said. My name is Maxim.

Hello Maxim, said Laura.

If you'd be comfortable, I'd like to invite you to join us downstairs, he said. You don't have to meet everyone all at once, perhaps the two of us could have a late lunch in one of the side rooms as a first step.

She didn't say anything but issued a curt nod in consent.

Wonderful, said Maxim. I'll give you a knock in a couple of hours.

I'd like Will there, said Laura.

Maxim paused for a few seconds.

I thought it might be nice for it to just be the two of us before you meet more of the group.

I'd prefer it if Will was there.

OK, said Maxim. I'll make it so.

Laura beamed a cartoonish smile back in response, relaxing her face as soon as Maxim turned his back.

When Maxim reappeared a few hours later Laura had showered and put on proper clothes for the first time since she'd arrived. She felt like herself, it was as if the clothes were a more integral part of her than her skin.

She followed Maxim downstairs. Everything was different in the light. She was able to see what Will had meant when he'd described the building as beautiful; in the dark it had felt cold and empty, like an airport terminal in a distant timezone. Now, with light streaming through the glass, people sitting along the table or sprawled out across beanbags on the floor, it carried a warm glow. People looked up at her as she passed. She returned their glances only for them to quickly look away.

Maxim took her into a side room that she had not noticed on her nightly expeditions.

Will was already there, sitting on a sofa, looking down at the floor. He looked different in the light. Laura could see his features clearly for the first time. Each was slightly offset from where it should have been, but there was something pleasing about the cumulative effect of the asymmetry. When Laura had walked in he'd had his arms folded, then he'd begun massaging his shoulder tissue while one of his legs pulsed up and down. Now he was pressing a finger into his left temple, causing his iris to shift a few millimetres from the centre of his eye.

A woman entered carrying a tray stacked with a pot of tea, green olives the size of small apples and a loaf of flour-doused sourdough bread.

Laura, this is Natalie, said Maxim. She'll be joining us.

Natalie raised her hand to greet Laura, who didn't respond.

Once they were settled Maxim began his explanation: why they were here, his idea for the building, the group he had assembled, why what they were doing was important. He reminded Laura of one of her father's business associates, the way he paused for emphasis and outlined each point with a laboured hand gesture that made it look like he was plucking words out of the air and rearranging them into an optimum order after their utterance.

Next to her, Will's leg had reached what must have been its maximum level of oscillation, she could feel the floor next to her vibrate.

Maxim was now talking about how the spatial dimensions of the building had been carefully optimised to encourage discourse and community. Laura stopped him mid-sentence.

But you took me from my apartment and brought me here against my will.

No one spoke. Laura continued.

I woke up and I was here, and you haven't explained why, and I want to know now. You're acting like everything is normal but I could — probably should — run out and flag down a police car and get you put away for a very long time, all of you, ruin whatever it is you have going here. And that would be the least you'd deserve.

Let's calm down, said Maxim.

You think I haven't been calm? said Laura, almost shouting. I'm so fucking calm.

Will and Natalie were looking at the floor, but Maxim had reacted to Laura's outburst by redoubling his efforts to maintain eye contact. His face was fixed in concentration, his brow furrowed. He looked to Laura like a chess grandmaster weighing up his next move.

How is your relationship with your father, Laura? he said.

What business is that of yours? How does that relate to anything?

It's a simple question.

You know we don't get on, as does everyone else in the world.

I'm asking you how he makes you feel.

We haven't spoken in a long time.

How long has it been?

Laura paused to think. A few years, probably, she said.

And how does he treat your mother?

I don't know why you think you have the right to ask these questions.

I'm trying to understand.

She won't admit it but my father has destroyed my mother, she's barely a person anymore.

That must be difficult for you to see.

Yes.

Your father is not a nice man.

You don't get to say that. I get to say that.

A lot of people are affected by his actions. What you've experienced on a personal level the wider public, the natural world, are also experiencing.

You're giving him too much credit.

No, said Maxim. He is responsible for extensive damage to the natural environment, he has played a significant role in tearing apart the social fabric of this country while inflicting untold damage on countless others from afar.

None of that that has anything to do with me, I barely even speak to him anymore.

I'm sure you've benefited. Materially.

I didn't choose to. I just existed. I didn't make that choice.

I didn't say you did.

So what, you brought me here to punish me for the sins of my father? Is that it?

No. This is why it would have been better for you not to interrupt. You don't know what we are doing here. I wanted to explain to you how you fit in.

Whatever. Please go ahead.

I think we can help you, Laura. I think you feel the same as many of us do. You are lost, you have lost contact with the world, and you want to make change, both to yourself and to others, but you don't know how. We do what we describe as applied research, we try to affect change, both in ourselves and in the wider world. In the last few months we have begun to transfigure our theory into practice. We have started to act. I think we can help you. I also think you can help us.

So this is some kind of blackmail or ransom scenario? My father won't pay.

We don't need money, said Maxim.

What then?

We want you to become a member of the group. We will ask only that you do not tell the outside world what we do here. If you wish, you could tell your friends that you are fine and safe but that you will be away for a while. Or you could say nothing at all. The latter would be preferable for us. We will

provide you with everything you need. You can stay for as long as you wish. We think you will like it here.

So I just stay here? And that's it? Laura spat out, incredulous. I'm not being used as a pawn in some kind of Fischer Price Baader-Meinhof scheme?

Just stay with us for a while. That's all I'm asking.

And what if I said I wanted to leave, that I'd go straight to a police station and tell them what had happened.

I'd be disappointed. But you're free to do as you wish.

I don't believe you.

I'd just ask you to consider what would happen were you to do that. You would go to the police station. You would tell them that someone had taken you. You would give them all the details you have. You would describe a large building somewhere in the countryside; maybe you'd be able to direct them to it, but more likely you would not. If they found your account persuasive then there would be some trouble for us, it's true. But there would be trouble for you, too. You would be dragged through the press, they would transform your account into a sob story, they would lionise your poor parents, who were so worried about you and prayed so hard for your safe return. And then what would you do? Where would you go? You would return to London, try to resume your life, perhaps try to find some form of employment, although we know you'll never need to work for money. If that sounds like a positive outcome for you then I'll drive you to the nearest police station right now. Let's go.

He got up and gestured towards the door but Laura stayed seated. He sat back down.

Just give it a week, said Maxim. Natalie will help you settle in. I don't know why you asked for Will to be here, but I understand he's aware of some of the circumstances regarding how you came to be here. Perhaps he can help you too.

Natalie was nodding in support of Maxim, which made Laura start to regret her decision, but Will was smiling at her in a manner that suggested detachment from the others, that he and Laura were insulated from the rest.

I don't think I really have a choice, said Laura. I think if I tried to leave right now you would stop me. But you're right, I don't want to go back to London, I don't want to face all that right now. I'll stay for a week and then you can take me back.

Excellent, said Maxim. We're happy to have you with us.

Laura sat on the bed for a while, stared at the wall. She was not sure how much time had passed when someone knocked on her door. It was Will. He looked tired, his dark eyes receding into their sockets. His arms were loosely crossed. Something about him made her feel calm.

So you're staying then I take it, he said, leaning against the door frame.

I don't know. It feels like it might be the least bad option.

Well let's go downstairs. There'll be food soon.

Laura told him to wait outside. She went to the bathroom and splashed her face with cold water in front of the mirror. Her skin was no longer tight and red, the purple patches under her eyes had begun to recede.

Downstairs, no one approached her, though she thought she noticed a few people stealing glances in her direction.

She walked around the garden with Will. The sensation of the sea air on her skin was psychedelic, trees and plants shimmered with the wind, dappling the ground with specs of light. Laura shielded her eyes with her forearm. Will placed the cap he was wearing on her head. Its headband was damp with sweat.

They reached the cliff and turned around. Back at the house, the table was being arranged for dinner. She asked Will if they were required to help.

Don't say that too loudly, he said, you're my ticket out of table-setting duty.

Laura was seated next to Natalie and a tall man with a French accent who provided them with an unprompted lecture on the ethics of life-extension therapies.

What we really mean when we say these things are not correct and that they should not be allowed is that they should be available to everyone, because what is medical care if not life-extension therapy? he

said. It is designed to keep us alive, no? Beyond the natural span of our life? What is natural? We are always trying to extend our lives, these people are just stupid enough to show us this disparity, that while some have been able to extend their lives only to fifty, the rich can shoot for much longer.

People chimed in with questions and counterarguments. Laura used the discourse as cover to ask Natalie what she was supposed to be doing for the next few days. She wanted a path to follow, to delegate her life to someone who knew how to use it better than she did.

Oh, I can walk you through that tomorrow, said Natalie. For the most part it's up to you. Eventually Maxim would like you to participate in our programme. But the idea is for you to have as much autonomy as you need.

After dinner they went outside to the garden. A few people approached Laura to introduce themselves.

I'm terrible with names, she told them. But nice to meet you.

She was not sure whether they knew who she was and how she'd come to be with them; if they did, no one mentioned it.

She was tired. She sought out Will to say goodnight but could not find him.

The next day Natalie took Laura through her schedule. Everything was optional, she said, all Laura had to do was tell her if there was something she did not wish to participate in and she would be excused.

She was assigned to administrative duty with Natalie for the next few weeks, and then she would join research group four. Outside these commitments and mealtimes, her time would be her own. She did not have to think, everything was laid out for her.

You can start tomorrow, said Natalie. Today you can walk around and observe. There's a research session in the Lhotse meeting room at two that you can drop in on if you wish.

Natalie assigned herself to be Laura's twin. They would meet once a week. If she had any laundry she could leave it in the basket at the end of the landing. And there was a one-off session taking place at the end of the week, an initiation of sorts.

All of this month's new members will be involved, Natalie told Laura. It's just our way of welcoming people in.

Laura spent the rest of the day exploring the building and its grounds, venturing as far as the cliff, where she sat for a while with her eyes closed and paid attention to the sensation of the sun on her face, imagining the sea expanding to the horizon below her. People stopped her in the corridors to make idle conversation. It was the most she'd interacted with anyone in a very long time.

The research group she observed was looking into long-haul trucking infrastructure. She found the subject itself dull, but the enthusiasm the group applied to it kept her attention. They were attempting to calculate how far the traffic pile-up would extend if lorries were unable to pass through the channel tunnel. They did not explain the reason for these calculations, but coming to the correct answer was treated with utmost importance.



## *Will*

Will slept straight through each night. It was the first period of truly solid rest he had achieved without the assistance of narcotics since university. When he awoke he no longer had to overcome an unseen force that resisted his attempts to extract himself from bed. The aches and pains he was accustomed to from spending long hours on his bike had moved to different areas of his body, the result of his labour in the garden, but he did not seek to medicate them away as had done in London. They felt like marks of achievement.

His thoughts were faster, more lucid. He arrived at conclusions without rumination, freeing up long periods during which his mind was completely clear. Sophie rarely occupied his attention, and when she did pop into his head she was quickly replaced by something more practical; he would be working in the garden or drying dishes or chopping firewood and when someone interrupted him with a question he would realise that he had been completely immersed in the task, unaware of anything else.

His body, which before had existed in a perpetual state of unrest, was tranquil, pliable. No longer in a state of constant agitation, he began to notice things that he had previously ignored: the light through the trees, the texture of materials in his hand, the warmth of the sun on his skin.

It had been a few weeks now. He would not go back to London. If there were still things he didn't understand he barely thought about them. Such thinking was not useful. No one else acted as if anything was wrong, even Laura seemed to have settled into a routine. Everyone was so nice to each other. They enjoyed one another's company. They had built a strong and perfect community.

The group was instructed to assemble in the garden at seven on Friday evening. Will had finished his work in the vegetable patch and gone over an hour early to find almost the entire group already there, laying out chairs in a horseshoe formation and suspending tea lights from tree branches. When he offered to help he was told to leave them to it.

Laura came down a few minutes before seven. There was a grace to the way she moved that had not been observable in the static images he'd seen online. She flowed from one action to the next as if her life had been choreographed in advance. He raised his hand to catch her attention and she came over to where he sat on the grass and asked him to roll her a cigarette.

At seven, Maxim appeared and stood in the centre of the circle. They stopped talking.

Welcome, he said. I'm excited to get started this evening. We are here to welcome our new members. I know some of you have already had the opportunity to meet them, but for those who haven't, Laura and Will, please raise your hands.

They did so. The group nodded and smiled. Will was struck by, despite their diversity in age, race and gender there was something that tied them together as a homogenous whole. He wondered if he fit with them, he didn't feel like he did, but there was no way for him to know.

They were ushered into the centre of the circle and directed to face each other on two cushions. Will scanned for an escape route, but Laura was looking at him with an alarmed expression he interpreted as a plea for him not to leave her.

We're so happy to have you with us, said Maxim. We just want to find out a little more about you, and perhaps you'll find out a little about yourselves in the process. All of us have done this before, there's nothing to be worried about.

People around the circle were nodding and smiling, in encouragement or anticipation Will could not be sure.

Maxim began by instructing Will and Laura to look at one another. They did so for a few seconds before looking back to Maxim, who told them to really consider the other person, to hold their gaze until they felt a connection. They turned back to one another and this time held eye contact.

Maxim asked Will what he noticed. Will said that he didn't know. Maxim asked Will what he could see in Laura's face. Will told him he did not understand the question.

Is her mouth open or closed, for example? said Maxim. Is there any movement?

Her mouth is closed, said Will.

Tell her that, then.

Laura, your mouth is closed.

Maxim asked him if he noticed anything else and Will told Laura that she had blinked a couple of times and asked Maxim if he was doing it right.

There are no right or wrong answers, said Maxim. All you need to do is observe.

Soon Will found himself speaking unprompted.

You have green eyes, he said. You are breathing deeply, I can see that from how your shoulders rise a little every few seconds. Now you are pursing your lips together, I think in reaction to what I've just said.

Will lost his awareness of the crowd around him. It was as if he and Laura were alone. He noticed a beauty spot below her bottom lip that he hadn't registered before.

Maxim stopped him and asked Laura to do the same. She repeated many of the things Will had said about her, slightly altering them to fit him. Will felt exposed and also as if he might weep. Laura stopped and looked back to Maxim, whose expression was a mask of stoic calm, his arms folded.

Thank you, Laura. And now I want you to go one level deeper, each of you. Laura, when Will noted that you were breathing deeply, how did that make you feel?

I don't know, she said. I didn't realise I was breathing deeply. Actually I just feel awkward. This is really awkward.

Will, said Maxim, how does it make you feel to know that Laura is uncomfortable?

I guess I don't like to hear that, he said. I don't want her to be uncomfortable.

Obviously it's not you that's making me feel uncomfortable, she said. I wouldn't want you to think that.

They continued to trade observations and share how their observations made them feel. Each detail they listed triggered a reaction in the other, which then changed the affective texture of the conversation, leading to a new string of observations and reactions. Maxim stopped giving his input. At some point Will began to understand that what they felt was no longer separate, there was just one single feeling that floated between them, morphing and adapting. The periphery of his vision

disappeared, he was unaware of where they were or that there were others with them, he was alone with Laura, and he said this and Laura said that yes, yes, this was how she felt too.

Maxim reemerged and thanked them and led the group in a round of applause, and they were back in the middle of the circle, surrounded by strangers.

Natalie found Will after lunch one day and asked him to join one of the research groups.

I don't know much about that, said Will. I'm happy just doing what I'm doing now, the gardening and that.

There's no pressure to contribute, said Natalie. Just attend one of the afternoon sessions and see if you find it interesting or worthwhile.

He was placed in a group with Laura. They had not spoken since the initiation. She had begun sitting at the opposite end of the table at dinner, moving into another cluster of conversation whenever he approached.

Will didn't know anything about trade or supply chains or whatever it was they were talking about. Initially he found the conversation interesting enough, but as it went on his leg started to twitch. When someone asked him a question he had to ask them to repeat it.

I was just asking whether you thought what we're proposing would be effective, said a blonde-haired man whose name Will could not remember.

Yes, sorry. Yes, I think this would work, Will replied.

Why do you think it would work?

People just don't like it when things stop working. And I think you were talking about slowing deliveries somehow, and they really like getting their stuff, their packages.

Thank you, said the man, settling back in his chair as if his point had been proved.

Will resolved to concentrate. He hadn't quite understood how they would slow down the deliveries, which was the only point he had gleaned from the hour of discourse he had witnessed, but now he started to follow more closely.

The man was explaining the value of goods that passed under the English Channel each day and how their passage was already slowing as a result of fraying infrastructure and an increase in customs checks.

We would only have to add to this a little and it would fall apart altogether, he said.

Will raised his hand.

I was just wondering how we'd do this? he said. I must have missed that part.

We haven't got there yet, we're just establishing whether this would be something that could have a worthwhile impact. But I guess we can move on to that part now.

Will leaned forward to get a better look at the slides that were being projected onto the wall opposite. They outlined a series of approaches, from calling in bomb threats to a group of people chaining themselves to train tracks to violent attacks on personnel.

Really? said Will. You'd do these?

That's what we're trying to decide now, sighed the man. We will choose the approach we deem to be most effective at achieving our goal.

But you've done stuff like this before?

The man didn't say anything.

But who would do it? asked Will.

Whoever feels drawn to it. It's a fantastic opportunity, a privilege.

Will felt something dawn on him, and then he was dizzy with the sense that he knew something that few others did, not Kamal or James or Sophie or anyone outside in the world of money and rent and advertising.

Laura was looking at him from her spot on the other side of the room. It was the first time in days she'd acknowledged his presence. And then he saw that everyone else in the room was looking at him too, and rather than ask more questions he nodded and sat back down.

That night at dusk they went to the beach. They scrambled around for firewood, lighting their way with phone torches. It had remained warm even as the summer had begun to fade, the evenings starting to show the first signs that they were drawing in.

It was the first time since Will's arrival that they'd ventured down past the cliff. He wondered if this was because Maxim was not with them, perhaps they were breaking some restriction he had put in place. People were behaving differently from how they did when he was present, there was more laughter, they shouted and squealed.

Their walks to the clifftop usually ended with them staring up at the stars in silence. That night, they lay around the fire, bodies sprawled over one another, illuminated by the flicker of the flames.

Will talked to the blonde-haired man who had led the session earlier. His name was Dean. Will apologised if he had been confrontational, because he had not meant to be, and Dean told him not to worry; he had been asking very reasonable questions, questions anyone in his position would ask.

The nature of what we do here can be contentious, said Dean. Some people leave once they realise that we are serious about acting upon our principles.

Everything that's going on, the people chaining themselves to things and the trains not running, stuff blowing up, is that us?

Once actions have occurred we no longer talk about them or about those who may have been involved, Dean replied.

Some of those who had been slumped around the fire were getting to their feet. One of the women hesitated before turning her back on the others and pulling her t-shirt over her head. She threw it down to where she'd sat by the fire and continued removing her clothes until she was in her underwear and then removed that too and charged into the sea, sending up flecks of foam that shone red in the firelight.

Others followed her lead. Will noticed Laura among them, she was laughing with Elena, fiddling with the button of her shorts. He looked back to Dean, who had himself started to undress, before pulling off his shirt.

The water was freezing. The breath was forced from his lungs as he let his legs go limp and his shoulders fell below the water. He held his nose and shut his eyes and went under. He felt like nothing at all, like his body had dissolved and fused with the water around him, the constant somatic stimuli he was used to dominating him transmuted into a single sensation, one so intense that he could not think at all, his head was empty.

After a period of time that could have been seconds or weeks he returned to the surface, gasping for oxygen, sucking the warm night air into his lungs.

He waded out in the shallow water until he was past the reach of the firelight. He turned to look back to the beach. Torsos bobbed up and down in the placid surf. He watched them splash one another, dive under, reemerge. The moon above waned in a thin crescent. He was obscured in the darkness, no one could see him. He felt very alone and very safe.

Something brushed against his ankle. He kicked off from the sand and whatever it was let go. He turned away from the shore, unsure of what he expected to see, and felt it again, this time on the inside of his thigh. He slammed his hand into the water and grabbed whatever it was, his hand clasped around what felt like a wrist.

A body burst from under the water and flicked hair back from over its face.

You look fucking terrified! shouted Laura.

You are the funniest person in the world, he said.

Your face was a picture.

He splashed her, pushed her backwards, and she pushed him back, and then he was holding her shoulders and they were both laughing, and the muscles of her face relaxed and she was no longer laughing. She placed her arms around his neck and he kissed her, and when they stopped they held each other close in the cold water as the light from the fire on the shore began to dim, leaving them in total darkness, invisible waves lapping against them where they stood.

Laura leant down and she looked to Will like a spirit, although he could not have explained exactly how, there was just something spirit-like about her, the way her pupils were opaque but of such intense colour that they gave the impression of infinite depth.

They were in her room. Everyone else was still at the beach. They had returned to the shore and dried themselves and dressed and discretely made their way back up the cliff. They crept through the house but came across no one. Laura pulled Will by his wrist into her room.

They fucked and he was too nervous to stay hard but made her come with his mouth and with his hand and came himself across her stomach when she asked him to. They lay next to each other bathed in light from the moon and Will wondered if Laura had fallen asleep and tried himself to sleep but was unable to because feeling her warm body on his, the weight of her head on his chest, felt so precious that he wanted to cherish every moment of it, did not want it to end. And he knew that when this was all over, when he had reached the end of his life, he would think about this moment as one in which he had felt truly content in a way that transcended the material, was more than skin and flesh and the stuff of this world.



### III

On the train everyone is quiet. They are seated together, three on each side, a table between them. The carriage is almost full, and when passengers venture towards them in search of a seat they all stare until they are left alone.

Sometimes it is just your turn, Natalie tells herself.

We could have at least coughed up for first class, one of them says. Might be the last chance we get for a while. No one laughs.

The inspector asks to see their tickets.

Lighten up, he says. It's almost Christmas.

They pass the Olympic Park. A wiry, putty-formed red statue, apartment blocks that look like software renders.

The station is busy. The sheets of Victorian glass above them are shrouded in a mist of condensation.

On to the Underground. Elbows, shoulders. Air stale as if from inside a long-sealed tomb.

Back out into the daylight. Westminster, the Square, the Abbey.

Natalie sees the plan play out whenever she closes her eyes, the paint and the shouting and the chaos.

They sit on a bench facing the Houses of Parliament. Michael hands out cigarettes to those who want them. Natalie has never smoked in her life but is tempted. It seems apt for the moment. She weighs it up and declines.

Michael will go first and they will follow behind. He will throw the paint and they will lock themselves to the railings. The police will take him but will not be able to take them, at least not immediately.

They keep an eye on the exit. The woman is not quite prominent enough to require a security detail. A junior minister, a symbolic target. This is a warning shot, it is psychological.

She appears from the grand doors, thanks the guards on her way out. She walks fast, long strides.

Michael is on his feet, tracing a route that will intersect with her path just as she passes from the immediate view of the police. The paint is tucked under his jacket. The rest of them begin to stroll towards the gates, following at a distance.

They are nearly in position when Natalie hears a shout and a scream.

The woman is on the floor and Michael is on top of her.

Natalie thinks: What the fuck is he doing.

There is blood on the grey concrete, red of an impossibly deep hue.

They stop walking. The others look to her.

Fuck, Natalie hisses. What the fuck.

She keeps walking. They loop back around towards the station.

Do not look back, Natalie tells them, her teeth locked together.

More sirens than she has ever heard.

And then they are back at the tube station. Before they begin their descent Natalie disobeys her own command. She turns to see medics, men with submachine guns, bemused bystanders, photographers.

Keep your hoods up and your heads down, she says, as if talking to herself. Just stay calm and we'll be fine.

On the train no one speaks. A few get out their phones and she tells them to put them away. When they switch to their next train the carriage is empty and they begin to talk and she does not stop them.

Why the fuck would he do that. What even happened?

Was that part of the plan? Were we just not told? He was supposed to just throw paint, right?

No, says Natalie. That was not part of the plan.

Fucking psycho.

We are going to make it back, says Natalie. We can talk about it there. We are going to be OK.

What a fucking nut job.

Retard.

It's lucky we didn't get any closer. Imagine that, locked to a fence like: Hi officer, our friend just murdered someone. Probably would have been shot.

No point dwelling on something that didn't happen though is there.

I'm just saying.



## *Maxim*

The motorway was all but empty. Maxim switched the car into cruise control, turned down the heating and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Dawn was encroaching on the night. The cat's eyes blinked off. He felt the rising sun warm the back of his neck.

He pulled into a service station to pick up a bottle of water and something to eat, maybe a shot of espresso, parked the car in a charging spot, left the heating on to fend off the morning frost. In a deserted Starbucks he stood at a high table and scanned the front page of a newspaper someone had left.

The story was still leading the headlines. The family had opted not to take up the offer of a state funeral, opting instead for a modest service in the deceased's constituency. Mourners had been leaving tokens of remembrance on the steps of her office: wreaths and flowers and bottles of a wine that the MP had been known to enjoy and a specific breed of teddy bear her daughter was apparently fond of.

Before her death she had been roundly despised, hated by both press and public. There had once been a social media campaign highlighting a series of large donations she had received from private companies that stood to benefit from her department's proposed border control initiative, which was seen as draconian by all but the most wild-eyed xenophobes. But now she was a mother, a loving wife, a rising star in her party, someone who cared about her family and her constituents and the country at large. Her death was a great tragedy, a loss keenly felt by all.

Reading between the lines of the story, Maxim could be fairly sure Michael had not said anything. It was evident that the reporters had done what they could to paint him as unsympathetically as possible, but they'd had to resort to adjectives in the absence of hard facts: he was described as an unhinged thirty-one-year-old university dropout who, as far as they could tell, had not maintained an online presence. This was the worst they could do. It was all they had.

Maxim wanted to make the meeting quick and return without anyone asking where he'd been. No one knew he had his own car; he kept it in the church car park, obscured from view. If got back early enough he could sneak in through the front door and up to his office while breakfast was cleaned up.

He merged onto the M25 and took a sip of water from the bottle he'd placed in the drinks holder and glanced at the navigation screen, which told him he had twenty-five minutes until he reached his destination.

A thought he did not wish to address threatened to assert itself. He acknowledged its presence without engaging it directly, a technique he'd recently found himself relying upon with increasing frequency. He focused on the road, paying close attention to the car's smooth progress around a series of shallow-banked corners until the thought had retreated beyond his awareness.

By the time he reached the foot of the hill that marked the final last leg of his journey the day had begun in earnest. Through the trees that lined the narrow track he could see the Downs extend to the horizon, buildings converging into towns, a patchwork of fields demarcated by sparse woodland. The foliage was shedding its frost under the low sun.

He tapped on the intercom and had to wait a minute before the gates swung open. At the front door he was greeted not by the man he had expected to see but by a woman of early middle age.

You should have received an email, she said. I'm afraid Richard has been called out of town, urgent business. I hope you haven't come far.

That's unfortunate, said Maxim.

He will be back soon. I am not exactly sure when, but you are welcome to come in and wait as long as you like.

Maxim hesitated before following her inside.

We haven't met, she said. I'm the wife.

She guided him into a large open reception area, her perfume trailing behind; bergamot, lemon, jasmine. Works of abstract impressionism lined the walls, teal vases perched on low plinths shimmered as he passed them. In the kitchen she asked if she could get him anything. He declined.

Well if there is anything at all please just let myself or Bethany know, she'll be more than happy to help. You can make yourself comfortable in the drawing room.

She opened the double doors on the other side of the kitchen island and gestured through to a room lined with bookshelves, a desk and a chaise longue facing a triptych of floor-length bay windows through which he could see pale hills expand in the wake of an impeccably kept lawn.

He perched himself at the foot of the chaise longue and checked his phone. The man's assistant had sent him an email just over an hour ago informing him of the postponement. He would have been at the service station at the time. If he had thought to check earlier he could have avoided coming.

He replied: I'm here now, when will he be back?

The reply came almost immediately: I can't say exactly, but he shouldn't be too long. I'd advise you to sit tight, he is intent on seeing you as soon as he can.

Maxim moved to a chair by the window. On a side table he noticed a picture of the man and his family assembled on an empty Mediterranean boardwalk. He picked it up to take a closer look.

The man wore a crisp short-sleeved Oxford. A white linen blazer was draped over his shoulder. His smile was rigid, as if he was nearing the end of a marathon portrait sitting. The family stood a few feet apart, not touching one another. The girl looked to be in her mid-teens. There was something about her that marked her apart from the person he knew; here she seemed sullen, awkward. She was gripping one of her skinny wrists between the thumb and index finger of her opposite hand. The muscles in her cheek were tense, her eyes narrowed as if she was holding back tears.

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When he'd worked at the hedge fund, Maxim was expected to attend one client dinner each month. Usually he feigned illness or claimed it was imperative that he worked late, but his excuses soon wore thin.

His impression of the dinners turned out to be largely accurate; men in double-breasted jackets bloviated on the state of the markets, the injustice of their tax obligations, the idiocy of the Bank of England or the ECB or the Federal Reserve. The firm had reserved the entirety of a Chelsea bistro. Each of them was required to man-mark a client and ensure their wine glass remained full. He nodded

his way through the evening, cringing at the overblown introductions the more senior staff made on his behalf, grinning vacantly after being described as brilliant for the fourth time in an hour.

They rotated seats after each course. Each new neighbour was more intoxicated than the last. He braced himself against the showers of spit that rained down in the intervals between each gulp of wine and acquiesced his way through the mire of prosaic monologue that poured forth.

As they approached dessert he was seated next to a tall man wearing an open-collared Oxford shirt, who picked up a bottle of champagne to fill the unused flute next to Maxim. When Maxim covered the rim with his palm the man nodded in recognition and swapped the champagne for an adjacent bottle of mineral water.

Me too. I find drinking to be a waste of time, generally, said the man, extending his hand. Richard, a pleasure to meet you.

For the first time all evening, Maxim found himself engaged. Richard did not lecture. He asked Maxim for his perspective on the bond markets of emerging economies, the short positions the fund was considering taking. He peppered Maxim with follow-up questions that suggested he was genuinely interested in what he had to say. He mocked Maxim's suggestions, playfully poking holes in each of his investment theses.

Don't take me too seriously, said Richard, no one knows what they're doing anyway. That's the game: you say something with enough confidence and someone will believe you, and if enough people believe you, you'll be right.

Maxim smiled and nodded.

So tell me something real, said Richard. Tell me something about you.

Without hesitation Maxim launched into the spiel he had given at his university admission interview and the screening for his job, touching on his background enough to garner empathy before stating that it was no reason for him to receive special treatment, that he wanted to be considered on merit alone. He noticed Richard's eyes begin to lose focus, as if he was thinking about something else, and felt desperate enough to regain his attention that he began to tell the truth. He talked about how he felt like everything was devoid of meaning, the money games they played, the megacorporations,

how the dead-eyed political class had built a layer of artificiality over everything he considered real, and how dismantling this layer was the only way they could begin to address the myriad of problems society faced, the perpetually accelerating polycrisis they found themselves embroiled in. Maxim couldn't tell whether Richard's expression signalled incredulity or agreement, and part of him was aware that he had gone too far, but he could not stop, he had to finish.

He told him of his idea, nascent at the time, to form a group that would act on these principles.

Maxim was apparently the only one to have been surprised by Richard's sudden presence on the front page of every broadsheet and tabloid. He had walked past a days-old issue of the Financial Times that someone had left by the water cooler and doubled back upon recognising the man that gazed back at him, grinning as he tried to shield his face from the paparazzi that had assembled by Westminster Square.

He was more surprised still when he received an email from Richard's assistant asking for a meeting, accompanied by an explicit request not to inform anyone else at the fund, particularly not Maxim's boss, who was Richard's point of contact.

Maxim slipped out as if he was going for an early lunch and walked the half mile to Richard's Green Park office. He was ushered past the front desk by a prim receptionist and through a regal open corridor, its white walls adorned with oil paintings in a style Maxim half recognised from an art history module he had been required to take as British proto-modernist; deep reds and yellows intersected at acute angles, loosely tracing the shapes of objects that had been calcified into their most basic forms: trees, trenches, bodies.

Richard wore a loose-fitting white shirt and thick-rimmed glasses. He stood up from behind a heavy oak desk and extended his hand.

Maxim, he said. It's good to see you again. Thank you for taking the time.

I've got a lot more time than you have at the moment, I assume. It's no bother.

Yes, things have been very busy. But that's not a problem.

It was perhaps premature to bring that up, I apologise.

Always best to address the elephant in the room as soon as possible, I find.

Richard filled a glass with the contents of a gleaming bottle of sparkling water and slid it over the table to Maxim.

You must be wondering why I brought you here, said Richard. Particularly since this is, as you pointed out, such a busy time.

A little, I'll admit.

I want to sound you out on a few things. I found a lot of what you said the other evening really very interesting. I have a nose for ambition, and what you said really stuck with me. I'd like to know how serious you are.

Are you asking me to pitch you?

Why not. Give it a go.

•

Now, in the house, Maxim followed up with Richard's assistant every hour to check his progress, adopting an increasingly urgent tone as the day went on. Each time he threatened to leave the assistant urged him not to. They both knew his words were empty. He would stay as long as it took.

Bethany made a bed for him upstairs. The assistant assured him that Richard would be with him in the morning.

He considered texting Natalie to tell her he'd been called away but thought better of it; he had slipped up with her, it had been a mistake to do what they had done, and then to continue to do it. Her devotion to him had changed in texture since, she expected things of him, put herself before the rest of the group, acted like what they had done granted her a special level of access to him, a monopoly on his time. It had to stop, as soon as he returned he would tell her so.

He tried to read but could not concentrate. He wondered if he was in the girl's room. It seemed unlikely, the house surely had an abundance of guest bedrooms. He took a freezing shower in the en-suite, immersing himself under the stinging jet until his limbs began to grow numb. When he dried

himself and cocooned his naked body under the heavy duvet he felt briefly calm, but he realised too late that in clearing his mind had left himself vulnerable to the thought.

He became aware of its texture, its general shape, somewhere at the edge of his consciousness, small at first but growing steadily and, this time, seemingly immune to his established diversion tactics. Mostly it concerned doubt; that what he was doing was effective or even morally defensible, that he had compromised too much on his values, that the trade-offs he had been forced to make had grown to engulf the integrity of the project, just like every other attempt anyone had ever made to improve something, that the sense of enlightenment he and the rest of the group felt was nothing more than myopic delusion, the subjugation of reason to affect.

Complying with Richard's demand had been worth it, of this he was still sure; his daughter had settled in just as he had assured Natalie she would, and he remained confident that his decision had struck the right ethical balance. Although what Michael had done was not something he would condone, it was compatible with the spirit of their mission. But still, the thought was trying to send him a message. His subconscious had identified something he did not yet have full view of. He remembered what Richard had told him before they had closed the deal: the world was too complex to sit on the sidelines, and the ends always justified the means. It was this principle that had led him to accept Richard's offer in the first place, despite his misgivings; there was no way he could have accumulated the capital he needed on his own, it would have taken him years, the story he told about the arbitrage opportunity that had made him rich was a bare-faced lie. Richard had also said that the only way you knew that you were moving in the right direction was by feeling your way forward. If something felt good, it should be done. But the opposite principle also applied.

When Richard finally appeared he said as much. Maxim had not seen him angry before. Risk needed to be balanced, he said. Murder was a red line, what had happened was totally unacceptable. Nothing like that could ever happen again. The funding, and much more besides, was contingent upon it.



## *Laura*

Laura had become aware of the actions slowly and then all at once. No one had kept anything from her, but neither had they been transparent about what was underway. There was a frisson of transgression to the planning that occurred in their research groups, a dynamic of acceleration was inherent in the process; those who suggested they act with more ambition attracted nods of approval, there was no line that could not be crossed. At first Laura had not recognised that they were being serious, she had thought they were indulging in outlandish speculation, that the scenarios they cooked up were thought experiments. And then she had come across a group huddled in front of the television in the main meeting room and everything had come together, a great revelation, damascene, like everything turning from black and white to full colour.

Everyone was excited about what they were doing and the impact it would have and she found no reason why she could not join them in their enthusiasm, she could imagine her father growing livid at what she knew he would breathlessly describe as people who had no idea how the world works ruining things for those who just wanted to go about their lives, who actually made things and made the world what it was, his face traversing the full scale of the red quadrant of the colour spectrum from rose pink to deep maroon as he did so.

She could tell she was happy because she was not thinking about being happy. She made her way through each day as if her path had been decided for her in advance by an entity that knew what she needed better than she did herself.

No one had said anything about Will moving into her room. She had been waiting for Maxim or Natalie to call her aside and tell her that what they were doing was against some unwritten ethical code, but they had been left alone.

As far as she could tell there were few romantic relationships in the group. It was erotic but sexless; on summer nights the sauna at the back of the garden was packed with naked bodies, and when they

were sufficiently broiled they spilled out onto the grass, where they lay around vaping and playing cards.

People are so comfortable with one another that they don't even think about sex, Will had said.

Like Eden before the Fall, Laura replied.

They talked late into the night, lying naked under the covers as moonlight seeped in through the narrow window above them.

Will had told Laura about his mum and dad and how they had died and left and how he had grown up feeling acutely alone and how this loneliness had, he felt, affected everything he had done in his life to that point. Laura had responded by talking about her own parents, caveating each of her statements because obviously her childhood had been idyllic in comparison to his, she felt embarrassed even bringing it up, it was pathetic, she was just a rich girl with daddy issues and open questions regarding her sexuality and a surplus of guilt that had corroded her sense of self — throw a ball in the air in certain areas of West London and you'd hit someone who was exactly the same.

Don't be stupid, Will said. You can feel however you want. No use pretending you're fine.

Anyway, Laura said. I think that's why I'm still here. I hate my father, I really hate him.

She turned onto her back and looked up at the ceiling before continuing.

When I was younger he was always on trips to North Africa, the Middle East, Russia. I never thought about why. Maxim's right, all the money he got there from overthrowing regimes and funding wars so he could secure commodities deals and whatever else, it's all soaked in blood, which means I'm soaked in blood too. It all has to stop.

Will stroked her hair, kissed her. They were quiet for a while.

And that I met you, that's part of this too, Laura said, turning back to face Will. I was always so uptight. I forced everything. And now I feel like for the first time I'm letting go, and this happens, and it feels so good, it's just unquestionably a good thing, I don't want it to ever stop, I want it to go on forever. But I'm not scared either, I'm just letting it happen.

That's how I feel, said Will. Although sometimes I feel scared because you could definitely fuck me up if you wanted to, you could destroy me. I'm completely vulnerable. But I know you won't.

I would never, said Laura, squeezing Will's wrist.

A few minutes later, Laura said: I think we need to do something. We can do something about my father. Like Maxim says, we can tear everything apart. Everyone here is taking action, changing things. I want to do that too, Will.

Laura turned to the side and felt something solid against her head under the pillow. She pulled out the knife she'd taken from downstairs.

Fuck, I forgot this was here, she said, holding it above her head. A shard of light refracted from the tip of the blade.

She slid back towards the wall so she could examine it further, and as she did so it slipped from her hand. She tried to catch it but in doing so sent it spinning. Will let out a cry and held his arm just above his wrist. A dark liquid oozed out, just a little at first and then more, dripping into a pool on the bedsheets.

Oh my God, I'm so sorry, said Laura, picking up the knife and looking back to Will to see where he had been cut and pushing the blade into her skin at the same spot.

What the fuck are you doing, he said, grabbing her wrist and forcing the knife from her hand.

She was crying and apologising and he was apologising too. He turned on the bedside light to inspect the damage.

We're OK, he said, finding his white t-shirt from the floor and dabbing it to his arm and then to hers. That was so stupid, why did you do that.

Laura's arm stung, a good, pure pain.

I don't know, she said. I didn't mean to.

I mean just doing it to yourself. Never do that. What the fuck.

I'm sorry.

She pulled him back to the bed and guided his arm to hers, placing them parallel to one another.

Not much damage, she said. Yours has already stopped bleeding. Will I was so scared.

We'll live, said Will. But never do anything like that again, promise me.

I promise.

Laura turned her arm and placed her cut so it was on top of Will's and rubbed them together, feeling the blood smear over their skin, watching as it merged into a single substance. She stopped and licked her wound. It tasted metallic. They fell back into the bed and kissed, blood between their lips.

Natalie drove, Elena in the front seat, Will and Laura in the back. The sun had set a few hours earlier, they were nearing the winter equinox.

There had been discussion over whether it would be better to go at rush hour and seek cover in the crowd or later in the evening when there would be fewer people about to see them. They had settled on the latter option.

Without Maxim's leadership there had been extensive debate over what they should do. They needed food but the risk of exposure was obvious, the press and, they assumed, the police were still paying close attention to what Michael had done, seeking further suspects, because surely he could not have acted alone.

Natalie had led a clique against the outing, but her group had been outnumbered by those who were growing increasingly concerned over their dwindling supplies. They had the vegetables from the greenhouse but that was about it; Graeme was a resourceful chef, but even he was subject to material limitations. When it had become clear that a group would be going whether she liked it or not, Natalie had volunteered to join as a compromise.

Will tapped his finger against the window in intervals of five. Natalie flicked the Range Rover's headlights between its low and high beams as cars came around corners in the opposite direction and disappeared behind them. Laura thought she saw a fox through the window but could not be sure, it vanished as soon as her eyes had registered it.

They pulled into the empty car park. Natalie engaged the handbrake and clicked off the lights. Will pulled at the door but it would not open until Natalie disengaged the child lock.

They wore hoods and hats, scarves pulled up over the lower halves of their faces, obscuring themselves just enough to protect against CCTV cameras.

Laura had not been to a supermarket since she'd left London. The store they had chosen felt like a caricature of fifties America, the America that existed in the minds of the British public, an America that people still got excited about even though it had been around for decades now and did not exist and never had existed. But rather than gleaming loaves of white bread and super-sized vegetables and cartons of egg whites there were cocktail sausages and hoisin duck wraps and pork-filled pastries lubricated with gelatine.

She was soothed by the hum of the fridges. She had often found herself calmed by these kinds of spaces, zones devoid of context in which everything had been designed to look like nothing at all, a series of spatial codes that were meant to make you feel as if you could be anywhere in the world, like you could step outside and find yourself in Doha or Dublin, New York or Newcastle. If you wanted to you could think of these spaces as areas of infinite potential, sites of modern miracles, where goods and produce had been brought from all over the world for your benefit, where small armies of bureaucrats had worked tirelessly to create an experience optimised to facilitate your consumption. And if you could get beyond the inherent dynamic of control you could come to feel something akin to enlightenment.

Will pushed the trolley and Natalie and Elena located items and threw them in while Laura scribbled over the corresponding entries on the list. The list was a result of hours of wrangling; people had added too much, their favourite flavour of crisps or a particular brand of biscuit. An extensive process of retrospective filtering had been necessary, but this had been noticed by some of those who had added the impractical items, and they had insisted that their requests should be included. Eventually the list had become a chimaera of vital supplies and random fripperies. This was what happened when Maxim was not there to issue his stern guidance.

At the checkout, a grey-haired man in a gilet the luminous green of the supermarket's logo scanned their items. He seemed to be staring at something in the middle distance, his gaze burning a hole through the pharmaceuticals shelf a few feet away. Laura could not believe that this was someone's job.

That they just turned up every day to sit behind a till and say hello to the customers and scan items and take money seemed impossible, that could not be anyone's life, it was a death sentence, and yet thousands of people, millions around the world, submitted to this fate each day, they were not human, it did not seem possible to live like that and then retire on a meagre pension and die shortly thereafter. She saw a parallel to how she had felt before, like doing anything that stemmed from her own initiative was unconscionable because of what might go wrong. She was not sure when the change had occurred, but her mindset had changed. It was possible — imperative — for her to act. Anything less would be a waste of life, she would be like one of these hapless cashiers, surrendering personal sovereignty, simulating a machine.

They loaded the items back into the trolley, passing orange juice and shaving foam and various vegetables between one another with the precision of a Fordist assembly line, and went out into the cold night to load the car.

Nothing bad was ever going to happen, said Laura. Everyone's so paranoid.

There's nothing wrong with being careful, said Natalie.

They drove on in silence. The roads were quiet. Laura took out a packet of salted almonds she had liberated from the trolley before they'd packed up the car and offered them around. Will took some, Natalie refused, frowning as if she was about to express her disdain for Laura's choice of purchase but instead returning her gaze to the dark woodland that passed by the window.

Do you think Maxim knew what Michael was going to do? asked Laura, addressing the group.

Let's not speculate, said Natalie.

We're just talking, said Elena, who was fiddling with the air-conditioning settings.

I don't think he did, said Will. It was such a mental thing to do. Insane. No way to predict that.

What do you think, Natalie? said Laura. You know him best out of all of us.

It doesn't seem like something he would want to happen, said Natalie.

And where is Maxim now? asked Will. You think he got cold feet?

No, said Natalie. Of course not.

Well where is he, then? said Laura.

He'll be back soon.

You don't know, do you? said Will.

He doesn't tell me everything, said Natalie.

Elena had called ahead to let the group know when they'd be back. Some of them came out to help unload the Range Rover.

Fuck, you've got so much good stuff, said Dean, unpacking a carrier bag containing various exotic fruits.

We just got what's on the list, said Will. But we got pretty much all of it.

Has anyone seen Maxim? asked Natalie, addressing no one in particular. Her words hung in the air.

A couple of bottles of the wine they had bought were uncorked. They sat around the table. It was the first time in weeks Laura had seen people laugh without reservation. They were loud and boisterous, it reminded her of the summer.

They carried on until the early morning, the sun's late rise granting them a few extra hours of darkness. Laura asked Natalie where Maxim was again and she told her she didn't know, and Laura gently pressed her to make sure she was telling the truth and concluded that she was. The others seemed to have heard because they subsequently began to talk with a new looseness, and Laura overheard Dean bring up Michael. She stopped in the middle of something she was saying to Will to listen.

I think what he did was amazing if I'm being honest, said Dean. Watching on the TV after gave me chills.

Same, said Graeme. I had an out-of-body experience watching that. The lad's a hero.

Laura nodded in assent.

What was it like actually being there? Dean asked Natalie.

I don't think Maxim thinks this is the direction we should be going in, she said, hesitating. The whole thing was pretty scary, to be honest.

The big man's not here right now though, said Graeme. You can say what you really feel.

The conversations around tailed off in expectation of her answer.

It was bad, said Natalie. When he did it I thought that was it. We were so close, it's a miracle we got away.

But you did get away, you're fine, said Dean.

When it was happening everything kind of fell away, Natalie said. It was as if time had stopped. It was like being in the presence of something extremely beautiful, you know when something happens and it's just so obviously powerful that you stop thinking?



## *Natalie*

The door to Maxim's office was locked. They had used four-digit prime numbers as passcodes for various online accounts; 1009, 1013, 1021, 1049, 1229. Natalie entered each into the pad by the door. It clicked open on 2099.

She had spent many hours in this room, always on the side of the desk closest to the door, taking notes on a laptop as he issued commands or pinned against the wall, her body bent in submission. Whenever she'd attempted to venture to Maxim's side so she could see whatever it was he had been describing on his screen he had told her to sit back down; he would send her what he was talking about. She had soon learnt to stay on her side of the desk.

And now she was transgressing.

She owed it to the group to establish Maxim's whereabouts. He had not responded to her messages and calls. She still had faith in him, loved him, and soon she would tell him what she thought was happening to her body. But that could wait. She knew that whatever he was doing, wherever he was, he was working in their best interests. She just needed something to tell the group, to quell their impatience.

She barely had to look beyond the name of the sender to know what had happened. Richard Knight. She read the latest email and then searched the name and read every other email until she heard voices downstairs. She closed the laptop and scanned the room to check she hadn't disturbed anything, turned off the light and locked the door behind her.

For the next few days she went about her tasks as if following a predefined path. She was led by her body, which seemed to know what to do without instruction. This principle extended to speech; whenever someone attempted to interact with her she just let go and let the words pour forth, and then they thanked her for her input and were on their way, and she could not remember what she had said.

It was a betrayal wholly compatible with everything Maxim had ever told her. She could fit the pieces together, the motives and the money and the lies, and not find anything that compromised the

integrity of his mission. Moves they had made that had sat uncomfortably with her now made total sense.

There was a sharp-edged logic to what he had done, at once beautiful and acutely painful. It would be another of their secrets, something else that she would hold close, another way in which she would silently protect him, a further token of their intimacy, their special connection. Her hands instinctively went to the base of her abdomen.

When Maxim finally returned he acted like he had never left. He mentioned nothing to her or to anyone else.

She continued following the algorithmic operation of her body, buffeted by parameters that she had no control over. She still felt sick and tired but had a new appetite; she snuck down to the kitchen in the middle of the night to eat leftovers from the fridge before returning upstairs to not sleep, cradling her stomach to soothe herself.

Her state reminded her of when old computers encountered a bug and needed to be restarted in safe mode, a radically limited version of their operating system that enabled whatever the issue was to be identified and rectified. You could protect yourself by returning to the basics. If you simplified things enough, the solution would become clear.

One evening at dinner Maxim told the group that they would be putting all actions on hold for the foreseeable future.

I understand that this is not an ideal situation, he said. But external circumstances deem this course of action not only advisable but necessary.

A swell of incredulous murmurs threatened to overwhelm his address. He applied his signature empathetic sensibility to tell them that he understood their concern but that the point was not up for debate. Everything was to be stopped indefinitely.

Is this to do with Michael? asked Dean.

We have attracted more attention than we need, replied Maxim. It's imperative that we act with caution.

Why would we stop now? someone shouted, After everything we've done?

We all know the bitch deserved it.

You're wrong on this, Maxim. It's total bullshit.

Maxim tried to quieten the crowd but was soon overwhelmed by the torrent of protest.

That evening he called Natalie into his office, and she found herself still ready to do whatever he told her to, braced herself to again submit.

But instead he told her that what had happened between them needed to stop, it was an unnecessary complication, a distraction for both of them. It unbalanced the group. She wanted to argue, to make the case that their relationship was special, to ask him what she meant to him, to tell him her news and his involvement, but he had delivered his verdict in the tone he used to command the group to quieten before he addressed them, so she said nothing, just nodded and thanked him and left his office.

She hurried to her room so that no one would see her fall apart. But she did not fall apart. She was instead overcome by a great wave of anger. He could not do this to her, he had no right, she had done everything he had asked her to. His betrayal of the group and what he had done to her became one in her mind. She got into bed but could not sleep and found herself working her way through a plethora of scenarios that would reestablish the balance between them.

The answer came to her in the early hours. She knew what she would do.

Natalie had not considered the possibility that anyone could ever have questioned Maxim, but now she witnessed open displays of dissent. Rules were bent, plans were made. She told Maxim nothing.

One afternoon she was left alone with Laura in the kitchen. They had both been assigned to wash up. She asked Laura about her family, about her father. Laura considered her with suspicion, but Natalie pushed her further, telling her that she had always been impressed at how Laura had managed to put the matter of her kidnapping behind her, but that she had always wondered why, because most people would have ignored the hypothesis that Maxim had ventured to persuade her to stay, but Laura had accepted it almost immediately.

It's like you were looking for a reason to leave the world, Natalie said. You wanted to exit.

Laura made a show of being immersed in scrubbing a stubborn layer of congealed grease from an iron skillet and then responded: I don't regret anything. I don't know why you're saying this now, it's actually quite fucked up.

How do you feel about Maxim? Do you still think he has all of our best interests at heart?

I don't know. People don't like being shut in though, that's not what we're here for. But why are you of all people asking me this, Natalie? What the fuck is going on?

You want to do something that will change things, like Maxim always promised you would.

Laura did not respond and then Natalie told her what she had found, about the emails, and Laura did not react with surprise, it was as if she had known all along.

When Maxim asked Natalie how she thought his new guidelines had gone down with the group she told him that they thought he had made a difficult but correct decision, one which they were completely onboard with.

Good, he said. Good.



## *Will*

There were no direct trains and the station was too far to walk to anyway. They took the shortcut through the trees and walked along the hard shoulder of the main road until they reached the bus stop.

The area's bus network was reliable if irregular. It had been put into place a few decades before to service the influx of workers who had built the nuclear power plant. More routes had been added in anticipation of work beginning on a new nuclear plant that would sit a few miles along the coast from the brutalist complex they could see from the cliff.

The bus weaved through hamlets and small villages, pubs and village greens, past signposts for local astronomical societies, farms selling their produce. Will could not remember everything being so political as it was now; there were signs propped up in windows and in front gardens advocating for a range of loosely affiliated causes, from placards for the three main political parties to posters demanding the reinstatement of the area's dark sky status, which had been recently revoked.

He had witnessed a similar tendency in London, but there he had assumed that the population density and the will of a certain section of the urban elite to buttress its pseudo-radical self-image was the cause, with this tendency manifested in reverse in the suburbs, where those who saw themselves as real people from real places campaigned against issues close to the heart of the out-of-touch city dwellers: refugees not welcome, end EU meddling, Tories in.

He had not imagined that the countryside would be the same, but the signs carried a greater urgency than he had seen in the city. The biggest issue seemed to be the new nuclear plant. Homemade billboards urging passersby to sign a petition in favour of a referendum lined the roads, supplemented by handpainted wooden signs that laid out the issues the local community anticipated facing: soiled rivers, lorries clogging the roads, the destruction of the area's natural beauty, increased instances of cancer. *One is enough*, read the first line of one of the most frequent slogans, the second directly underneath: *One = 2 many*.

The bus reached its final stop. They disembarked and crouched in the shelter, huddled together against its thin plastic pane in an attempt to escape the winter wind.

It was almost half an hour before their final bus arrived. They were its only passengers. The driver sneered as they embarked, as if they were forcing themselves onto his territory. And they must have looked strange, Will thought, it was likely that the only people who took this route were those working on the pipeline; they had left the tourist archipelago, there wasn't a town for miles.

They had not told Maxim or anyone else where they were going. They had just left. Dean had suggested they split up into smaller groups so as not to attract attention, but no one had responded, and when the time had come they had all left together. The area was so sparsely populated that such a suggestion seemed laughable with hindsight.

The map Dean had stored on his phone directed them to follow the road the bus had stopped on. After they'd been walking for a few minutes a tall steel fence appeared, topped with multiple layers of barbed wire. A line of trees behind the fence obscured their view, but they managed to find a section where the foliage was less dense. They couldn't make out much, just a few unmarked tarmac roads, a cluster of shipping containers, some construction vehicles.

There's no point in going to the entrance, said Will. That's where all the security will be.

Where should we go, then? said Dean.

Down to the sea. Probably our best bet.

They turned around and followed the fence as it bent east, climbing over weathered dunes and through clumps of gnarled sea grass until they reached a formation of rocks slippery with algae. Heavy gusts carried the cries of seagulls.

The fence turned back inwards just before it reached the shoreline. Laura took out a flask of tea from her backpack and offered it around. A few of the group tried to roll cigarettes, slumping over to shield themselves from the wind.

Will scanned the horizon with the binoculars he'd found in the storage room. It took him a while to dial in the range, but when he did the blur of green and grey and brown and white crystallised into water and foam and spit and sky and cloud and winter sun. He scanned the horizon. At first all he could make out were tankers, but then, looking back along the shoreline, he saw it. The fence vanished, JCBs, sheet metal and concrete mixers took its place. And just out to sea, unobscured by the flurry of

activity on the shoreline, was the pipeline. It continued above the water for what Will estimated to be a few hundred metres before disappearing below. It floated in the air, a dull brown that was difficult to distinguish from the colour of the sea below but stood out in contrast to the white sky above.

There it is, said Will, passing the binoculars to Laura, who went through the same process of surveying the horizon before Will directed her to the pipeline.

I don't know what I was expecting to be honest, said Laura. It's a pipeline. It looks like a pipeline.

It's kind of beautiful, said Will. The amount of energy that will flow through there, the sheer kinetic weight of everything that will happen because of that hulk of material. It's wild.

Now we know where it is, at least, said Dean. I wouldn't want to try to get in over the fence or through the front gate.

It's a good job this is just a thought exercise then, isn't it? said Will. It's obviously too dangerous. If we managed to get near it I don't know what we'd do anyway. There isn't just an off button.

Laura was looking at him, her arms folded. He expected her to contradict or chastise him but she didn't say anything, just pursed her lips and turned her back to look out to sea.

When they got back it was as if the rest of the group had been waiting for them to return. Will felt like a kid creeping back in after curfew. The contrast between their boisterous mood and the quiet of the building was jarring, Will lowered his tone but Laura and Dean were laughing about something, their voices echoing through the corridor and into the main room, where the others sat at the table, pausing their card games in anticipation of a confrontation, something coming to a head.

But Maxim was not there and Natalie said nothing.



## *Natalie*

Natalie woke up and went downstairs. Some of the group stood in a circle formation out in the garden, their breath combining in a cloud of vapour in the early morning frost. They wore hoodies and tracksuit bottoms, hats and gloves.

She picked a spot at the table, away from the window. The room had not yet been penetrated by the approaching sunlight, meaning she could linger unnoticed.

They began their exercises: star jumps, push-ups, planks, before each picking up a kettlebell and performing a series of laboured swinging and squatting motions. She sat watching for a while and then retreated back upstairs when it appeared they were reaching the end of the routine.

Maxim did not go to his office until the afternoon. He never missed his morning meditation practice, and when that was complete he went down to breakfast, and after breakfast he retreated to his room to read for a while. It was only when the group embarked on its routine of chores that he began work in earnest, and recently Natalie had noticed that he went up even later, if at all.

She closed the door of his office behind her and started up his laptop. On her first few excursions into Maxim's digital life she had expected to learn something about his personality or motivation, but beyond the initial revelation she had found nothing. His emails were curt, businesslike, professional, devoid of emotion. If he kept some kind of confessional document or diary that held the secret to what drove him it had so far eluded her.

She had trawled his hard drive and cloud folders and messages and emails and the inboxes of social media accounts she was surprised he had, although they were all anonymous and had never posted, but found nothing that had enlightened her as to why he had done what he had done. His inner world remained obscure. She felt like she did not know him at all, perhaps she never had, she had fallen for the facade just like everyone else. He had never loved her, he barely cared at all.

But he did trust her, it seemed. Vexing and flattering in equal measure was the lack of operational security he had extended to her. He preached paranoia, told her that she had to behave as if someone was always watching; only then could she be sure that she was safe. He extended this principle to the

wider group, made sure to include it in the onboarding training. The emphasis placed on secrecy was the most important factor in the continued success of their project; they rarely shared information even with each other, they were not party to the details of actions until after they had taken place. They did not speak with one another, let alone the police, and when there were arrests they could be confident they would not be exposed: each individual knew only what they had to, and so could not divulge compromising information even if they wished to; it was not in their possession.

When she realised that Maxim had lowered his guard to her alone she felt a pang of compassion, briefly she felt close to him again, it was a demonstration of his trust in her that she knew would make what she would have to do even more painful. She had to remind herself of what he had done, to her and to the group, in order to reestablish her resolve.

She drafted and redrafted the email, started a new copy in her notes app. It was difficult to capture Maxim's tone; his emails were so different from how he spoke, they were delicately composed, formal and direct but underpinned by a subservience foreign to her experience of him.

Unable to settle on a final version, she remembered a principle Maxim often preached. It's important always to retain optionality, he said. You consider every possible path, plan extensively before committing to anything at all. She drafted three versions. She would decide which to send when it came to it.

Each word she typed triggered an acute pain in the depths of her stomach. Until then the betrayal had felt unreal, but now her closeness to Maxim, the sense that he had become a part of her, that they shared an intimacy that had been physical but was also so much more, was inverted.

She knew that when she decided to send the message it would feel like she had dealt herself a mortal wound, cleaved away the part of herself she loved more than anything in the world.

It took her a while to track down where Laura's group met. They shifted around; Natalie cornered Dean at dinner and asked him directly where she could find them, but when she went to the room he told her they'd be in the next day there was no one there. If she was still acting on Maxim's command this would have been cause for high alarm, she would have gone straight to him to tell him that

something was afoot and they needed to get to the bottom of it. But now she just persisted, cornering Dean at breakfast the next morning and politely informing him that she had not been able to find the group where he had told her they would be. Dean apologised and gave her the location of that day's meeting, but she could tell from his lack of eye contact that she was being lied to again.

She went from the library to each meeting room and up to the bedrooms and back down to the main room before repeating each step, baffling some of the other members, who she passed multiple times. And then, from the upstairs bathroom, she looked out over the driveway and saw a small group walking purposefully towards the lane.

Natalie took three stairs at a time and almost careered into the porch window when she reached the bottom. She found her boots and pulled them on without lacing them up and burst out of the front door. A few of the group turned their heads as they reached the fence but did not stop walking, and Natalie continued her jog until she reached them.

Hi Natalie, said Will when she caught up with them, raising his voice as if alerting the others to her presence.

I just wanted to check in and see how everything was going with you, she blurted out without pausing to catch her breath.

We're just going on a little stroll, said Dean. We find it more generative than sitting inside.

Sure, said Natalie. Let's keep going.

But there was no moment for her to broach the subject, to warn them of what she was planning; it was impossible to just come out with it. Laura was clearly still wary of her despite the disclosure, perhaps it had marked her as even less deserving of trust. The group barely talked as she walked along with them; occasionally she would be beside Dean or one of the others and a pack would accelerate out of earshot and she was sure that they were speaking about her or about whatever it was that they wanted to keep her ignorant of.

Laura was perpetually affixed to Will, Natalie rarely saw them apart, and when she did they were never alone, always flanked by members of their clique. She changed the chore schedule, added Will to the

gardening group and took his place on food preparation. Laura did not seem to mind, although Natalie thought she noticed her facial expression change quickly whenever she turned to look at her, as if she had been making a face to someone behind Natalie's back.

One day she caught her in the garden on her way back into the building.

Dean told me what you guys are doing, said Natalie. I just wanted to say that I think it's an excellent idea.

Laura frowned. Natalie continued without pause, attempting to foreclose any opportunity for Laura to pose a question that might undo her lie.

Considering what I told you, I think you have every right to do it. I understand completely, you should go ahead with it.

I don't know what you're talking about, said Laura.

It's OK, I don't plan to get involved or invade your privacy. But just tell me when you are planning to do it and I might be able to be helpful.

We're not doing anything, said Laura, seemingly nonplussed.

OK then, said Natalie. She lowered her tone, scanned around as if to check no one could hear them, although she didn't actually care who heard, this was just a gesture for Laura's benefit. I am not asking you to tell me anything, but it's in your best interest to give me the date. You'll have to trust me on that. I know you have no reason to but I promise you it's the right thing for you to do. I think we all know the time of Maxim dictating the group's every move has passed. Just let me know. I can help.

Laura flicked on the sink and washed off some of the dirt from her hands, eyeing Natalie with suspicion.

Natalie began to take long walks, traversing the pebbled beach until she reached the decommissioned lighthouse before returning. It was freezing, a harsh gale swept the shoreline. The few fishermen who had braved the conditions stayed inside their tents.

Maxim was still trying to bring people back outside. When he spoke to the group he gave a convincing impression of his old self, and they reacted as they always had. Natalie wasn't sure if it was

her own personal hurt that caused her to experience his rallying calls as hollow and insincere or whether he really had lost something. Equally, it was easy to see why, after the initial burst of dissent, no one challenged him outright: he had done so much for many of them, some still believed in the mission, others were lying to themselves, they were too implicated in what they had collectively done to leave, they had nowhere else to go, and so it was easier to keep pretending that things were as they always had been than to see the truth.

Laura, Will, Dean and the rest of their group seemed to be ignoring everyone else altogether. They exchanged knowing looks when Maxim spoke, humoured him when he came to speak to them in a manner that would have made Natalie feel humiliated on his behalf if she hadn't hated him so much.

As she was about to turn around and head back to the house she stopped to look back along the shore, crouching on the sea wall that bordered the lighthouse. The horizon was appealingly grim, she could barely make out the upmarket town just a few miles down the coast through the dismal grey haze. Her hands clung to her hips inside the pockets of her jacket, tracing the contours of her body in search of friction to generate heat. The back of her left palm brushed an unfamiliar piece of metal, the zip for a pocket she rarely made use of. She inserted her hand and found a foreign object, a piece of paper. She pulled it out. On it, a date scrawled in looping longhand: January 10<sup>th</sup>.



## *Will*

I've started to dream about it, Will told Laura. There's this huge black ocean and I'm being submerged, it's impossible to get out even though I want to, and then I stop resisting and it feels so good, and I let myself go under.

And what happens then? she asked.

I wake up.

The rest of the group reported the same, they had all been visited by a vast black substance. They took it as a sign. But Laura rarely dreamed, and when she did all she saw was the face of her father.

This means we are doing the right thing, she told Will. There's no turning back now.

Or it's that we've thought about nothing else for weeks, he replied. When I wake up I feel afraid. In the dream it's so peaceful, but as soon as I'm out of it I feel like something terrible has happened. It takes me a few minutes to convince myself that everything's fine.

You don't have to worry, she said. It would be weird if you didn't feel a little apprehensive. It doesn't tell you anything more than that what we're doing is big.

I just know that it will change everything. And I'm happy here, it took us so long to get to this point. Aren't you happy?

She touched his arm at the elbow.

Of course I'm happy. But we were meant to do this, I'm sure of it, it's what we've been working up to this whole time, it's why we were brought here.

We were brought here to be together.

But also to do more. There's always more.

She told Will more about her father and how he had treated her, hinting at first so as to catch his interest before becoming increasingly explicit. All the things she told him were true; her father had hit her, he had been cruel, he had forced her to leave her family and go away to school, where she had developed an eating disorder and had been hated by all the girls, and being his daughter had marked her from birth, the wealth seemed like a blessing but really it meant that she could never be a normal

person, in fact it was worse than that, people hated her before they even met her, she knew what they said to one another, she had come across it online, she had started to imagine what people were thinking as she passed them in the street, it didn't matter if they actually recognised her, and she knew that most did not know who she was, but that was the point; being born as who she was had left her feeling as she did, it was a guilt she could not escape, an original sin no one could sacrifice themselves to relieve, not even Will.

And beyond what others thought of her was her conviction that they were right, because it was true that her father had made the world an immeasurably worse place, that his wealth, some of which he had passed down to her, was a transmutation of the suffering of others and the degradation of nature, and there was no way she could wash herself clean of this, or perhaps there was, perhaps that was what they were doing now.

And little by little she noticed Will's resolve erode. That was what love did to you, she thought, it made you credulous and pliable. He would do whatever she wanted and she loved him all the more for it.

Will told her again about his own parents, or what he could remember of them. She cried when he told her about his mum and how much he had loved her and how he had always held his dad responsible for her death even though he knew this to be ridiculous. He had been at a football match and his dad had gone to get a drink at halftime and had not returned, and he could understand perhaps if his dad had fallen out of love with his mum and told them he was leaving, but the manner of his exit had been so brutal it was as if he had deliberately wanted to hurt them, that what he had done had directly caused his mother's cells to turn against her. It had just been him and his mum and then his mum had begun coughing a lot, so much so that he had remarked on it only for her to tell him that she was fine and that he shouldn't worry, she had just been smoking too much, she needed to cut down, and then one morning before he left for school she had been waiting for the kettle to boil and the coughing had been so bad that he had got up from the kitchen table to get her a glass of water and noticed a small pool of blood in the sink, which she had hastily turned on the tap to wash down, and he had insisted that she go to the doctor even though he knew she was scared and he was too.

He had never got the full diagnosis and now considered it unimportant; the etiology was clear to him, and though he might never understand how Laura felt towards her father — his dad had never been abusive, what he had done had been very different — perhaps he did have an idea of what it was like to feel betrayed and angry and bitter and for those feelings to make you sick. And he told her about the times he had felt bad and how he'd had no idea why he'd felt so bad, but of course it had something to do with how damaged he was, how deeply hurt, and until he had met Laura he had not imagined that it would be possible to get distance from this part of himself, and he was so scared of losing this distance, and perhaps that was selfish, but it was how he felt. But if Laura was not happy he could not be happy, and he could also imagine that if there was something he could do, some radical act he could commit that would alleviate the pain of his past wounds, he would do it without thinking.

Their research suggested it would be easier than they'd expected it to be. Instances of similar sabotage had been executed with flames, drills, hammers, saws. If there was enough time, it was possible to chip away at the metal until it was breached. All you needed for the pressure to drop was one small leak, and then an alert would be raised and the flow would be stopped. The precarity of the system would be exposed, the risk it posed to the natural environment could clearly not be accepted by any right-minded public, and it would also serve as a visual representation of the larger issue: there was little difference in the environmental destruction caused by material that was leaked and material that was burned.

They were able to steal some of what they needed. The DIY shop lacked security, and Laura was able to sweet talk its owner while Will disappeared into the side room and dropped the tools into his bag.

The date they had chosen was arbitrary, and when, a week out, the forecast projected winds and rain, they considered postponing before deciding they would just make the call on the day. When the day came it was clear and bright.

They left early, took the bus along the coast to a town a couple of miles away from the site. The man they hired the boat from was loquacious, which excused them having to make small talk; he didn't get much business in January, he said, which was a shame because he considered days like these some of the

most beautiful of the whole year, all you needed to do was wrap up warm. The sea is almost flat today, he told them, you'll have a lovely time.

They paid with cash Will had withdrawn, an amount that had finally taken him to the limit of his overdraft.

Dean took charge of the boat, which was really more of a dinghy, steering them carefully along the estuary and beyond the dock and out to the North Sea.

They headed directly towards the sun, which was still making its way up into the sky, causing the surface of the water to glisten, before turning back down the coast. The boat skipped through the supple waves and they gripped the side to steady themselves and pulled their hoods up to deflect the spit.

We've got half an hour or so until we're there, right? Will asked Dean, who gave him a thumbs up.

We are all together now, Laura thought as she squeezed Will's arm. Everything was charged with boundless potential. She could feel the net of the fake begin to retract, revealing something new underneath, something like the real. She was ready for a miracle.



## *Natalie*

Natalie let the man in and took him upstairs to Maxim's office. Maxim was surprised but did his best to appear as if he had been expecting him. They were alone. Natalie had instructed everyone to leave and they had done so.

She returned downstairs. It was strange for the building to be so quiet. She had made so many good memories there. She checked the time on her phone. The officers would be there any minute. She imagined them streaming into the building, a sea of uniforms engulfing everything inside and sweeping Maxim away with them, an organic process, as inevitable as the ebb and flow of the tides.

The authorities had all the material they needed, she had sent it over in several dispatches. She had not told them that she had also informed the press.

They all arrived at once. She had instructed them to park in the lane and walk up, but the police had not heeded her instructions; several squad cars and a van came through the gates in tight formation. The kettle was boiling and she made the tea and put everything on a tray and took it up, leaving the front door ajar.

From inside Maxim told her to leave them, but she pretended not to hear and opened the door with her back. The man shared Laura's sharp features, it was obvious that they were related. Natalie beamed at him, he looked past her.

I said you could leave us, Maxim was saying, and then he stopped.

Natalie left the room. The officers passed her in the opposite direction.

There were cameras, some shouting and tussling, and Natalie had to force her way through the melee.





The beaches were coated black. The substance spread steadily out into the North Sea and pooled along the coastline before making its way towards the Netherlands, adding a matte, earthy sheen to the water.

The news channels broadcasted endless footage of soiled gulls, dead flora and fauna. Environmental agencies projected the clean-up would take decades. An uncalculatable amount of damage had been done, much of it irreversible.

The moral dimensions of what had occurred became a topic of popular debate. It was widely agreed that no one was in the right. But sides were taken nonetheless, cohering roughly along established generational and political lines.

The discourse came in waves, new themes gaining traction as others lost energy.

This is what happens when you pander to a generation of privileged radicals, proclaimed a cluster of identikit talk radio hosts and tabloid columnists, while their broadsheet adversaries pointed to the nefarious role the father's lobbying had surely played and the financial connections between him and the group. These dynamics did not make sense without considering the interpersonal element, argued others, it's so interesting, it's a familial psychodrama played out on an epic scale, perhaps we will never know exactly what happened or why, but we can learn a lot by looking at the relationship between father and daughter. Then there were those who pointed to the close proximity of the father to the government, uncovered links between the leader of the cult and several up-and-coming members of the elite, with whom he had been to university, branded the entire series of events an intelligence services psyop gone awry.

The police did their best to navigate the fractured landscape of public opinion, delaying the results of their investigation until they had complete confidence in their findings. In the building by the coast where they had arrested the father and the leader of the cult they found laptops, smartphones, maps containing details of attacks that had taken place over the last few years, and slowly they were able to tie those they had arrested to the group; they obtained access to their social media and email accounts, charted their paths to radicalisation.

The woman who had led them to the house in exchange for legal immunity had refused to answer any further questions, but they had so much material that they did not require her input. They let her

go without charge, leaving her free to raise her child, a boy who would be born six months later and given the name of his father.

None of the suspects talked, not the father or the daughter, nor any of those who had been found on the oil-covered vessel by the crew of the lifeboat. They joined the ranks of their silent comrades in prison after trials in which only the father pled innocent.

And in the wake of their silence the public grew frustrated, because they needed answers, there had to be a common motive that would enable them to make sense of what had happened, to draw a line under events that none of them understood. But the silence remained, intensified, until eventually they talked of the events with less frequency and then rarely at all, and the clean-up operation mitigated the most immediate hazards, and the new nuclear plant became operational, and the perpetrators were released from prison after serving half of their sentences on account of their good behaviour and apparent remorse.

A few weeks after the press had covered the release of the prisoners, two of them, the daughter and a man of a similar age, were pictured sitting together on a clifftop bench above the site of the disaster, overlooking the black sea beneath them, holding one another in a close embrace.