

SONGS FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

Dan Holloway

Songs From the Other Side of the Wall has appeared in various and incomplete forms on the websites www.youwriteon.com, www.authonomy.com. It is available to download as a pdf from www.danholloway.wordpress.com and www.yearzerowriters.wordpress.com.

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Dan Holloway studied theology and philosophy at Oxford, and still gives papers based on his doctoral research into identity and relationships, the themes that run through his books. At the height of the budget travel boom, he and his wife visited 23 countries in a single year, the recounting of which began his ventures into writing full-length novels, his fascination with modern Europe, and the love of Tokaji wine which inspired two of his novels, including this one. His short stories have appeared in *Empire Review* and a number of anthologies, and he writes a regular column on the UK music scene for the online journal *The Indie Handbook*. *Songs from the Other Side of the Wall* was a number one book on the leading writers' websites *Youwriteon* and *Authonomy*, and is his third completed novel. Dan has a morbid addiction to appearing on TV gameshows, and in 2000 was both the World Intelligence Champion, and the fourth member of the Oxford University discus and hammer throwing team.

Author's note

Mary Quant's shop on the King's Road really was called *Bazaar*. To the best of my knowledge, she never employed anyone called Sylvie, and never summarily dismissed anyone for their interest in silk.

All characters in this story are fictional or used fictionally. London, Oxford, Bucharest, Tokaj, Miskolc, and Budapest are real places used fictionally. There are many bars off Lipscani Street, but the Grey Wolf is not one of them. There is no Szant Gabor vineyard in Tokaj. The vineyards at Szant Tamas and Mezes Maly are very real, and their wines are better than I could ever describe in writing. The *Astoria* in London is sadly no more a real place, but it was in 2007. Oxford does have a University (two of them, in fact), but it does not have a Department of Balkan Studies. The Saïd Business School is part of Oxford University, and there is indeed a statue of a bull outside, but I have never heard it talk.

Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* and Tracey Ermin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995* are genuine works of art. The works of Sandrine, Yang, and every other student at the fictional Pest Fine Art College, are not, but with acknowledgement, I have no objection to anyone bringing them to life.

For my wife

SONGS FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

1

December 12 2007

“You’ve gotta come see it, Szandi,” says Yang. I slam the phone down but it misses the base. I hit the clock instead, which flashes 03.00.

I put the handset on the pillow and turn over so I’m looking at it. The white plastic appears faintly red in the clock’s LCD glow. “Szandi?” I hear. The black dots of the speaker seem to wink in the dark as she talks.

“Yeah?”

“My sculpture. It’s finished. You’ve gotta come see!”

“I will. I’ll come over first thing in the morning.”

“It *is* first thing in the morning, you daft bitch.” I hear her laugh, but it’s distant. I bet she thinks she’s put her hand over the mouthpiece; but she’s too stoned to get it right.

“Are you gonna make me come get you, Szandi?”

“Just try.”

“Pleaaase,” she says.

“OK.” I’m too tired to argue. I’ll be back in bed quicker if I just go.

I pull on a jumper, thick woollen leggings, and a pair of pumps, and head out of the flat into the cold city. The mist coming off the Danube wraps itself around me like the breath of a thousand ghosts.

I make my way through Víziváros. The streets get narrower with every turn until I reach a passage that’s little more than a crack, where one building has slipped down the hill with age and worked loose of its partner. There are

no lights, but I know every chip and layer of orange and blue and green and brown paint on the door that opens onto a thin, concrete staircase. I climb to the top and ring the bell.

Yang opens her studio door a few centimetres, and looks me up and down as though she can't figure out why I'm here. All I can see are her eyes. Her pupils are huge, like she's sucked in two black moons. I was right. She's stoned. She fumbles to free the safety chain, opens the door fully and reaches out a hand to drag me inside.

We stand on the paint-splattered floorboards just inside the door, our hands still locked together. She grins but her muscle control's gone, and the smile teeters on her lips. She's wearing the long T-shirt I printed for her that says *slut slit* a few centimetres above the hem. The black letters are spaced out and I can see enough between them to know the T-shirt's all she's wearing.

She steps to one side and pushes me forward. I'm standing in front of a glass tank about a metre high, the same deep and twice as long. Inside are loads of little red balloons. They're just hovering in space, refusing to fall to earth or float off into the sky. Some of them are clustered together so it looks like they're supporting each other, but I walk all the way around the tank and there's clear air surrounding every one of them.

"Gelatine," she says. "Cool, huh? Chemicals suspended in extract of cow!" She giggles, wobbles, and nearly topples through the glass.

"Like a negative of Damien Hirst," I say, but it's more beautiful than that; and more old fashioned, like the millefiori paperweights in Dad's study. The concept's modern and kind of cool, but there's something in the execution – the smoothness of the red; the flat, crisp angles of the glass; the clarity of the gelatine – that belongs to another time.

"It's called One Hundred Balloons Without String," she says.

"At least that's descriptive."

She sits down on the floor beside a little pile of screwed-up and sticky papers, and starts rummaging through them. "Wanna hear the text?" she asks, grabbing at my leg with one hand and shaking a pair of chopsticks off a piece of A4 with the other.

"Text?" I say, sitting down next to her.

"Yeah, the words that go with the sculpture."

"I know what a text is. Isn't it a bit out of date, though? People don't really do that kind of thing any more."

“I know,” she says. She’s sitting with her legs crossed and the T-shirt’s riding up. My eyes follow the long, pale olive line of the inside of her thigh. She puts the sheet of paper in her lap. “It’s part of the whole retro thing, like you said about Damien Hirst.” She picks it up and moves it closer to her eyes, then away, then back again. “Ah, fuck it,” she says. “You read it. I’m knackered.”

She hands me the paper. The edge is covered in a thick, sticky gloop that I hope is gelatine. I’ve forgotten how exquisite her handwriting is, even when she’s scribbling. My eyes trace the narrow, inverted curves of her ns and her ms, and the almost shorthand ripples of her vowels. Her letters have the elegance and tightness of her body, the perfect proportion of its angles and curves.

“As newborns,” I begin, “we announce ourselves to the world utterly without fear. We take in a gigantic lungful of air that fills our shrivelled skin like a balloon and, for the last time in decades, without embarrassment, expectation – or fear – we let out an almighty scream. Although, and precisely because, we are ignorant of them, there is nothing in our future or our past (not the slap of the mother’s hand nor the reward of her breast) that tells us what we must do.”

“Yeah,” she says. Her eyelids are starting to fall. The skin on them is smooth, like cream-coloured suede. I watch as they move slowly up and down, trying to decide whether she’s more beautiful with her eyes open or closed.

“Hey, don’t stop,” she says, staring straight at me. Her brow’s creased like she’s cross, but her spaced-out pupils stay big and glistening and distant.

“No.” I put the paper down. “You tell me.”

“Tired, Szandi.”

“Yeah, but you’re not too tired to call me over here. So tell me about your metaphorical balloons!”

“Fuck, you know, Szandi. You’re born and you open your eyes and all around you see this cat’s cradle of ropes and cords and strings. Family, rules, race, sex. *Like a balloon tied to the vendor’s hand, on the verge of floating into a limitless sky with nothing to direct us but the breeze of chance.* Life feels, what?”

“Precarious,” I offer.

“Yeah, that’s it. Precarious.”

“Only,” I say, looking at the sculpture, “if you look at life from every angle you see there isn’t a cat’s cradle at all. There’s nothing touching anything else.”

“Yeah. But who can see their life from every angle? Only God could do that. Do you believe in God, Szandi?”

I shake my head.

“Me neither.”

“Maybe when we die,” I say. “Maybe we can see it then. When we’re really old, and lying in our beds with our eyes closed and all we can hear is our breathing. Maybe we get so far from the world we can see our life from every side.”

“That’d be sad,” says Yang. “You go your whole life knowing exactly where you are, then just before you die *ping*, someone cuts the rope.”

“Better to die young.”

“Like Claire,” she says, without sympathy, without any feeling at all. Just a statement of fact.

“Like Claire,” I repeat, and pick up her text. My hand’s shaking. The paper makes a sound like rain falling on glass.

“What did I write about dying?” she asks.

“You don’t remember?”

“I’m tired, Szandi. Tired and a bit stoned. Read it to me.”

I turn the page, reading as I go, and let my eyes find their way to the last paragraph.

“...we walk towards death in ignorance,” I read, “fearless once again of punishment and reward. We take a gulp of air with what’s left of our lungs; and announce our presence, without embarrassment, expectation – or fear – not with a scream but a gurgle, a dribble, and last a rattle. Finally the balloon has reached space, beyond hope, fear, past, present, horizon; beyond air, beyond weather.”

It’s beautiful. Her words are like poetry in the same effortless way as the sculpture. They slide off the tongue and float weightlessly away without making a ripple.

“It’s overwritten,” I say quietly. “Is that part of the retro irony?”

“Yeah,” she says, opening her eyes. “I took the style from your blog.”

Touché.

“Fuck you,” I say, and start to laugh.

She screws up her forehead and leans towards me. Her head falls onto my shoulder, and a spike of hair jolts out of place and flops over one eye. She juts out her bottom lip and blows, making her hair dance. The combination of the gesture and her utter seriousness is comical and I feel the corners of my mouth twitching.

“Hey, you,” she says. “Let me be serious for a minute.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Yeah.” She frowns harder, scrunching up her nose. “I was going to tell you I made this for you.”

“For me?”

“For you. Because you’re not like any normal balloon.”

“Right.”

“You see all these balloons?” she asks. She tries lifting her head but she’s too tired and it slides from my shoulder to my chest. She puts a hand there as a pillow, letting it mould itself to my breast.

“Yeah.”

“Look at one of them. Any one. Pick a balloon,” she says, like she’s a magician doing a card trick. “What do you see?”

“You tell me.”

“You see that the only thing making it any different from all the other balloons is its position. The only thing that makes your balloon different is how it relates to every other balloon. It’s only when they’ve all floated off into space that you can look at a balloon and see it on its own.” She sighs and shrugs her shoulder gently against me. “Poor balloon.”

“Poor balloon?”

“Yeah,” she says, but now her eyes are firmly closed and her words are getting blurred. “Poor balloon. Think...need to change...in the morning.” Now her voice is hardly there at all, and it’s starting to merge with shallow, ragged breaths that will soon become a snore. “Ninety-nine Balloons Without String...One With.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask. “You’re the one floating off into space.”

It’s too late. Underneath the T-shirt her chest is rising and falling in the slow rhythm of a torch song. I kiss her head, ease it gently down onto my lap, lean back, and look up at the ceiling. The flaking eau de nil paint is textured with pits and splashes and craters. I look at the patterns they make,

joining the dots in a hundred different ways. I try seeing each one separately, cut off from the scratches and marks around it; but I can't.

It's midday when I come back from the shops, and Yang's in the shower, back in our flat for the first time in a week. The water rinses the sleep off her like a layer of fine powder and leaves her shining like the stone of a fresh-peeled lychee. I step in and we kiss and let our fingers flow with the water down the contours of our flesh. She takes me, still wet, to bed and we make love for an hour, tongues and hands and skin blurring in moist heat. As our bodies move, the water slowly dries, and when we're spent we lie on the bed, glinting with the sticky sheen of sweat and sex.

For a while, I watch her and listen to her breathe. Her eyes are shut but the rasps from her lips come too quickly for sleep. I want to tell her I love her. I put my arm around her shoulder and nuzzle the thick, black hair. I press my breast against hers, watch her lips open and sigh as my hard pink nipple brushes the soft brown of hers. The thin layers of sweat and skin that separate us melt together. I push down on her a little harder. I want the boundary to disappear altogether. I want my heart to leap out of my chest and start beating in hers. But it won't. Not yet, not until the morning I wake up, feel a body next to me, and don't think of Claire.

By mid afternoon slivers of silk surround me on the sofa. I pull pieces off at random and throw them on the floor together, trying to make the colours and shapes talk to each other. Instead they just flop down in heaps and look a mess.

"What the fuck?" asks Yang, standing in the door.

"I'm playing," I lie.

"No you're fucking not, you're messing with your sculpture."

"OK. I thought I could maybe do something with the lining, or put some coloured stitching in. It's not right."

"It's finished," she says. She starts picking the bits up from the floor. Then the ones on the sofa, till she stands in front of me brandishing a thick, multicoloured weapon. "It's been finished for over a week."

Now it's night, and she'll sleep through till I bring coffee, and shake her till she remembers she has to set up for the exhibition. I'm glad she's asleep. Often I'll wake, and over the nape of her neck I'll see Yang's face reflected in

the glass of the clock, her eyes open. She's not sleeping, but she's not awake. Deep behind the black of her pupils there's an intense concentration I can't penetrate.

I go to the kitchen, pour a beer, and sit down with the letter I've been avoiding all day. I tap the edge against the wood for a minute or so. The postmark says Tokaj. I don't recognise the ballpoint handwriting that's pressing unevenly into the cheap envelope, but that doesn't matter. I know it's about Dad.

I push the beer across the table, slide my finger under the flap, tearing it clumsily like I'm gutting a fish with a blunt knife, and lay the sheet of shiny lined paper on the table.

Dear Szandrine,

Your father doesn't know I'm writing. He'd just tell me not to interfere. But isn't that what friends do, eh? I would've called but there was no way of getting your number without him suspecting, so it's a letter. Sorry it's not a very good one – you a student and all, but the only things I'm used to writing are invoices.

I know you'll be here in a week anyway but it would mean the world if you came home early. Even if it's only a day. To show your Dad you care. Sometimes when I go over he's so grey and quiet I wonder just how ill he is. But he won't see the doctor. Maybe you could make him.

One more thing, and you mustn't let him know I said anything. You already know what would make him happy, even if it's too late to make him well. Tell him you'll look after the vineyard. Tell him you'll take over Szant Gabor when he's gone.

I know it's all too much to ask but what am I supposed to do? Marko's my oldest friend in the world.

Gyorgy

I go to the bathroom and open the door of the big mirror-cabinet above the sink. There's the cutthroat Dad gave me when I was ten, its blue enamel handle shining amongst the tampons and pill bottles. I open it out and watch as a droplet of moisture appears and glistens on it like dew on grass. I hold the blade up to my lips. The edge is so fine I only know I've cut myself from the red that's swirling in the centre of my tear.

“Oh, Dad,” I whisper, wiping the carbon-steel on the letter, leaving a smudge of salt and blood and rust.

DAN HOLLOWAY

Half of me wants to run home and hold him for as long as he has left. And half of me wants to go back into the other room and lose myself forever in the warmth of Yang's sleeping body. At this moment I have two lives in front of me, but I know the moment I choose one, the other will die.

It's long past midnight and even though it's winter the sun will come soon. The darkness outside is already loosening. It melts in front of me, and I realise it's no longer the orange yellow dark of streetlamps and neon signs. It's the sleazy light of a bar, the Grey Wolf in Bucharest. It's New Year's Eve. 2006 is about to become 2007. The future is full of possibility. I have a place come the autumn to study languages at the Sorbonne. I am about to sing in public for the first time. Somewhere, waiting for me, in the West, Claire is alive.

2

It was 7.30. Two countries were about to start a new life in the EU, and I was playing in a concert to celebrate. There was a glass of Pilsner I hadn't touched in front of me on my table. Jason, *The Point of the Bomb's* roadie, was still playing with the amp so I couldn't run through my sound check. Behind the bar a CD player broke the quiet – just – with acoustic jazz covers of Kraftwerk so cool my breath formed little clouds that danced over my beer.

The Grey Wolf was off Lipscani Street, the centre of Bucharest's trendy bar quarter and the heart of the historic city. The entrance was under a small neon sign and led down some cramped stone stairs to a basement. I was amazed anyone could find it, but a steady stream of punters filled it out and soon the seats were all taken.

“Hey!”

I looked up from my beer. The woman sitting opposite me was smaller than her voice. She had short, pixie hair and wore a tight, black cotton polo. She must have been about twenty, but in the artificial light it was hard to tell.

“Hi.”

“It's OK to drink it, you know.” She smiled at me. Her eyes flashed mischief. “I won't tell anyone you're underage.”

“Eh?”

“It's OK. I had all my best hangovers when I was fifteen and away from home.”

I laughed. “I'm seventeen. It's my first time in Bucharest.”

“Me too,” she said. “So what are you doing?”

“Waiting for that guy to finish playing with the set,” I said, pointing to Jason.

“You're a musician, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool. I'm Ilke.”

“Sandrine.”

“No way! With an accent like that.”

“My Dad,” I said. “I'm from Hungary, but he saw a film with this French actress in it, just after I was born. The register office wouldn't let him spell it the same, though, so technically I'm Szandrine with a *z*. Which doesn't make sense in Hungarian or French.”

“Cool!”

“So where are you from?”

“Berlin.”

Berlin.

“You OK?” asked Ilke, but I was too lost in thought to answer.

I was a week old when Mum went back to England and left me and Dad in our huge house at the heart of the vineyard. It was the 9th of November 1989, the day the Berlin Wall came down.

There were no photos of her in the house. Dad never talked about her, and taking my cue from his silence, I never asked. I filled in her story for myself until it was stronger than any real memories I had. In my version she walked across no man’s land towards the Berlin Wall. When she was almost there it disappeared, and without slowing she walked through the empty space where it had stood. She became smaller and smaller on the horizon, but as far away as she got, I could still see a trickle of dust from her hands snaking back towards me, and I knew one day I’d use it to follow her to the West.

In October 2006 Mum came back. She came to Hungary on a research trip, with an assistant called Claire. I was asleep when they arrived. In the morning I was up early, woken by my heart racing. In the excitement my shoulders got caught up in the fabric of my dress as I pulled it on. When it finally fell into place and I could see again, there was Claire, standing in the vineyard like she’d been waiting for me all her life. I blinked in case I was still dreaming, and when I looked again she was gone. I sat on the corner of the bed, trying to breathe while my pulse skitted over my skin like a moth caught in a lamp. By the time I’d collected myself and gone down to breakfast Mum had left, and taken Claire with her.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Wanna try it out?” a deep voice shouted in my ear.

I looked up. It was Jason. I turned to say goodbye to Ilke; but she was no longer there.

I took a gulp of beer and stood up. My head swam for a moment but then it cleared.

“You bet.”

I threaded my way through the packed bar without touching anyone, as though some kind of force field had surrounded me. Before I knew it I had my guitar in my hands, and Jason and I were lost in conversation about music.

I'd been writing and sharing songs online with the guys from *The Point of the Bomb* for months. Some nights when I sat typing the lyrics into my computer as I sang them to myself, I imagined the words floating out of the window and speeding their way down the cables and fibres of the Web, and finding their way eventually to an internet café in Paris or London or Barcelona where Michael and Janie and Steve and Greg were waiting.

On October 17 my screen had flashed.

Mike's in the Shack. Wanna chat?

I clicked through. *What's up?*

Wanna play?

Play?

Yeab. Bucharest. New Year's Eve. Half an hour. Try out your new songs.

You're fucking kidding?!

When I'd finished setting up, Steve signalled for me to join the band at their table, huddled next to the stage.

"What's it like outside?" I asked.

"Piata Universităţii's filling up," said Michael. Big city squares were the kind of venue Michael and the band were used to playing, but tonight they'd chosen low key. No having to watch what they said or did for the cameras, and no big deal having a beginner like me as support.

"It's heaving out there," said Steve. "It's like feeling the blood rushing back after you've slept on your arm."

"That's a metaphor we could run with," I said. "Ceaușescu cuts off the country's blood..."

"And then he's gone, but sensation still doesn't return for a while," said Steve.

"Yeah," I continued. "You just have pins and needles and the dull throbbing pain of trying to readjust."

"And finally the blood comes back and life goes on," said Michael.

"Fuck me!" said Greg, the drummer. "Do you guys never just chill out?"

Before I knew it, the lighting had changed. I was on stage.

DAN HOLLOWAY

I had a half hour set, ten three minute songs I'd written after local thugs killed a Serb called Radko because he had a job and they didn't. Musically they were formulaic. I'd sing the verses in a folk and torch song cross with my guitar. Then I'd thump out the choruses to a metal bass line and drums, courtesy of Steve and Greg, who'd been playing around with the music online for the last week. The structure was always the same – verse, chorus, verse, chorus, fade.

I sat on a barstool, put the guitar on my knee, and began strumming *Mostar Bridge*, a diatribe against the chattering classes, complete with rhymes that were little more than the kind of doggerel we did in language classes at school:

*I was gonna join Bono and Midge
But you headed me off at Mostar Bridge.*

What happened as I played was unlike anything I'd experienced alone in my room. The audience pounded their fists in the air to my choruses. They were expectant through the verses, still until the next crescendo. The Grey Wolf was a single living creature and I was its heart.

Too soon I was building to the chorus of my final song, Greg pounding drums behind, Steve thrashing the bass beside me.

*A gut full of lead
And a face full of steel.
He's dead but the wounds will heal.*

I could feel the force of the noise I was making pushing me forward. I opened my throat and sucked in a lungful of passion and fury, spitting it out in a scream.

*The wounds will heal,
The wounds will heal,
The wounds will heal.
He's dead...*

Pause.

But...

Just me and a near-silent arpeggio on my guitar:

The wounds will heal.

There was a second's silence. I took in the crowd of faces. They were all looking at me. At that moment, absolutely nothing separated us. I breathed in, and my head fell onto the belly of my guitar.

3

The moment I came off stage the audience, the applause, the music – even the Kraftwerk covers they put on again – disappeared. Or rather, I knew they were there, but instead of sharing a skin with me like they had been a moment earlier, now they were going on somewhere else.

I sat back at the table but it was empty. The band was getting ready for their set; Jason was adjusting the amps.

I stared into the glass and saw Radko looking up at me through a single eye. He died on an ordinary evening in October that year. I sat on the landing, listening through the banisters to Dad and Gyorgy talk. Their words came in tiny bursts, the long silences between broken only by the whirring of a moth that had found its way in off the porch.

“I went to see his landlady,” said Gyorgy.

“And?”

“Didn’t know a thing.”

“You were the first to tell her?”

“Yes, and you know what?”

“What?”

“She didn’t cry. Didn’t cry but she was devastated. She told me I had to go and see his room. *I want you to see how beautifully he kept it*, she said. Kept saying *he was only young but he knew how to look after things*. I told her I knew. Told her he was the best worker I ever had.”

“So what was it like?” asked Dad.

“What was what like?”

“His room.”

“I couldn’t face it,” said Gyorgy.

Silence settled again until I heard a strange, rhythmic noise, that got slowly louder until I could hear it was the sound of sobbing.

I sat and watched Camus the vineyard cat leaping to try and reach the moth as the tears continued, interrupted only by Gyorgy’s occasional cry of “fucking animals.”

The next day’s papers said Radko was beaten to death by a gang of racist thugs on his way home from work. They described the attack in detail. One guy knocked him on the back of his head with a piece of metal or an exhaust

or something like that. He fell to the ground. Someone stamped on the side of his head – they knew because there was a boot mark on Radko’s cheek – pinning him to the ground while the others kicked him in the kidneys again and again and again until his organs burst.

I drained my beer and watched *The Point of the Bomb* finish their set. Michael worked the crowd with just a few movements of his right hand, which he reached out to them and reeled back in slow motion. The audience lost any individual identity and became one being, its ripples of movement following Michael’s lead. It was like watching a snake charmer. With his black curls and leather trousers he reminded me of Jim Morrison.

“Fancy another beer?” he asked when the set was finally over. It was 10.30, about the time one of their gigs would normally be getting started. But the Grey Wolf was already half empty as people went to jostle for position in Piața Universității.

“Not heading off yet?”

“Not yet. I’ll turn up at the last minute, make sure I get a nice place on the edge.”

“I never had you pegged as claustrophobic,” I said.

“Now you put it like that, neither did I. I guess I like to get a whiff of what’s going on, but when it comes down to it I’d rather watch than join in.”

“You wanna watch it,” said Greg. “That kind of thing could get you arrested.”

“See you back at the hotel, then,” said Steve. “We’d rather take our chances in the mosh pit. You were great by the way, Sandrine.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Steve put his index finger to his eye and gave me a mini salute. I giggled. I had a fresh, cold beer in my hands and I was beginning to feel like I belonged again.

“Don’t wait up,” said Michael.

“As if,” said Janie, who turned to me, bent over and whispered, “mind yourself with that one,” just loud enough for Michael to hear.

“Fuck off the lot of you,” he said. It was the last thing he said to any of them.

With the rest of the band gone, Michael and I finished our beers in near silence. We’d spent two years talking in the chatrooms and forums of his

website, *Endangeredworlds.net*, swapping lyrics, discussing tunes, chewing over politics. He'd heard my amateur MP3s. I'd seen YouTube clips of his concerts from all round the world. Now we'd heard each other play for real there wasn't much left to say. But the silence was pleasant enough.

"I might head back to my hotel and watch on TV," I said when both our glasses were empty.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Or I might just wander around."

"I know what you mean."

"You do?"

"Yeah," he said. "Sometimes you don't want to be in the middle of things. Sometimes, when something's really important, it's best to watch it from the edges, from the spaces. Or even to watch other people rather than the thing itself."

We said goodbye, and I headed out of the Grey Wolf high on the smell of beer and smoking fireworks. People bumped and jostled down the streets like pinballs, stopping to fling their arms around strangers, kissing each other and shouting messages of love and peace that were instantly lost in the noise. They seemed to share my heady feeling of hope and endless possibility.

I didn't see the ghosts standing at every shoulder, pushing them on; ghosts of the thousands who simply disappeared from the world, drawing substance again for one night from the beery breath of the masses. As far as I was concerned Ceaușescu had died in 1989, and taken Romania's problems with him.

I weaved up and down the alleys off Lipscani Street, wondering what to post on my blog, *Songs From the Other Side of the Wall*. I started walking up Smârdan Street, crossed into Ion Ghica Street. The crowds had almost thinned to nothing. My feet felt like they were on springs. Come midnight something – the old East? My old life? – would stop forever, and something new would take its place.

I approached the back of the wall of people as the giant clock counted down the last few seconds. Romania held its breath. I half expected to see Mum walking ahead of me, melting the crowds in front of her so I could follow. But I didn't see her.

I saw Claire.

I stopped about twenty metres from her. She hadn't seen me. She was in the middle of a conversation with someone. It took a few seconds to realise it was Michael.

My brain didn't have time to put things together before the countdown finished and the crowd erupted. A wave of sound swept back towards me. Immediately afterwards another wave followed. Of movement. A row of heads rose up out of the mass and fell back down. It seemed like these heads became detached and rolled back towards me. As they reached the back of the crowd everything slowed.

I felt something tickle inside my chest. I was calling out to Claire, only the sound was taking too long to climb its way out of my lungs. I watched, motionless, as she and Michael broke off their conversation and turned to see what was coming. Then she turned her head 180 degrees, searching for a way out. She must have been looking right through me but then she vanished, and so did Michael.

Through the forest of running legs I saw her for a fraction of a second. Or at least I thought I did. I thought I saw her last breath leave her, silently, in a cloud of ice crystals that evaporated into the night; and an eye, a single eye, unnaturally wide and black, in what seemed like recognition.

Something snapped inside me. The violence of it threw me against a wall. I stood there as the world around me – the mad, vibrant, exciting world that had sent a flirtatious glimpse of what it had to offer me – shrunk down to the size and shape of my skin.

I was alone.

Songs from the Other Side of the Wall

Bucharest January 2 2007

I stared into his single eye, the one that wasn't pressed flat to the pavement, for five minutes; it refused to stare back at me. Although I scoured the dark of his dilated pupil; although I counted the crazings of blood across the glassy white, I did not, for even one of those three hundred seconds, nor the three months that followed, think of Radko as anything other than an idea. He became in my eyes, in my thoughts, in the lyrics of my songs and the words of my blog, the emblem of everything the world needed to hear.

I didn't actually see his body. I didn't see the moon-black blood leak onto the cobbles or the early autumn wind pick up the torn corner of his shirt and tease the passers-by with the sight of prepubescent welts and bruises that, cut off in death, would never mature; or of starburst thread veins that gave the skin around his kidneys the patina of toecaps. But in the five minutes it took Gyorgy to tell my father that Radko was dead, to explain the positioning of every blow, to cry into his arms; to dry his tears and hold my father as he let go the uncontrolled sobbing of his own; to sit at the table, two men approaching old-age drinking beer in a silent toast to a youth they barely knew – in that five minutes I screwed my stare through the glassy surface of a single eye, down the optic nerve, past brain and spinal cord, limbic system, circulation and endocrine; but as far as I looked nothing of Radko looked back. His soul had already gone.

All I was able to see that night was Radko's eye – the one that wasn't pressed to the pavement. I knew it was the pressure of the boot that forced it open so it looked like it would pop out of its socket; but in my imagination it was wide in astonishment. I watched as the astonishment turned to fear then resignation then the pupil began to swirl as blood surged up from his liver and spleen and slowly the shiny black went dull and grey. And I kept thinking to myself, What's happening to his other eye? Is that eye dead as well? Radko was split in two and one of them was dead but what about the other one? Eventually in this picture the kicking ended and the thug with the boot on Radko's cheek gave a flick of his ankle and flipped him over. Radko turned face up and I could see that the second eye was as grey as the first – there was only one Radko and he was dead. But what had happened in the thirty seconds or so in between? The other Radko could have been desperately trying to signal something. It might not have been too late for him. But no one would ever see.

Three months later, yesterday, just after the stroke of midnight, in the first screams of the crowd's celebration, Claire was dead. I saw her body. I watched it fall, watched the horrified scream of Michael's contorted figure as it tried to twist free, as it turned and spun

DAN HOLLOWAY

and eventually fell, squeezing the final breath from her fragile flesh. I know – the images to prove it are there on YouTube – that she took less than a frame of film to die and be buried in the crush. In that one twenty-seventh of a second or less; in that time so small there is no proof it ever existed (or rather there is digital proof that it did not) I saw enough in one frozen eye to know that she understood every detail of my love for her. But before her death stare could answer me she was gone.

After Radko died I locked myself away and wrote song after song; I cannot write a word for Claire. I don't understand, and the thought of what my silence means terrifies me.

Every word to describe what happened, even stripped to the barest fact, scans like the opening of a verse. Violence itself has a rhythm, the quiet-loud-quiet of a throwaway pop song. The gap, the fraction of meaning I need to fill to turn the bare lines of history into song, is so infinitely thin that if it brushed your face you wouldn't even think it was a breeze; but it surrounds like a second skin. I can't get free of it without turning inside out.

4

I clicked back to *Endangeredworlds*' homepage. Someone had reformatted it completely so there was just a simple screen, outlined in black. To go anywhere you had to click a discreet "enter site" button in the corner. Otherwise you just sat there and stared at the banner endlessly scrolling in 48 point Calibri, *Goodbye, Mike, words can never say.*

Words did say, of course. In addition to the forums, Greg had posted an account of the tragic events. I read it through for what must have been the fortieth time, and for the fortieth time the words pulled me up short:

Endangeredworlds is in mourning today for Michael Tyler. The site's founder was killed, along with his sister Claire, in riots that broke out in Bucharest on the stroke of New Year.

Along with his sister Claire

He'd talked about her *ad infinitum*, about the clingy sister he had to phone or e-mail to check in with every night, to make sure she hadn't done anything stupid like she did seventeen years before. And that was Claire.

Instinctively, I took my hand off the keyboard and looked at it. It was hooked over from all the typing, but as I stared at the space between my fingers and my palm I said the same thing to myself over and over again.

"It's empty. Something was there but now it's gone."

I had to get back onto the streets. I could clear my head there, in open spaces filled with car horns and the chug of Vespas, screaming youths and the chorus of hacking smokers. My room was too quiet. I needed noise to think. I needed to go and kick paper cups and tin cans in the gutter. Then I'd sit in a square somewhere with a beer.

Outside it was freezing, but the cafes and bars still spilled people onto the streets. Everyone seemed to have a laptop. They were all reading or writing, telling people what it was like to be there while history was made. Hardly any of them were Romanian. The Romanians were all at work, dealing with the new reality of being in the EU. Those that were left were all political tourists like me, hoovering up everyone else's experiences from the forums and the blogs and chatrooms in case they missed anything out when they told the story to their friends back home.

I looked at reflections of their laptop screens in the windows as I walked. I realised, suddenly, that I was checking to see if any of them was reading my

latest post. I quickly looked down at my feet, turned the next corner, and sat down at a café table with a beer.

“Excuse me, miss.”

It was the waiter. I told him I hadn’t finished my beer and I’d let him know when I wanted another.

“No, I don’t want to take your order,” he said. “I don’t mean to bother you but didn’t you sing in the Grey Wolf on New Year’s Eve?”

“That’s right,” I answered.

“You were great.”

“Thank you.” Had it really been less than two days?

“You’re from Hungary aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“It seems strange.”

“What seems strange?” I asked.

“You coming here to join in with *our* celebration. Most Hungarians hate us. The ones who live here have bolted themselves into their homes since Christmas in the hope it’ll all go away. And the ones who live in Hungary think now we’re brothers together in the EU the Romanians will come in the night and take their jobs. So why are you here?”

Why are you here? Well, Claire, why were you here?

I was staying at a boutique hotel near the city centre. It was the kind of place where the staff treat you like a friend rather than a customer. That’s great when you arrive lonely off the night plane, desperate for a welcoming face; less so when all you want is to sit in the bar and watch the world. When I got back Nicolai was on reception. He must have been in his fifties. He looked like he’d worked there all his life, and he’d been shrinking into the counter since the day he started. Every bit of him was getting smaller with age except his smile. By the time he retired it would fill the front of his head.

“Good night, Nicolai,” I shouted from the door. It was easier than the puppet games we’d play otherwise: I’d smile at him and he’d smile back and I’d have to look away before it got embarrassing and I’d time how long before I could make eye contact again, all the time watching his fixed smile from my peripheral vision, wondering when he’d say hello. “I’m heading back home tomorrow. Will I see you in the morning?”

“Then it’s goodbye,” he said. “I don’t work tomorrow.”

“Thank you for everything,” I said, shaking his hand and palming him a ten dollar bill.

“You’re welcome,” he said with the same smile. The one that said I was the best customer he’d ever had, the same one he used with everyone he met. “Will you be having room service tonight?” he asked. “Or would you like to settle up now?”

“Can I pay now?” I reached in my purse and handed over my Dad’s credit card.

Nicolai stared at his computer screen, and down at the card; he frowned. Maybe he was going to call my Dad and say *your daughter’s done a runner with your life savings*. It was OK. Dad was happy to let me have a card because I always paid off what I spent from my allowance. But Nicolai wasn’t looking suspiciously at me, just the credit card.

Suddenly I understood. “A friend booked the room for me,” I said.

Nicolai looked at me, and back at the details on the screen. He could see Michael’s name. Through his smile he was itching to ask. Professional courtesy, I guess, and maybe a touch of sympathy, held him back.

I nodded; and returned his smile.

“Of course,” he said.

5

When I took my clothes off I realised I hadn't washed for two days. I'd been collecting filth like the growth rings of a tree. As I showered I felt the warm water prising my pores, holding them open and scraping out the rubble and decay. I was growing weightless as the dirt vanished down the plughole.

The next thing I knew I was lying on the bed rubbing sleep from my eyes. My hair was matted so I gave it a few quick tugs with the brush. I put on some skinny jeans and under my coat I wore a purple jumper that had a polo neck big enough I could reach with my lip to chew it without taking my hands out of my pocket.

*I'm on a mission
to tell every politician
that while they drink champagne and laugh
whole cultures starve
wrestling with us just for air
condemned to history's electric chair
governments will never listen
or search the streets for cultures that go missing
so there's no reason for the talk to carry on
that's the point of the bomb*

I was humming the tune of the song that gave the band its name when a man in a dark suit joined me in the lift. The immaculate way it was tailored made him look English. I was transfixed by the way the light played on his tie, which was made out of a red silk shot through with purple and blue and a hundred different greens and yellows.

His skin was grey like it was coated with fine cement powder. He looked at me through faded blue eyes, without blinking, and water collected in little pools that teetered on the edge of his eyelids. I wanted to tell him it was rude to stare when I realised I wasn't just humming; I was singing the lyrics aloud and he could understand every word.

The door opened in the lobby and I expected him to make a dash for the exit, but he didn't move. He stood between me and the door. I tried a smile. There was a flicker at the corner of his mouth but it was so small it could have been a tic. I didn't want him to think I was staring him out so I tried to look somewhere else, but I only got as far as his hair. He had a sweep of

grey, with streaks of silver so pure it shone like a halo. The style was as exact as his suit. But that wasn't why I couldn't shift my eyes. There was something else about this guy's hair that had me hooked.

"*That's the point of the bomb*, did you say?" he asked.

Here we go. "Sorry," I said quietly.

"Is that what you said? *That's the point of the bomb?* Is it?"

Oh shit, he thinks I'm some kind of psycho. "I'm really sorry," I garbled. "They're just lyrics from a song, that's all."

"I know they're lyrics from a song," he said. "My son wrote them."

The doors pinged to say they were about to close and the guy in the suit looked down to press the button.

I had absolutely no idea what to say. He hadn't a clue, of course, that I knew Michael, but his expression was clear. A mix of exhaustion, desperation, and a pinpoint of hope.

"I'm going for a beer," I said. "Do you want to join me?" He wanted to talk to someone about his son, and I was happy to give up an hour to hear him talk about his daughter. "I'm Sandrine. I was a friend of Michael's."

"Peter," he answered, holding out his hand. A smile loosened his skin. It fell back into its natural folds and jowls, releasing tears from each eye that followed crooked paths through the furrows of his cheeks.

I didn't take his hand. Instead I threaded it through the crook of my elbow and led him towards the bar, where I ordered us two beers and a bowl of olives.

Looking at him in his dark pressed suit, his old-world elegance fading into the neo-classical style of one of the sofas in the bar, I wondered if I should have got him a glass of wine instead, or a port, or sherry. But he seemed happy with his Pilsner, probably because the glass was big enough that holding it gave both his hands something to do.

"So Michael was your son?" I asked. It was only fair to start where he wanted and let the conversation drift to Claire in its own time.

"Yes, Michael was my son," he repeated, the blue of his eyes filling out two shades and growing ten years younger as he said the name. "Did you know him well?"

"We spoke almost every day."

"You live in England, then?"

“No. What I mean is we communicated by computer.” I had no idea how to explain the world of online political activism, of Bulletin Boards and chatrooms.

“I see,” he said, although I couldn’t imagine he did. “Through *Endangered Worlds* I suppose?”

“That’s right.”

“Same here,” he said.

“I’m sorry?”

“That’s how I’ve spoken to him for the last three years. Every night in the chatrooms on *Endangered Worlds*.”

My head was asking a hundred questions but all that came out was: “Why?”

“Because for the first time in nearly forty years I’ve been able to talk to my son.”

All I could do was repeat, “Why?”

“It’s a very personal story,” he said. I’d pushed him too far, and I didn’t blame him for clamming up; but he carried on. “Before I tell you, I should probably introduce myself properly. *Sandrinechanteuse* – I assume from your age and your accent that’s who you are – it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m *Greenhamgal*.”

“Well, *Greenhamgal*,” I said. “I’m delighted to meet you, too.”

“Now we’re properly acquainted let me explain. First, though.” He got up from his chair and took my glass. “I think I should get us another of these.”

I watched him head to the bar. This had none of the feel of a dream; but if it was real then I was talking to someone I’d chatted to for hours about their experiences of all-women camps at the anti-nuclear protests of the mid-80s, someone I’d been tempted more than once to ask about the openness of the lesbian community in England; and that someone was Michael and Claire’s father

He put two beers on the table between us and sat down.

I listened to Peter for an hour, during which I bought us two more beers and said nothing.

He was born in 1942. By 1963, when he left university without a degree, his father had given up hope of his son ever entering a proper profession. In desperation he sent Peter to his uncle, who had returned from the Far East

long after the war with a Chinese bride and samples of her father's silk, and made a fortune selling cloth to fuel the post-rationing fashion explosion.

His uncle soon realised that Peter was a born aesthete, and sent him out with a constantly changing supply of new colours and weaves to sell to the boutiques that kept springing up on and around Chelsea's King's Road.

When he met her, Sylvie was working as a dressmaker at *Bazaar*, Mary Quant's Chelsea shop selling the miniskirts and sharp-cut clothes in big bold prints that made the couturier's name.

"Sylvie loved the feel of my uncle's cloths," Peter said. "It was finer than any silk she'd come across before. Whenever I was passing she would rush out from her workroom in the back to run my samples through her fingers."

But the brash young Quant wasn't interested in the feel of cold, clinging waves of smoothness on the skin. Her eye was on colour and pattern: bold, bright, and primary; a million miles from the delicacies and subtlety of Peter's silks. One day Sylvie was so excited when she heard Peter's voice, so eager to get to him before Quant sent him on his way for wasting her time, that in her rush she tore the dress she'd been working on for a show that evening; Quant dismissed her on the spot.

"She stood there," he said, "on the King's Road, her shoulders hitching themselves in tiny convulsions as she bawled her eyes out. I'd cost her her job, just because I got turned on watching her threading the slick fabric through her fingers, kneading it in her palms, running it over feint blue veins that pulsed under the porcelain skin of her wrists. I felt awful. I'd used her. It had cost me nothing – I never sold anything to *Bazaar* so I didn't care a jot if I lost their business – but it had cost her everything.

"Then I realised what I could do to make it up to her. 'Come back to my place,' I said. She had nowhere to be, after all. 'I beg your pardon,' she replied. 'I live a hundred yards from here,' I said. 'I keep a roll of all our silks in the flat. We can spend the afternoon there. You can see them all, and the ones you like the best you can have. You can make your own dresses from them and start your own shop.'"

She went back to his flat. They spent the afternoon throwing roll after roll of silk on the floor. Together they explored the texture of every cloth. Afternoon became evening and they began to drink wine. As the alcohol dampened their sensitivity they started taking off clothes to expose more and more skin to the fabric. By the time evening had turned to night they were

naked and the layers and contours of their bodies were inseparable from the folds and hollows of the cloth.

“She left just before morning. She was gone before I woke, before I could help her carry her pick of the fabrics, so she left with nothing. My father found out I’d been involved in an altercation in one of London’s most respected boutiques and stormed into my uncle’s office. My uncle managed to convince him to let me stay in the business on the condition that I didn’t set foot near the King’s Road again. A man in his position couldn’t afford that sort of publicity. A man in my uncle’s position rather liked the publicity, so instead of sending me to Harrogate as my father had hoped, he set me up with an office in Paris.

“I never saw Sylvie again. At the end of the 70s my uncle found out through his connections that she had a son, Michael, and a few years later a daughter, Claire. She died in 1974. That was the last I heard of any of them until I saw Michael on the television one day. He was still using Sylvie’s name, Tyler, and there was something about him that made me feel I was looking at an old photo of myself.”

“His hair,” I said, speaking for the first time. “I knew there was something familiar when I saw you in the lift. You and Michael have the same hair.”

He took a sip of beer, looked as if he were thinking for a moment, and laughed.

“That’s it!” he said. “You’re right. He had my hair. Anyway, I could never speak to him as myself, so I became *Greenhamgal*, and you know the rest.”

The image of Sylvie, wrapped in silk, took over my mind. Seeing her, consumed by the touch, the taste, the cold smell and slow, sliding hiss of silk on her skin, I knew that something hypnotic had entered Claire’s genes and I understood, just a little, why I had fallen in love with a woman I’d seen only once, on the other side of a window.

“Here.” Peter’s voice startled me, and I wasn’t sure whether it was from tiredness or too much beer or daydreams of Sylvie. “Take my card. Call me when you want to talk some more.” I took the card. The only thing written on it was a number, in purple on the palest spearmint. The card was thick and handmade, shot through with the finest threads of what could only be silk.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and added: “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“That I couldn’t tell you anything about Claire.”

songs from the other side of the wall

I opened my mouth to ask him something but instead I just smiled.

As soon as I hit my bed I started crying. Caught in the sticky web of the seconds before sleep, I understood exactly the delirium of the New Year celebrations. It wasn't about the innocent glee of the unknown. It was about a hope born of relief: that a part of the past was over; that tomorrow's pain would, even at its worst, be different from yesterday's.

For the first time in my life I wanted to go home.

Songs from the Other Side of the Wall

Arrivals, Ferihegy Airport, Budapest January 3 2007

Blog Zero

Songs from the Other Side of the Wall is no longer about me and politics; from now on (for now at any rate) it's about me and Claire. Rather it's about my attempt to find and preserve her; to right the digital wrong done her by YouTube, I guess. In time it will become my memorial to her, and of my love for her.

So why not start again? Why not scrap "Songs" and create something new? To start with, what would I call it? Until I've finished there's no way of knowing what would be suitable; you can't chop and change a blog, pencil in a first draft and revisit it again and again.

No, this is still "Songs", but it's Blog Zero. When people call something "Zero" they never really mean it's something absolutely new. What they really mean is it's something absolutely different from what went before. "Zero" is that wonderfully ambiguous nothing – that mouth; that genital space – that equally means end and beginning; sucked in and spat out. Ground Zero; Year Zero; even the epidemiologists of AIDS gave Patient Zero his name not for taxonomic reasons but because they wanted someone to blame for bringing down the final curtain on the sexual innocence of the Seventies.

New beginnings are "One", not "Zero". There's a tired feminist point to score there but I'll score it somewhere else, because this isn't the place for ideology any more.

I'm waiting for my connection back home; I have a letter from Claire, and I want to read it looking out of the window at the spot where I saw her staring up at me and fell in love.

6

“Thank God you’re OK,” said my Dad, wrapping me in his arms and holding me for longer than he’d ever done before.

“Yeah, I’m OK.” What else was there to say?

When he finally let me go I could see the relief in his eyes, and I realised his relief wasn’t just that I was safe. It was relief I hadn’t got caught up in the trouble.

It made sense. He had no idea I knew Michael or Claire; he didn’t even know about the singing. As far as he knew I was just going along for the politics.

There was no point getting hurt. I wasn’t like some of the kids at school who were bulimic or self-harmed and hid it from their parents, then cried to their friends that daddy didn’t care, as if fathers were supposed to be psychic about their daughters instead of loving them. If he didn’t understand, it was only because I didn’t tell him.

When I was younger I used to tell Dad about my plans. “I want to go to the Sorbonne when I’m eighteen,” I declared over breakfast one day when I was eleven.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” he said without looking up from his plate of eggs.

“It’s not nonsense. I want to go to Paris and study languages.”

He sighed. “It’s good that you’re ambitious,” he said. “But you can study languages in Budapest. It’s a great university.”

“I don’t want to go to a great university,” I said, pouting as though there was something bitter in my egg. “I want to go to the Sorbonne. I want to learn languages so I can travel where I want to when I’m grown up. But when I’m a student I want to be in Paris so I can sit in cafes on the Left Bank. I’ll drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and write songs about politics for old men with accordions to play in the Place de la Concorde.”

He took a sip of his own coffee, and put his knife and fork down. He leaned over the table and looked at me concerned, like the dentist used to do before he told me I needed a filling. “Szandi,” he said. “Where do you get such ridiculous ideas from?”

“I thought you’d be pleased,” I said.

“Pleased?”

“Pleased,” I confirmed. “You gave me a French name. A French company sells your wine.”

He didn’t answer. He just shook his head, picked up his knife and fork, slowly exhaling air as he moved his shoulders in what could only be called a Gallic shrug.

I tried a few more times but the response was always the same. He never forbade my dreams, just met them with quiet incomprehension. Perhaps he thought I’d grow out of them. Perhaps he thought he was employing some kind of clever reverse psychology. All it did was make me keep my ambitions to myself. Then I discovered *Endangeredworlds.net*, and I realised there was a whole network of people out there with similar dreams.

They all seemed to want what I wanted. They all understood the pull of the Left Bank. Their cultural language was built on Eastern European émigrés like Kundera and Kieslowski, who had ended up in France. There was an energy that contrasted with Dad’s slow, lethargic disillusion with the vineyard’s new owners.

Before long I’d gone from not being able to share things with Dad to not needing to. We led different lives, although they always coincided twice a day at the dinner table, three times at weekends. I never doubted that my Dad loved me or that I loved him back, but love had absolutely no bearing on the physical courses our lives took.

The lingering presence of his arms only confirmed a love that was no less present for being unspoken.

“I’m starving,” he said.

“Me too.”

7

After two large bowls of paprikás and several fistfuls of bread, I kissed Dad on the cheek, washed up our plates and went upstairs. There's a gap between two of the balustrades on the landing from which you can see the top of the kitchen table. For a moment or two I watched Dad's back leaning into the struts of his chair as he read the paper. His arms and shoulders were relaxed, all the tension in his posture gone.

Our house was in a natural hollow on a south-facing slope of one of the Tokaj Foothills. It rarely attracted sunlight at ground-level, and the long, low building cast little shadow on the vines that crawled up the hill behind it. Had a large family lived there, as had been the case for most of Szant Gabor Vineyard's history, the house would have been spacious. For us it was almost unwieldy.

The layout was the traditional wide and shallow of farmhouses and chateaux throughout Europe. It would have made sense to close down the rooms at each extremity, but it suited us to use every last corridor and cupboard.

The western side of the house was effectively mine. I could pad down its stone hallways, over shabby cotton runners, through airy rooms and what was left of the peeling trompe l'oeuil patterns on the walls, and the only company I had was the occasional mouse that had escaped Camus' clutches.

I didn't keep anything in these rooms, not even books, which I crammed into my bedroom two or more deep. There was just a breeze that blew through layers of woollens in winter, and dried the sweat on my naked skin in summer.

The last signs of life on the vines long gone into hiding, so there was little to see from my bedroom window by daylight. At night there was nothing except shifting blue shadows in the moonlight that marked the contours of the hill. But I could still see the exact spot where Claire had stood on the gravel path, on the eighth row of vines from the house.

The envelope was still thick and cold in my hand, tickling the skin of my right thigh as I fidgeted. The shutters were open and my light was on, but there was no-one outside to see me standing naked in the window.

Pulling the chair from my desk, and placing it under the window, I opened the envelope and read.

Dear Sandrine,

Dearest

Sandrine,

If you're reading this it means I've finally listened to what my brother has to say, rather than badgering him endlessly for advice, ignoring it, then coming back with the same questions again, as I've spent my life doing.

There are so many things I want to say, answers to questions I imagine you asking, but if you write back there will be plenty of time for me to answer. And if you don't then saying them now would have been a waste.

So I'll confine myself for now to a few brief facts about my life so you know a little about the woman who is about to tell a stranger that she loves her.

I got up, took a full-length blue cotton dress out of the wardrobe and pulled it over my head before sitting down again. The finest hairs on my skin were so sensitive to the breath of the air that I needed the layer of fabric to act as a damper between them and the night.

My mother, Sylvie, was a seamstress. She earned her keep doing piecework at home for a London fashion house. She had no husband to look after or to be looked after by, so because she was paid by the item she worked long into the night, every night. She often forgot to put me to bed at all. I didn't care because I was captivated by her, and watched in silence, hoping she would forget that I was there so that I could stay up with her. I loved to see the deft flicks of her hands, the shimmy of metal blades, the folding and playing of cloth in the strained electric light.

When I was four, a sliver of petrol-coloured silk slipped through my mother's scissors. It seemed to stop for a moment in mid air, suspended by an invisible thread from the steel. Then it twisted like a silverfish into my outstretched hand. If I had ever sipped from the wine that was never far from my mother's side, I would have realised that the feeling I experienced as I pressed the fabric between my pudgy fingers, lightly then firm then lightly again, was intoxication. For hours I watched her working the cloth. My hands moved in mimicry, and I marvelled in the cold smooth texture on my skin as the light flashed blue and silver and shots of jade on my eyes.

When Motor Neurone Disease put an end to my mother's career, I couldn't understand why she wouldn't allow anything lovely in the house any more. One night she was too weak to shut her bedroom door and I heard her crying. I knew how drab the house had become now that it wasn't filled with fabric, and I assumed my mother was crying for the lost beauty. I opened my bedside drawer and took out my most prized possession, the sliver of petrol-blue silk.

songs from the other side of the wall

I crept into my mother's room, tapped her shoulder, and placed the cloth on her hand, where its ephemeral softness would soothe her as it soothed me whenever I was unable to sleep. My mother stopped crying long enough to look at me, and smiled. The next morning, although I was only five, I used various kitchen stools and a good deal of ingenuity to reach enough cupboards to prepare her breakfast. Full of excitement, I rushed upstairs with the bowl of cereal and the glass of orange juice, and dashed into mother's room.

I was delighted to see the present she had left the previous night had worked. My mother was lying there peacefully, the silk next to her on the pillow. It was only when I went closer, to wake her, that I saw the cloth was resting on a sheet of paper. The writing was larger and even more childishly written than my own: You don't understand. I no longer feel anything.

I studied at Oxford where I got a First, and carried on, starting and almost completing a doctorate.

Then, in 1989, at the age of 24, I had a breakdown, and my life went into a sleep. In 2006 your mother came to work as a lecturer in the department where I worked pushing papers as an administrator, the only work that was mindless enough for me to do in my sleep. She saw something in me, took me under her wing, and I woke up. I carried on where I'd left off, as if my seventeen year snooze had left me not one line, one pound, one pull of gravity older.

I was asleep but, like a reveller who's grown intoxicated and manages only a fitful slumber, there were times in those seventeen years when a sudden, rasping intake of breath woke me and my eyes shot open in a night-terror of confused lucidity.

One such moment came in 1996 when I saw Tracey Emin's installation Everyone I Have Ever Slept With, 1963-1995. It consisted of a tent, on the inside of which the artist had embroidered the names of everyone with whom she had ever shared a bed, from lovers, to her mother, to the dead children in her womb.

After leaving the gallery, I sat in Bar Italia drinking coffee. I decided to embroider my own list on the inside of my mind. As I went through the list of my sleeping partners it struck me that I'd only ever shared my bed with things, and never with a person. I was so horrified that I put my coffee down at once, and fell back into the disturbed sleep of depression.

In October your mother brought me with her to Hungary as her research assistant. We arrived late, after you had gone to bed. Your father gave us a bowl of gulyás and showed us to our rooms. The next morning I woke with the first touch of sun. I hadn't seen the place in the light so I went walking by myself in the vineyard.

For some reason I stopped on the path by the end of the house furthest from where I'd slept. I can remember every detail of the place – I stood next to the eighth vine back from

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the house. I looked up and there you were. You were wearing the thinnest blue dress that flowed around you like water. For the first time in ten years I remembered the list I had sewn inside my skull in Bar Italia, a list that began with a sliver of petrol-blue silk, the colour of your dress. I saw the contours of your body moving by the imprint they left in the cloth, and remembered the silk that had dropped from my mother's scissors, the silk that had comforted me to sleep and caught the last tear my mother shed. I knew the feeling well enough this time to know that I was intoxicated. I was in love.

As long as I live, when I close my eyes it will no longer be to the criss-cross patterns of red and black or pinpoints of white noise and three-quarter faded images, but the cool, bright, ever-changing shimmer of blue; a blue that melts into cotton and silk and has no shape of its own, that takes the form of your flesh, is your skin without thickness or weight, the always moving liquid that I only have to close my eyes to drink.

So, where do we go from here?

Your

Claire.

My mind was blank of anything but uninterpreted images, images of skin and flesh, and silk and cotton; images of myself as Claire had seen me. Which me had she seen in those last seconds? An idealised me, framed by my bedroom window, or the desperate, helpless Sandrine, watching her die in slow motion? I would never know. Never. And never was too big a word for me to bear.

I found myself watching someone else, from beside the vine on the eighth row back, perhaps. I was watching a letter fall from their hand, brushing the hem of a blue cotton dress as it fell.

I was watching someone who looked like me, except that whirring cycles – like helicopter blades – of blankness and tics had taken hold of her face and were distorting it, slowly extracting what was human and leaving only a series of anatomical shapes. It was as though Picasso were working his life sketch into its final, disjointed state. Only he wasn't pulling the girl I saw apart into a portrait. She wasn't becoming one of the Desmoiselles D'Avignon. She was becoming Guernica, the twisted shrapnel of a person, iron and cement and death. The surface of her skin, dripping with sweat, fired off light indiscriminately like so much futile flak, while what was inside invisibly went sour.

songs from the other side of the wall

In the end the noise of the building scream, silent but visible on every inch of her skin as it pushed her into a thousand inhuman shapes from the inside, was just too loud. I had to look away.

Later on I tried to piece together what happened during the last week of the holiday, but I got nowhere. My internet history was blank; my diary was blank; the books on my shelves were still in place. I couldn't even account for the basic functions of life. I'd had my period on Christmas Day so there were no missing tampons. I could have asked Dad, but apart from eating together three times a day our lives never crossed anyway.

When I came to, a week after reading Claire's letter, I was pulling the blue-handled razor over the last hairs in the crook of my belly and flicking them away down the sink. *Is this the first time I've shaved in a week?* I wondered, but I had no way of telling.

That night I scoured my side of the house for any detail from that week, like something from a TV crime show. Once I'd finished in the bedroom, I took my bathroom apart with the precision of a forensic team. I emptied shampoo and shaving gel and make-up and toothpaste to see how much was left. I measured my hair to the nearest millimetre. It was only when I'd finished that I realised I had absolutely nothing to compare the figures to.

The next morning I went downstairs for breakfast as usual, but the wood beneath my feet felt different. It was like walking on rubber; and the stairs seemed to give ever so slightly under my weight. Even the banister and the stone floor of the hall felt, somehow, soft. I had gone somewhere for a week, and I had come back. But I had come back – just the tiniest amount – transparent. I had left a part of me behind. The part that made me solid.

I stood still in hallway for a moment, afraid to go into the kitchen but with no idea why. My mind played tricks on me. Had my world always been like this? Had I always needed to press a little bit harder on it to make a mark? Was this just the first time I'd noticed?

"Good morning, Sandrine," said Dad when I finally opened the kitchen door. I clung to the arms of the chair as I lowered myself into the chair.

"What's that?" I asked, seeing the large padded envelope on the table behind my breakfast.

"No idea," he said. "It came for you by courier yesterday afternoon."

I moved my plate and rattled the envelope. The padding squished under my fingers and disoriented me. Whatever was inside the packing was thin,

like paper. A pamphlet maybe. That wasn't unusual, but I knew from my computer history I hadn't ordered anything.

I wasn't curious enough to open it then; just like I wasn't really feeling hungry for the plate of scrambled egg and tomato mish-mash. It was the first day back at school, and I was already unsettled.

I was sure no one would be talking about anything but the riots. I imagined having to fend off comments and gossip and stupid, insensitive, ignorant questions. *What, you were there? Was it gruesome? Was it cool? Did you see anyone die?*

In fact, no one mentioned a few skirmishes in a country most of them had never seen. Politics, riots, *Endangered Worlds*, were things that didn't register on their horizons. New games consoles, Christmas TV, the latest downloads were as far as conversation got. Maybe an occasional worried remark from someone who hadn't finished their assignment. And the furthest they delved into the backstreets and alleys of the internet was to catch up on each others' Facebook.

It was like I'd stepped off a plane and set foot in a foreign country. Only it was home.

Dad had dinner on the table when I got in, like he always did. It was fish, baked fogas, my favourite. He always cooked fogas on the first day of a new term.

"That was delicious," I said.

"Thank you." He looked surprised. I don't think I'd ever commented before.

I got up from the table and stood behind him. I put an arm on each of his shoulders. As my fingers accustomed themselves to the feel of his sweater they pushed around until their tips met a few inches under his Adam's apple. For the first time I noticed the scent of cellar-mould that hung around him like the low morning mists that cling to the Tokaj Foothills in autumn. There was something ancient about the smell.

He put his hand on my fingers and I almost jumped back as a shiver went through me.

"Goodnight, Dad," I said.

"Goodnight, Szandi."

January 11 2007

It was the first day of classes today but classes seem strangely irrelevant now. I feel like I've woken up and I'm in another world. It looks the same in every way as the world I left behind when I went to Romania. Every sensual reference point is the same and yet the world itself is wholly different.

It's not even a question of different values. Nothing so trite as saying that before I went away I had a future and now Claire's dead I haven't.

No, the difference is this: before I went away I experienced the world. Now I am merely observing it, using it. The world is there for no purpose other than to provide me with information about Claire.

It's been over a week since the last post. That's the longest gap I can remember. All I can say is, I've no idea where the time's gone. But that's another story.

For now, I'll leave it at this. I've read the letter she left me, and she loved me.

I know — from the threads and comments and e-mails that have exploded in my absence — that you're all still out there. So now, while I trawl through everything you've written, I'd like to ask something, please.

Think of a woman standing outside alone, framed by the crest of a hill. It's morning and there's a little dew on the ground that gives the image a limpid, gouache finish. You can't see her face, but then she looks up. You see her eyes. Keep them there, fixed on yours and yours on them. Don't let her look down again, because when she does she will be alone again. Forever.

Dwell on that thought until tomorrow. Because right now I don't have time to.

9

Uploading the post felt like putting an arm's length between me and a lover, or a family. I really didn't want to spend the evening trawling through threads and messages going over and over the events of New Year, as though they weren't already locked in an endless feed somewhere inside my head. I wanted to open my parcel, stare out of the window, and think of Claire. For the first time, I wanted to keep secrets from my readers.

I opened my inbox, created tabs for many of the threads, teasing out the strands as if from silk cocoons. I got impatient with the speed of the connection, tapped the desk, and clicked furiously on *refresh*. It was a chore. The same ten or twenty names cropped up again and again; a few guests had passed by and dropped off a comment or two; but the community that gathered around *Songs* was small, and detached from the rest of the world, like colonies of crabs and tubeworms clustering around a deep sea vent.

All I really wanted to know was whether *Greenhamgal* had been online. I worked through the different chatrooms and forums, checking the status on his profile. Peter had been as silent as me. I felt more connected to him through our absence than to any of the familiar posters. His absence felt like a message of solidarity.

I imagined him sitting in front of a blank computer somewhere, his hands holding a Pilsner rather than a mouse. *You don't have to be part of this madness*, he said. *Let's remember them in our own way. Forget collective memories, reminiscence by committee. Let's think of the things that made them special to us, the things only we know, the things we can't share because no-one else would understand. The importance of those private thoughts will be the thing that we share. When this is over we'll talk about it together, but for now I'll think of Sylvie's skin, indistinguishable from mine in hollows of cold silk.*

"And I'll think of Claire," I whispered to myself. "Looking up at my window from the eighth row back."

I took another look at the first few posts on each thread as I closed down the tabs one by one. There was nothing that wasn't anodyne and predictable; nothing that didn't come from the textbook of political propriety.

...The truth always provokes violence because words can never defeat it.

→[Streetfyer] *it's like that monster. What's it called? The one where every time you cut its head off it grows another two.*

→[Rebel_yell] *Cerberus? Didn't he have three heads?*

→[Sandanieceta] *Cerberus was a dog. You mean Hydra.*

→[Streetfyer] *That's right. This is like Hydra – you can cut off our head but we'll grow back stronger.*

→[Basquebitch] *Yeab. Two heads will grow back, and they'll kill them, then four will grow back and soon we'll be so strong...*

→[Rebel_Yell] *That's deep. It's like something from Derrida – the more you resist me the more I thrive.*

→[SomeMuvvasSon] *Forgive me if I'm wrong but I thought Hydra only grew one head back*

→[Rebel_Yell] *Dunno mate. Let me google it.*

...Sandrine must be disgusted by the media circus...

→[Smallisbeautiful] *That's right. This Radko died on her doorstep and no-one says anything, just cos he's a Serb. A western celeb gets killed and TV goes crazy for it.*

→[Sandanieceta] *Don't the police even think it was the same people who did it?*

→[Rebel_Yell] *That's what I heard.*

→[Smallisbeautiful] *They do fuck all when a Serb's killed but they're so frightened of losing face in front of the Brits they'll round anyone up now.*

It was like hearing a tape of myself the previous year, and in the end I closed the browser in embarrassment. I turned the computer off and left them to interpret my silence however they wanted. The same as they would if I'd had anything to say.

10

I needed to bathe before I opened the parcel. I knew it was ritualistic behaviour, the kind of thing that happens with post-traumatic stress; and I knew it could form habits that took you over until you were trapped inside a shell of endless reiteration. But bathing, and shaving, had always been rituals for me, so I figured it didn't matter.

My bathroom was right at the end of the house. I took off my clothes, turned on the taps, and let steam fill the air. My skin opened like a fern in the rain, and I lowered myself into the roll-top bath.

I picked the cutthroat off the table by the bath and unfolded the blade. For a moment I watched the bare electric light arcing between the water and blue enamel of the handle.

Then I concentrated solely on the blade, and its infinitely thin point of contact with my skin. My hands moved so expertly, one tautening my skin, the other gently drawing the edge of the razor after it, that it would be inconceivable for me to draw blood unless it was by design. The pull of my fingers stretched my tight skin further still until it seemed as if even the whisper of the blade passing over it would cause me to burst out from inside. But however fragile the meniscus I offered to the knife, my touch was always a single degree lighter, and left behind only smooth, undamaged skin.

I was hypnotised by the ease with which I could have nicked the surface. It seemed, as I watched my flesh buck against my fingertips, that one cut, however fine, would let go every drop of weight and pressure inside me.

After I wiped the blade dry, holstered it, and towelled myself down, I padded back to my bedroom. The parcel was still there on my desk. If I hadn't known it was just blood pouring through the pads of my fingers, I would have sworn it moved when I picked it up; that whatever was inside it jumped.

The envelope lacked a postmark, or any information at all about the sender. Couriers usually plastered their packets with marketing, slapped tracking barcodes all over them. Someone had paid top whack for a custom service. Or dressed themselves up as a delivery driver. There was a label – the kind you'd pick up in any stationery store – with my name and address printed in Arial 16 point. The address had “Hungary” as the last line, so maybe it came from abroad. That was it.

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I sat down in the chair facing out of the window and slid my finger under the edge of the flap. It gave easily, creating a wake a millimetre or so in front of my finger without breaking the paper. I prised the mouth apart and looked inside.

I took out several sheets of paper. They'd been ripped from a notebook, and from the shape of the words on the page it looked like it was marked up as a diary. I flicked through them and shook the envelope but there was nothing with them. It didn't matter. I knew they were from Claire.

11

The pages ran in chronological order but they weren't consecutive. Someone had gone through the whole diary and pulled out just what they wanted me to read. As though these pages contained something of special significance to me; as though the others didn't.

I sat in my chair by the window and read. It was too dark to see anything of the unlit land outside but I didn't care. My eyes were busy reading anyway. But I could see the place she stood as clearly as ever.

September 1 2006

8.01pm

I have the feeling that today my life changed forever. The new Lecturer in the Sociology of Hungary arrived this morning. I showed her around and we had coffee, same as I do for every new academic. What's the big deal? I don't know. But SOMETHING about her's the big deal.

It's not like we're going to have a torrid affair or settle down together. It's just...What's the point? I'm never going to get it down the way I want to.

OK. Here's one part of it. I haven't kept a diary since 1989. And suddenly today I walk into Borders, buy a Paperblank, bring it home and start writing. Even though I haven't a clue what I'm going to write.

Dr Jennifer Clay is 57 (that's the advantage of dealing with application forms). Not that you'd know it. She looks like a French style icon with her immaculate black hair and her perfectly-cut grey wool suit. Juliette Binoche or Segolene Royale or one of those women that drip class.

That's not right. It makes it sound like I've got a crush on her, which I haven't.

Later

I know what it is. For the past seventeen years I've been asleep. Now I've woken up.

2 September 2006

1.31pm

I've been thinking about that all morning. Most of the things we wake up in the middle of the night to write down we look at in the morning and wonder what the hell we were doing.

"For the past seventeen years I've been asleep. Now I've woken up."

That's still right.

Somehow or other Jennifer has woken me from a sleep.

Did she wake me with a kiss, my knight in shining armour? No, wrong archetype! I repeat. I haven't got a crush on her.

Does the fact that she's 57, beautiful, and only just beginning her career, the career I always wanted, inspire me? I guess it shows there's always hope, but I didn't rush into Bodley last night and start ordering things up from the stack. I didn't get home and dig out my ninety-nine percent finished thesis. I went to Borders, bought a notebook, and started writing about HER.

It feels more like a scene from a Japanese horror film. Jennifer crossed over from another place to reach me where I was unreachable, and she took me back with her.

September 3rd

She didn't reach in and grab me out of the grey sleep of depression that has had me wrapped up for years, pretending that its straightjacket is actually a safe, warm duvet. She called me. It was her words that pulled me out. The moment they left her lips they took on form, became a cord that slipped inside my linen prison and coiled themselves around me, and as our conversation progressed they wound me slowly in, out of my sleep and back towards her lips.

What were those words? The most ridiculous thing really. "Do you speak..."

...again tomorrow. I told her I'd love to and then I regretted it all the way home. The last thing I want is for her to think I'm coming onto her. I wish I had the confidence just to believe that someone wants to be my friend and get on with things without endlessly picking things apart at the seams. I guess that's what comes from having a dressmaker for a mother. Michael tells me to stop being so ridiculous and get on with my life. Women have friends, he says. That's what they do. They have friends and drink coffee together. If only I could believe it was as simple as that. I might message him again for an extra bit of reassurance.

Tuesday 12th

Wow! I can't stop the buzzing in my head. It could be the coffee I was drinking all afternoon, but it's not just that. Jennifer spent hours asking about my research. She wanted to know about the time I'd spent around Lake Balaton, the work I'd done with the fishermen there. She wanted to know whom I'd interviewed, how I'd interviewed them, how I'd kept reliable records and made sure that nothing had got interpreted out of existence.

songs from the other side of the wall

She was interested. She wasn't just interested, she was actually asking for advice. And she's asked me to bring...

...as her research assistant. She's got research money in her start-up fund to pay for it. She's already asked Professor Cadman about it, twisted his arm into letting me have the time, without taking it out of my leave. I can't believe it! I never thought I'd be going back – and who knows what next!

26th

Had a major panic and called Michael in the middle of the night. I told him I didn't want to build this up only to get disappointed again. I told him I was so sick of disappointment I was thinking of telling Jennifer "thanks but I can't". I don't know that I can bear to have something this exciting taken from me again. Worse still to have the excitement turn to apathy and disappointment and send me back to that awful, numbing sleep. Wouldn't it be better to hover just above the line of wakefulness? Not looking up too far, but never dipping down into that awful...

I took everything in the first time. I could have put the pages down and recited every word back to myself; but I wanted to see them turn in front of my eyes and feel the pad of my finger run down the fuzz of the tear.

My gown fell a few centimetres open as I read and the winter air had settled on my chest. I could hear my heart pounding under the cold patch. The constant pumping of blood made it feel hot, and small beads of sweat formed like the condensation of dew where the temperatures met.

Claire's words had changed. At first they moved with the stutter of an engine that's been left outside on a February night. They coughed and complained and refused to settle into a rhythm. Within a month, the engine was purring, whizzing round faster and faster till it began to over rev. I felt her excitement, her panic, her exhilaration as she wrote.

I finished reading for a third time. My heart was running to keep up, jumping in my throat, missing beats, catching them again, syncopating and improvising its own timing. Then I noticed what was happening. My heart wasn't playing tricks, murmuring, skipping around. The beats had separated out. There were two sets, and though I felt them in the same way they were utterly distinct. One was mine, the hotness in my chest. The other, although I felt it with senses I knew were real, wasn't coming from inside me. It was coming from the darkness outside the window.

 12

That night I slept with an exhaustion that fell off my body like droplets of sweat.

The most that could be said for school was that I showed up at lessons, opened my books, and took notes in the right places. I still went through the mechanics, even though the words bypassed my mind on the way from book to paper. My body knew, although my brain had forgotten, that my future still depended on the year's grades.

After supper, I sat at my desk with the computer on. I'd logged onto *Endangered Worlds* but I was still on the homepage. The forums and the chatrooms, the download areas and discussion boards were the heart of the site, but they were really just an add-on to Michael's vision.

"It's a glorified barter site," he'd told NME when he set up the online charity in 1999, on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Or a car-share pool, or a date joint."

Endangered Worlds existed to preserve minority cultures and languages; patois and music and methods of storytelling; communities and ways of life. It operated as a giant swap board. On one side of the board were communities, individuals, and projects in need of help; on the other were people and organisations with some kind of skill or time or stuff to offer. *Endangered Worlds* matched them up.

Michael's constant energy and vigilance stopped the whole thing becoming yet another middle-class conscience-cleanser, a box-ticking exercise for "ethical" businesses. Sometimes the virtual group's activities went a little off-piste into slightly grey economies; and it didn't always argue semantics when it came to who was a terrorist, and who was a freedom fighter, but for Michael that was a small price to pay to keep the community real.

I made the two clicks that took me to *Songs*. There was a string of comments since yesterday. The tone had changed. The group had picked up on my mood, as though they were a single, conscious being, a lover sensitive to the rhythms and needs of its beloved.

Hang in there, Sandrine...

As long as it takes, Sandrinechantuese...

We're with you all the way...

Others offered me empathy and advice.

[Streetfyter] *When my sister died*, one comment began, and a sub-thread soon sprang to life, pouring compassion Streetfyter's way.

There were threads on the best music to get you through. This ranged from things I might have tried like Nirvana's unplugged cover of *Where Did You Sleep Last Night* and fado laments, to the usual mix of My Chemical Romance and Marilyn Manson I wouldn't have touched. It was a list of my community's past-midnight music, things to listen to when friends were in bed and life was in hiding and you needed something to keep you alive until the world came back.

I hadn't listened to music since New Year, and put my earphones in finding some Nouvelle Vague on my i-Pod. My ears flinched as their cover of *Love Will Tear Us Apart* began, and I had to turn the volume way down, but then I felt good, like a hungry animal emerging from hibernation.

I'd always liked that kind of acoustic, late night bar sound, things with the feel of torch songs. Michael used to tease me about it.

→ *You're trying too hard to prove your gay credentials*, he messaged me once.

→ *Fuck you*

→ *Seriously. It's all very well dipping your toe in the pool of human misery, but there's only so much dirge you can listen to if you're not trying to prove a point*

→ *So what're you saying? I need to change my taste just to show I'm not secretly gagging for a good man?*

→ *Whatever*

→ *Whatever yourself*

→ *Seriously, Sandrine*. He said "seriously" a lot. If I'd been sharper I would have fired back, *Why do you say seriously so much if you're not trying to prove a point?* but I never was sharp enough for IMing with Michael, and now it's too late. *You don't have to show people you bleed to convince them you feel, or to convince yourself. There's only so much blood one person can afford to spill.*

→ *Who are you? My Dad?* I managed. *Do you want to see what I've written today or not?*

→ *Whatever*

There was a final group who all wanted to tell me they were there for me, living it with me.

[Rebel_Yell] We're there too, Sandrine. I know it's not the same but we all lost Michael.

Patronising fuck. How was it the same?

[Bonebreaker] Yeah, we're all here for each other on this. You're not alone, Sandrine. We're here to keep you from falling.

I didn't know whether I was moved or repulsed. I felt nauseous. I half expected to read a comment saying *increase the peace*.

Not alone? "OK, where are you, then?" I shouted at the screen. What were they? Just a collection of mostly-faked profiles, and a few electric signals telling the cells on a screen to change colour. What did I care if people were out there thinking of me? All I wanted was Claire, here, not thinking about me but holding me.

It was unfair and I felt bad for thinking like that. They had been my family, the way they'd been a family to Michael. It made me wonder whether maybe I'd been wrong about him and Claire in Bucharest. Of the pair, maybe she wasn't the one who'd been on her own after all. At least she had my Mum.

I knew I really ought to reply, and I resented it. They were stealing my time, taking it away from something more important.

January 12th

Home

Hey, guys. It'd be impossible to say thank you to everyone separately.

But in the old days I'd have done it. Would they pick up on that? I wasn't sure why I cared.

So let me give you all a group hug, and a poem:

Sometimes there's a price to pay,

you don't have to say, just be,

Just you and me,

without words,

so easy to be heard

Over screams and violence

nothing there but silence.

Admitting my need's not easy,

songs from the other side of the wall

*words defeat me
you're not there
But your presence is borne in the air,
like a kiss
I miss
You. One day I'll repay you
till then I pray you
take this art,
this sign of my heart.*

I typed it straight into the computer in about a minute. I knew they'd love it, even if it was crass and sentimental. I'd deceived them, but for the first time it mattered to me more that they believed I was giving them something sincere than that I was. I had other things to do. I had a phone call to make.

13

“Hello?”

“Peter?”

“Is that Sandrine?”

“Yeah, it’s Sandrine.”

“You sound a half octave higher than you did when we met,” he said.

“People’s voices always sound different on the phone.”

“I thought I might hear from you.”

“I haven’t bumped into you on the Web.”

“I miss him,” said Peter. “I didn’t want to air my grief in public.”

“That’s what I figured,” I said. “I miss Claire. I’ve been online a few times but it feels wrong somehow. I thought you’d understand.”

“I do.”

“Look, there’s something I need to ask you,” I said, flipping his silk card between the fingers of my right hand and holding the phone with my left.

“Ask away,” he said. The tone of his voice told me he knew it was going to be serious.

I didn’t know how to broach the subject but I knew it would go on gnawing at me if I didn’t, so I just launched in.

“A parcel came for me a couple of days ago,” I said. “It contained pages from Claire’s diaries. I know you weren’t her father, but you were Michael’s.” It wasn’t going well.

“I haven’t sent you anything,” he said. It wasn’t the first time I’d felt Peter was talking to someone else, someone just like me but a minute in the future.

As it had done in Bucharest, my mouth opened to form a question, but nothing came out.

“Much to my surprise,” said Peter, “Michael named me in his will, but Claire didn’t. He wanted me to have some of his personal things – clothes, mainly, and some paintings he’d done.”

“Paintings?” I asked. I’d had no idea.

“They’re really quite beautiful,” he said. “Abstracts, mainly, layers of folded colour, playing with the light, enhancing and cancelling itself out.”

“He must have known about your life in fabric.”

“I know.”

Now it was my turn to feel as though I were talking to a different Peter, one just like the Peter on the other end of the phone but wound forward ever so slightly. I could have let him carry on, answered at the correct time, but I felt an overwhelming urge to speak right then.

“I imagine you crying when you got the paintings,” I said. I could almost hear his mouth on the other end of the line, opening to ask a question. Nothing came out. “You thought, *After everything it turns out he’d been looking for me and said nothing, just like I’d been looking for him and said nothing.*”

“I wondered how life would have been different if one of us had said something.”

There was a long silence, maybe ten minutes or more. I never thought he might have hung up, and I knew he didn’t think I had.

“You know,” I said, eventually. “Sometimes no-one has to make the first move. Sometimes a child just knows what their Dad thinks of them, only they don’t say because they feel awkward, or they think that saying it might break the spell. He left you his paintings – he didn’t have to do that.”

He took his own time to answer. I let him take it. Perhaps, I thought, he was trying to work out whether Michael had seen something behind *Greenhamgal* that made him wonder.

“Thank you,” he said, finally. “Sorry to unburden myself on you.”

“It’s easier with strangers,” I said.

“Are we strangers?” he asked. He didn’t sound hurt. He sounded like he wanted to know, like a botanist might want to know what to write under a leaf he’s picked and pressed in the jungle.

I thought about it. He was different from the other people I knew online, and not just because I’d met him. I tried to think how, and started talking, hoping the answer would come.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re strangers in a good way. We know hardly anything about each other.” It seemed to be working. “We only know the stuff that matters to the conversation that we’re having now. None of the rubbish or the detail. That’s not quite right. I know you as *Greenhamgal* and you know me as *Sandrinechantense*, but we know that’s all nonsense. What we don’t have is any of the junk that’s real, the stuff you get when you kick around with someone for a while before you realise you’ve got something to talk about; or when you meet someone, have an intense conversation, and meet them again in the street buying bread or some other crap. It’s like we’ve been through a filter.”

DAN HOLLOWAY

“That’s quite an impressive speech,” he said.

“It didn’t sound ridiculous?”

“No, I know exactly what you mean. Did you call me for a reason?” he added after a pause.

“I can’t remember,” I said. “I wanted to ask about Claire’s diaries. And I wanted not to feel quite so alone. I think that was all.”

“Mission accomplished?” he asked.

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“Call me again sometime.”

“I will,” I said.

14

Over the next few days I stopped wondering where Claire's diaries had come from, and just read. Maybe "read" is the wrong word. I experienced the feel of the paper, the noise it made as I flicked a sheet to the back of the pile, the scent I imagined coming from the ink.

I knew it couldn't carry on for ever. Eventually the few inanimate pages would take the place of Claire; the ritual of reading them would take the place of life. One day I would give up anything except sitting by the window feeling paper that was fast wearing thin.

In the end I didn't have to make the decision when to pull myself out of the chair and carry on.

I was struggling with *Songs* again, trying to think of something new to say about Claire. There was nothing new to say. *Still stroking the pages*. That was hardly going to win a Pulitzer.

A pop-up announced *Greg's waiting for you in The Shack*.

The Shack was one of the on-topic chatrooms on *Endangered Worlds*, where Michael and I tried out lyrics together.

Wanna join him? the screen asked, offering me a choice of *Yeab, Go jump!* and *later*.

Why not? I thought, clicking through.

Michael had always been the ideas man, the lyricist. Janie, the lead guitarist, wrote the hooks and melodies. Steve was the wild one who got the band into the papers but not always in the right way, and tried to inject various world music influences into their sound. Greg was the one who held them all together. For all their radical politics they fitted the stereotypes of the four piece combo perfectly.

It was just us in *The Shack*.

→*Hey*

→*Hey, Sandrine*

→*What's new?*

I felt bad I had to ask. I hadn't spoken to the band since Michael died.

→*Favour :p*

→*Go on, I guess I owe you*

→*How come?*

→*For going hikikomori the last two weeks*

DAN HOLLOWAY

→*Stop trying to show off with your fancy words*

→*OK. Incommunicado.*

→*Whatever. Anyway, we're thinking about a memorial concert. In London.*

Interested?

→*In coming?*

→*In playing. I thought you could do the set you did at the Grey Wolf. Michael loved it.*

→*He did?*

→*He did.*

Suddenly I wanted him to go. I was smiling to myself and it felt wrong.

→*It's OK to be happy. I won't think you're the devil.*

But that was only part of it. I'd been distracted. For a moment I'd allowed my old life to hook me back in. What was I afraid of? That if I went, I'd forget Claire? The choice itself threatened to become an obsession.

→*Send me the details*

I typed, and logged straight off before I could change my mind.

15

When I got back from school the next day I knew what was in the package that was waiting for me. I took it to my room and positioned my chair at the window. I held the envelope as loosely as possible to see if it would respond to me, but there was no pulse, nothing, just the light, dead weight of paper. Maybe it was Claire's rebuke for putting her brother ahead of her.

I opened the envelope and slid my hand inside to retrieve the loose papers. There were four pages torn from what I guessed was the same notebook as before. This time they were consecutive. Again there was no note.

I heard myself let out a sigh when I read the date at the top of the first page.

October 3rd

When I met Jen she brought a part of me back to life that had been dead for too many years. Today I met her daughter, and what happened was something entirely new. Not a hybrid, not a recollection, not a reawakening. This is creatio ex nihilo.

I've been trying to think of the first time I felt like this; to go back through the fog of the past seventeen years and come out the other side in my student days, and back further into my childhood.

There were moments – the morning I got the invitation to Erin Baxter's wedding; the night we finished our masters exams and I ended up in Erin's room after drinking snakebite all night and she said "I love you" and put her hand inside my skirt and found skin then lace and said "Get those off now, you bitch" and I did, and a few minutes later I said "I love you" back; the last day of summer term in the lower sixth when Lizzie Foulds walked home with me and hung around at the end of our road looking furtive, and said "I think my parents want to move to Cornwall" and bit her lip because she was too nervous to say she'd miss me, and we both had our first kiss and I could taste her blood all evening and wouldn't eat or drink or clean my teeth in case I couldn't taste it any more; the Sunday afternoon I sat in my room waiting for Michael to get back from the park because I wanted to tell him I was gay.

But all those moments were about me. They were boundaries I crossed and the people there to cross them with me could have been anyone. So by the time I got back to the house this evening I'd realised, the first time I felt like this was today.

DAN HOLLOWAY

I was so excited when I woke up I went walking in the grounds. In the light this place is even bigger than it was when we got here last night. There's a small garden facing north, block-paved over where Marko keeps his car, but the rest of the grounds are just vines. I walked up to the crest of the small hill where I gather the best vines are, the ones that get the lion's share of the sun and the mist – if there was any difference in the grapes it was lost on a layman like me – I just drink the stuff. I came back down and walked around the house. As I got to the end (God this place is enormous – it must have taken me a few minutes to get from front to back) I was aware of something moving.

I stopped and looked up at the window, and there she was. She wasn't doing anything, just standing, in a thin blue dress that clung to her like it was charged with static. If I'd got there a few minutes earlier – if the house hadn't been so huge, if I hadn't been so desperate to see what was so special about the grapes at the top of the hill – maybe I'd have caught her naked and the sight would have made me quiver and I'd still be thinking about her tonight. But not like this. With that single, simple blue dress on her she was so much more than just flesh and skin and heat and moisture.

Before today everything was about me. Now it's all about her.

She'd finished right at the end of the page; as if she'd gauged what she wrote to fit it exactly. I looked at the pages again, saw the way her writing changed as she wrote, grew larger, more careless, the pen pressed harder into the page, the final full stop shooting off the edge.

I let the pages drop to the floor, and my hand hung down by my side. I looked out into the darkness and wanted more than anything for her to be looking up at me again.

My fingers brushed my stockings, then found skin, and lace. I said "I love you" but minutes passed and I heard nothing back; I put my hands over my face and cried.

16

I woke in the night with Claire's question in my head. *When was the first time I felt like this?* I knew I wouldn't get back to sleep so I put on a big jumper and some leggings and went to the kitchen.

The kitchen is a vast room at the centre of the house with a thick stone floor and a ceiling that's too high to hang pans from. There's nothing fitted, just a hotchpotch of oak cupboards and dressers round the walls and a wooden door that heads into the pantry. In the centre there's a slab of a table that's big enough for twelve but outside harvest season it only ever seated me and Dad.

I opened the pantry door to get some eggs. There was clack on the stone behind me and an insistent squawk.

"Hey, Camus," I said. "You can't sleep either?"

He continued squawking.

"I know," I said. "All the mice are asleep for winter."

I took three eggs out of the basket and balanced a pat of butter on top of them, unhooked a Pick salami from the meat peg, and made sure to close the door.

"Here we go," I said, sharpening a knife on Dad's giant whetstone and slicing a few wafers of sausage. "A banquet for two insomniacs bereft by winter."

I put some butter into a warm pan and whisked the eggs up while it melted, resisting at first, then sagging a little, rolling to the edge where it slowly sighed into liquid. Camus looked at me. He knew he was onto a sure thing so he'd gone quiet.

"Come on," I said as I slipped the omelette onto a plate and tidied the salami shavings into a little pile. "Pull up a seat for our banquet." I tapped my finger on the side and he leapt up.

"What do you reckon?" I asked, but by now he had his head in the salami, using a paw to scoop each shaving to his mouth as though he'd developed manners now he had company. "When was the first time I felt like this?"

"Like what?" I answered myself.

"In love? Lustful? Lonely? Despondent and fucked up?" I suggested, but none of them was right.

“You’re no use are you?” I said scrubbing the fur between his ears. “All you need is your next meal.”

I imagined Claire sitting in her room waiting for Michael to come home. She was probably doing something as dumb as me talking to Camus. It was something else she and I had in common: making Michael our confidante.

→*Really?* he’d messaged when I told him I was gay.

→*What do you mean really?* I was furious. I think I’d expected him to say *How brave of you* or *I’m so glad you’ve found yourself* and send me a virtual hug but *really?* was all he could manage.

→*Yeab, really? You’re not just saying it because it sounds cool?*

→*Fuck off*

→*Is that fuck off you insensitive shit, or fuck off I’m having a tantrum?*

I was absolutely furious but whatever I said would stoke the fire. I thought about logging off but that would have made him think he was right. It was the only time he’d made me feel like a little girl and not an equal.

→*You’re meant to be my friend* I typed eventually.

→*That’s why I’m asking. No one else will.*

In the end I bit my lip and typed.

→*Really.*

He never mentioned it again. Nor did I.

“OK, Camus,” I said. “I’ll do the dishes, you clean the side. Deal?”

He looked at me expectantly, his nose twitching at my fingers where I hadn’t washed my hands after slicing salami.

I dried the frying pan and put it back on the dresser, lifted Camus up under his front legs with my left hand, and wiped the side down with my right. He hissed as the disinfectant atomised, wriggled himself loose, and sat like a sentry at the pantry door.

“You’re right,” I said. “There are some things you need to leave till it gets light. Night time’s for small talk and food.”

I waited till Dad was in the cellars before I went to speak to him next morning. I never spent much time there and I wanted him to know I’d made the effort.

He took me there when I was young, told me about the unique properties of cellar mould in the Tokaj Foothills; explained the spores of *botrytis* only came to infect the grapes in years with late autumn mists, that without this *noble rot* the legendary, life-giving wines would be acrid and pale; showed me

how to recork the bottles and reseal the wax every five years to keep the wine vigorous; explained how wine had tasted different under the communists, like burnt toffee instead of caramelised fruit. I wasn't interested. I listened to what he said about the wine and asked him questions about the people who drank it instead. I wanted to know about the chateau in Pessac-Leognan that put up the money to export it to clients in the hungry new economies of the Far East, with their insatiable taste for luxury.

"Eight hundred years ago Marco Polo brought silk for western skin. Now Marko Kertész sends silk for eastern palates," he said.

"Tell me where," I'd reply.

"Japan, China. Let me show you how we collect Eszencia from the puttunysos."

"Tell me where else," I demanded.

"Singapore, Hong Kong," he'd say quickly. "Now, come and look at these bottles from 1972. It was the greatest vintage of the occupation but look how impure the colour is." He tilted one of the long-necked bottles up to the brilliant white light that seemed so out of place in the middle of all the history.

"Where in China?" I asked, or "Tell me about Hong Kong," but when he finally gave up explaining his traditions and answered me it was always the same. He shrugged his shoulders and told me, "How should I know? The chateau takes care of all that."

The cellars were cut into the side of the hill. "They're not a part of the house," Dad would say. "They're a part of the hill. Tokaji Aszu is a part of the Tokaji-Hegyelja."

Dad was in the damp, phlegmy heart of the cellar. I stood and watched him, doused in the slick wet light that played off walls of rock. It was where he kept the estate's oldest wines before he selected bottles by hand to be sent to the world's biggest auction houses and most exclusive restaurants. Our ancestors had made these wines long before communism came to Hungary; many of them were from a time before Karl Marx was born.

There was a ledge cut into the hill for every year, and inside every one, rows of bottles craned their necks through curtains of silky mould like skulls watching over the living from the walls of an ossuary. They were all watching my Dad as he picked bottles at random, cradled them in his hands and lifted them to his face. He spluttered as spindles of mould fell and stuck in his throat, then he turned a bottle under the light. He held it still for a moment

and I felt like I was watching myself, holding the pages from Claire's diary and feeling her presence through them. I wondered if he felt his ancestors through the bottles, through the mould and the rock. I'd never felt them once.

"Hey, Dad," I called when he opened his eyes.

"Szandi!"

I wandered over to him. I was cold from standing still. I put one hand inside my jeans and tucked the other round his arm, pushing myself against his thick jumper.

"1811," he said, pointing to the bottle he'd just replaced.

"Year of the Comet," I fired back at him.

"The greatest vintage in history." He put his arm round my shoulder. He smelled of wet wool. "What is it, Szandi?" he asked.

"I need to go away," I said. "Just for a few days. Over Easter. Is that OK?"

"Of course it's OK," he said. "Why wouldn't it be?" I could feel his arm a little firmer on me, like he was trying to reassure me, only I knew he was the one who needed the reassurance.

"It's to do with New Year."

"Want to tell me about it?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Shall we go inside and get a drink?"

"No," I said. "I'd like to stay here."

"OK," he said, letting me go and fetching a pair of low wooden stools for us to sit on.

"You know the people who were killed in Bucharest?" I said. There was no point skirting around things. "The rock star and his sister."

"I heard about it on the news."

"I knew him," I said, only ready to tell so much at one time. "Michael. We used to talk about music."

"I'm sorry."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry too."

"Are you OK?"

There's a question. "Yeah, I'm OK."

There was a brief silence. I heard the shuffle of my feet echo in the high, damp air.

songs from the other side of the wall

“There’s a memorial concert for him,” I said eventually. “Just a small do in a bar. His band asked me to play.”

“Then of course you should go,” he said.

“It’s in London.”

Dad sighed. He looked around him, and he looked at me. He started to say something but closed his mouth and bowed his head instead. “You know,” he said. “We both have things we’re not ready to say to each other. But if there’s anything you want to say to your mother you should.”

“Thanks.”

Saturday 20 January

We read so much about the erotic gaze that I wonder whether we ever consider what we really mean. Is it the way we cast our eye through keyholes at something that can never know we're there? Is it a veil we throw over something or someone with our eyes to stop the rest of the world getting in and seeing what we see? Or is it a look that we fall so in love with that we altogether forget that the object of our gaze is there for us to touch all along?

The morning we met, the morning I looked out of my window and saw her, Claire was looking straight back. And she fell as much in love with what she saw as I'd done. From then until she died we'd each carried a picture of the other with us that we grew to love more every day. I wonder, if she'd been there when I came down to breakfast – if Mum had been a little bit less organised with her notebook; if she'd bothered with make-up – or if we'd passed in the corridor before she'd left, would we have hurried past each other, too frightened to talk in case we made the ink run on the perfect pictures we carried in our head?

If we had met; if the lines of our erotic images had blurred and the blemishes pushed their way to the surface, would that have made them less perfect or more so? What is it that makes me so in love with her? I don't think I'm ready to answer that yet.

What was it that made her so in love with me? That's what I want to know. Was it the flawlessness of the Sandrine she imagined every time she closed her eyes, Sandrine in a blue dress who'd been made perfect by the thousand memories she evoked, memories that polished her like so many grains of sand rounding a pebble on the sea bed? Or was it the Sandrine she saw through the dress, through the skin and flesh, the moisture and the heat, sullen Sandrine with all her impatience and imperfection?

What did you see, Claire, when you closed your eyes each night? What was the object of your erotic gaze? Who was the Sandrine you saw through the crowds the moment before you never saw anything again?

17

It felt good that I'd talked to Dad. I was relaxed enough for the first time in weeks to spend some time responding to comments, answering e-mails, following various threads in the forums, and chatting. Not about Claire but about Michael, and about politics. The things I used to talk about before New Year. Occasionally someone would push a bit too far and I'd excuse myself and move to another thread. But I felt like I was hanging out with friends again.

I was due to leave for England at the start of April, more than two months away, but the time passed in a pocket of calm. I went back to posting regularly on *Songs*. January 20th's became the template for a succession of philosophical speculations about love and the erotic. Writing them was easy, something I could do in a few minutes from things I picked up from the reading list the Sorbonne had sent.

I got more support from my readers as the posts became less personal. The more I kept them at arm's length, the more they seemed to connect with me.

I wonder sometimes, I wrote at the end of February, whether to Claire I was something exotic. Did I represent the places she had withdrawn from? Was I the life that had waited for her down the other road, the one she hadn't taken? How many of us, when we make a choice, get to see what lies down both paths? Perhaps, newly arrived in a land she had turned her back on seventeen years before, I was her rewind button, I was a possibility she hadn't yet shunned. I wonder, if she had finished her study and lived half her life in Hungary in the intervening years; if the smell and the taste and the feel of our country had become commonplace to her, what would she have seen when she looked up at me for the vineyard? Just another girl wearing the same fashion as all her classmates? Who knows? That's the rewind button I can't press.

→[Brunibaby] *I'm sure she loved you, Sandrine. We all do.*

→[Streetfytter] *What's so special about you, Sandrine, is the way you wear your heart on your sleeve.*

→[Rebel_yell] *Yeah, you're not afraid to admit your vulnerability, and face up to your issues.*

→[Smallisbeautiful] *No, what's special about Sandrine is that she asks the questions that matter.*

→[Carlostbejackal] *You're so right Small. She makes us look at who we are and what we do. There's not many who do that.*

→[Sandanieceta] *how about Sartre for starters?*

→[Streetfyter] *or Houellebecq*

→[Sandanieceta] *Houellebecq's a misogynist racist bastard*

→[Streetfyter] *says the western press*

→[Rebel_yell] *says anyone who's ever read anything of his*

→[Streetfyter] *but the point is he asks the questions. We wouldn't know what racism was if someone didn't provoke the discussion*

→[Sandanieceta] *And that'd be a bad thing?*

The thread hit the point of turbulence and collapsed into a brawl between supporters of Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Houellebecq for thirty or forty posts.

For two months there were no more parcels, but I didn't have the same hunger for any scrap of knowledge now I was going to England. I could go to Oxford and ask the people who'd known her in person. I'd ask Mum.

Any free time I had during the day I spent in art class working on my portfolio. My big project was a video installation that scrolled through black and white photos alternating the atrocities in Kosovo and still life arrangements of shop mannequins I'd photoshopped into the window displays of boutiques from London and Milan. Over the top I sang unaccompanied folk songs from Armenia and Bulgaria. It was a companion piece to the songs I'd written about Radko, but now the technique interested me more than the politics.

At weekends I did enough study to keep my head above water, but I spent more time with Dad. I asked him anything and everything about the vineyard. "What's the oldest wine in the cellar?" for example.

"1689," he fired back.

"How many bottles?"

"Just one. It's the first vintage we ever produced," he said, as though he'd made the wine himself.

"So no one's ever going to drink it?"

"Not in my lifetime," he said. "In yours, well, I guess that's up to you."

"Would it still be any good?" I added quickly, moving the conversation back to safe ground.

“Of course,” he said. “If you store it well and recork it regularly, a good Tokaji will never go over the hill. Not even after hundreds of years.”

“Do you ever sell the oldest ones?” I asked.

“Not the really old ones, no. Sometimes the 1864, very occasionally the 1811. Nothing older than that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He scratched his broad forehead as though he were trying to open up one of the cracks that years of sun had cut into his skin. “For years no-one was really interested in anything except the legendary vintages. Now people *are* interested it doesn’t feel right. They belong here, inside the hill. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” I said. “Does the chateau put pressure on you to sell them?”

“It wouldn’t matter if they did,” he said.

“So what’ll happen to them? They’ll stay here forever like a scrapbook?”

“Who knows?” he said. “Maybe they’ll still be here when people have gone altogether, and rats will knock them off the shelves and have a giant rodent drinking party.” He chuckled. Then he wiped his brow on his cuff and sighed. “Or maybe it’ll just seep back into the soil it came from.”

18

Dad was meeting the chateau's marketing director in France the day before my flight.

"You can come with me," he said. "We're meeting in Bordeaux. You could try some French wines, and eat Arcachon oysters."

"I need to practice if that's OK," I said. "But thank you." Dad and France were still two separate parts of my life, but I kissed him on the cheek for asking.

"Of course," he said and changed the subject at once.

The night before he left I was barely on my landing when the scent of dinner coiled itself around me. The sweet smell of seared meat, perfumed with salt and wearing jasmine and caramel gloves, pulled me down the stairs and sat me at the table.

"What's that I can smell?" I asked.

"Foie gras d'oise en poêle," he said in an earthy French accent.

"Wow!"

"This is something we should have done a long time ago." He carried a huge wooden board over from the pantry. Camus, tail in the air and nose pointing up like a fish in a stargazer pie, followed the board like he was on a string. Dad put the wood down and the sharp tang of ten or twelve blue cheeses joined the party. Soon the table was set with an assortment of fresh and caramelised fruit, a bowl of lightly foaming cream speckled with vanilla seeds, and a plate with two generous rounds of foie gras, one, raw, a pale orange pink, the other, cooked, a glistening ochre. In the middle of the table, like some kind of New Age artwork or musical instrument, was a sea of crystal glasses.

Dad leaned against the sink with his hands behind his back.

"OK, Szandi," he said. "Do you know what these are?"

"Delicious?" I suggested. He laughed, a warm laugh that filled his face.

"They're the best accompaniments for Tokaji." He put on a serious, instructive face, and deep lines pushed his skin down over his eyebrows to make him look even more commanding. He paused, then he smiled again. He pulled his arm from behind his back with a slow-motion flourish.

"And this," he said. "Is the finest Tokaji to accompany them." He brought the bottle over to the table and laid it down between us. The label

was brown and faded but the Szant Gabor name was still clear, as was the year, 1811. “I wondered if we should have something older, but I thought we’d have quality instead of age.”

“Wow!” I said again, before adding: “Why?”

“Because we never have and we should have done,” he said, in a voice that was plain and straightforward and said there was no other agenda behind it at all.

“Do you think my palate’s ready?” I asked. “It’d be a terrible waste if it wasn’t.”

“No-one’s palate is ever ready,” he replied. “It’s unlike anything you’ll ever taste. If you waited for the day when you’d take a sip and you could put your finger on every part of the flavour and the smell then you’d never drink it. And what would be the point of that?”

“I see what you mean.”

He pulled a corkscrew out of his pocket and whipped it round the wax, which peeled away in one piece. Carefully but without any airs or ritual, he put the screw into the cork. “The advantage of recorking it every few years,” he said, “is you don’t have to worry about the damn thing falling to bits on you.”

The metal was fully in. He beckoned me over and I stood behind him. He put a hand behind my head and pushed gently until my face was thirty centimetres or so from the bottle. “You have to catch the nose as it’s uncorked,” he said. “The concentration and complexity only improves with age, but we must drink it straight away. It’s very delicate. I’ve heard of flowers in the desert that flower for one day every hundred years. I’ve no idea what they’re called but they should call them Tokaji flowers.”

I can’t describe what I smelled when he opened the bottle. It was deeper than a smell. To be honest I couldn’t say whether or not my nose took anything in. But *something* happened. As soon as Dad took the cork out of the bottle I breathed in 200 years of our family’s history. It felt as though, to make room for it inside me, the wine took a small piece of me in return.

“Well?” he said, as I swilled foie gras and wine, feeling the acid, the sugar, and the fat dissolving in my mouth.

Dad watched me intently as I finished my mouthful. He’d balled his right hand into a fist, jammed it into his left hand and rested his chin on top of them. I took my time. He smiled his approval.

I thought for a moment after I'd finished, cutting off a sliver of Roquefort as I did. "It's surprising," I said.

"Good," he replied.

"I feel, I don't know, different."

Dad smiled. "Do you know the legends?" he asked.

"You told me when I was a kid."

"Many times," he said, wiping a thick cotton napkin round his mouth to remove the few drops of fat that glistened on his stubble. He rested his chin back on his hands. He looked at me like he was trying to work out whether I'd changed in front of his eyes.

"It has magical, restorative properties," I said. "Or so say the Tsars of Russia."

"And look what happened to them!"

We finished the meal in silence. I picked up the dishes and took them to the sink. "Thanks, Dad," I said, taking his plate.

"Thank you, Szandi."

"Have a good time in France."

"And you do your best in England. I must come and hear you sing one day."

"That would be good," I said.

19

Mum knew I was coming. I'd found it surprisingly easy to make contact. Her e-mail address was on Oxford University's "contact search" directory, and I typed out a message with the subject "meeting?":

I'm going to be in England on March x-y. We should probably meet. Is that OK? Sandrine.

Nothing elaborate; no mention of her visit the previous autumn; no questions about why she left without even saying hello. Maybe she'd tell me when we met, and maybe I'd listen if she did. Once I'd coloured in the details of Claire's life.

Mum's reply was equally formal.

Of course. I live in Flat 6B, Gloucester Green. There's a map atIf I'm not in just call the office.

It felt like we were both skating on a fragile surface, unsure how deep the freezing water underneath went.

Once I'd landed I took the train into London, and the tube across town to Paddington. There were regular coaches direct from Gatwick to Oxford but Mum's flat was next door to the coach station and I didn't want her to know I'd got there until I was ready, so I decided to arrive by train.

From what the guidebooks said, tourists fantasise about coming to Oxford by train. They've all read Thomas Hardy's description of the Dreaming Spire, and ride with their noses pinned to the glass, waiting for the magic of the place to take their breath away. In a way I was just like them. As soon as the train left Reading Station, I put the pages of Claire's diary back in my bag and pressed my cheek to the window, waiting for my first glimpse of the place where she'd lived. Cold air came from nowhere and batted my fringe against the glass. I imagined it was Claire's ghost reaching out her fingers to welcome me home.

I stepped out of the station, down a few stone steps, and onto the forecourt pavement. It wasn't like the area around most of the railway stations I knew. The rows of cabs were there, their drivers milling with their

hands in their pockets and cigarettes glued into their mouths. Past some traffic lights I could see bus stands. But the place was new, and still clean, like someone had left on the plastic sheet it came wrapped in till the last minute.

I sat on the bottom step and took out the map I'd printed from the University website. Over the top of the paper I could see a bronze statue of a bull. It stood guard over a vast limestone building the map told me was the Saïd Business School. There was still a hint of frost in the air and I was sure I could see little clouds of ice puffing from his nostrils. Satisfied that my destination was in easy walking distance, I put the map away, rested my elbows on my thighs, planted my chin on the backs of my hands, and stared at the bull. He was thick around the shoulders and the rump, sturdy and reassuring. I could have sworn he had turned his head slightly towards me when I wasn't looking.

He had only the finest sprinkling of green on his coat, like the velvety dusting of lichen on new-grown antlers. "So you're new here too, huh?" I said.

"That's right," I was sure I heard him say.

I looked at the statue, and the vast, blank building behind it, masking everything else from view, as though Oxford University wasn't there at all; as though all the city had to show for itself was a giant, pristine business college.

"What's it like, standing there with that great building in the way, never seeing anything of the city?"

"To be honest," the bull said back to me, "I hadn't really noticed I was standing next to a wall, but now you come to mention it, I suppose I am. Can't say I feel like I've missed much, though. It's amazing what you see when you stare at a station all day."

"Yeah?"

"Indeed. Oxford's been here for over 700 years, and it's always been the same, from what I hear. People dash past in less than a minute sometimes. All of them different."

"From what you hear?"

"I hear quite a lot as it happens. People huddle together next to me to get out of the rain and carry on their conversations as though no one's listening."

"Well there isn't really anyone listening, is there?" I said.

“Now that you mention it I suppose there isn’t.” The voice was low, the melancholy pitch of a horn coming through the fog.

“So do you ever wonder?” I asked.

“Wonder?”

“What it’s like, this great old city you’re part of that’s famous the world over.”

“Never.”

How strange, I thought.

“You know what,” I said. “I’ll get some postcards, and when I leave I’ll come by and show you what Oxford’s like.”

There was a silence. I looked, and the statue seemed, without my noticing, to have moved back to its original position, staring ahead. Maybe the air had warmed up a little in the few minutes I’d been in town, but there was no sign of mist by its nostrils.

Ah well, I thought, crossing the bus and taxi lanes, and putting my hand on the statue’s cold, metallic neck, before heading off into town.

The Department of Balkan Studies was a twenty minute walk from the railway station. I didn’t go through the centre of town, and although I passed a couple of impressive buildings I got the impression the University was something that went on elsewhere.

Eventually I came to a tall, red brick building in one of several streets in the city’s north that all seemed to be filled with similar tall, red brick buildings. Outside was a small blue plaque declaring in gold writing “University of Oxford, Department of Balkan Studies”. I crossed the road and sat on a wall outside another of these identikit houses, took out a carton of juice, and pulled up my hood so I’d look like just another student if Mum happened to look out of her window.

Claire had worked with Mum in the Department of Hungarian Studies. How Hungary got to be part of the Balkans I don’t know, but according to the University’s website, it took its place alongside Romania, Bulgaria, and the former Yugoslav nations. Each seemed to have a small coterie of academics and a part-time administrator. I guess it’s a suitably fragmented and chaotic set-up for that part of the world.

I sat on the wall, taking occasional sips of juice, and wondered whether, when she’d got back from Hungary, Claire spent much time staring over the road, hoping she might look out one day and see me. I felt a knot tie itself in my throat and force its way up into the back of my mouth. I couldn’t

swallow any more juice and tipped the rest of the carton onto the pavement, screwing the cardboard into a tiny ball. I squeezed and squeezed until there was nothing left, neither liquid nor air.

Eventually I went to check into my hotel, which was a five minute walk further north. It consisted of several red-brick houses knocked into one, and as I climbed the stairs to my room, it was easy to imagine Claire walking in front of me, going about her everyday routine.

The room had a green and red patterned carpet, art nouveau wallpaper that was gold and a matching green, and brass fittings. There was a desk, and a couple of shelves made out of a few chunky bits of wood someone had covered with a thick coat of beige paint. I put my clothes onto the shelves and got out my laptop. I could feel the keyboard pulling me like it had a magnet in it. I stared at it for several minutes before I snapped it shut, took off the clothes I'd been wearing since I left Tokaj, poured myself a hot bath, and shaved.

20

By the time I'd finished bathing it was late afternoon and I was starving. I ordered a club sandwich from room service. It was cold like it had been waiting in the fridge all day, and drowning in mayonnaise that left me feeling slightly ill; but by the time I'd soaked up the excess oil sloshing round my stomach with two complimentary oat biscuits, I began to feel human again.

I'd often wondered how I'd feel before I finally met Mum. I'd imagined myself rehearsing speeches and questions to make sure I got things right. Now it came to it, all I did was look at the map and try to work out a route through this unfamiliar city so I wouldn't run into her before I got to her flat. In the end events always overtake us, and anything we do to pretend otherwise is just superstition. I stuffed the map into my pocket along with my room key and a purse with a couple of twenty pound notes in it, and headed into town.

I felt like a jaguar creeping up on its prey in the jungle. Gloucester Green was a forest of the metal skeletons of market stalls. The occasional roll of green- and white-striped canvas lay on the ground like fallen vegetation. Beneath the flats a thin tree-line of shops surrounded the square – a strange mix of noodle bars and fashion shops, dirty fast food joints and an amusement arcade. Dotted amongst them were big half-moon steps leading up to the apartment blocks. The steps doubled as benches for groups of school kids hanging out smoking Marlboro Lights, and dropouts nursing the ends of their roll-ups.

It felt eerily quiet for a place in the middle of a city, like somewhere life had gone on year after year then one day everyone just stopped showing up. It was just like the place I waited for the bus back home from Miskolc.

I rested against one of the spindly metal stalls for a moment, waiting for my breathing to settle and adrenalin to stop gouting through my body. After a few minutes I realised if I waited until I was calm I'd still be there in the morning. I made my way to the steps at one corner of the square. They were on one side of a walkway through to the coach bays. On the other side, a couple of policemen in high visibility vests sipped coffees at a stainless steel table.

I pressed the button labelled *Dr J Clay* and waited.

“Hello,” came a voice out of the black dots of the brushed metal speakerphone. It caught me off guard. I’d never heard Mum speak and it took me a moment to realise the voice was hers.

“Hi.” I paused, uncertain what came next.

“Is that Sandrine?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on up. I’m on the second floor.”

There was a buzz, and I pulled open the dark wood and security glass door. The stairwell was concrete and chipped terrazzo. It reeked of old body fluids and the sweet, acrid smell of stale weed. I stuffed my hands in my pockets rather than put them on the scabbed black plastic that covered the banister.

I got to the second floor, opened the glass and metal door into a small, yellow-lit lobby, and checked which of the doors was 6B. It swung in just as I got there.

“Sandrine.” I heard the voice before I noticed the person holding the door open for me.

When I did see her, I realised I’d never carried a picture of her in my head. It was always just her. So what I saw didn’t come as a shock. I didn’t think *you’re not supposed to look like that*, as I might have done watching a film based on a favourite book. Nor did I think *I thought you’d look more like me*.

She looked, for want of a better word, French. She was short and slender without being thin, more like the kind of tautness you got from regular exercise and good food. Her grey wool suit was cut to show every detail of her body at its best. She had a black, styled bob with a slight wave running through it, and porcelain features that looked like they’d be ugly if you moved any detail even the smallest distance. No one thing about her face was perfect in any way, in fact, but the overall effect of her features was to create an effortless and infectious beauty. And at the same time it was heartbreaking, like a song that’s too perfect. She was so beautiful I wanted to scream or cry or lose consciousness altogether because it was just too much.

“Hi, Mum,” I said.

“I’ve decanted some armagnac,” she said, waving me through. “I hope that’s OK. I figured you probably have all the wine you want at home.”

“Thanks.”

Within a couple of steps we were in what I guessed was her main room. She poured two glasses from a plain decanter standing on a round wooden

table. The room didn't seem to fit with the run down flats, or with the quality and effortless style of her clothes. It didn't really fit with anything. Table aside there was nothing there except for a flat screen TV with a DVD player, and a couple of chairs with wooden legs and upholstery that was old but had obviously been good in its time. I wondered how long she'd actually lived there, or if she'd hired some by-the-day place so she didn't have to show me her real home.

"I don't keep many things," she said, as if she sensed what I was thinking. She handed me a glass and sat on one of the chairs.

"No books."

"I keep them at the office. Same with the computer"

"No music," I added.

"No."

I took a swig of the armagnac. I'd never tasted it before, but from what Dad had taught me about the importance of balance and complexity in Tokaji, I could tell it was a good one.

How was this going to work?

"What would you like me to tell you?" she asked.

Everything, I thought, *I'd like you to tell me everything.*

"Tell me about your work," I said. That was a good place to start. It was personal to her, and it would lead naturally to Claire.

"I'm a sociologist."

"Yeah, I know. I saw your page on the department's website. What about the stuff you actually do? *The Changing Face of the Seasonal Work Force in Hungary's Vineyards*. What do you actually do on a project like that?"

"Speak to people, mainly," she said.

"People like my Dad?"

"Yes. People like your Dad."

"So that's why you came in the autumn, because that's when the grape pickers were around?"

"Yes."

"Did you speak to them?"

"I was going to," she said. She took a big gulp, swilled the rest of the liquid around the glass, and put it down on the table.

"What did you want to find out?"

"All sorts of things. What kind of people work in the vineyards now? Are they the same kind of people who used to do the work?"

“They’re not,” I said. “Not at Szant Gabor, anyway.”

“That’s what I figured. I wanted to know why they’re different.”

“You mean do we hire cheap Slovaks now we’re all in the EU; and how many Kosovo Albanians do we squirrel away?”

“That sort of thing. And I want to find out what the locals think about the new workers.”

I nodded. It made sense. She wanted to find out how many of us went around beating the likes of Radko to death. For some reason I felt protective, like I wanted to stop her prying into our business. Then I realised that by *our* business I meant Dad’s business, Tokaj’s business. “What did you find out?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Because you left so soon?”

“Yes.” She looked both uncomfortable, like this was a question she didn’t want to answer, and resigned, because it was the one she’d expected me to ask. I wondered if I’d been too direct. I didn’t want her to clam up. No, that wasn’t it. Not the whole of it. I didn’t want to make things worse than they already were for her.

“What was Claire’s role?”

She picked up her glass again, but didn’t drink. She held it in two hands under her chin. The pose was almost girlish. The reflected light gave her skin a rich glow that made her look like something from an old photo. “Claire?”

“Yeah.”

“She was my research assistant.”

“So she’d what? Find people who’d talk to you, write up your notes and stuff?”

“Not really.” She clearly didn’t want to elaborate.

But I did want her to, so I waited.

“I wanted her there so I could bounce ideas off her,” she said, eventually.

“She was an administrator, wasn’t she?”

“She was, but she used to be a specialist in Hungarian Studies.”

“Really?”

“She was a real star in her day from what I can tell. Top of her year in Finals; distinction in her Masters.”

“So what went wrong?”

“She had a breakdown. Just before she was due to hand in her doctoral thesis.”

Wow!

“What happened? I mean, if it’s not too personal.”

“I guess not,” said Mum. “After all, she’s dead now; and there’s really not much to tell. She called her brother one night to say she thought she might be having some problems with her work. Couldn’t make head or tale of her conclusion. It was November 9th, 1989, she told me. The day the Berlin Wall came down. The story was on the news and everyone was saying *everything’s different now*. So she called Michael, her brother, to say if everything was different where did that leave her thesis, and she hung up. He went straight over to her place because she was so brilliant and confident he knew something was wrong for her to be speaking like this. He found her full of vodka and pills. Apparently she hadn’t written a word of her thesis for the past two months. When the Wall came down it tipped her over the edge.”

“But she was all right? I mean, eventually.”

“Not really. After that she never looked at her work again. All she did was filing and filling out forms, and watching other people do the job she’d always wanted. She rang Michael every night for the rest of her life, and every night he waited for her call. They were both terrified she’d do the same thing all over again but neither of them knew how to stop it. That’s not really being all right, is it?”

“No.” Although the words weren’t going in properly my body knew it wanted to cry. I downed the rest of my armagnac to stop it. “But when you came to Hungary,” I said. “She wasn’t doing filing and filling out forms then, was she?”

“No, she wasn’t. I’m sorry,” said Mum, emptying her glass as well. “Do you mind if we finish this conversation another time? I’d like to hear about you.” She smiled and poured us both another drink.

Me? What on earth did that mean? I thought of all the layers of “me”. Then I wondered, if I peeled the layers back, maybe I’d get to the last one and find all that was left was air.

“What do you want to know?” I asked.

Mum leaned back in the chair, crossed her legs and put her hands under her chin as though searching for the answer to a question she’d never considered before. The wool of her black suit was so fine and light that it moved with her and drifted effortlessly downwards, so relaxed it had to remind itself gravity was there. I could see the definition of the muscles in

her thighs through the fabric. Was this was the way that Peter's silk had moulded itself to his and Sylvie's bodies?

"What do you want to do with your life?" she asked, eventually.

I don't think anyone had asked me that before. Plenty of people had assumed, or caught me up in their own aspirations. No one had ever asked.

I liked that she'd asked what I wanted to *do*, not what I wanted to *be*. What was the point of *being* anything? Being something meant you lay there on life's shore, waiting for a wave to break over you. *Being* meant you did nothing, not even lying with your eyes open watching for the water to come. I never had a clue what I wanted to *be*; I'd always known what I'd wanted to *do*. I wanted to follow Mum through the Wall. But at that moment I really didn't know whether that was true any more.

"I'm still young," I said. "It's too early to say." For the first time in my life it was true, and knowing that terrified me.

21

I put my empty glass down on the table and said I had to leave. Mum didn't object.

I headed straight back to the hotel. As I waited for the lift, I looked over at the receptionist, who was wearing an immaculate navy waistcoat, with a white blouse buttoned up to her neck, the collar stiff and straight. Her walnut hair was tied in a bun that didn't let a single strand out of place. She looked perfect. But her gaze was fixed on her computer screen. She hadn't even noticed me come in. I thought of Nicolai in Bucharest. He would have raised his head for a moment, said "Good evening, Miss Kertész", and thrown me a brief smile that made me feel like the centre of the world. The lift pinged, and as soon as the doors closed behind me I finally began to cry.

In my room I sat on the bed and continued to cry. Without taking my bag off my shoulder, I curled my head into my knees and sobbed until my skin grew warm and wet. I've no idea how long I cried, but when I stopped, I lifted my head up and struggled to adjust to my surroundings, as though someone had moved me while my eyes were closed.

Looking back now, I can remember the tiniest details of what I did that night, but, like watching a movie without a soundtrack, not a single thought accompanies them.

I sat at the desk, opened up the laptop, booted up, logged on, and clicked through to *Endangeredworlds*.

I scrolled through the chatrooms, and after a few minutes I found a quiet room. The only person hanging out was Janie. She was listening to Nouvelle Vague's covers of punk classics and waiting for someone to show up.

→*Hey* I typed.

The screen stayed blank. After a minute or so the sidebar showed the track she was listening to had finished. The *now playing for Janie* window closed, and the cursor sprang to life.

→*Hey Sandrine.*

→*Got time to talk?*

→*I guess. About the concert?*

→*No. That OK?*

→*That's good. To be honest I'm getting sick of it. People mean well, but come on, most of them never even chatted with Michael here, let alone met him.*

→I met him

→Yeah, I know. So what's on your mind?

→That's just it. Nothing's on my mind.

→So what do you want to talk about?

→About that. My mind. It's as though it's just disappeared.

→Can't have gone altogether, can it? You know who I am.

→I know. It's hard to explain. I **know** everything I've always known. But I feel like I know them the same way I know what I read in a book, or find on Wikipedia.

→Wikipedia? You're fucked. Seriously, it's just shock. You feel like you're in a bubble. We all feel that.

→No, that's not it. I know what that kind of detachment's like. It's like you're an eagle watching life going on on the ground below, like life's your prey and you can see it, scurrying about down there, but no matter how hard you try to swoop down and catch it, there's always a thermal that's too strong and pushes you back up. I don't know if it makes sense, but the best way I can describe the difference is that when I've felt shock, or grief, or that kind of all-consuming depression, I've felt like I've been reading about my life in a book, but there's always been an "I" that's done the reading. Now, it's like I **am** the book. The pages are turning but there's no author, no reader, no meaning, no **content** at all. Just the words on a page.

→That's fucked up. So what do you want me to do about it?

→I don't **want** anything. That's just it. I'm typing away but there's absolutely no thought going into my words at all. Sure the words make sense. I mean, they're grammatically correct, the syntax is fine. They make as much sense as anything Sandrine would ever say. But they **mean** absolutely nothing. Perhaps I'm chatting with you because they might mean something to **you**. And maybe at the memorial you can explain it to me and then it'll mean something to me as well.

→Jesus H, Sandrine. You'd be better off laying this on Steve. He might have the first clue what you're going on about.

→Steve's not around though.

→No, he and Greg are getting pissed up somewhere in Brixton. You won't hear anything from them for a day or so. It's their way of coping.

→So you're it.

→Fucking great.

→Maybe you don't have to understand. Maybe you just have to remember and tell me about it later. Maybe not even that. Maybe it's good enough just to be on screen with me and print this out at the end of the night.

songs from the other side of the wall

→If you haven't got a printer, why don't you just e-mail yourself? Or put something on a stick?

→No. The actual conversation's important. If there's not someone else on another screen somewhere then I may miss something.

→I thought your mind was a blank. What difference does it make if I'm here or not? You're either going to piss the whole lot out or you're not.

→I can't explain it. The easiest way to put is this: there's a serious possibility that I'm not real, that this conversation isn't actually happening at all. But there's also a big chance that it's the key to everything for me, that when I come to, when there's an "I" reading the book once again, I'll really need these pages. But if they don't exist they'll be lost forever. And that means Sandrine might be lost as well. So you have to be there, and you have to print this out. You're the one who can make it real.

→Look, Sandrine. I don't have the first fucking clue what you're on about, but are you in some kind of trouble?

→I don't know. I haven't been raped. I've not ODD. I've only had a couple of brandies to drink all day.

→So you've just slipped. Look, I've had a drink, I can't drive over there, but if you get in a taxi and give them my address I'll cover the fare.

→Thanks, but I need to stay here, on my own.

→Whatever.

→This must sound really strange, but even though I can't say how, it is important. This has happened to me before, and it scared the hell out of me. It's almost certain that what's happening now is the same as what happened then.

→So what did happen?

→I don't know.

→Great.

→Sorry, that wasn't very clear. It was earlier this year. I woke up one day and I was in the bath. I'd lost a whole week. I've got no idea what happened to me. I must have done things. I must have played around online, eaten, messed the sheets up in my room, but there was absolutely no trace of any of it. It's like someone followed me around with a broom, sweeping everything up the moment I did it. I didn't leave a single footprint on the world. Take my hair. My legs, my armpits, my private parts were absolutely smooth. Not a hair poking out from its follicle. But my cream was as full as it had been the week before – like someone has slipped in from another world, shaved me, then slipped out again.

→You shave your pubes?

→It's a kind of ritual.

→So you want me to make a printout of our chat?

DAN HOLLOWAY

→Yes.

→*Fine. What do you want to chat about, Sandrine?*

→*I don't know. Even the book's gone empty now. The one there's no "I" to read. It's like the pages are still turning, but there's nothing written on them. That must mean whatever it was that was important for us to say, we've already said it.*

→*Jesus fuck, you're a strange one. Good night, then. I'll see you in a couple of days.*

→*You'll print this out?*

→*Yeab, I'll print it out.*

→*Thanks*

→*And I meant it about the cab. Just show up, right?*

→*Right. Thanks.*

22

When I woke in the morning, my body was heavy, like I was being sucked into the bedclothes. I remembered arriving at Mum's the previous night. I remembered thinking how beautiful she was when she opened the door. I remembered talking, then suddenly running out of things to say. After that, nothing.

I took a shower, hoping the water would unclog the pores of my memory, but as I rubbed myself dry the hole where the previous night had been remained the same. I started up the computer in case there was a clue there. Nothing. The history was empty. I checked my profile on *Endangeredworlds*, and the machine's settings, but according to everything I could find I hadn't been near the computer.

After nibbling on a croissant and some orange juice, I decided to go back to see Mum and not throw more time after what I'd already lost.

I'd put on a pair of skinny jeans and my bra when a phone went. For a moment I ignored it – it wasn't my mobile ringtone, and back in Hungary there was no landline in hearing distance of my room. After a while, I realised it was the hotel phone on the bedside table.

I hadn't told anyone where I was. Which could only mean one thing. Whoever was at the other end of the line had something to do with last night.

"Hello," I said, picking up the phone and curling myself into the pillows and padded headboard.

"Good morning, Sandrine. I do hope you don't mind me calling."

"Peter? How did you know I was here?"

"That doesn't matter. But let's face it, the truth is you need someone to talk to right now. And it's equally true that I need the same. I'm too old to go into consternation about *how* we know, or to negotiate over what we can offer each other. So. Shall we talk?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to work out how the hell he knew where I was.

"You're playing at the concert?" he asked.

"Yes." I figured there was no point asking how he got his information so I let myself go with it. "Are you coming?"

"No. But I'll make sure to watch on YouTube."

"The band would love you to be there, if you told them who you were"

“It’s not because of them.”

“What then?”

“You, Sandrine. I thought you’d understand.”

I did understand. “Strangers. In the best kind of way.”

“That’s right. I wonder if we’ll ever meet again,” he said. “In fact sometimes I think I would go so far as saying that we *mustn’t* ever meet again.”

“It would spoil everything,” I agreed. “You know, I was thinking, just after you said *Good morning*, if I’d had to choose one person in the world to speak to it would be you. But it only works because we don’t really know any of the stupid little bits of each other’s lives. I mean, I don’t know what blood pressure pills you’re on – not that you’re necessarily ill, but I guess that’s the point – I don’t know any of that stuff. And you don’t know about me. Just the stuff I write on *Songs*.”

“All we know about each other are the words we use to talk. No agendas, no preconceptions, no expectations.”

“Which means it could all be rubbish. Just like *Greenhamgal* and *Sandrinechantouse* are rubbish.”

“It could be gibberish or it could be completely true. We’d know the answer if we met up, if we started to fill in those insignificant gaps. But as long as we never do, as long as we only ever talk like this, we’ll never know, and what we say *could* still be the absolute truth. How many *real* relationships are like that?”

“That’s like Schrödinger’s cat,” I said. “The cat could be alive as long as you don’t look in the box and see that it’s dead.”

“Or a letter you never open.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about this stuff a lot the last few months. About eyes. The way when someone’s asleep with their head in the pillow, and you can only see one eye, and it’s flickering away in a dream like a bass guitar string, how do you know if the other eye’s dreaming or not? What does the unseen eye do? When you look it’s not unseen.”

“That’s exactly the sort of thing I’d imagine you think about.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

There was a silence on the end of the phone. A thick silence I could almost reach down the line and get my hand around.

“I never saw anyone else sleep,” he said, eventually.

There was another silence. This time I could feel it reaching down the line for me. The silence reached inside me, squeezing tightly like it was looking for my deepest, most closely guarded tears. Then I realised.

“You mean Michael, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You never spoke to him all that time because if you did you’d know something for sure. You’d break the spell.”

“Yes.”

“What? What was it you didn’t want to know?”

“I have no idea,” he said.

“Is that something else you don’t want to know?”

“No. It’s what I want to know more than anything. Whether it has something to do with Michael, or something to do with me. Or Sylvie.”

“And you think you’ll find out by talking to me.”

“Yes,” he said. “I do. But not this time. I think we’ve both done all the talking we can for today. To each other, at least.”

There was a click on the other end of the line. He’d hung up, but the silence had escaped and crawled down the line. It tightened its grip inside me, and this time it found those deep, guarded tears it was looking for.

23

“Hello, Sandrine,” said Mum, holding the door open. “I put coffee on.”

“Thanks. I can smell it.”

I sat in the same chair I had the previous night, sucking in the smell of coffee, feeling it slowly infuse me with warmth and colour. Mum returned with two big, matching black mugs, put one into my hands, and sat down. She was wearing black woollen trousers and a ribbed grey polo-neck. She had no make-up, but she looked immaculate.

“How was your first night in Oxford?”

“OK.”

“It’s all right.” She smiled. The smile changed the shape and texture of her face completely. Her skin became soft and folded, her bones receded and gave way to gentle curves. Her eyes, creased between her lids, seemed to squeeze little points of gold from inside her that burst on the chestnut surface of her irises. “I’m not going to ask you where you’re staying. It’s none of my business.”

“The Blenheim Lodge,” I said.

“That’s just up the road from my office.”

“I know. I stopped by to have a look.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

“So,” she said, as though it was time to get down to business.

“So,” I echoed.

“Do you have any more questions for me?”

More questions. I’d never, in seventeen years, had *any* questions for her. Not one. Not so much as *why?* That kind of question always seemed to be about the past – *Why did you leave? What were you thinking? Did you ever think about me?* What did any of those really matter? I’d only ever wanted to know how and when I was going to follow her. It had never been *about* her. How screwed up was that?

I put my mug down and said the first thing that came into my head.

“Tell me about you and Dad.”

“Your father?”

“Please.”

She inhaled deeply. “OK,” she said. “I think I’d better go and get us another coffee first.”

She got out of her chair and went to take my mug. I stood and picked it up. “I’ve got it.”

“Thanks.”

I followed her into the kitchen. It was small and tidy, but the formica was peeling off the sideboard and some of the cupboard doors were no longer flush. A couple of them had gold handles in place of chrome, and the oven and fridge didn’t match. I leaned on the sideboard while she put some more ground kona beans into a slim black DeLonghi machine. I watched her spooning it out. Her fingers were short but slim, neat rather than elegant. The skin was still taut, if a little thin over the backs of her hands. Nothing like the hands of anyone I knew in Tokaj.

She glanced up and caught me looking. I thought I saw a spark of recognition, and then it was gone.

“OK,” she said as we sat back down cradling our refilled mugs, the pyrex jug still three-quarters full on the table. We were settled in for the long haul. I’d never imagined this moment, when we sat down and talked, about the past. Now we came to it, it made perfect sense.

I was filling in gaps, joining together chunks that floated like islands, sewing them up so they were all part of a single life. My memories suddenly seemed desperately fragile, like petals drifting apart on the surface of a pond.

“What is it you want to know about me and your father?”

“Everything.”

“Everything? That begins a long time before we met. And it ends a long time after we parted.”

Of course it did. Before and after were the only things that made what she had to say anything more than a fairytale.

“I can listen,” I said. “If you’re OK to tell.”

She pulled her legs up onto the chair and tucked her feet underneath her. Putting her coffee down, she looked at her nails and picked at each one in turn, as though that’s where she kept her memories, a few years tucked away under each.

“I’m OK to tell,” she said.

“I only ever wanted two things from life,” she began. “I wanted to study, and I wanted to be a mother.”

She was born and raised in Cambridge, and she grew up surrounded by books. “My first memory of the outside world was the invasion of Hungary in 1956. I was six.”

Her father taught Latin, her mother French. Languages were a part of her life from the beginning, and with a certain inevitability, she decided to make her name studying them. She was able to pick up any language she tried with little or no effort, and the plan progressed smoothly as she passed through puberty. To help her expand beyond French, Latin, and her mother’s basic Italian, her father arranged for one of his students, the son of Jewish musicians who had come to England shortly before the War, to teach her Polish. He thought it would be good for her to learn an eastern European language.

Bertie – his parents had been determined to give him a good, inconspicuous English name to provide the best possible start in their new country – had inherited every bit of the creative energy and brilliance of both his parents.

“Once I’d mastered enough of the basics, our lessons were conversational. Bertie told me about music. About Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Janacek. Exotic names whose music seemed equally exotic to my western ears. It was new, and it was exciting, and I learned about all of it in Polish, this wonderful, exotic, musical language. Listening to him speak.” She closed her eyes for a moment, before opening them and taking a swig of coffee, blowing on the surface to hide her reddened face behind the steam. “The way his words fell on me, they may as well have been his hands. My skin felt like his fingers were crawling over it. When I got pregnant I’d just turned fifteen. After my father found out, Bertie vanished from my life forever. That night I heard my father from my room. ‘Fucking kike; fucking Jewish animal. We should have sent them back. Sent them back to die where they belonged, every dirty fucking one of them.’ I never spoke to him again.”

Her father had taken her out of school, kept her hidden until the baby was born, and then arranged for it to “disappear”, only to reappear as a cousin, one she was never allowed to see. A year later, the baby died. It had

swallowed some mescaline her uncle left lying on the carpet because he was too busy understanding the doors of consciousness to tidy up his drugs. A year after that, her father was dead too. "He had a heart attack before I was old enough and well enough to kill him."

Her life went into suspension. But all the time her body kept on ageing. Before she knew it she was thirty, working in a newsagent's in Cambridge, selling papers to academics rather than writing academic papers of her own. She was neither studying, nor a mother. "They were dreams that belonged to a different person, from a different time."

"And then, one morning, it was as though I'd woken up to discover my early adult life had passed me by. But my dreams were still possible. Possible but almost infinitely hard.

"I decided to tackle them one at a time. I packed my things, withdrew the money I'd saved in the years I'd been too depressed to spend anything beyond rent, food and heating, changed it for travellers' cheques, applied for a passport, and got together enough clothes to fill a backpack. I knew I could still speak French, and I had no reason to suppose I'd lost the ability to pick up new languages. I booked a ticket on a ferry to Cherbourg, and gave myself ten years, until I was forty, to find a man who would give me a child."

She started in the west of France. It was the height of the Cold War. Reagan was about to come to power in America, and Russia was in the process of annexing Afghanistan. Karol Wojtyła was the new Pope, but the shipyards in his native Poland still ran quietly, as far as the outside world could see at any rate, on Communist time.

Mum figured the best place to find a man was in the cities, where people come and go all the time, where bars and cafes simmer with frustrated flesh. But it didn't take her long to realise that with all the coming and going, no one stayed long enough to notice the woman behind the bar, or the girl who mopped the floors. And she soon learned that in the cities the delicate balancing act of food, shelter and casual wages was just too precarious, too subject to a sudden influx of people from a war zone somewhere who'd sleep ten to a room and work for half the wage.

"I spent three years living in the grey, constantly changing soup of migrant workers that slopped through Europe's cities. One month I'd bob to the surface in Madrid, the next in Zurich, and two months later in Torino, but I was always part of the same sad stew of human desperation. Whatever you did, there was always someone prepared to put up with a little more

degradation than you. And if they ever started to carve themselves the dignity of a clean uniform, or the benefit of food on the job, or to gain enough experience to do the job to a better standard and demand a better wage, the next wave of human flotsam would come in and say ‘we don’t need food,’ ‘we’re happy to work in our own clothes,’ ‘we don’t do the job so well, but we do it cheaper.’ A single woman looking for a place of her own where she can get to know a man could never compete with these girls who lived four to a floor and still managed to produce offspring out of nowhere. So I always ended up with my head pushed back under, waiting to see where the undertow took me next.”

The experience sparked her interest in transient migrant workforces. “I suppose in a way that time actually prepared me very well to fulfil one part of my dream. I just didn’t know which.”

After three years she gave up on the cities, tired of being buffeted by the tide. She soon learned that the best chance to find work, and the best place to meet people, was the country. Farms always had something they needed doing in return for a place on the floor of a barn; guest houses and mountain lodges always had a small room somewhere they’d let you have if you kept the place clean out of season whilst the owners took off for the sun. And far from being isolated from human company, she soon discovered the hidden networks of life that teemed in these places. The country was like a run-down room in a squat, empty as long as the lights were on, but the moment it went dark the cockroaches and the rats and the moths emerged from nowhere to take their places in a fully-formed ecosystem.

“I formed some of the best relationships of my life while I wandered from farm to farm. I never stayed more than three or four months, doing seasonal work until one morning I’d wake up, and there would be something in the sky or the wind, imperceptible to me, that meant the work was done, and I’d head off to find the next place and a different kind of work. Who I was, where I came from, was absolutely unimportant. The people I met were doing exactly the same as me. Sometimes they’d tell me about themselves, but most of the time there was an absolute immediacy to what we did and what we talked about. If we were hungry we’d share food; if we were cold we’d share clothes; if we needed company we made love; if we needed conversation we’d talk about things that were completely abstract – music, cinema, art, books, things we could have picked up anywhere. For a few

months we'd have this glue that made us inseparable. Then we'd go our separate ways as though there had never been anything between us at all."

After a couple of years she began to learn exactly where to go with each season – what kind of farms grew what kind of vegetables and when they needed picking through the late spring and summer. She'd turn up in the mountains in late autumn, head down to the valleys in spring. And all the time she was moving slowly east.

She lived in a tiny bubble of seasons and casual all and nothing relationships, whilst all around her Europe was changing inexorably. People in the East were pressing their eyes up to the glass in wonder at the wild excesses of capitalism they saw on TV. The stereotypes of debauchery, gluttony, and greed their leaders fed them provoked envy instead of revulsion.

"But I didn't get pregnant. As each autumn turned to winter, I could feel my body crumbling. I wasn't yet forty but my periods were starting to become irregular. Each time I was late I wondered, not if I was pregnant at last, but if my ovaries had dried up for good. And when my period finally came I cried with a mix of disappointment and hope."

She spent the winter of 1987 to 1988 in Austria, picking the grapes that had frozen on the vines for eiswein, and planting grain come spring. As the days drew out and the sun rose in the sky, she finally realised that she'd gone as far as she could go in western Europe. The border between Austria and Hungary, two countries married together for so much of their history, was the most porous there was between East and West. One day in early May she slipped from one world into the other. She spent the summer in the communities around Lake Balaton, and in early October 1988 she packed, yet again, and headed for Tokaj.

"Heading away from the water, feeling the early morning cold creeping under my clothes and into my bones, I confronted the possibility for the first time that I would go home empty. And I didn't have a home to return to.

"Maybe I'd just keep travelling east for the rest of my life. One day I would finally come to the sea, and I'd spend the rest of my days looking out at the waves breaking up the beach until I found the courage, or the sheer lack of inertia, to walk out into the undertow.

"I arrived in Tokaj in the early evening, and asked around for the nearest vineyard that might have work. I found a guy sitting outside the local garage drinking beer, who told me Szant Gabor would be a good place to start. It

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was only a few kilometres outside town. He offered to take me, but he looked like he'd been drinking all day so I told him I'd walk. It took me an hour, and by then it was dark.”

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“Do you have any work?” I asked, when your father opened the door. My Hungarian was already good enough to get by perfectly well. “I can help with the harvest. And I can cook.”

“Work?” he said. He seemed to be talking to himself. “I’ll have to see, but I do have some warm gulyas and there’s plenty of rooms to choose from if you need a bed. The pickers won’t be here for a week.”

I ate three bowls of goulash and several wedges of bread without stopping. Then he took me upstairs, and showed me to an enormous room. I curled into the sheets, went straight to sleep, and slept through until morning.

When I woke up the next day, the room was already flooded with light, and I went over to the window to take a look where I’d ended up. I was used to the sight of vines marching up the sides of gently rolling hills, and there was really very little different about what I saw that morning. There was just enough, though – in the textures of the hillside, in the damp scent of the air – to make it completely different from anywhere I’d ever been. A curtain of mist curled round the bases of the plants. Behind it, spores discreetly infected the grapes with noble rot. In weeks the disease would concentrate their sweetness until it burst from underneath their blistered skins, giving birth to another year’s fabulous wines.

I took off my clothes, opened the window, and leaned out to breathe it in through my skin. The cold slipped inside me, and I was happy to let it come.

After a few minutes I closed the window, put my clothes back on, opened my door, and followed the smell of bread to the kitchen.

“Still hungry?” your father asked when he saw me.

“Starving.”

“Good. There’s hot bread and eggs on the way. In the meanwhile there’s a plate of salami in the pantry, and some cold fogas.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m Jenny.”

“Marko.”

“Thanks, Marko,” I said, helping myself to six or seven slices of sweet paprika salami. “So, do you live here all by yourself?”

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“My father’s here too. He never leaves the room next to mine, so to all intents and purposes I have the house to myself. Not that I use it. I spend my days in the cellars or in my office. The half where you’re sleeping stays empty eleven months of the year. In a week the pickers will be here, and they’ll sleep four or five to a room so I hope you don’t mind a crowd. By Christmas they’ll all be gone, and you’ll have the wing to yourself again. If you want to stay until Christmas, of course.”

I don’t know what had happened that morning, but between the view from the window and the way your father spoke to me, I felt like I’d woken up from a journey on a sleeper train to find I’d pulled in to my home station.

I won’t go into the details of what happened next. That’s, well, it’s something that belongs locked away somewhere safe. But when the workers arrived for harvest, I moved into your father’s half of the house. Before they left I’d moved into his room, and when harvest was over and a rickety minibus came to take the last of them back to Miskolc, your father and I waved them goodbye from the front door.

A few days before Christmas, we buried your grandfather. The whole village turned out to say goodbye. I held your father’s arm all through the day, as he wore a smile for everyone who told him how hard it would be to fill Zoltan’s shoes. I had become part of their community.

“It’s not hard,” he said to me afterwards, as we sat in the cellar staring at the bottles from Zoltan’s years in charge of Szant Gabor. “But it is a tragedy.”

I didn’t understand what he meant. I knew little about the wine other than the mechanics I’d picked up during the harvest.

“1988 will be the best vintage in living memory. The years to come will be better still. I will be known as the man who made Szant Gabor great again, after the terrible years presided over by Zoltan Kertész. And it has nothing to do with me.”

“Everyone knows how hard your father worked,” I said, naively.

“No!” He stood, picked up a bottle from 1979, and held it at arm’s length like it was a rotting piece of meat. “He was the great man! Him! Not me! But look what they did to him! Look!”

He smashed the bottle on the floor with all the force he had, and collapsed onto the damp stone, running his hand through the glass and the liquid.

“Look!” he sobbed, holding a bloody hand out. “Smell it! It smells like shit! It smells like shit because the communists forced him to make shit.”

He cried. And when he’d finished crying, we sat in the cellar all night, shivering in the cold, damp, musty air, and he explained everything to me about the mythology of Tokaji, about how the communists had destroyed it, about how the Party’s control was loosening. It would soon be at an end, and through an accident of history he’d find himself presiding over the next Golden Age of Tokaji.

We emerged as the sky began to turn steely grey, and watched the sun come up in silence. As orange gave way to yellow, your father looked out over the vines and said, so softly he probably thought I couldn’t hear:

“Next year our world will change beyond recognition. People will let us make the wine our ancestors made. People will come from France and Germany and Spain, and they’ll give Hungarians the money to make great Hungarian wine, and the whole world will drink it. It should be your wine they drink. Not mine.”

On New Year’s Eve we sat in the same place and watched the sun go down for the last time that year. “Next year our world will change,” your father said, but my world had already changed. My road had taken me as far east as I’d ever go. For the first time in my life what I wanted was what I had, and I didn’t think about the emptiness in my belly once.

At the end of March, Marko came back from the cellar, and walked in to the smell of lightly frying fogas. He always cooked, so he knew that something was going on. He stood in the kitchen doorway, his hands in his pockets, his hair swept back over his broad forehead. For about a second his look threw a question at me. The next few seconds slowed to the point where I could almost see the join between the frames. His gaze moved from the pan to my face, followed my eyes as they lifted to meet his. The question left his face and he opened his mouth in disbelief. Then he ran – he never ran, it was a day of firsts! – took the pan out of my hand, put it down on the side and lifted me in the air. When he put me down I watched the skin around his eyes, his mouth, his cheeks as it folded and furrowed.

I stared at the valleys and craters in his face. That close up they didn’t make any sense. They were just a series of lines, but as I pulled back from him and my eyes adjusted I took in the whole of his face. There was nothing to him except the most enormous smile.

It was a day of firsts but that night, for the second time, he cried and said that Zoltan should have been there. We sat in bed and I cradled him on my lap. I held his head to my no longer empty belly.

That summer the clocks stopped. The three of us lived in a world that was completely outside of time. In a way I suppose it would be better to say we were a microcosm of the world that was going on without us. Europe floated in a space that was half beginning and half end. The only thing that really characterised it was change – change that hadn't decided to tip one way or the other – that couldn't go back to the past but wasn't ready to move to the future. It was marking time as though it hadn't made up its mind what it would do next.

In a way we were the same, the three of us. There was a skin that each of us had shed, but the new one hadn't hardened. We were basking in the sun, waiting for it to dry, enjoying the warmth of every second, filled with excitement and anticipation, without any idea what it was we were waiting for.

At the same time I knew something was terribly wrong, that the life we shared was too thin, that if I held it up to the sun I would see through it. We were living in the pause between frames, the beat between ticks of the clock. I think somewhere I knew that your father and I *were* the transition between one life and the other.

And you were. I don't know how to say it. I don't know if I can say it. It's as if you were the heat that we gave off as we passed through one another, Sandrine. You were the heat we expended that left both of us slightly closer to death.

That's how it seemed when you were born. I held you in my arms, once. For the first time in my life I had achieved something I always wanted. I had come to the end of something. That part of my life, the part that wanted to be a mother, was over. I held you up to me, pressed my cheek against yours, and whispered so quietly your father never heard: "Now half of me is dead. Half of me is dead and I don't know if the other half has the fight to keep alive without it."

I handed you to Marko. I looked at the two of you together, and looked out of the window at the vineyard, at the hundreds of years of history that would carry on a little longer because of you.

songs from the other side of the wall

“It should have been Zoltan here, not me,” I said, and started sobbing. I cried for seven days until I’d wrung the last drop from my body. And then I left, the night the Berlin Wall came down.’

Mum emptied the last of the coffee into our mugs and stood to take the pot back to the kitchen. After a few seconds I followed her. She was standing with her palms on the sideboard, her head bent down between her shoulders, her black bob hanging limply in front of her face. As I watched, there was a small convulsion in her body. Another followed, and more. They got closer together until her whole body shook like a drill. It was like she'd been storing tears since the day they dried up seventeen years ago.

I crossed the kitchen floor until I was standing behind her. Slowly I reached out a hand, like a parent waking a child from its sleepwalk. She jumped at my touch, turned, her hair flying back from her face to reveal deep, black, wet hollows around her eyes.

She put her hands behind my head, pulled it into her shoulder. I could feel the pressure building on my neck as she pressed me against the damp ends of her hair. Tears were running down the strands like dew on spiderwebs, collecting at the tips in drops that grew swollen until they burst on my skin.

My face was becoming damp and warm. I threw my arms around her, pressed my hands on her back, ran them down the sides of her spine. Her body gave slightly under the force of my touch, then relaxed back into the quick, convulsing rhythm of her sobs. My hands moved quicker, more forcefully. It was as though her tears were filling the emptiness in me, watering me, nourishing me like an umbilicus.

When she's spent, I thought, then I'll cry. I'll cry and cry and fill her again, and we'll spend our lives in this room, feeding each other with tears until the only thing that's left in the whole world are these two women, and the never-ending cycle of their tears.

The pads of my fingers felt bone beneath them. They moved over her, tracing vertebrae, searching out valleys, digging, opening her up. I pushed her back against the side, pulled myself away, cupped her face in my hands. My cheeks were wet. My hands, her skin, her hair, my hair, dripping, soaking. I had no idea where her tears ended and mine began; she ended and I began.

The air was heavy, so heavy it pushed and pushed until I sank beneath it, sliding to the floor, bringing her with me. We lay, still, spent and squeezed together by the pressure.

I don't know how long we slept, but when I woke there was a cold crust that cracked as I moved the muscles in my face, trying to feel my way around my skin. I tried to lift my arm but it wouldn't move. I opened my eyes. The lids wouldn't budge. I tried a little more force and the salty residue of tears unzipped.

I couldn't decipher what I saw. Black, slick, sleek strands. I blinked. Blinked again. Hair. Now I could feel the pressure on my arm. It had form, shape, contours.

"Sandrine?" I heard, coming from somewhere, from close but through layers, through thickness, from outside of me.

"Mum?" I said, everything coming back into focus.

"Sandrine."

"Mum."

We left her flat and closed the door at the bottom of the stairs. I felt the air hit me. It was dirty, heavy with exhaust and leftover rain, but it felt clean and new. I took a lungful, another and another exaggerated breath.

I wondered where we were going for dinner, and I realised I was thinking about “us”, and “us” meant me and Mum, not me and Claire.

We exited Gloucester Green onto a street that was lined with wine bars and restaurants, went past a big, old church that seemed to have landed from nowhere in the middle of the city, and carried on down Broad Street, a vast, imposing river of a road. On one side, limestone college buildings loomed, and on the other small clothes shops and sandwich bars peeked out from the bottom of an impressive row of town houses. At the end of the road we passed a crossroads of enormous neo-classical buildings and Mum nipped down a tiny, winding alley, underneath a stone walkway that joined two of the huge college buildings above us. She took us down a smaller path that I wouldn't have seen if I'd been walking on my own, and after a sharp turn it opened out into the courtyard of a low, sprawling pub.

We went inside, through a low door, down a couple of stone steps, and into another world, the world of warm beer on shivering nights, of folk music and tall tales. The place was full of students in slacks and long woollen coats, moving their hands excitedly, speaking at each other slightly too quickly and slightly too loudly. It was as far as I could imagine from the bars in Tokaj and Miskolc, or from the Grey Wolf.

I sat at a wooden bench in the corner and Mum brought us each a pint glass of cider and opened a packet of crisps onto the table.

“It's like a little town in here,” I said. “Hidden away like something from Harry Potter.”

“Every visitor should come to the Turf. Claire brought me here my first night in Oxford.”

I reached for a crisp and washed it down with a large mouthful of cider. The drink tasted strange. It was sweet, like flavoured vodka.

“How did you end up in Oxford?”

“That's the second half of my long story,” she said.

“It's OK. You've told me enough for one day.”

“It's not that.”

It was her turn to reach for a crisp and take a large swig from her drink. I watched the skin on her fingers whiten slightly as she gripped the glass harder. For a moment a wall between her mind and mine disappeared, and I felt myself sliding inside. It was the same sensation I had when I spoke to Peter. The sensation of momentarily passing through someone else's thoughts, seeing everything spread out bare and in real time as I went.

That kind of knowledge presents you with a choice. You can retreat gently, brush over your footprints and hope your presence was never noticed; or you can speak, and make the contact real.

"I know," I said.

She looked at me, her head on one side, her hair hanging away from it on one side, covering her cheek on the other.

"I don't know what I'm going to do yet. I really don't know. I mean, when I came here I was sure I'd stay a few days, then I'd be gone and I'd never be back. Now, I'm not sure. But whether I leave forever, or whether I come back again has nothing to do with whether you tell me nothing, or whether you tell me everything."

Mum steeped her hands on the table and rested her chin on them. There was still a smear of smudged mascara around her eyes. It looked like the corona around an eclipse. "What made you so wise, Sandrine? I listen to you and I find it hard to hear a seventeen year-old."

"I'm not wise," I said. "There's just stuff I know." I closed my eyes for a moment. The backs of my lids were a comfortably blank red-black. "It's not like I'm a kid soldier in the Lord's Resistance Army or anything. I mean, there isn't this precious thing inside me, this innocence that's died. And what I know may not be your usual seventeen year-old stuff, but there's a hell of a lot more I don't know. There's plenty of gaps. And they scare the shit out of me."

"The gaps scare the shit out of all of us. That's not something that's going to change when you get older."

"Tell me," I said. "Please."

"I tell you what I'll do. I'll give you the version that gets me to the end of this drink. Then I'm going to get us each another pint; and when I bring it back the conversation's over."

"Deal."

"OK," she said, taking a swig before she started. "When I got to England, I went back to Cambridge. The place had me on a piece of elastic. I was

away ten years but it still yanked me back. I'd always earned my keep while I'd been away, so I had enough to put down a deposit on a room, and to buy drink from the supermarket.

"Once I had a stash of it I didn't go out again. I don't think I intended to drink myself to death. That would have required a degree of planning I was incapable of. I didn't intend anything. I just drank and slept and drank and slept. My room fell into filth and decay around me, and I began to decay with it. Slowly we began to merge into a formless heap of organic crap.

"Then one day I stretched out my hand, felt around for a bottle by the side of the bed, but instead of the vodka I came up with a pair of socks. Before I knew where I was, I was dressed, outside, and breathing in the air again.

"I sat on a bench in Cambridge station, watching the students getting on and off the trains, the commuters coming home with their copies of the *Evening Standard*. I must have looked a sight, but I found myself smiling at people as they stepped down from the carriages. Most of them smiled back; some of them looked away or buried their head in their paper, but I didn't care. They'd noticed me. I was part of the world again.

"I bought some clean clothes on the way back to my room, had a long bath, noticed the unopened box of tampons on my bedside table, and realised that in the four months I'd been home my periods had stopped. For the first time in my life something had been taken out of my hands completely. I would never have another child.

"Only it wasn't that simple, because you were still there. On the other side of Europe. Hundreds of miles away, but there was no longer a Wall separating us. Not a physical one, anyway. I sat there and I thought. I must have thought, without sleeping or eating, for more than a day because when I went back out to fetch a salad for dinner it was getting dark, just a tiny bit darker than it had been when I'd closed the door behind me.

"All my thinking produced only one conclusion. I could sum it up in a single sentence. A day's solid cogitation on a lifetime's dreams and pain and hope and hurt, and I came up with a sentence: as long as you keep hoping for something that has absolutely no shape, the only thing you'll ever get is ghosts.

"I wanted to be a mother; I wanted to be an academic. Words that had absolutely no content. I didn't want something. I just wanted.

“By the time I was out of the door to fetch dinner, I realised that there was something real, concrete I wanted. I wanted you.

“I knew exactly how I’d get you back in my life. I would become an expert on Hungary. I’d get to know everything there was to know about your country and then, when I’d got myself a post and a research grant, I’d come back to Tokaj.

“It took me seventeen years.” She drained her glass, put it on the table, and stood up to fetch another. The conversation was over.

Mum came back from the bar with two fresh glasses. *You left*, I wanted to say. *You left without a single word*. But the conversation was over. *You left and you took Claire away*.

“So,” she said. “You never said what you were doing in England.”

“I’m singing,” I said.

“Singing?” It wasn’t the answer she’d expected.

“Yeah. I write songs. Folk songs. Well, not exactly folk songs. More folk with a bit of rock and a hint of torch song.”

“And you’ve come all the way to England. You must be good.”

Something passed across her face, brushing her cheeks with a pale coating of red, leaving a gloss on her eyes. It might have been pride.

“Not really,” I said. “It’s a private gig. For a friend.”

“Can I hear you? Not now,” she added, quickly. “I know; it’s private. But sometime, I’d like to hear you play.”

“Of course.” I held the glass to my lips, sucking down the cold yellow liquid. I kept it there, cider sloshing around my lips, until every drop was gone. I smiled and Mum smiled back.

Mum drained her glass and, without any hesitation, without either of us waiting for the other to make a move, we stood up and walked back to the crossroads. We stopped there briefly, Mum’s face glowing red under a traffic light, her eyes little pools of night.

“I’m heading to London tomorrow night,” I said. “So I could see you for lunch.”

“Great. Why don’t we meet here at one? The King’s Arms does nice food.”

“OK.”

We started walking before there was a chance to say anything else. We’d both put in the minimum stake, just enough to keep us in the game. Whatever the game was.

I didn't go straight back to the hotel. Instead, I turned down a small Street off Parks Road, followed it down a narrow alley past the Lamb and Flag pub, and arrived on the wide boulevard of St Giles. By now it was nine o'clock, and the city was in the full flush of life. I had no map with me, and I turned first left, then right, then whichever way I fancied according to no principle at all other than the desire to lose myself in the flow of the city. It was an impossible task. There was always a landmark, a college or a church, a theatre or museum somewhere in my eye-line. The noise and the bustle of the city was there, but not the anonymity; not the total privacy that comes from being utterly lost in the buzzing screaming throng of a thousand strangers.

Without that privacy it was impossible to think properly about everything that had happened since I arrived in England. Without that vast canvas of noise it was impossible to stop the world around me and listen only to my thoughts.

I sat for a while in the Old Tom pub opposite Christ Church, cradling a half pint of lager, drinking as slowly as I could, waiting for a stranger to pull up beside me and ask if I came there often.

"No," I'd say.

"Really?"

"No, I'm new to Oxford."

"Yeah? Visiting friends?"

"Visiting my Mum."

"That right?" he'd say, bored, staring at my chest as the remnants of his pint slathered over the glass and out of the corners of his mouth.

"That's right." His eyes would follow the dregs of the liquid hungrily down my throat. He'd make a move for the door, his arm carrying me along like a trawl net. "You going to get me another or what?" I'd ask.

He'd mask his disappointment, spend a moment sizing up the return he was likely to get for his time and money, and head to the bar.

For half an hour he'd sit and listen. "Don't you think?" I'd ask occasionally, tapping him on the knee and pointing my eyes in his direction to keep him interested. The words would pour out of me like tangled threads, and once I was through maybe the mess that was currently inside me would be gone. I'd thank him for the drink, then I'd corner the barman,

ask him to call me a cab, and have him watch me out of the door and into the car, leaving the stranger behind, tangled in the fabric of our mother-daughter fuck up.

No-one came.

My head filled with comical, playful images of words morphing into silk and back into words, weaving themselves into stories and cloths. I closed my eyes and the world I saw was clearer than the inside of the pub I'd left behind. I could see every letter, every fibre, every nuance of colour, every hint of depth and texture. *I want to make that*, I thought. *I want to take it out of me and put it in the world.*

I went to sleep as soon as I hit the bed, and slept through till ten the next morning. I showered, checked out, left my things at reception to pick up later, and headed into town to meet Mum.

I was leaving for London that evening, and catching the plane back to Budapest the day after the concert. Things between us felt raw and unfinished. I'd expected seeing Mum to raise issues from the past. Instead, I felt like there was a giant loose end stretching into the future.

For the first time the thought of going to the Sorbonne made me nervous instead of excited. I would be suspended there, pulled by Mum from the West and Dad from the East, held up only by the equal force they exerted and waiting to be snapped in one direction or the other the moment one of them blinked.

Mum was sitting at one of the wooden benches outside the King's Arms, her military style coat buttoned all the way up and her shoulders hunched up as she tried to keep warm. She stood up when she saw me coming and led the way inside. The pub was a maze of small rooms, slotted together like pieces of a jigsaw. Although the place was huge, the dark wood tables and small windows gave the place a feeling of seclusion, of whispering and plotting in corners. We went past the bar, down a panelled corridor, and up a few steps into an area that felt like someone's study, complete with fireplace and button-back velvet chairs.

"Pie and chips OK?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Back in a second then," she said, draping her coat over the back of a chair and heading off somewhere to order food without looking over her shoulder. I watched her walking away, taking short, staccato steps. *We should have said goodbye last night*, I thought, suddenly feeling disoriented, like everything was ever so slightly out of whack. There was a small wooden door in the corner of the room with a fire exit sign above it, and I considered slipping out and away. But by the time I turned back around from the door, Mum was coming back into the room with a couple of glasses.

"There we are," she said, sitting down. "Ready in ten minutes."

"Odd, isn't it?" I said after a minute or so.

She gave a polite smile. The connection that had been there yesterday was gone.

“It’s the opposite of how most people live their lives,” I continued.

“What’s that?”

“Well, most people seem to go through life exchanging platitudes and nonsenses about nothing in particular, but the moment they need to say something serious they clam up. For me it’s always been fine talking about the big stuff. Politics, death, sex. That’s fine; but I can’t do shoes or the weather for anyone.”

“Me neither.” Her shoulders lowered and eased back slightly. Her breathing was a little slower and deeper.

“It’s much easier online. No-one in chatrooms and forums ever wants to know what you had for breakfast or stuff like that.”

“That depends what forums you go to.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Seriously, Sandrine. We didn’t really talk about the big stuff yesterday.”

“Then what did we do?”

“We exchanged facts,” she said. “Maybe a couple of opinions thrown in, but in the end what we really did was say what happened.”

“But in your flat?”

“That was instinct. There was no thought behind it; no feeling.”

I was tapping my fingers on the side of my glass. The noise I got was hollow. I looked down and saw the glass was empty.

“You’re just like me,” she carried on. I could feel myself shifting on a seat that felt absurdly uncomfortable. “You use the big words, so you think you’ve talked about the big things. Sex; politics; death; betrayal, revenge, hatred as well I expect. You can use them as easily as you use a knife and fork. And when you use them you can tick them off and say *it’s OK, I’ve done the big stuff now*. You don’t have to bother with small talk either – the things that might actually bring you close to another person’s real life – because you’re a big talk person. So you do neither. You live in a world you build out of pretty sentences and impressive words.”

I said nothing. The hollow drumming noise was getting louder. I looked down but my hands were still.

“Look, Sandrine, we’ve got to say things that will hurt. If we don’t, what’s the point? We’ll just carry on swapping words.”

She sat back. Now it was my turn, but I had no idea what to say.

"I was in love with Claire," I said, finally, with no idea why.

"I see." Mum looked all round the room. She looked over her shoulder to see if lunch was coming. She looked anywhere but at me. "And when did that happen?"

"When you came to stay."

"When we didn't even see you?"

"I can't explain it."

"I see," she said for a second time. She tapped the tines of her fork on her teeth. "So is that why you came to see me?"

"Yes."

Two large plates appeared in front of us. I looked up to see a woman about my age. Her pale white skin flushed across the cheeks and forehead. She took two napkins, wrapped round cutlery, out of her top pocket, put them on the table, mumbled *thank you*, and scurried away as fast as she could.

"I hated her," Mum said, taking a mouthful of chips.

"Claire?"

"Yes. Claire."

"I thought you were friends."

"We were. We were very good friends. We were such good friends I took her with me to Hungary. And when we got there she made me leave. She practically dragged me all the way to the airport before I had a chance to see you."

The thumping in my head crawled behind my eyes. My field of vision narrowed to a tiny point before it disappeared altogether. My face was wet, but the tears didn't clear my sight. I stood up, feeling the edge of the table with my hands. I thought I remembered where the fire exit was. I took enough steps to confirm I was standing in the gangway, that the route out was clear, then I turned back to where I thought Mum had been sitting.

"I loved her," I said. "I loved her and you took her away; and now she's dead."

I headed for the door, brushing past the chairs with the backs of my hands. As I held the handle I heard her voice behind me, but I had no way of knowing if the words were aimed at me or muttered to herself and carried to me on a waft of stale beer. "Well you sound every inch the teenager now, Sandrine."

As I opened the door the air and sunlight smacked my face full on and cleared my eyes enough for me to run all the way back to the hotel.

30

The coach headed along the High Street, walled with colleges and history, and up Headington Hill. Oxford had swallowed me, left me to mulch a while in its gastric juices, and now it was spewing me back out. It was the second time in a few months I'd left Hungary, tried my footing in the world I'd longed to be a part of all my life. And it was the second time I'd lasted for a couple of days before I felt a desperate need to be home, to feel Hungary under my feet as I stepped off the plane at Ferihegy.

I belonged neither in the West nor the East, neither with Mum nor Dad. For a few minutes it felt like I existed not in but alongside the world. I travelled through the space where everyone else lived and breathed and laughed and cried, only I was in a parallel universe, like theirs in every way except I was the only person there. The two worlds spent eternity almost but not quite brushing against each other – hearing the occasional whisper from somewhere they couldn't quite place; but never leaving even the smallest footprint on each other.

A chalk cutting whizzed past; the coach was climbing a hill; a couple in front of me were giggling; a kid behind was thumping his foot arrhythmically into the back of my seat. I was Sandrine again, on her way to London.

I got off the coach at Marble Arch and looked at the map. My hotel in Russell Square was two miles away, but it was a straightforward trip all the way down Oxford Street. Just a couple of short turns at the end and I'd be there; so I decided to walk, glad of the chance to melt into the million-faced grey soup of London. I had my bag and my guitar with me. Once the bag was securely on my back the weight was next to nothing, and barely inconvenienced me at all. The guitar flapped around at my side, banging into people's handbags and hips, creating a little pocket of space around me.

I walked carefully, steering my guitar as I went, slowing down and speeding up in time with the endless flow of shoppers. They moved as one collective system. A system with a million parts it was true, each one following a course that was ever so slightly different from every other; but they were unmistakably parts of a whole – like droplets of monsoon rain beating a path back to the Bengal Sea. But however I altered my speed and direction, I was part of a different system.

The hotel was a vast concrete block, four sides' worth of identical concrete rooms surrounding a vast concrete courtyard where gaudy-coloured coaches parked to disgorge their cargoes. Puddles of students hung around, straddling road and pavement, waiting for instructions that never came. So they just stood, these little homogenous pools, these groups of Japanese and Chinese, Indonesian, Spanish and American, foreigners lost in a new city just like I was.

The noise of the traffic in the background became a buzzing swarm of whispers in my mind.

“Look at her,” the whispers said. “Look at the freak.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She doesn’t work.”

“That’s it. She doesn’t work. She’s gone wrong. Her gyroscope’s out of kilter.”

“Isn’t anyone going to fix her?”

“I don’t think they can fix her.”

“What’ll she do, then?”

“Do? She’ll keep spinning in her own orbit.”

“Further and further out of whack.”

“And one day she’ll just stop.”

“Like a spider that’s broken four of its legs.”

“Or a bird that’s lost a wing.”

“A cat with its head half stove in.”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

“Just watch.”

“Until the flapping stops and the thing’s put out of its misery.”

It took me five minutes to reach my room from reception, down a series of never-ending corridors. I felt like I was in one of the giant state-built blocks on the outskirts of Budapest. The room itself was advertised as three stars but although it was large, it was basic and uninviting. The herringbone parquet floor was cold and noisy; the varnish chipped and discoloured. The room had a kettle and some sachets of plain-wrapped coloured powders that promised to become tea or coffee if you just added water.

I put my bag and guitar down on the floor by the bed, took off my shoes, and lay down. Outside the door I could hear clicking on the wooden corridors, and excited shouting as the crowds dispersed through the concrete space. Slowly my sobs joined the feet and voices in their syncopated beat.

After a while I showered and made myself a cup of hydrated powder. It was nearly eight o'clock by now. I looked at the brown liquid and my stomach turned over, so I put on some black skinnies and a chunky-knit purple sweater, and headed out with just a purse and a streetmap.

I made for Tottenham Court Road, and turned down towards Centrepoint, crossing over into Charing Cross Road. I was entering Theatreland and Soho. It was like there were two parallel but completely different worlds in the same small area. One was full of glamour and glossy billboards with reviews from the cultural press; the other was flaking paint and peeling plastic, pasted over with a few torn posters and blurred business cards offering massage and other personal services. Half the people were suited and tied, ladies walking serenely in long, expensive coats and the sheer pashmina; the other half was wrapped in hoodies and leather, and walked with a bent-kneed swagger. Each group had a common patois, a low gentle mumble or a broken lilt. If I tuned my ears to one pitch the other disappeared altogether; and I could switch effortlessly between the two.

I stood for a while, watching these two worlds pass each other by as if they had no knowledge at all of each other's existence. It was easy to imagine I was standing in a doorway between them. The one thing that held them together, like the twin spirals of the double helix, was the string of neon lights that stretched down to the horizon, proclaiming everything in the same flat, flickering tone: theatre and massage parlour, bookstore and sex shop, jazz club and strip joint alike.

A wave of excitement rushed from my feet upwards as the sights and sounds overwhelmed me. Two worlds held together by a string of lights, I thought. Only it wasn't a thought. Not an idea; not an abstraction. It was a tidal wave of colour and noise. I felt myself bouncing down the road, drowning in a sensual sea.

31

I walked for about an hour, turning down each alley no matter how small, putting my head around the doors of all the clubs and bars, checking out the interiors without actually going in. I was following a streetmap that showed only the neon lights. It looked like a circuit board, the hard-wiring at the heart of the city.

My head buzzing, I eventually turned my back on Soho and headed up the Tottenham Court Road. I went into a big easyinternetcafe, picked up a meatball marinara baguette and a double espresso from the Subway on the ground floor, put two pounds into the credit machine, went upstairs, and logged on.

I went to *Endangeredworlds* and took a look around. The site had barely changed in the past couple of months. The home page announced the memorial gig. The chatrooms had a flurry of recent activity talking about who was playing and what they'd sing. Quite a few users, many of whose usernames I didn't recognise, hoped I repeated my set from the Grey Wolf. They either loved the songs or thought it would be a fitting tribute. Others thought it might be in bad taste to play music from the night Michael died. A couple said it was bad juju.

But under the surface, in the part of the site that really mattered, the user groups and interfaces, it felt like a holiday resort in autumn. A few people were still hanging around, catching the last rays of a splendid but fading summer. They'd carry on going through the same routine, seaside tourists looking at the same postcards every day, eating the same ice cream every afternoon even when it was really too cold. But without Michael the heart of the site was shutting down.

Three months earlier, I would have been distraught. Now I flicked through the help offered boards, and the same old help required posts, and I was just an observer. As I scrolled through the pages, I saw my name in various threads – *Sandrinechanteuse* still lived there. She had a life that ticked by independently of me. At the moment it seemed as active as it had ever been as people debated what she should sing. But even she was beginning to crack and split in two. *Sandrinechanteuse's* own posts were harder and harder to find. I had to scroll further down the screens, turn to later and later pages on the threads to find her. She was still there, but the first *Sandrinechanteuse*, the

one who still lived and breathed there, now bore little resemblance to her. And I recognised neither of them.

I downed my cold espresso and finished my sub. Wiping my hands, I clicked through to *Songs from the Other Side of the Wall*.

The texture of the pages had changed. The shape of the text on the screen, the patterns the paragraphs and usernames made, had become staccato, filled with space. There were none of my long rambling posts followed up with comments and debate. Now the short, rat-a-tat of comments stood on their own, a burst of a hundred bullets filmed from every angle and frozen like something from the Matrix.

→[Streetfyer] *Hey, are you there, Sandrine?*

→[AKCrazy] *She don't give a shit about us any more. She's too big for us now*

→[Smallisbeautiful] *Of course she cares. She hurts. The pain's driving her into herself, and you talking like that isn't going to pull her back out again*

→[AKCrazy] *Fucking bollocks. She's played us and now she's split. She never cared. What do we know about her anyway?*

→[Smallisbeautiful] *Show some respect*

→[Somemuvvasson] *AK's right. What do we really know about her? I mean, has anyone actually seen her in Hungary?*

→[AKCrazy] *That's right. We know jack. I mean, I bet she's no real lesbian even. Just saying it to get famous...*

→[Smallisbeautiful] *Sandrine, if you're out there, it's OK. There are some jerks here, but you get jerks anywhere. But there are more people here who really care. We won't give up on you. Come back when you're ready.*

→[Streetfyer] *yeah. We miss you.*

For years this small corner of Michael's website had been my home. This kind of attention, the concern and interest, was no different from what I'd always received here, but now I felt stalked and harassed, and I wanted to leave. I didn't want to know that *Sandanieceta* had kept to her/himself so much after her/his brother died that her/his family had considered signing her/him in as an inpatient in a mental hospital. I didn't want to know that *Rebel_Yell* understood my pain and was prepared to offer sympathy and a bed any night I couldn't cope with being on my own.

I typed a brief message,

→*I might see some of you tomorrow*

DAN HOLLOWAY

and logged off. There was more than a pound's worth of credit on my slip. I tore it up and made the little pieces into a pile that I left on the workstation.

32

It was an early afternoon concert, due to finish by three. That was how the band had managed to book the *Astoria* on Charing Cross Road with so little notice. I was glad to shower, get dressed, and leave the hotel as soon as I got up, without stopping for breakfast. Instead I grabbed a sausage and egg McMuffin from MacDonal'd's by Tottenham Court Road tube. I ate it on the steps of the *Astoria*, using my guitar case as a plate.

I sat and watched London slowly creak into life like some vast machine in need of oil. It was a few metres from where I'd stood the night before, but at 9.30 in the morning the only people about were a few students, shoppers who'd come early to beat the rush hour and had time to kill before anywhere opened, and a couple of guys in suits who were late for work. It was just like Budapest; just like any other city, I guessed. The two garish worlds from last night, held together with a neon thread, had disappeared. They'd taken cover behind thick locked doors and boarded windows.

Janie was the first of the band to arrive.

"Good to see you, Sandrine. Any sign of life?"

"Nah." I guessed the *Astoria* was the last place to open at this time.

She sat down beside me, cradling her guitar between her knees, and clutching a bag to her stomach. She had on a white hoodie with some new rave designs in pink and yellow and black. "Are you not fucking freezing?" she asked, putting the hood up and pulling a packet of Silk Cut and a lighter from her pocket.

"Positively hot," I said, declining the cigarette she held out for me.

"Freakshow." She spluttered a half laugh, half cough as she sucked in the first mouthful of smoke.

"Nah. Central European winters."

"First time in London?"

"First time in England."

"What do you think?"

"Nothing like I expected," I said, and laughed with her.

"I'm gonna call Jason," she said, opening the handbag that was made out of little plastic squares that looked like they'd been carrier bags in their previous life. It should have a strapline saying *I used to be a plastic bag*, I thought. "He ought to be here with the kit and amps."

She lowered her head over the bag and dug with her hands like a mole making a burrow. "Fuck it, why do I never get a bigger bag?"

"Wanna borrow my mobile?"

"Do you have Jason's number in it?"

"No."

"Thanks, then, but no thanks." She started to empty the contents onto the pavement in front of her. Cigarettes, a packet and several loose ones in better or worse shape, tubs of pills, tubes of sweets, pens, purse, a travelcard holder, a wodge of paper folded into quarters. I started reading the print on it while I waited.

"→Hey

→Hey Sandrine.

→Got time to talk?..."

"What's this?" I asked, picking it up.

"Eh?"

"This. It's got my name on it."

Janie looked up out of her bag. I could just about see her eyes inside her hood, like an animal at the back of a cave. She took the paper from me and turned it round in her hand.

"Fucked if I know," she said, handing it back. "Never seen it before."

I opened it out.

"→Hey

→Hey Sandrine.

→Got time to talk?

→I guess. About the concert?

→No. That OK?

→That's good. To be honest I'm getting sick of it. People mean well, but come on, most of them never even chatted with Michael here, let alone met him.

→I met him

→Yeab, I know. So what's on your mind?

→That's just it. Nothing's on my mind.

→So what do you want to talk about.

→About that. My mind. It's as though it's just disappeared..."

Five minutes later I raised my head from the paper. Janie was on the phone. The entire contents of her bag was on the pavement in front of the steps. *This is the moment my life changed*, I thought. I looked at disconnected things lying on the cold concrete, stained and bleached with a thousand

layers of vomit and kebab and beer and disinfectant. I knew I'd remember everything that was there, and where it was in relation to everything else, until the day I die.

This is the moment my life changed, I thought for a second time. It sounded like the title of a sculpture. No. It *was* the title of a sculpture. It was the title of my first sculpture. That was the moment I knew I had to be an artist.

"He'll be ten minutes," Janie announced flatly as she put the phone in her pocket and started packing her bag.

"Do you remember this?" I waved the paper in front of her.

"Remember what, hun?"

"This."

"What is it?"

"It's the printout from a chatroom. From a couple of days ago. It's a conversation we had."

"Not a chance," she said. "I haven't spoken to you since Romania." She put a bent cigarette between her lips and lit it like the idea of a conversation she never remembered having didn't bother her in the slightest.

I looked at the last sheet again. →*You'll print this out?* →*Yeab, I'll print it out.*

The message was clear, the same message I'd been unable to leave during the week I lost after New Year: *stretch the cord too far and it will snap. Try to live in a world that's not yours and eventually you'll become so thin that you leave no trace of yourself anywhere.* I'd tried to live in a world I shared with Claire, I'd tried to live online, I'd tried to live in the West.

It was time to stop trying to live out fantasies. In my head I was already composing my application to Art College in Budapest.

33

On stage I watched the music drift away and settle over the crowd. People lifted their heads, opened their mouths, and threw their hands into the air, dancing in the droplets of my songs.

He's dead

But the wounds will heal.

I hung my head over my guitar. Suddenly the instrument's neck and wooden belly felt strange in my hands, as though I'd noticed their weight for the first time, and couldn't work out how to hold the thing comfortably.

I picked up my guitar and turned to leave the stage with the rest of the band.

"Great set," mouthed Greg, not bothering to shout over the noise of the fans.

I nodded back.

Steve came over and put his arm around me. I turned to the audience and raised my guitar aloft. The crowd screamed louder as though my arm were the volume control. We began to walk off together, arms around each other like soldiers limping off the field of battle. A couple of times we turned, saluted, and listened to the crowd roar.

I looked over at Steve, and noticed that his other hand, the one he didn't have on my shoulder, was rubbing his eyes. I looked at Greg and Janie, who were embracing at the back of the stage. They were also crying. We'd all said goodbyes today.

I looked across to where Jason was standing, waiting to come and start packing everything away. He was brushing his eye with the end of his sleeve. Then he suddenly put his arm down by his side and stood upright, as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. Too cool to be seen crying, I thought. Then I realised he was trying to avoid my eyes. OK, too cool to be caught by me, by an outsider. Has he twigged I'm not one of them any more? Or was I never part of the crowd to him?

I got to the edge of the stage and Jason clapped one of his giant hands on Steve's back. He pulled Steve to him, gave him a bear hug, and said something in his ear. It was clear what my position was. I started to head for the dressing room when Jason reached out an arm and placed it on my shoulder. He broke off from Steve and steered me into a dark corner. I

looked behind me, trying to find Steve with my eyes. But he'd already joined Janie and Greg.

"What the hell's going on?" I shouted, but no-one else would hear over the crowd.

Jason put one hand on each of my arms and looked straight at me. I panicked, and struggled against his grip. He was too strong.

"Let's go somewhere else," he mouthed at me.

"No fucking way!"

"Come on," he insisted.

"Leave me alone, for fuck's sake!"

But he wasn't doing anything. He wasn't moving. He was just holding me. There was no menace in his eyes. "Please," he said.

I followed, down the darkened corridor until I could finally hear the quickness of my breath over the fading noise of the fans.

"What is it?" I asked.

Jason kept an even pressure on my back. Finally we reached the dressing room. He closed the door behind us and pushed me into a chair. He stood in front of me, blocking my sight with his bulk. I smelled sweat and cheap aftershave.

For a few seconds there was silence. Then he spoke, in a deep, soft voice. "It's your Dad," was all I heard.

34

Two hours later I was on the plane. Jason booked me onto the first flight to Budapest, and had a cab waiting for me on Charing Cross Road to take me to the airport. “I’ll say goodbye for you,” he said as he placed my guitar on the seat beside me.

“Thanks.”

He reached a hand through the front window of the cab, palmed something to the driver and whispered something in his ear. Then he reached in through the door, gave me a hug and stretched out a hand. I looked at it, confused. He left it there. I shook it, and felt something slick against my palm. He lowered his head.

“Take it when you get to the airport,” he whispered. “You might not get another chance to sleep once you land.”

The journey to Heathrow was a blur. Instead of a thousand conflicting thoughts fighting for space, my mind was empty. When I got out of the cab, I took a single white pill out of the baggie and swallowed it without wondering what it was.

Before the safety talk was over, my mind began to drift slowly towards sleep. The emptiness was slowly filling with jumbled images and thoughts. I knew Dad had had a heart attack; I knew he was in hospital in Miskolc. I had no other information. I had no idea how or where it had happened. The last thing I saw before I slept was Dad standing in the cellar, holding a bottle of 1811 Eszencia above his head. I saw him fall; I saw the bottle fall. They hit the ground together, and the bottle cracked open like an egg. Thick brown liquid oozed from the glass and settled around him like blood. I saw Dad’s eyes wide in terror, and I didn’t know whether the horror was from pain, or from watching the wine disappear forever, one drop at a time.

When I opened my eyes people were standing around me, reaching into the overhead lockers. A man in jeans and an Abercrombie & Fitch sweatshirt smiled at me. He had brown hair down to his shoulders and the beginnings of a beard. His arms were above his head, looking for something in the locker. He lifted down my guitar and put it on the seat next to me.

“Thanks,” I said. My head felt thick, like it had a fur lining.

“You play, huh?” he asked, his eyes keen like a dog expecting a walk.

“I used to,” I said.

The skin between his eyebrows curled up as though he was trying to fit my answer with the guitar that was, incontrovertibly, sitting on the seat beside me. In the end he shrugged his shoulders and contented himself with commenting, “I had a friend who was in a band once.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So did I.”

My first impression of Dad, as I came closer to his bed, was that he looked grey. Like he had a layer of cellar mould draped over him and nobody had bothered to wash it off. I put my guitar and bag down by his bed and sat in the visitor’s chair.

“Has anyone else been in?” I asked the nurse.

“His friend only just left,” she said. “He came in with the ambulance.”

Thank God for Gyorgy.

“Will he...” I didn’t know how to finish the question. Recover? Get his life back? Survive?

“He’ll be just fine,” a quiet voice wheezed out. The nurse and I both turned.

“Welcome back, Mr Kertész,” she said. “I’ll get the doctor.”

“Szandi?”

“I’m here,” I said, avoiding the canula in the back of his hand as I held the tips of his fingers.

“You’re a picture.”

I smiled. “I came straight from the concert. I haven’t been home to wash yet.” I felt something hot on my cheek and wiped away the tear.

I felt Dad’s fingers tighten as much as they were able to.

“Straight from the concert, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“So you’ve got your guitar with you?”

I picked it off the floor and put it on the bed. Dad pulled his fingers from mine and placed them on the case.

“Play something,” he said.

“It’s a hospital, Dad!”

“I know. It’s a hospital; I’m here because I’m ill. And what would make me feel better is hearing my daughter play.”

I looked at the beds up and down the ward. Each one was its own little world, a flat, still body at its centre, machines, cards, flowers, visitors all

drawing their energy from this engine. Each world was too busy pulling together the pieces of its own story to notice what was going on in the parallel worlds it shared its space with.

I put my hands on the guitar case. The crinkles of its fake leather surface felt alien. I felt like someone old running their hands over the skin of a former lover. It was something I'd once shared an intimacy with. Now it was distant, and the pads of my fingers recoiled slightly at its touch.

“What should I play?”

“Something you wrote.”

I took the guitar from the case, leaning over to shield it from the view of any passing doctors. There weren't any. I felt for the right place on the neck, closed my eyes, and began to play. I rarely heard the weak, metallic noise it made when it wasn't run through the amp, but the tune was still unmistakable in the thin, tinny sound.

I played a song I'd written for Claire the day after she left. The slow, pared down intro represented the stillness of our eyes meeting. I'd tried to weave two tunes through the piece, two sets of chords – one running away, the other running in pursuit, calling out but never quite catching the first. The complexity of the story was lost in the quiet, acoustic sound my Dad could hear, but my mind filled in the gaps as I played.

Dad put his hand on my knee. “Does it have words?” he asked.

“They're in English.”

“I'd like to hear your voice.”

I continued where I'd left off, whispering the words as softly as I could.

Mists run up the hill,

Clinging to the soil,

Wet fingers caress the ground,

Waving at the sky without a sound,

At vapour trails behind your plane,

Falling to the ground like rain.

Moisture wraps moisture in its arms,

Our breath and tears together

Although we are apart.

Our breath and tears together

Though we are apart.

We are apart.

“Beautiful, Szandi,” said Dad. He smiled, and closed his eyes to sleep.

I packed away the guitar and placed it on the floor. As I raised my head, I caught a glimpse of the other beds with their visitors. Every head was turned towards me. I shut them out as I had done the audience at the *Astoria*, and concentrated on Dad. His breathing was shallow but he looked comfortable. His skin was still clammy and grey, but it looked less so than when I'd first arrived. Or maybe I was just getting used to it.

When the doctor came he told me to let Dad rest. I sat by the bed for an hour, watching him sleep, satisfying myself he was stable. By then it was too late to catch a bus home from Miskolc, so I called a taxi and asked if the driver was happy to accept English pounds for the fare. "Of course," he said. "I'm happy with anything that's not forints."

The light in the porch was shining when the taxi dropped me outside the door. Gyorgy must have left it on for me. I opened the door, and put my things down in the hall. The sound of the guitar case echoed, sliding up the stairs, pushing down the corridors in either wing of the house before slipping down the banister and arriving back at my feet to report that everything was empty.

Aside from harvest season, I had only ever known this enormous space, built to house a dynasty and all its hangers-on, contain two people. I went days without noticing Dad was there; wandering freely round the place, only running into him at mealtimes. But now he wasn't there it felt for the first time like a vast, hollow shell.

I left the door open as I bathed, feeling my pores open one by one in the heat like flowers opening on a summer morning. I lingered over my shaving, taking in every centimetre of sensation as the blade whispered against my skin. I pulled it over my body as though I were playing a cadenza, noticing every rise and fall of feeling on my skin. I placed the open blade beside the bath and slid down into the water, letting it caress and cushion me. Then I pulled my shoulders out, and immersed them again, taking in every slight variation in temperature and texture on the surface of my flesh. I closed my eyes to shut out the light. The movements of air and liquid, and fingertips, on my skin magnified to fill the gap left by the darkness, and when I came my screams filled the dark, hollow house before it fell empty again.

I lay in bed, listening for the sound of Camus padding his way down the corridor, but the noise never came. There were better places for him to be than hanging out with me. Spring was rousing Tokaj's small animals from

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their winter sleep. Poking their heads above ground, weak and disoriented, they were rich pickings for a hunter like Camus.

I wondered how I could convey the absence of such a particular sound as the tip-tap of a cat's paws. I let my mind roll gently like waves looking for a shore, and couldn't imagine ever wanting to be anything but an artist.

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Over the following fortnight, I went back to school, but I no longer had any desire, or need, to be there. I'd done some research on the web – I hadn't been tempted to visit *Endangeredworlds* once, and watched it fall down my history list without regret – and spoken to several art colleges in Budapest. I chose the Pest Fine Art School for its emphasis on sculpture and multimedia art. They were still accepting applications. Admission was by a single piece of work, so now I had something better to do than worry about school.

Every day after lessons ended I caught the bus to Miskolc to check on Dad, staying an hour before taking the bus home. Once home, I opened the post, filing it as best I could with the little knowledge I had of how the vineyard worked, calling someone at the neighbouring vineyard of Szant Tamas for advice if I wasn't sure about anything. Then I'd cut off some salami and eat it with bread and pickles, using my left hand to pick up the food while I scrawled ideas in an A3 pad with my right.

In the end I scrapped everything and decided to stick with my very first idea, *This is the moment my life changed*. I listed the contents of Janie's bag as she'd laid them out on the pavement in front of the *Astoria*, and drew a chart with the position of each. It didn't seem deep, or clever, or to make any kind of important point about the universe. It wouldn't make anyone look at the world in a new way; in fact, it would change nothing. But it was personal, intimate even. That seemed as good a reason as any.

Each day Dad was a little brighter. The doctors confirmed his improvement. They also confirmed that however much he regained his health, he would never get back to how he'd been before the heart attack. He would have to make changes to his daily routines, changes I knew I would have to enforce in the short term.

We talked. I told him I'd make him eat more healthily, cook for him whilst he was convalescing, give him the recipes so he'd be able to look after himself when I wasn't there. He didn't balk at all when I said *when I'm not here*. I would help him whilst he found and trained someone to do the heavy work in the cellar. *I'll have to put prices up if I employ someone*, he protested. *People will pay whatever rate you set*, I reassured him. *We're talking about the Japanese and the Americans here*.

We never talked beyond the immediate future, beyond the summer. *What will happen when Marko is too ill to run Szant Gabor? What will happen when Marko dies?* For the time being that didn't matter. We had to focus on making sure he got his strength up so he could run Szant Gabor again.

Two weeks after I returned from England, Gyorgy and I brought him home. Gyorgy borrowed an almost new Mercedes from a friend in the trade so we could take Dad home in comfort, giving him the smoothest ride possible on the rough paths where the road ran out.

Gyorgy offered Dad his arm to lift him out of the car. Dad had learned enough in hospital about the weakness of his body and the strength of his oldest friendship to take it. We took him slowly up the steps, one of us on either arm. He managed them without stopping, but he drew in a sharp breath at the top. As much as his heart required a certain amount of rest, it also needed stimulation, as did his muscles, which had become weak from a fortnight of inactivity.

I handed Dad the key. He took it, put it into the lock, and opened the door. The smell of baking fogas infused the first breath he took back in his home. Camus appeared from nowhere to nuzzle around Dad's calves.

"Don't pretend you're pleased to see me," Dad said. "You're only being friendly because you want me to give you some fish."

"I'll come by tomorrow," said Gyorgy, hovering in the doorway. Dad clutched his arms around himself, rubbing his shoulders.

"Sorry." Gyorgy closed the door.

"Don't be silly," said Dad. "Stay and eat."

"Please," I added.

"No. That's enough excitement for now." He stood there, moving from one leg to another, playing with the door handle then letting it go. "I," he began a couple of times, before looking around, scratching what was left of his hair, and sighing.

Dad took a pace forward and put his arms round his old friend. Gyorgy buried his head in Dad's shoulder like a child coming home to its mother after a long trip to an evil grandparent.

After thirty seconds or so the two men broke apart, nodded to one another, and Gyorgy left without another word.

"You know," Dad said when Gyorgy had gone, as he stood in the corridor like a visitor in his own home. "I've been thinking a lot while I was in hospital."

“Shhh! It’s natural to think a lot when something like this happens. And it’s natural to talk about it when you’re better. But now’s the time to get well, so come and eat the dinner I’ve made you.”

“But there may not *be* time later.”

“The only thing that *needs* saying now is I love you, but you already know that. So come and eat for pity’s sake.”

“I love you, too,” he said, and headed for the kitchen. I couldn’t tell if the heaviness in his breath as he walked was exasperation or exhaustion.

Dad sat at the head of the table and let me prepare dinner. I took the foil-covered fish from the bottom of the oven and rested it on a giant pottery server, still in its wrapper. I fetched a lettuce from the pantry, ignoring Dad’s protestations as I chopped it and spread the shredded leaves over a pair of plates. I opened out the foil, bending my head over the jet of earthy-scented steam that shot into the air, and lifted a flaking portion from one side of the fogas, dropping it into a sea of lettuce before turning the fish over by the head and doing the same on the other side.

“Thank you,” he said, as I handed him a plate.

For a minute or so we ate in silence, easing our way back into the old routine. Only it wasn’t the old routine any more. It was the first day of a new one. Dad had accepted it without resistance when he sat and let me serve his dinner.

“I’m not going to France next year,” I said eventually, as if I were spelling out to him the other side of the bargain, telling him what he’d bought in exchange for handing over the reins of power to his daughter.

He put his cutlery down and crossed his arms. His lip seemed to quiver as though it were on the point of asking a question but didn’t have the strength. I saw pain in his eyes, and realised what he thought.

“I’m going to art college in Budapest,” I said. *Not England.*

Relief passed across his eyes, but in a second it had gone and his brow was creased again. “Not because of me?”

“No,” I said, and by the grace of a few minutes back in London, it was the truth. “Not because of you.”

The lines eased and the colour came back to his face. We finished our meal in silence.

As Dad’s strength slowly returned, he began to join me in the kitchen, and we prepared dinner in the evening. We took the recipes he’d always used and

replaced pickles with fresh vegetables, salami with chicken and fish, speck with olive oil.

After three weeks it was finally time to broach the other subject we hadn't mentioned. I finished drying the plates, and poured him the glass of Eger Bikaver he had before bed. Instead of handing him the glass as usual, I poured a second, and put them both on the table.

"We talked a lot," I said. The topic didn't need an introduction. "Well, she talked a lot. I listened mostly."

He sighed and chewed on a large slug of wine.

"When she came here," I said. "Did the two of you talk at all?"

"It was late. She had her colleague with her. I showed them straight to their rooms."

"And in the morning, before they left?"

"She said there had been a change of plan."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

It was my turn to wash the cloying red wine around my mouth.

"I think she really loved you," I said.

"She loved me. I loved her." He shrugged, one of his wonderful, expansive shrugs.

"She loved me too. She still does."

"Of course," he said, quietly. "Of course she loves you. She's your mother."

"I think she loved me even when she left."

"I'm sure she did."

"You don't sound mad."

"What's the point of being mad?"

"Yeah."

He looked around the room like he was searching for something. Then he cradled his glass like that was what he'd been looking for. "What's she like?"

"She's beautiful."

Dad raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"And she's sad, and angry, and bitter."

"That's a shame."

"You sound like you'd like to see her again."

He shrugged. A small, tight shrug.

"I had no idea."

“I don’t think I do really,” he said. “I nearly died. It’s still there, when I go to sleep: fear, questions. I wonder if I’ll wake up. I run through the things I wish I could change if I’m going to die in the night. Give it a month or so and I’ll feel different.”

I smiled. *Don’t think like that.* The words swilled around my mouth but didn’t come out. Why shouldn’t he be frightened? How were you meant to think when you’d nearly died?

“What about you?” he asked. “Do you want to see her again?”

“All the time I was growing up, that’s what scared you more than anything in the whole world, wasn’t it?”

“Not much gets by you, does it?”

“Not much.”

“So?” he asked.

“For seventeen years I don’t think I *wanted* to see her. I just kind of *knew* I’d see her. Like I was on the end of a line and she was playing me in.”

“You know something, Szandi?”

“What?”

“Not much gets past me either.”

We smiled at each other in silence.

“And now?” he asked, eventually.

“I hate her,” I said.

“Ah well.”

“It’ll pass,” I said. “Give it a few months and I’ll be fine.”

“I never hated her, you know.”

“You couldn’t hate anyone, Dad. You’re too good a man.”

“Not too good. Too much of a coward. I never hated her, but from the moment she walked out, I was terrified of her. Terrified she’d take you away.”

“I love you, Dad.” It was the only thing to say that made any sense.

“I love you too,” he said. He lowered his head. I could see him thinking, wanting the conversation to be closed but uncertain he could let it lie.

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Do you hate her?”

“Not because of you,” I said.

He nodded, as though the answer would do.

Spring soon lost its yellow edge. The first buds appeared on the vines. Dad was well enough to return to a gentle workload, and kept up a regime of exercise, and eating our new healthy meals. Szant Gabor took on a manager, Gabor (“who else but Gabor for Szant Gabor,” Dad said to everyone he met, chuckling at his own joke). He took care of the day to day things that Dad couldn’t manage. But the alchemical parts of winemaking, the heart of the business, were still Dad’s domain. Gabor was the sorcerer’s apprentice, mixing potions, fetching and carrying, but barely even breathing without the eye of the master watching the way his diaphragm moved. The French bosses still took care of marketing, and Dad let them go about it with his usual resignation.

For a while I squeezed every last drop of concentration into my sculpture, and forgot about Mum, and Claire, completely. Not that there was much to do on the surface of it. I needed to source specific items – where I could, that is. I could get my hands on the right pill bottles, for example, but the pills in them were aspirin and antihistamines. That was only the beginning of the sculpture, though.

What really bothered me was the text. I had the screwed up printout of the online conversation with Janie (I’d straightened out the paper enough to transcribe everything, but little enough to ensure I could return it to the original creases), which would take its place in the sculpture itself. But should the text be visible as a whole? Would the piece mean more with the words on show? Or less? And there was the question of setting the piece. Should I try to recreate the pavement, and the bottom step of the *Astoria*? Should I leave the pieces in a vacuum? But if I did that how would I depict the relation of each object to the next? In other words, how much was this a recreation and how much was it a representation? I was wrestling the same demons artists had been fighting since the devil said to Eve, “Yes, but did God mean *this* fruit?”

At the end of May it was time. Sculpture applicants were all due in Budapest on the last Thursday of the month. I had no idea what to expect other than a small space and as much of the morning to set up as I had left when I got there. It was too soon after his illness to leave Dad and stay in Budapest the night before.

We double parked outside the main door and Gyorgy helped me carry my carefully-wrapped work up the steps, through reception, up two flights of stairs and through half a dozen concrete corridors with shabby plastic floors and walls lined with paintings, all of them in the style of someone famous, rather than the style of someone who would be famous one day. Finally we came to a wooden door with a frosted glass and wire window.

I pushed. The door opened into an enormous high-ceilinged hall that had been marked out in a grid like a parking lot.

“Hi.” A guy in combats and a bright pink hoody was sitting at a formica desk just inside the door. “Four one seven,” he said, smiling through a straggly blonde beard.

“Eh?”

“Your space. Row four, slot seventeen.”

“Thanks.”

“The panel will be coming round at midday. Give me a shout if you need a hand,” he said, already burying his head back in his copy of *The Idiot*.

Gyorgy and I found the place. Next door in 416 a skinny guy in a Ramones T-shirt, who’d built what looked like the Burj el-Arab out of a cardboard honeycomb, was straightening each piece meticulously like a water bird fluffing its feathers. In 418 a female goth was touching up the paint on some plaster of paris casts. There were loads of them, all the same, painted in what I realised were the colours of the EU member flags. Looking closer I saw they were life-sized casts of a woman’s genitals.

We placed the flat package down and I hugged Gyorgy. “You’re a good daughter,” he said as we embraced.

“Thanks.” He turned to try and find his way back to the car before the police got there first.

I watched the goth, and Ramone, neither of whom looked up to acknowledge me. Standing there with my cardboard-covered God-knows-what I felt like I’d come to the wrong room. I’d come to senior school when I was meant to be in the juniors. I had neither Ramone’s technical skill nor Goth Girl’s head for ideas. I wasn’t sure what I did have, other than the belief I ought to be a sculptor.

In the end I’d solved the problem of setting the sculpture by placing everything between two giant sheets of Perspex, held to the bottom sheet with transparent glue. Around the edges of each sheet I’d fixed a moulded

neon tube, which I sealed off on the outside, so that it shone only through the thickness of the Perspex.

Even when everyone had their things set up, there was little sign of people mixing. There was none of the standing around idly talking, or swapping riffs and spliffs you'd get with musicians. Instead, there were occasional furtive glances, and nervous eyes cast over details that had been checked a hundred times before. I wondered whether these were really my kind of people. But it didn't make me want to come here any less. I didn't care if they weren't my people, because I knew this was my thing.

At twelve the door opened, and four people came in. The room didn't go quiet, because it had never been noisy, but the would-be students turned their heads from their sculptures to the four figures who'd begun talking to a girl with spiky blonde hair in bay 101. I did a quick look around the room, and estimated there were at least a hundred of us. What time were we going to finish if the panel was speaking to everyone? I began thinking about calling Gyorgy and telling him he might as well go home for the night; and could he check in on Dad to see he was OK.

Then the panel split, and each of the four figures headed for the first slot in one of the lines. I looked to see who'd come our way, the last of the four. With his neat grey hair, dark suit and tie, he didn't look like an artist. He looked like a lawyer, or an accountant. My eyes drifted as he stood in front of guy 401, one hand stroking his chin and the other clutching an elbow like he was talking about the stock market.

By now we were all sitting down, ready for the long haul, except the panellists and the four people they were questioning, so, a couple of strange, skeletal abstracts apart, I had a clear view of what was going on. My gaze got as far as candidate 301, and then his interrogator. For the next two hours they didn't leave her.

She looked Chinese, only not quite like the Chinese women I'd seen on the web or in movies. There was something ever so slightly western about the softness of her eyes and the curve of her forehead. From twenty metres away or more I could see her white irises burning like coronas around the eclipses of her pupils. Black hair fell slick around her shoulder, its sheen sliding effortlessly between the shades of the rainbow like a pianist's fingers teasing notes on a scale. But what stopped me in my tracks was her dress.

From the cleft at the top of her neck to the bottom of her ankles, the woman was wrapped in a petrol-blue silk so sheer it seemed she'd sloughed

off her dress like a husk, and her skin had sucked out the fabric's colour and gloss and wore it like a film of oil. For a moment I thought she hadn't shed a dress, but Claire's skin, revealing something moist and new and alive, emerging resplendent from the dryness and the dust.

I expected her to walk with the poise of a model, but she mooched between candidates, slouching with her hands swinging lazily by her hips as she spoke to them. And that was what took my breath away. Her bored gait, her yeah-so-fucking-what approach to life shot her down from her platform in the heavens and made her real.

Real. Tangible, possible, solid. Just a woman; accessible to every regular, physical sense I possessed.

"I'm Zhang Yang," she said to 315 after over an hour. The first words I'd heard. "I'm a second year doctoral student. Next year I'll be taking sculpture classes. Call me Yang."

I hoped I wasn't too conspicuous, standing just a couple of metres away without taking my eyes off her, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't stop myself looking. At the same time I was aware that the interviewer assigned to my row was speaking to Ramone next door, although I had no idea what they were saying. I knew I should be hanging on every word, trying to figure out his tastes and preferences, getting a feel for the rhythm and style of his questions. It was too late for that. I shifted awkwardly on my feet, tried to attune myself to catch the last words of their conversation, but all I caught was "Thank you. Do we have a number to contact you tomorrow?"

I cursed myself, missing Ramone's response in the process. Yang flicked her eyes in my direction as she moved between candidates. They caught me at such an angle I thought I saw so far into their blackness I could see the throbbing of her heart at their base. In a few seconds she'd begun to introduce herself to 317.

"Good afternoon, I'm Professor Nemeth," a voice said. It took me a moment to place it, and a further moment to notice the hand the man in the suit had reached out in my direction.

I took it, silently. He cocked his head as though waiting for me before he carried on. "Sandrine Kertész," I said.

"Hmm." His eyes brightened. I wondered if he was going to ask me whether there was a story behind my name. But his face was soon blank again, and he stared down at the title card by the sculpture.

"This is the moment my life changed," he mused, reading the card out loud.

“Quite possibly,” I said back before I could censor myself.

“Hmm.” This time he seemed to growl it out. He bent down, examining every detail. “May I?” he asked, gesturing he’d like to look underneath.

“Sure.”

“Here, let me help,” said Ramone, taking one side. I took the other and lifted. Professor Nemeth peered underneath. He got so close he looked like he was going to limbo under the Perspex.

He waved his hand and we lowered the sculpture back to the floor.

Thanks, I mouthed. Ramone winked back at me.

“Hmm.”

“You could make a tape loop of that,” I thought. Out of my peripheral vision I saw Ramone raise his eyebrows up to his floppy fringe and I realised I’d said it.

“Excuse me?”

“Hmm,” I said. “Or maybe a painting. Write it in 43 different colours on a piece of white canvas.”

“Hmm?”

“43 ‘Hmm’s, each different. One for each word the Eskimos supposedly have for snow. All the same. All different.”

I heard a loud cough to my left and turned round. Goth had her mouth buried in her sleeve.

Professor Nemeth looked at Goth Girl. Then he looked at Ramone, and then at me. His face was inscrutable. “Why glue?” he asked. Goth Girl gave in and started laughing so hard the tears began to smudge her mascara.

“Hmm?” I asked, not sure whether I wanted to laugh my head off or run out of the door and never come back.

“You’ve stuck the objects to the case with glue,” said Nemeth, calmly. “Why not use pins?”

“Because this is the moment life changes. Not the moment it ends. The part you want to pin down has gone. This is just the colourless skin it’s shed. The bit the butterfly collector throws away. The new life’s flown.” I had no idea where the words came from as I spoke them.

“Where did you get the neon tubes bent like this?”

“My Dad’s friend owns a garage,” I said.

“You got a mechanic to do it? Enterprising.”

“I got a mechanic to show *me* how to do it,” I corrected.

“Hmm.” He held out his hand. “Do we have a number to contact you tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said, taking his hand for a second time.

“Some people think there’s only a fine line between high art and low humour.” He turned to introduce himself to Goth Girl. “Let’s hope for your sake I’m one of them,” he said over his shoulder.

I glanced to the row in front of me. At the same moment Yang looked up. Her face filled out with an enormous smile before she went back to grilling
318.

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The next day I discovered Professor Nemeth *was* someone who appreciated my stupid remarks. At least, they didn't put him off enough to lose me my place.

As soon as I came off the phone (a brief but efficient call from an administrator who assured me papers would follow at some point soon) my imagination went into overdrive. Everywhere I went I stopped seeing things, and started seeing sculptures. My mind transposed objects into representations, natural substances into their chemical simulacra. Sometimes, when I let myself drift, I'd picture Yang in her petrol blue dress, and enjoy the shiver of anticipation she sent through me.

Then, without being able to control it, I'd fix on the blue and Yang's face would morph into Claire's. It was those moments when my imagination caught me off guard I began to think about making my first real sculpture a piece for Claire.

When I went running into the cellars to find Dad, he knew straightaway why I'd come. He put down the bottle he was cradling and opened his arms to embrace me instead. I felt warm tears fall onto my forehead and evaporate in his breath.

"I'm so pleased," was all he managed to say for several minutes.

"I know," I repeated again and again into his shoulder.

As summer flushed the vines, and the fruit ripened and sweetened in the sun, I got ready to leave for Budapest. I was every bit as excited as I had been all the years I'd dreamed of the Sorbonne; only now the happiness seemed more concentrated, like the juice from grapes shrivelled by noble rot, because I could share it with Dad. I didn't tell him about Claire, of course, or the sculpture that was forming inside my head; and I no longer had the community at *Endangeredworlds* to share the details with me. But I didn't miss them once. I was happy playing with colours and textures inside my head, where no-one could see them but me.

I didn't think about Mum. She no longer haunted my dreams, standing on a horizon I couldn't reach. She was just Mum. I'd lived without her for seventeen years. It was no big deal to carry on the same way.

Even the picture of Claire mellowed. I'd still wake from time to time, find myself walking to the window and staring out at the vines below. I'd see

something in the darkness, a ripple of imitation blue in the moonlight, and I'd feel a stabbing in my belly that I knew was a hunger pain in the empty hollow where Claire should be. It would soon fade, and a real, rich, shimmering blue would take its place in my mind, suggesting patterns for my sculpture. And as the transformation happened the sharp pain soon turned dull, and became a throb of excitement.

One day, at the start of September, I was talking to Dad in the cellars. Not about anything in particular, just chatting about the weather and the preparations for harvest, or making sure he knew which cuts of meat to use to cut down his fat whilst I was away.

Suddenly, he looked grey. He shivered and held his arm.

"Dad!" I shouted, rushing over to him.

"Hey, not so fast, Szandi." He smiled and caught me as I careered into him.

"I thought."

"I know what you thought."

"But."

"But," he echoed. "But there's something I've been meaning to say, and I don't know how. I guess now I don't have a choice, though, do I?"

"No, you most definitely don't!"

He sat down on the floor and motioned for me to join him. I did. He started to stroke the stubble on his chin. "You were ten years old," he said, finding himself a comfortable spot against a barrel. "I was shaving. I stood in front of the mirror, checked both sides to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Then I ran my hand over my skin to confirm it was all smooth. I nodded to myself. Yes, I'd done a good job. I was pleased."

I leaned into him. I could feel stubble through the hair on the top of my head. I smiled and draped an arm on his shoulder.

"Normally I'd turn away, happy that I'd got the day off to a good start, and get on with business. But that morning was different. I kept looking in the mirror. I saw the satisfaction on my face, and I felt." He paused, sighed, messed my hair as he tried to think. "I felt sad. Intensely sad. *How ridiculous do you think you are, old man?* I asked the clean-shaved face in the mirror. *Who's it for, eh? Your daughter? What does she care if your chin's smooth or hairy?*"

"Good job she doesn't care," I said, brushing my nails on his neck, making a noise like a striking match.

"I wasn't going to be impressing any woman. I hadn't thought about a woman since your mother left. But I hadn't realised it before. Ten years had just...gone. *Why do I do this every day?* I asked. The answer came to me straight away. But I've no idea where it came from."

"From the face in the mirror," I said, half under my breath.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that's it. It came from the face in the mirror. It told me I wanted to keep my hand in; so I could show my son what to do one day."

There was a silence. I felt Dad's Adam's apple moving on my scalp.

"But of course there would never be a son. I felt so stupid. Such a stupid, sad old man. I had the most beautiful daughter in the world. What did I need with a cutthroat? What did I need with a son? I called out for you."

"Yeah, I remember." I'd heard him calling my name *Szandi! Hey, Szandi!* It had come down thirty metres or so of high airy corridors to get to me, but it reached me clear and undiluted. "Your eyes were puffy. I thought you were tired. You were holding the cutthroat. I thought the colour was pretty, and asked you what it was"

"It's a razor I said. *My father gave it to me. My grandfather gave it to him."*

"And I'd like to give it to you, you said."

"I told you to be careful, because the blade was sharp. You took it and looked at the handle. You said thank you, and left. And I felt stupid again. I thought you'd think I was ridiculous, and put it under your bed, and never think about it again. Then I stopped being sad. I realised I knew something I hadn't known before."

"The face in the mirror told you."

"Yes! The face in the mirror told me! It told me I'd got my idea of parenthood turned on its head. Part of it, anyway. It's about wanting your child to be happy. I'd got that bit right. But it's not about being happy doing things together. Being a parent is about learning to enjoy your happiness separately."

He stopped. I could feel from the tightness in his arm there was something left to say. I softened against him as if doing so could melt his tension. For what must have been over a minute the only thing I could hear was his fitful breathing trying to settle.

"The point of all that, anyway...is this. I'm so proud that you're going to be an artist, so happy that you're going to Budapest. But I'd have been just as happy if you'd gone to Paris; or Oxford, and gone to live with your mother."

songs from the other side of the wall

His body went limp, as though all of a sudden it had let go of something completely. His arms stretched round me and kissed the top of my head.

“I didn’t put it under the bed and forget about it,” I said. But the conversation was over, and I had no idea if he heard.

38

At the end of September, I prepared to leave. I packed a case with a few things – my laptop, some clothes, toiletries, the blue-handled cutthroat, and the pages of Claire’s diary. Anything else I needed I could buy in Budapest.

One of the managers at the Mezes Maly vineyard offered to find me a room at a decent rent in Viziváros, the old, fashionable part of Buda, just over the Danube from the night clubs of Pest. It was on the top floor of an old wine exporting office. The company still did business from the ground floor, and rented the rest of the building out to local ad agencies and an IT firm. The top floor was too low-ceilinged and irregular to use as an office, but it had a view of the river, and I was glad not to have to look for anywhere else.

Gyorgy came to take me to the bus station in Miskolc. Camus returned from a successful night’s mousing to see me off. I asked Dad ten times if he knew what to do with all the food I’d left in the freezer.

“I’m sure,” he said for an eleventh time as I threw my arms around him.

We pulled apart, looked at each other, and both nodded at the same time.

At the station, I took my case and shook Gyorgy’s hand through the window of the door.

“Take care of him,” I said.

“Pah!” he said. “Your father will be fine as long as he knows you’re OK.” He let go of my hand, leaving it white from his grip. “You’ll miss your bus,” he added, starting the engine, and looking purposefully ahead. I turned and walked towards the bay without looking back, so he could cry in peace. I knew he’d be round to check on Dad twice a day.

Getting off the bus in Budapest felt different from the many times I’d done it before. I stood, still, holding my case at my side whilst everything carried on around me. For a second or two it felt like I should be carrying my guitar instead of a case. It was like I was slightly out of phase and someone was playing with the dials to bring everything into line. I expected to hear a great whoosh of air suck me into the rhythm of the city. But I only heard an old woman shouting at me to get out of the way before the bus left without her.

I found a taxi and read the address to the driver. I thought I saw him raise an eyebrow in the mirror.

“Do you know it?” I asked.

“I know it,” he said.

“Well?”

“Eh?”

“Well, don’t be enigmatic. I’ve never seen it. I’m about to move in there for three years and you’re making me think I ought to take the next bus back to Miskolc.”

The driver laughed. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It’s not haunted. It’s a wonderful old building. Full of character. My uncle used to work there when he was a boy, when it was a great big import and export firm, just after the war.”

“*Import* and export? I thought it was a wine export business.”

“Sure,” he said with a shrug. “They exported wine.”

“What did they import?”

“It was a long time ago. I don’t remember.” He raised his eyes like he was searching for an answer. “Luxuries! They exported luxuries and they imported luxuries. Who knows what? Maybe if you dig around under the boards you’ll find some old contraband hidden from the communists, eh?”

The flat was bright, airy despite the low ceilings, with pale wooden floors and newly-painted walls. Any ghosts had been renovated out of existence. The next morning I was awake at six. I made myself a mug of coffee in a fancy contraption that came with the flat. I misjudged the quantities and the drink was so thick I almost had to eat it instead of drinking. It left me buzzier and more excited than I was already, and I spent twice as long as I should have done getting dressed. I put on purple skinnies, a black Patti Smith T-shirt that came down just above my knees, a thick red belt to match my red Converse All Stars, and an emerald green cardigan. *Why not push the boat out on my first day?* I thought, tying a purple ribbon into my hair. *I never know who might be there.*

I had nothing to take with me to induction, just a canvas bag. I'd painted coloured circles on it like a Damien Hirst spot painting, and sewn on a Clearasil label I'd coloured pink before spelling out my name in a zig-zag of black felt letters above it.

I easily remembered the way to the concrete building on the other side of the Danube, and when I got there I hurtled down the corridors and up the stairs in excitement. Soon I came to a steady stream of people all heading in the same direction, and tagged myself onto the back of them.

"Induction?" I asked a short, skinny guy whose jeans were so tight they looked like leggings.

"Yeah." He carried on walking without turning to say hello. He had his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched inside a military-style jacket. Clearly too cool to talk to anyone.

I scanned the group as I weaved in and out, wondering if Goth Girl or Ramone would be there, but I didn't recognise anyone from application day.

The big studio we were all making for had chairs laid out for about twenty. Looking round the side of the room I got a feel for the kind of sculptures people here worked on. Lots of them were rooted in everyday life. It felt like I'd walked into an exhibition of ready-mades from the early twentieth century, only they all had a slight twist to them. Neon signs that spelled out swear words; S&M gear made out of old carrier bags – a gimp mask bore the slogan *love the planet if you must; but hate me*. I could see why my application piece fitted in.

I sat through an hour long session with Professor Nemeth that was half inspirational teambuilding rubbish, and half procedural. At the end he gave us all a list of the equipment we'd need, and some suppliers we could get it from in town, no doubt all part of a well-established network of back-scratching and kickbacks. There was no sign of Yang.

At the end I wandered down the corridor towards the student café. A group of people chattered in front of me. The café was behind a pair of blue fire doors with mesh-glass portholes. I swung them open. Inside was the same grey vinyl floor. The lack of colour on the walls surprised me. Eventually, though, among the grey-backed chairs and formica tables, my eye settled on a daub of blue. It was a loose cut T-shirt. Whoever was wearing it had their head in a book.

I was still looking when the book lowered to reveal Yang.

I felt my skin crackle as it drew electricity from her.

She saw me staring and smiled, beckoning me to join her with a flick of her head. Her black hair shimmered as it moved.

I went over. She kicked a chair out from opposite her, and I sat down.

"I remember you from applications," she said in perfect English.

"Yeah."

"You had some sort of neon and Perspex thing, right?"

"This is the moment my life changed."

"I imagine there's a story behind that."

"Sure there's a story behind it," I said, and searched around for another subject. "What are you reading?"

"Az Kapitány."

"It's Hungarian?"

"It's by a Hungarian author, in English."

"With a Hungarian title."

"Yup!" She grinned at me. Her face formed tiny wrinkles of suede-brown in her soft skin. I wanted to touch her face and see if it had the texture of cashmere.

"Sounds as fucked up as me!"

She laughed, then the creases fell back into place. Her face was like a pale yellow pool.

"I'm Sandrine. Hungarian. French name, English mother. I can speak all three – in the same sentence if I'm drunk. You can call me Szandi with a Z if you'd rather."

“Zhang Yang. Three quarters Chinese, but I can’t speak it. Don’t know about the rest, my family moved around too much. You can call me Yang.” She held out her hand.

I took it. A ball of something shot up my arm and into my stomach. I felt my mouth open and a breath escape. I knew if I looked into her eyes I’d faint. I stared at her book instead.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s erotica,” she said. I kept my gaze on the book but I could feel her eyes peeling back my skin, prising it off my flesh and crawling underneath. Their heat came out through my pores. “It’s set in a vineyard in Tokaj.”

“My father has a vineyard in Tokaj,” I said.

“And does anything erotic happen there?”

I watched my hands playing with the strap of my bag.

“Sorry,” she said, and reached her hand across, taking my left wrist and pulling it onto the table. “I’ve said something I shouldn’t.” Her touch spread up my arm and over my body like a fever. The tears I’d bottled up for Claire burst out of me, burning the surface of my skin, and Yang’s gaze burned it from underneath.

“Come on,” she said, pulling me, but my body wouldn’t respond. It didn’t matter. Her strength was brutal. My legs were straight, my feet almost pulled off the floor, and before I could orient myself I was running down the corridor behind her.

Soon we were out in the street, running through the crowds back towards the river; across the bridge towards Viziváros, then we were back inside. More stairs; narrow stairs; a door. She let go of my hand and I crumpled to the floor. I put my hands over my face. Tears pushed through the cracks of my fingers like oil coating an engine.

I curled myself up so small – like I was trying to fold myself over and over again – I could feel Yang surround me completely. Her body formed itself into the shape of mine and moved with each sob and gasp and ragged breath, like she was reaching into every part of me and sucking out the last drop of poison. She didn’t speak. She didn’t move, except in time with me.

Eventually she pulled slowly away, sat next to me, took in a huge breath, and exhaled for what seemed like forever.

“Did you leave someone behind?” she asked, quietly.

I wondered for a moment if I’d start crying again but I didn’t. I was dry, and hollow, and brittle. “Claire,” I said without thinking. I looked up as I

realised what I'd said, and pulled back. My mouth opened but nothing came out.

"You're gay?" she asked casually.

"Yes," I said.

"Me too."

We laughed, awkwardly at first, then big, expansive, convulsive laughs from the pit of the belly.

"Tell me about her," she said. "Unless you want to go."

"No. No, I'm fine here."

"Well you'd better not stay literally there," she said, standing up and offering her hand. "You'll get cramp on the floor."

I stood up and looked around for the first time. It seemed like I was in a giant studio rather than a flat. Against one wall there was a sofa, and I could see a kettle, wine, some glasses, and a sink – although that was brimming with paint rollers and things made of plastic, metal and wood I could only guess were sculpting tools. Aside from that there was no sign of anything you'd expect to see in a regular house. The wooden floor was splattered with paint stains that made it look like a giant Jackson Pollock, and the paint on the walls and ceiling was coming away in blotches. It looked like the room was covered in scabs that Yang picked at when she couldn't find inspiration.

It was hard to tell what she was working on and what was junk. The centre of the room was empty, but there were bits of coloured, twisted plastic round the edges. I could see a couple of large cans of propane, so I figured maybe at least some of the damage was intentional; exactly what the intention was I couldn't say.

Yang was on the sofa by now. She had a bottle of uncorked Eger Bikaver in one hand and a couple of glasses by her feet. She watched me scouting out her studio as she poured. The corners of her mouth turned slightly up.

"There you go," she said eventually, holding out a full glass that had a dribble of the deep Bulls Blood running down the side.

I took it and sat down, slugging a good mouthful down so I didn't spill it everywhere. The tannins hit the top of my mouth and the back of my throat together and made me gasp for air.

Yang smiled. "Sour cherries," she said out of nowhere.

"It's not that bad," I said.

"The sculptures, dumbass! I'm working on a collection called *Sour Cherries*."

I could see a group of bright red pieces of exploded plastic that I guessed were what she meant.

She reached down the sofa and took out an old, battered tobacco tin, opened the lid and started making up a spliff. I watched her fingers working, as quick and skilful as if she were bending an armature or playing the piano.

"Tell me about Claire," she said, without raising her head or seeming to break her concentration.

"It sounds stupid."

"Don't go all self-pity on me." She finished rolling, held up the joint like she was inspecting a precision-machined part, and pinched in the end. "Nothing's stupid. Things either matter or they don't. It sounded earlier like she mattered." She put the joint in her mouth, flipped open a Zippo and lit the curl of paper at the end. I watched her tease the smoke around her mouth. For a few seconds all I thought was *God I want that to be my tongue* and I couldn't breathe. She exhaled and held it out to me like it was a fragile flower.

"Better not. I'm too unstable today as it is."

"So Claire, huh?" She took another draw.

"Claire's dead."

"Damn! There's nothing like starting at the beginning."

"I think that is the beginning," I said.

"You're strange, you know? That's good. So rewind and tell me how you met this Claire."

"We never actually met." Even to me it sounded odd.

"But you loved her so much you spend half a day crying over her?"

"I can't explain it, even to myself sometimes. It's like the soldiers the British and French sent to the South Pacific to supervise the A-bomb tests in the 50s. They were told to look away, to shield their eyes, but some of them didn't get it quite right. For a fraction of a second they looked when they shouldn't and what they saw burnt their retinas out. Now, whether their eyes are open or shut, whether they're dreaming or awake, they can't see anything except that flash of white light. Only it's not white at all; it's absolutely black."

"Babe, you should be an artist!" she said, and inhaled deeply.

"I woke up one morning. I was seventeen. I was going to see Mum for the first time since I was a week old. She was coming on work – she's an academic – and she had a researcher with her, Claire. I opened the window.

Claire was standing on the path through the vineyard, looking up at my window, and she's been burned into me ever since. She's this bright, bright light on the back of my eyelids wherever I go. Only it's not light; it's absolutely black. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah."

"Really? You think it's possible to fall in love just like that and life never be the same again?"

"Of course. But why did you never meet her? Like, over breakfast or something?"

"By the time I went to breakfast she'd gone. Mum took her away."

"And you never saw her again?"

"Yeah, I saw her again. Just before she died. No. Just *as* she died."

"Fuck!"

"I think she saw me. I think she was looking at me. We were opposite sides of a huge crowd. It was in Bucharest, at New Year."

"In the riots?"

"Yeah."

"She was the Brit girl killed in the riots? Fuck! That takes some getting over."

"It would have done. But like I said, that's really only where it started." It was too late to go back. "The night she died I met a man."

Yang raised an eyebrow. I could see her straining not to make a smartarse remark.

"You know what I think?" she asked when I was finished.

"You think I'm nuts."

"No. I think you should make it into a sculpture."

"Make *what* into a sculpture?"

"Claire. This guy. Blue silk. Your window. The whole fucking lot of it."

She was right. I needed to put *everything* into my sculpture.

"You know what to do, don't you?" she said.

"I'm not sure."

Yang leaned towards me. She put the palm of her hand on my stomach. I felt a spasm across my skin.

"You've got to take what's in there," she said. "Put it in your hands and lift it; very carefully, so it comes out whole. It's just balance, Szandi. Like you're handling the most fragile thing in the world. That's all there is to it. Then you'll have your sculpture; and the knot in here will be gone forever."

But you mustn't let anything break off on the way, or it'll shatter into a thousand pieces and take you over like cancer."

"I don't think I'm ready to go there yet," I said.

"If you're going to be an artist you have to go there. Of course, it helps to have someone waiting to call you in if things get scary."

"That's a rather old fashioned way to look at art," I said.

"I guess. Kind of Tracey Emin."

"That's it!" I stood up. My legs were carrying me to the door. My mind raced over Claire's letter, her description of going to see *Everyone I Have Ever Slept with 1963-1995*, of waking, briefly, as if from a dream when she saw it.

"Hey, stop running there, Lola!"

"It's OK," I said. "I've got it. The sculpture. I'm going to build a tent out of blue silk; and I'm going to cut letters out of blue silk, and sew them to the inside of the tent with blue silk thread. I'll call it *Everyone I have ever Seen From my Bedroom Window 1989-2007*."

"You see," she said. "You're ready."

I was nearly at the door by now, hoping I knew the streets of Viziváros well enough to find my way straight back. I needed to start sketching and planning. "Listen, can I call you if I need help? I mean, thank you. You've been fantastic, but I don't know if I could have come up with this if it hadn't been for you; and I've got no idea if I can follow it through, so..."

"It's fine," she said. "I guess I'm your muse." She laughed and lay back on the sofa. The laughter faded. I watched her stomach quiver, the movement less and less as she closed her eyes. Her T-shirt had ridden up when she fell backwards, and I could see the yellow-brown skin of her belly, changing colour in the light as it moved with her breaths. "Seriously," she said, drawing the syllables out like she was on the verge of sleep. She opened her eyes, just, and I wondered if they registered how I was staring. "I'm already thinking of it as my little project."

"Can I take your number?"

"Eh?" Her eyes were closed again. "Oh. Number. Yeah. I'm feeling a bit tired. Not sure I can remember. Mobile's over there by the sink. Call yourself from it."

I did as she said. I pressed *refuse* the moment the opening chords of *Smells Like Teen Spirit* came from my phone, but there was no need. Yang was fast asleep.

40

I didn't sleep all night, and in the morning I still felt fresh. Hours of crying had washed my system clean. I made myself two cups of strong coffee just to be sure, but even when I got back from college mid afternoon my head was clear.

I googled silk suppliers in Budapest, found a couple of likely candidates and browsed their catalogues for colours. A couple of phone calls later, I had samples on order, and got back to my sketches.

Just don't let anything break off on the way, I repeated to myself.

At first, I didn't know what the noise was. I hadn't thought about visitors. By the time I'd figured out it was a bell, and that there wasn't an intercom, the sound rang again, for longer this time. I grabbed my keys, ran downstairs, and opened the door. All I saw was the crash helmet. I don't think I heard the words, but I didn't need to. Instinctively, I reached out my hands and took the package. It was absolutely plain except for my name and address printed on a label in Arial 16 point. By the time I looked up to ask the courier for ID, he was gone, the bike snaking away from me through the old city streets.

I ran back up the stairs, shut the door behind me, and set a fresh pot of coffee going. I let the aroma drift through the flat while the package waited on the table. Perhaps it hadn't been delivered after all, I thought. Perhaps it had just appeared, a fragment from another part of space and time.

Don't let anything break off on the way. Perhaps it was already too late. Maybe I'd let something fall a long time ago, and the pieces were still raining down like the burnt remnants of a meteor shower. Is that what I'd seen from my window that morning, the beauty of a meteor, something incalculably old and distant, burning up when it came too close, splitting into a thousand pieces that would beat down on me – black, lifeless memories of something brilliant and alive – for the rest of my life?

I brought a steaming mug of coffee to the sofa, took a hit of the smell, and placed it on the floor.

The pages were loose, as they always were. Two pieces of cardboard – from the perforations I guessed they were the backings of A4 notepads – kept them safe in transit.

Tuesday October 3rd

Again

Oxford. Everything's changed. Damn right everything's changed. How could I be so stupid and so selfish? Jen has sacrificed so much for me and this is how I repay her? I thought she was going to kill me when I said we had to come back. But all the way back she's been courteous, polite, friendly even. I hate myself even more. But what could I do? If we'd stayed there it would have been obvious the moment I met her what my feelings were for Sandrine. How could I let Jen see that? How could I let Sandrine see it? Now I've ruined Jen's research, I've made an idiot of her in front of the daughter she hasn't seen for 17 years. And the worse thing is when I stop worrying about that, when I stop feeling ridiculous for the friendship I've screwed up and the lives of others I've messed around, I'm gonna realise I've thrown away the only shot I've ever had at love along with my pathetic remnant of a career.

5th

Back at work today. Jenny came in to collect her post but that was it. I did what I thought was right for a friend but now I've blown the friendship.

8th

It's been good to have a weekend away from work. I don't know how long I can stay there. But what else can I do? It's been under a week but I've already lost any confidence I found when I met Jenny.

Michael tells me to stop being ridiculous. He thinks I should start thinking about my own happiness. What does he know about that? He's spent his whole life chasing one cause after another. When he's not doing that he's picking up after me. When's he ever done anything for himself?

November 9th

*Has it really been over a month since I wrote anything? It feels like I don't have anything to say any more. Not here, anyway. This was meant to be about my new start, the chronicle of my success. What a joke! I feel like the people in that film, *Awakenings*, the ones with sleeping sickness. Robin Williams came along and gave them a shot of something and they woke up after years of numbness. Soon they all got tics, their bodies slowed down, and they went back to sleep. The only one left was Robert De Niro, who*

songs from the other side of the wall

watched his body disappear from under him. He knew what was coming. He could feel the numbness closing in every day. And one day that was it. Back to sleep until the next miracle cure who knows when.

There are only so many times you can wake up, look around, and really believe this time it'll last.

Michael tells me I shouldn't be so maudlin about it. Come on, sis, he said last night, if this girl means so much then just write to her. It's not that simple, broth. How do I tell him she's 17 years old? That she's my boss's daughter? If you don't tell me the details, sis, how can I help? God, he's so sensible. For a rock star he's bloody middle-aged. I don't even know what I do want him to tell me any more: It's OK, she'd run into your arms if you just picked up the phone, this nearly underage girl you've never even met?

Anyway, if there has to be a last entry it ought to be today. The day the Wall came down. The day everything changed. Fuck Glasnost. Fuck Perestroika. Fuck the Velvet fucking Revolution. I wish the Wall had stayed up forever. I wish I'd never seen what was on the other side.

The writing ran out half way down the page. It must have been the last entry.

My head swam round in circles, making me dizzy. I felt sick at the thought of Claire sitting in her flat, too scared to call or write. Sicker still that for months I'd been swapping lyrics and idle chat with Michael, and one slipped word from him could have changed everything. Fuck his fucking discretion. I clung to the arm of the sofa to steady myself.

Mum. The thought reached me through the throbbing in my temples. We'd been so close to something. Then I left, hating her for hating Claire. I thought she'd taken Claire away from me. She thought Claire had taken her daughter away; and we were both wrong.

Outside, the sky had darkened. Raindrops scratched at the window like pine needles. Water on glass blurred the lights against the Danube so I couldn't tell where the rain ended and the river began.

I could call Mum, I thought. One call could put things right between us.

But I did nothing. I just stared, my focus constantly shifting between the river and the glass, holding me suspended between the two.

Finally I pulled myself away, picked up my phone, and dialled.

"Hello, Sandrine."

"You don't mind me calling?"

"Of course I don't mind."

"It's Mum."

"Unh-hunh." I could feel Peter's calmness coming down the line towards me. His voice wasn't deep but it didn't have a single sharp edge. It was like a hundred year-old Tokaji.

"Things didn't turn out well between us, and now I've got the chance to make them right."

"But now you've got the chance you don't know if you want to do it."

"Yeah, and I feel terrible. Shouldn't I want to patch things up? Shouldn't I want that more than anything, before they go so sour it's another seventeen years till I see her again?"

"That's not for me to say."

"God, I'm sorry. How long was it you didn't speak to Michael?"

"Nearly forty years."

"And you weren't curious? You didn't have things to ask? Not even when you found him again? You were happy to stay on the other end of a keyboard, Ms anonymous *Greenhamgal*?"

"Of course I wasn't happy."

"Then?"

"Then why?"

"Yeah, why? Why didn't you say, just once, *Hey, Mike! What if your old Dad were here? Right now. What would you say to him?*"

"Because my happiness had nothing to do with it. Michael was happy. He was in a good place. That was worth more to me than any personal questions I might have wanted answering."

“Didn’t you think that was his decision? That he had a right to make up his mind whether he was pissed off or pleased as punch his Dad was back? Didn’t you think for a minute if he’d known he might have been in a *better* place?”

“Of course I did.” Silence. I waited. “It’s Claire, isn’t it? The reason you’re unsure.”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“They fell out. She and Mum. They fell out and they never made it up. And it was all based on a misunderstanding.”

“Which your mother doesn’t know.”

“No.”

“And you could tell her and set things straight. And it seems so obvious that it’s the right thing to do.”

“Exactly.”

“I think I’ve remembered what it was I didn’t want to know.” I didn’t interrupt. Peter’s tangents always had a logic to them, even if I couldn’t figure it out at the time.

“Yes?”

“I didn’t want to know whether he’d been Sylvie’s favourite. I knew I’d be able to tell. Straight away.”

“And that stopped you speaking to your son? For all those years?”

“Isn’t that the most ridiculous thing? All this time, fear has been slowly smothering me like ivy. Its roots have turned me to rubble and decay. It’s all I could do to breathe when I sat down and logged on behind the anonymity of the computer screen. The things I pictured waiting for me in the dark! The shapes I imagined in the corner, waiting to leap out if I turned on the light. And that’s all it was. No monsters hiding under the bed; no dark secrets or suppressed memories. Just the insecurities of a stupid old man; that was enough to paralyse me half my life.”

“So what was it? You were scared in case she loved Claire’s father more than she loved you?”

“I think so. Yes.”

“So what does that have to do with how she treated Michael? You think parents base the way they treat their children on genetics? It didn’t occur to you Sylvie might have treated one child better because she happened to bond

with that one best? Or just because of some random thing? You assumed it had to be about whose Dad she loved the most?”

“I didn’t assume anything. That’s the point. I’m trying to figure it out now just the same as you are.”

“Yeah!” I had my head pressed to the window, the cold of condensation soothing the heat rising in my temple. “Well you’d better get figuring.”

There was a silence again, and a droplet of moisture ran down the pane and onto my skin, tracing its way down my cheek and following the contour of my face to the corner of my mouth. It hovered there and I let my tongue slip between my lips and catch it before retreating. A metallic, musty taste filled my mouth.

“This is the best I can do, Sandrine,” he said. “I was suspended between the past and the future, between Sylvie and Michael. They were both pulling at me so hard the forces cancelled out, and I was left paralysed. I wanted so much to see Michael. He was my son. He wasn’t just family, wasn’t just a reminder of her; he was a part of me, the final piece in my jigsaw, and if I never saw him there would always be a hole, right in the centre of me. On the other hand, if I looked into his eyes I knew I’d see it. I’d see every second of every day he spent with her – written there as clearly as if she’d scribbled on his forehead in indelible ink. And if I saw the disappointment, the years of wishing he’d been loved the way his sister was loved, what then? That afternoon; those few hours gave my life its direction, its meaning. I don’t think I could cope with the thought of having something like that cut off, without warning. All that for a few hours with someone I never saw again. It doesn’t make any sense, does it?”

“Paralysis is a funny thing,” I said. “When Claire died, I spent weeks sitting in my room, looking out of the window, unable to move. Whether it was light or dark I’d sit there all the same; just looking out of the window. Screwing my eyes up and picturing her there. I couldn’t turn my head away in case she was gone when I looked back.

“It’s how people describe being hypnotised. You know you could get up and walk away at any moment. You know it’s the right thing to do. You just can’t. So you stay there and slowly you atrophy; you lose weight, but you’re not actually losing weight. It’s like you’re trying to transfer yourself to the past; like there’s two of you, and you want the one that’s here to fade into nothing so the one that’s stuck in that moment can become solid. Does that make sense?”

“That’s how I always thought of it,” he said. “I even wear the same clothes now I wore when I met Sylvie. I always thought of life as the struggle to stay forever in the moment when I was happiest. Whatever that meant giving up.”

“That’s it! For seventeen years it would have sounded nuts. Only maybe it wouldn’t. I’d assumed; no, I *knew* the moment I’d be happiest was in the future. So I spent every bit of energy rushing towards it. Then Claire died and I *knew* it was in the past, and I all I wanted was to stay there forever. It’s the same thing really, isn’t it?”

“Exactly the same. It’s all nostalgia. Only it’s not nostalgia that paralyses you.”

“Yeah!” I said, “Nostalgia doesn’t make you do nothing; it makes you run! It makes you spend your whole life running, towards something or away from it. What makes you do nothing is when you love two things exactly the same. Or when two things love you.”

“You know, I’ve never met anyone like you, Sandrine!”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “I’ve figured it out, by the way,” I added, casually.

“Why you can’t talk to your mother?”

“Yeah. She’s the future, isn’t she? I mean, she’s *my* future, or she could be. Not just the person who walked out on me. Not just someone who’ll get me to where I’m going, but the place itself.”

“Maybe.”

“I think I’m gonna go now. I’m cold and kind of scared. Dad was terrified, all his life, that I’d leave him and go and live with her. It’s ridiculous, right? Only it’s not. If I call her it’s the first step on a road that could end up there.”

“You go on, Sandrine. Just do one thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Do what *you* have to do, and don’t try to second guess your parents.”

“Thanks! You’ll...”

“I’ll be OK”, he said, before I could finish.

“Yeah. You will. You know what I think? I think you’ll always be OK. It’s a bit like an immutable law of nature.”

“Goodbye, Sandrine.” The line went dead before I could answer.

The outside of the flat was sodden and the only noise the rain made was the slow thud of water growing fat on itself. I held onto the phone for minutes after we'd hung up, like it connected me to somewhere the sun was shining and decisions were simple.

I left the flat, and threaded through the streets without an umbrella or coat. I needed to put Mum and Claire both out of my mind.

"Fuck, Szandi, you'll freeze!" Yang held the door open, and I stepped through. I stood, dripping onto her wooden floor, my arms wrapped around me.

She looked at me through her black eyes like she was sizing up whether I was drunk or fevered or suicidal. I looked back and our eyes just stayed there.

"I can't move my hands," I said eventually. "Too cold."

Yang came closer. Even through the damp cloth her hands were warm. She took each of my cuffs in turn and drew my hands to my side. Then she began to unzip my top. The fastener rasped as it opened. Pressure released and my body began to relax.

Her hands were fast and expert. She never looked where she was placing her fingers. They moved over my clothes instinctively, as though she was twisting wire. All the time her eyes traced the outline of my face slowly like she was using them as a torch to gently warm my skin. Gradually I felt the edges of my muscles thaw. I looked around the room behind her, flicking from object to object, from ceiling to floor, aware all the time of her eyes flushing my cheeks and bringing colour to my throat as I swallowed nervously. As feeling returned all over, I felt heat crawling over me like spiders following the paths where Yang's fingers had been.

I felt like a small child in front of a teacher with nothing to hide behind.

Soon I was naked, but Yang didn't go to fetch a towel. I tried to swallow and my throat caught. My body was trembling. "I've..." I began.

"Shh," she whispered. She put a hand at the top of each arm and the shivering stopped. One hand moved down my arm, leaving a dust-trail of static, until it reached my wrist. My palm clenched, but her hand kept moving, and prised it open as gently as a spring day opens a butterfly's wings.

She placed my hand on her shirt, in the crook of her waist. Beneath the fabric her body was taut, muscle pushing hard against the surface. I felt the cloth form contours and waves as she guided me round, drawing me across

her belly like a blade. A sigh spilled from her lips. I felt the shiny knot of a button. Using my hand as a tool, as dexterously as if it were her own, she flicked it open. She flinched as my cold skin touched hers.

My eyes closed and every sense except touch shut down. Tiny hairs brushing against the pads of my fingers; the soft, slight scratch of lace; tight, tiny curves of flesh and the rough, raised texture of her nipple hardening beneath me; wax on full, insistent lips, coating my skin; the soft rasp of her tongue curling round my teeth, pushing into the soft flesh of my cheek; the thinnest line of downy hair; skin giving way at once to wet warmth; fingers fizzing like a fuse before exploding heat inside me.

It was dark when I woke. I couldn't tell whether my eyes were open or closed. My body was still so alive with touch it banished every other sensation. My skin was remembering and reliving every movement. Gradually I recognised the pressure of a hand on my shoulder that wasn't a memory. I opened my mouth to ask where I was, and felt Yang's finger push between my open lips. It worked itself around my cheek, and gently parted my teeth, wrapping itself around my tongue and exploring the top of my mouth. I realised as I tried to force air past her into my throat, my breathing was out of control. My stomach was moving fast, squirming for air. I grabbed her by the wrist. I felt her weight move backwards as I pushed her hand out of my mouth and forced it between my legs, screaming so hard my whole body convulsed like I was retching uncontrollably.

"Brought you coffee," she said. I heard china clink on wood and opened my eyes. It was bright. I rubbed them and saw light pouring in through the window.

"Eh?"

"Coffee. Hawaiian Kona. Fucking strong shit. You need it."

"Thanks."

"So what now, huh?" She sat beside me and tucked her knees underneath her. I started to get my bearings as the coffee fumes took effect. I wasn't in a bed. It was just a mattress on the wooden floor in a small room that didn't seem to have anything else in it.

"What do you mean?"

"Fuck, Szandi." Yang sipped her own coffee. Her lips pursed. "You know. I'm trying to figure out what happened."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

“For being such a fuck up. For involving you in my shit.”

“What kind of sorry?”

“Eh?”

“Are you sorry as in it won’t happen again? As in *Oh fuck what have I done?*”

“I think I’m sorry as in *I don’t want to get you wrapped up in my problems.* Why?”

“Well, I’m not really into all that casual shit. I want to know if this is gonna happen again because if it’s not I, well, I need to know.”

“I...”

“Look, I don’t care if you’ve got issues. You can tell me anything and I’ll make you all the coffee you need. I’ll give you enough weed to forget the fucking lot when you have to. But I...sex gets me involved, that’s all. I can’t cut my body off and let it do its own thing like some people can.”

Her head seemed to have shrunk into her shoulders. I could see lines on her face that told me she was older than me, but she looked like a child.

Being with Yang felt like pristine snow. After seventeen years in my head, I could get to know my body at the same time as I discovered hers.

I pulled the towel from her shoulders and ran my hand across her back. Yang’s movements became even more gauche. She pulled the cloth back around her and looked away.

“No, Szandi,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

She looked back towards me. She was tall and straight again, and her black hair reflected the sunlight. “Drink your coffee, stop being sorry, and tell me what’s up.”

I picked up the mug and emptied it in one long mouthful. The caffeine hit the inside of my head and made my ears ring.

“Good, huh?”

I smiled. “OK,” I said, and opened the door to let Yang in. I told her everything, from the moment Mum walked out to the moment Peter put the phone down.

When I’d finished, Yang got up and fetched more coffee. I dressed and waited in her studio. The half-finished sculptures against the walls were like the border gardens of some grand old house, everything perfectly arranged by height and colour, planted and tended with the same care a gardener has for his tiniest seedlings.

“The answer’s in your tent,” she said.

“Eh?” My head was jumping and the fragrant steam rising from the fresh cup made me dizzy.

“You need to finish your tent. Don’t think about anything else till it’s done. Not your Mum.” She paused. “Not me. Just Claire. You can decide what to do after it’s finished.”

We drank in silence.

“You mean I should build her a mausoleum and leave her there. That’s what you’re saying.”

“No. I’m saying build your tent, and worry what next when it’s done. Put everything you have into it. Everything. If you wake up in the morning and it hurts too much, cut yourself so so the physical pain is worse, and carry on. Don’t leave anything inside you. I’ll be here to pick up the pieces.”

She took my hand and led me back to the bedroom.

“Now you can fuck me,” she said, letting the towel fall to the ground. She put her hands on top of my head and gently pushed me onto my knees. I closed my eyes and let my tongue find its way around and inside her. Yang slid her hands down my back and pressed her cheek between my shoulder blades. I could feel her belly moulded against the top of my head. It trembled in time with my tongue. From what seemed like another place altogether, I heard her quickened breath, and a stream of sighs so faint they were indistinguishable from tears.

A week later Yang moved a few of her things to my flat. When I woke, she was already up, fixing me coffee in the kitchen. While I worked, she headed into town and fetched us food. She'd be busy in her studio for hours, but the moment I finished a piece of sewing, or got hungry, or just needed a break, she was there with coffee or dinner or a hug. It was like we occupied two worlds, but the moment I needed her, Yang's world would go into suspension and she would slip effortlessly into mine.

"You don't have to do this for me," I said as she served up garlic potatoes one evening. "Thank you, though," I added, lifting a wedge from the pan, stuffing it in my mouth, and licking my fingers to cool them down.

"Yeah, I know. I don't have to do shit."

I laughed, and she put the pan down on the side, lit up a Marlboro, and watched me as I took a couple of mouthfuls. Sometimes it felt like I was her experiment, and Yang would appear once in a while with her clipboard to take notes.

"At least let me wash up tonight," I said.

"Don't I do it right?" she asked, scrunching out her cigarette against the bottom of the pan. Her eyes went from stern to mischievous like someone had pulled up a blind, and we laughed. She sat down and leaned over her plate. Watching her eat made me smile. She hunched her shoulders, held her head like she was sniffing menthol crystals, and moved her cutlery straight up and down without stopping for breath.

As soon as I'd finished, she took my plate away and sent me back into the studio, where I worked at cutting and sewing and cutting and sewing until I was exhausted. Some days the actions felt so repetitive I wondered if the work had any meaning at all. I could go a whole day and not think of Claire once, even though I was doing nothing but spelling out endless iterations of her name. It was hard to tell whether the constant performance of this simple task gave the piece its meaning, or reduced it to banality.

When I could no longer tell what my hands were doing, and my eyes fell out of synch with each other so the thread and the cloth merged into one and I became petrol-blind, I showered and headed to bed, where Yang was waiting.

My head and my eyes and my hands felt like they were still moving and would never stop. Yang raised her head off the pillow and her hair tumbled down behind her. She pulled the duvet back and I slipped in, clamping my hand to my forehead as though that would keep my thoughts still. She kissed me and slid down the bed, and worked skilfully with her tongue and her fingers and her hair until my body shook with pleasure, and everything went still.

“Wanna tell me about her?” she whispered in my ear.

“I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“You won’t upset me, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know. I don’t know why or how you’re able to do this, but I know. It’s not that. There’s nothing to tell. I don’t think I’ve thought about her once all day.”

She giggled and the breath tickled my neck. “We don’t always know what we’re thinking,” she said.

“I guess,” I answered, but it was little more than a reflex.

My breathing was deeper and longer, and in my mind images and shapes and sounds had begun to merge, like melting balls of different coloured wax that someone’s stirring with a long spoon.

“Now leave it,” said Yang as I finished off the final seam and ran my fingers over the hem to check the stitching was flat.

“I will,” I said. I was still moving my hands but I’d stopped feeling for faults. There weren’t any. It was as though I was trying to sew myself into the fabric. I was suddenly exhausted. Life would be so much easier, I thought, if I could just lie down under this blue silk sky and wait until I became part of it.

“Come on, Szandi.”

“Later,” I said. “Let me sleep.”

“You can sleep all you want in bed.” Her hand reached in through the flap and grabbed my wrist. I pulled back like a child who’s seen the world into which it’s about to be born and recoils in horror.

Yang took her hand away. I heard her footsteps retreating, only to return a few seconds later.

“I got you a treat to celebrate,” she said. There was no insistence in her voice. It was gentle, smoother than the silk.

I poked my head outside. She was sitting on the floor with a pair of glasses next to her. She was cutting wax from the neck of a Tokaji bottle. The label was familiar.

“Szant Gabor!”

“Yeah,” she said. “1864.”

“Where? How?”

“Google, a lot of phone calls, and several favours.”

We sat in silence and finished off the toffee-coloured liquid before the air had time to damage its delicate balance. I held the empty glass under my nose and I was back on the vineyard. The scent of caramel and pear slowly became the damp mould of the cellars, and the rich lanolins of Dad’s jumper.

“You should call him,” said Yang, as if she could read my mind.

“Yeah.”

“Go on. Tell him you’ve just celebrated your first masterpiece! I’ll pack up your tent and make sure it’s folded so nothing’s creased.”

“It’s OK, I’ll do it.” My hand twitched. I could hear the irritation in my voice.

“You’ve finished, Szandi.”

“Yeah, but I’ll just.”

“Finished.” The answer was final.

By the time I’d phoned Dad and showered, Yang had folded the tent into a triangle the size of one of the side panels. It was so thin it seemed not to have any depth at all. I felt a sudden desire to open it back out and crawl inside and make myself infinitely thin as well, but it was soon gone.

“Thank you,” I said.

“That’s OK.”

“I’ve been a total bitch. It feels like I’ve thought about nothing but that fucking tent for weeks.”

“Yeah, that’s the point. Welcome to the world of art.”

“I shouldn’t have let it take over my life.”

“Yeah you should. You have to, otherwise there’s no point.”

“I shouldn’t have let you do everything for me, though.”

“What would you have done if I hadn’t?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Yeah it is.” She finished skinning up, pinched the end and set light to the twist. I watched her close her eyes as she inhaled, and wondered where it was she went inside her head when she was stoned.

I looked at her sitting there, holding her joint with her thumb on the bottom and all the other fingers on top. She looked like a kid who hasn’t learned to use its cutlery properly. She was leaning on the other hand so her hair fell forward and hid half her face. The overall impression was one of awkwardness, of the kind of childishness I’d stopped seeing in myself a long time ago.

I felt an overwhelming need to tell Yang I loved her, but in the corner of my eye I saw the folded blue silk, and knew that I couldn’t. I held her as she finished her smoke. I felt like I was cradling a child, but I had no idea whether the child was her or me.

Yang lay on top of the bed, her breathing still fast from the exertion of making love. Light from streetlamps flooded in and bounced off her glistening, moving skin. I watched the way patches of darkness and white traced paths across her pale brown skin, like kites playing tag on the wind. I felt the ripple of her muscles and the way each bead of sweat formed and fell as if they were my own.

“You’re a voyeur, you know.”

“Eh?”

“Look at you. Watching me like I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I like watching you.”

“I wonder about you sometimes, Szandi,” she said, turning on her side.

Her hip glistened, and cast a shadow over the wisp of black hair between her legs. I heard myself swallow. She took her hand from underneath her cheek. She placed it on her stomach, and pushed it slowly down. Outside, the roar of traffic and the blaring horns of cabs disappeared. As I held my breath I could hear the sound of her skin brushing the thin film of sweat. I watched as her fingers disappeared into the shadow, listening intently for the first rasp of fingertips on hair.

“You see what I mean?”

“No.”

“Sometimes I think you like to look more than you like to touch. Not just me, but life. If you’re going to be a sculptor your primary sense has to be

touch. You can't sit back and look at life. You have to feel it through every pore of your skin."

"I like to touch well enough," I said, turning and wrapping my leg around her.

The next morning I went to make coffee the moment I woke, leaving Yang in bed beside me. I wanted to start doing things for her. I smiled as I pictured her eyes slowly opening to its aroma.

"Hey, Szandi!" I turned to see her leaning against the side.

"I was going to"

"I know," she said, cutting me off. "Thank you." She smiled. "I need to get going."

"Going?"

"My piece for the exhibition."

"Of course! Shit!"

"Don't worry, I'm coming back. I'll let you know when I'm done."

"What can I do?" I asked. "Fuck, I feel useless. I don't even know what you're working on."

She came over and put her arms round my shoulders, pushing her tongue into my mouth and kissing me slowly. "You don't have to *do* anything, dummy. All I want is for you to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Promise me you'll leave that fucking tent alone!" Her face broke into a smile like. She kissed me again, and skipped to the door. "I'll call when I'm done," she said, closing the door behind her.

43

Soon the sunlight will begin to play impressionist games as it clips the tiny waves on the Danube. We've got a long day ahead getting ready for the exhibition, and we both need coffee. "Tonight," I whisper, pressing Gyorgy's letter to my lips before tucking it under the plastic cutlery holder. I don't know why I think tonight will be any different from last night, but I do.

"You ready, Szandi?"

Yang's standing in the doorway fully dressed. I wonder if she's been watching me for long. She's wearing dungarees over a check shirt. The clothes are too big and she looks like a burly lumberjack. Beneath her collar there's a shiny flash of salmon pink. She's put her work clothes over her finery to save getting changed later.

"You'd better not be going without your breakfast," I say, smiling. I pour coffee into two mugs, handing one to her and drinking from the other before it's had a chance to cool. I should be exhausted but I'm not, and it's not just the caffeine. I feel like I've slept through undisturbed even though I haven't had a minute's rest all night.

"I'll eat on the way," she says, showing me a couple of snack bars she's got in her big front pocket. "Better go meet the guys with the crane."

"Crane?"

"How the fuck else do you think I'm getting my sculpture down?"

"So you're what? Taking the side of your apartment off?"

"Just the window." She grins. There's a thin line of dark brown on her top lip. I kiss it and it and feel my lips pucker at the bitter taste of drying coffee. "It's OK, I do it every year."

"Wouldn't it be easier to build your sculpture on site? Or to move your studio?"

"Fuck easy! I'll see you there."

I listen to her footsteps skitting down the stairs.

Fuck easy.

Tomorrow the winter exhibition will open to staff and students in the morning, and the public in the afternoon. Today's setting up time for the sculpture expo in the big hall where I brought my application piece. At least I get a whole day this time round. The School holds two exhibitions a year,

one in the winter and one in the summer. All first year students have to put a piece in one of the two shows, and everyone else has to exhibit at least twice more before they finish. Most people wait till summer, so as I look around at the pitches marked out on the floor I get a sense of space and airiness. It's so different from the frenetic mash of the interview it feels like a desert, and I imagine a warm sirocco blowing Yang's balloons away into the eaves.

I scan the room wondering where her pitch is. I picture her marshalling the small army of helpers she'll need to get her sculpture here safely. Some people barely touch life as they move through it. Yang crashes around and bends it to breaking.

I put the pieces of the tent in front of me. It's hard to make them out, blue on blue, so I lay them side by side, the groundsheet with its four tiny pockets in the corners to sheath the poles; the carbon fibre poles I took from a cheap one man tent in an outdoor pursuit shop and covered with silk, struggling for days to find a way to get the slick surfaces to bond, to avoid the cloth sagging on one side when I bent the poles into place; and the tent itself with its four triangles, sewn together down every seam but one, little eyelets of silk through which to thread the poles so everything keeps its shape.

I have a whole day but I need only a few minutes. I pull the flap back and pin it securely like a pathologist peeling back skin to examine the corpse's viscera. I can see the contours of the cloth, the way the letters reflect the light differently; sometimes they disappear into the background, and sometimes they appear a different colour altogether.

I begin my final check for imperfections, for creases and stitches that have come loose. I have an iron and crepe paper with me. In my pocket are needles, and thread I've spun from strands of unravelled silk. I trace the outline of each letter, feeling the rise and fall of stitches beneath the pads of my fingers.

Claire, I say under my breath, every time I spell her name. *Claire. Claire.* It becomes a mantra, a chant I have to repeat as though something terrible will happen the moment I let my lips go silent; as though she only exists at all as long as I repeat the word.

I step inside. The tent is spacious, more so than it looked laid out unassembled on the floor. I barely have to stoop. Once inside I sit, and carry on the ritual, tracing and repeating *Claire*. There are no flaws. There are no

creases, no tears, no misshapes in the fabric. Yang has folded it with infinite care as if she were folding the wings of a hummingbird.

There's nothing more to check but I can't leave. My hands run over the smooth surface of the groundsheet. It's slick against my skin, unnaturally so, like a body without pores or hair. And cold, like something whose life has seeped back into the ground it came from.

Claire. My eyes struggle to adjust to the blue. The light enters unevenly, and the extra thickness of the letters gives the darkness solidity against the fluid background. *Claire*, the only thing in this world that has substance; but it's a substance that's melting, the last shadows in the lee of waves beginning to settle on the skin of the sea. Soon the wind will have disappeared completely; there will be no more waves, just the formless, shapeless surface of the water reflecting back the sun so brightly that everything below is lost to sight forever.

I close my eyes. I'm back by my window in Tokaj, but even here there's no escape from the sun. It's bright, and the angle it beats on the glass distorts and distracts and I can barely see anything but the glass itself.

Claire, I whisper one last time. I bend slightly and leave the tent. I pull at the silk-covered ferrule in the centre. There's a ping and a fizz as the poles pull apart, the sound of slithering cloth as I screw the material into a ball and stuff it into my bag.

I look around me, trying to find Yang. I locate the bright, shining balloons ten metres or so away, surrounded by air that blurs against the Perspex and gelatine. A crowd of people has gathered, dumbstruck, stooping and peering and staring to see the space that separates each balloon from every other. But I can't see Yang.

"What the fuck?" I feel a hand and turn to see she's beaming at me.

"What film facilities have you got here?" I ask.

"Eh?"

"Film. Video. You know, cameras, speakers, screens and stuff. Where are they?"

"You're kidding?"

"No I'm not kidding." I look at my watch. It's 11. I have 6 hours. Plenty of time if she stops looking dumb and helps me find what I need.

"Come on," she says, taking my hand. She sounds cross but I can see the exhilaration in her face. We run down corridors, round corners, scraping our arms on cabinets as we go, up stairs, using banisters to propel ourselves,

down more corridors, and by the time we arrive in a huge store room we slam the door behind us and collapse on the floor laughing uncontrollably.

“You’re mad, Szandi!”

“I’m not mad,” I say. “I’m free.”

I feel her hand pressing on mine. All of a sudden she’s not laughing. Her eyes have become infinitely deep, like someone’s pulled away the trapdoor covering a mineshaft that goes down forever. I’m sure I can see the molten mantle of the earth shifting and swirling miles below.

“You were right,” she says.

“Eh?”

“You built her the most beautiful mausoleum. And you closed the door when you were on the right side. There’s not many people ever do that, Szandi.”

“I love you,” I say.

“I love you, too.”

44

It feels so easy I have to dig my fingernails into myself several times to make sure it's not one of those dreams where everything runs perfectly and you wake up to find you've slept through a deadline.

We find a camera and an empty room. "Do you have anything to make you sleep?" I ask Yang.

"Sleep?"

"Yeah, I need you to sleep."

She rolls her eyes. "No, but I can get something." Twenty minutes later she's back, and I use the time to set up the software ready for editing.

"OK," I say as she pops a couple of pills. "Before you're out I need you to talk into here." I hand her a digital recorder and dictate. She does exactly as I say, and before long her arm begins to drop, like the tiny black machine in her hand's too heavy. That's fine. I've plenty to play with once I upload the MP3s and put them on a loop.

"Take your clothes off," I say.

"Hmm," she sighs, and her arms make a vague attempt to move above her head. She's got just enough energy left to stay upright whilst I undress her. I take the tent out of my bag and unfold it on the floor in front of a plain white wall. I ease Yang down, supporting her with the flat of my forearms. She looks so fragile I worry she'll break if I so much as whisper against her skin.

It's only 1.30. I switch the camera on, focus it, and let it run. I sit there with my legs crossed, and rest my chin on my steepled palms. The room's heated but cold still rises through the vinyl floor. Gooseflesh starts to patinate Yang's skin. The sight of her sleeping is hypnotic, and soon I find my breathing falling into the same rhythm as hers. I want to lie down next to her, peel back her skin, crawl inside, and close it over the two of us.

I want to touch.

It's 2.30. Yang's been dreaming for a few minutes now. I wonder what she sees. Gently I move her, using the silk like a stretcher. I pull her to the opposite wall. She murmurs. An arm moves. I make sure I put the silk over my hands as I turn her. My skin must be freezing. It feels like I'm touching her through water and I imagine we're in the shower, or the sea. I feel pulses of water on the insides of my thighs, tiny waves lapping on my belly.

I make myself come to and refocus the camera.

3.00. Everything's done, even the editing, which is no more than four simple files spliced into loops. I fetch coffee one mug at a time and put it next to Yang. "Sorry," I say, and press the hand I've kept cold onto her stomach.

"Huh!" she gasps.

"Time to get up, sleepy."

"Eh?"

"Never mind. You might want your clothes."

She rubs her arm over her face. Her eyes don't focus. I can see her brain running to catch up as she looks around to take in the scene – me sitting at a computer; two big plasma screens by the door, her naked and wrapped in blue silk bedding that was, until a few hours earlier, the sculpture I'd been working on for weeks.

Even the IT and electricians go to plan as we install the piece, and now, at 5, it's ready to run. There's a small crowd of students around us, keen to see what the hell I've been up to changing my plans at the last minute like this. I look at their faces. One of them's Ramone. He's wearing a Television T-shirt today, and he grins at me. I smile back. The exhilaration I felt in the Grey Wolf returns as I switch on the projectors, set the software running, and do a final sound check to make sure the balance on the speakers captures exactly the cadences of Yang's voice.

I've created a small room from three bits of plasterboard. "Come on in," I say, and the crowd joins us like we're holding an impromptu party.

The screens come to life. There's Yang. I turn to the other screen. There she is again. She's standing next to me and I bite my lip as she takes in her own naked body in front of her fellow students.

"Fuck, Szandi, look at my nipples!" she says eventually. "You half froze me to death." She grins and holds my hand. "It's good," she whispers into my ear.

There must be ten of us in this tiny makeshift room. On one wall Yang lies naked on her side, her hands placed so we can see only one of her eyes. The lid's flickering away as she dreams. On the other wall's the same Yang, lying in the same pose only in negative. Her eye is closed and still. Heads turn from one to the other, trying to detect any other differences, but there aren't any. Her body has a perfect symmetry. The curve of her breast has the

songs from the other side of the wall

same fullness; her stomach rises and falls in the same rhythm to an identical depth; her hair hangs the same on the formless blue sea beneath her.

No one speaks. The only noise comes from the two speakers, each playing a loop of her voice. “I see you sleep,” says Yang from one side; “I see you dream,” she responds from the other; only the sound files are ever so slightly syncopated so that now one answers the other, now the voices fight to be heard, and now they talk at intervals that make no sense, as though the sounds came from two entirely different worlds.

“I made it for you,” I say.

“Cool.”

“I’ll see you back at the flat,” I say. “There’s something I need to do.”

It's evening. The hard choices, the difficult decisions have gone. Now there is only an answer, and it's so obvious I feel stupid for not thinking of it before. I take my phone out of my pocket and dial.

"Hello, Sandrine."

"I finished my piece for the exhibition."

"Was it good?" Peter asks.

"Yeah. It was very good," I answer, surprising myself.

"But you didn't ring me to tell me you'd made a good sculpture. You are, after all, a sculptor."

"No," I say. I'm talking quickly, like it's not me saying the words. "I've got a proposition. Kind of a business thing. Only it's not just a business thing. It's about love. About love and sculpture; and silk. It's sort of about the exhibition as well, though, because my piece was – my pieces were – good. I've learned that I can use silk. Well. Really well; and I know Yang could too."

"Yang?"

"I love her," I say. It seems like the most appropriate thing to say.

"Yang," he repeats to himself. I imagine him shaping the word, and nodding to himself, as though my answer is the one he wants to hear.

"My father's dying," I say. "He wants me to go back to Tokaj and run the vineyard."

"And your horizon's shrinking before your eyes."

"Yeah."

"When I went to Paris," he says, "the horizon of my life opened up wider than if the devil himself had taken me to a high place and laid the kingdoms of the world before me. I would have given anything to have it collapse into a single point, into just one room if Sylvie was with me. I wonder, Sandrine, when you see the walls rushing in, what is it you're frightened of losing? All that wonderful, intoxicating possibility? Or that one room in your flat where you and Yang make love?"

"If you'd said that to me yesterday I'd have slapped you for it."

Peter laughs. I laugh back, and for a few seconds I forget everything except how pleasant – physically pleasant – the actual act of laughter can be.

“I want to take Yang back with me but there’s no way she’s going to come back to a vineyard. Not even for me. But it’s a huge old house. I’ve got a whole wing to myself with its own bedroom and bathroom, and loads of rooms we never use, not even when we have the pickers staying in autumn.”

“It sounds like you could make a wonderful studio – two wonderful studios, even.”

“Yeah, but two studios in the middle of nowhere! Which is why I called you.”

“I see where this is going.”

“You have contacts still, don’t you? I mean, I know nothing about you, but I think you’re rich, and you didn’t get rich as a sales rep.”

“Perhaps I made a fortune canning tuna, or on some other, equally sideways, departure.”

“Perhaps, but you didn’t, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. So, Sandrine, what you propose is this. You want to set up a studio in your father’s house so you can be there and keep an eye on the vineyard, and still do your thing. But most of all you want to do your thing with Yang. So you want to entice her by promising her more than a studio; something more like a business, something I’d know about that combines your sculpture and the use of silk, which I imagine would be some kind of avant garde fashion art. Am I right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you want me to find you outlets for your products?”

“I’d like your help, yes.”

“Have you thought this through?”

“Of course I haven’t thought it through.”

“Good. Tell me about Yang,” he says. For a second there’s a change in the pitch of his voice, but when he carries on it’s gone. “Why do you need to entice her? If she loves you, why won’t she go with you anyway? It seems to me you both want something else rather more than you want each other.”

“If you loved Sylvie, why didn’t you tell your father to go to hell?”

“Touché.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I honestly don’t know whether she’d come or not. Maybe, no, probably she would. But what’s the point of asking her to make a choice if there’s no need to? Isn’t it choices that have caused all the trouble to start with?”

DAN HOLLOWAY

There's no answer. I imagine I can hear him chewing his lip at the other end of the line as he thinks.

"You know, don't you?" he asks, eventually.

I start to mouth a question but the words just come out, like someone's put them there without me knowing. "Yeah. She's your niece, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known?"

"As long as you have," he answers.

"Do you want to meet her?"

"I feel as though I ought to."

"Will you help us?"

"Because she's my niece?"

"No," I say. "Because she's my lover."

"Yes, Sandrine. Of course I'll help you."

"Thank you," I say. The line's dead.

“Thank you,” I say when Yang walks in. She sways slightly and leans against the wall.

“Chinese genes and diazepam don’t go well with wine.” She starts giggling and her head falls forward and lolls there for a while. She draws a knee up to steady herself until her leg’s at right angles.

She turns and looks at me. “Hey, where you going?” she says, looking at the suitcase by my feet, her reactions delayed like a bad piece of lip-synching.

“I need to go home.” I wait. A few seconds later her forehead creases and she sticks out her bottom lip. “My Dad’s dying.”

“Well that sucks.” She slides down the wall, taking the last few centimetres with a thud.

“A friend of his is on the way to pick me up. I don’t know how long I’ll be exactly. A day, a couple of days. No more than a week.” I feel a heavy tugging on my head, and wonder what it is until I look down and see my index finger looped inside a strand of hair. “Gyorgy will be here soon and I need to ask you something. It can’t wait. Are you good to talk?”

“You sure can pick your moments, can’t you, Szandi?”

Seconds later her face breaks into a grin.

“Talk,” she says.

“Once.” I stop, take a deep breath, start again. “When Dad’s gone, I’ll be back. But only to pack for good. I’m moving back to Tokaj. I want to keep the vineyard going.”

“Wine?”

“Just to keep an eye on things. I’m going to build a studio in my half of the house, make bags and T-shirts, like the ones I made you. I’ve got distributors set up, the works.”

“Fuck.”

“Come with me.”

Nothing.

“There’s plenty of room for another studio. Anyway, I’ve only just started this making things shit. I’m bound to fuck it up without someone who knows what they’re doing.”

Nothing. Her eyes are half closed. The studied concentration makes her look like she’s about four.

“If you don’t come, I’m fucked. I’ve told the distributors they’re getting a full package with accessories and stuff. I thought you could make exploded plastic earrings or something.”

“Hmm,” she says eventually. “Exploding plastic earrings. How can a girl resist an offer like that?”

“You’ll come?”

“Yeah, I’ll come.”

I jump to my feet and rush to her side, slip down the wall so I’m sitting next to her, put my arm around her, and hold her head on my shoulder. I kiss the top of her hair, taking in the smell of wine and weed, and smiling.

“What’re we called?” she asks. “What’s our shiny new label?”

“Ninety-nine Balloons,” I answer.

“And one with string.”

“Which is the logo.”

“You do know, don’t you, Szandi?” Her speech is clearer, as though the thought’s beaten away the cobwebs, but her voice is so quiet I can barely hear, and I wonder if she’s already half begun to dream.

“Know what?”

“I’d follow you into outer space if you asked me to,” she says, just as the doorbell rings.

“Good evening, Sandrine,” says Gyorgy as I open the door. I nearly trip over Yang as I go back to fetch my case. He glances but he’s too polite to raise an eyebrow or say anything about her other than “Good evening.”

“Hey,” says Yang, but she doesn’t open her eyes or lift her head.

“Thank you,” he says. His hand stops for a moment on mine, then he puts my case in the boot and gets in.

The drive back home passes in near silence. From time to time Gyorgy moves his hands around the wheel, or swallows, like he’s about to clear his throat and say something. Then he just sighs and goes back to driving.

“Is there stuff for me to make him food?” I ask as we pull up.

“There’s plenty.” Gyorgy’s face goes pale and he fetches my stuff from the boot.

“Don’t worry.” I place a hand on his arm to reassure him. “I know what you mean. Please, don’t think you’ve got to watch what you say.”

“Thank you, Sandrine. Would you like me to come in with you?”

“No,” I answer, sensing he’s keen to leave.

“Then I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Oh...” He doesn’t seem sure what to say, but it’s clear what he wants.

“I’ll call if anything happens.”

He nods, gets back in the car, and drives away.

Inside it’s cold, and there’s no smell. The pickers must have left over a week ago. It’s as though someone’s shutting down the house a room at a time. There’s just enough warmth to keep the damp at bay, but life is struggling to keep a hold here. I wonder if I should go in the kitchen, heat oil, and throw in garlic and salami to make the place breathe again. Instead I put my bag down, head upstairs, and turn left into Dad’s half of the house. It’s still cold and sterile. I can feel the illness sapping and shrinking him long before I get to him.

Finally I get to the door. Camus looks up from the wedge of light coming from underneath and mews.

I push the door inwards. It creaks and I sense movement from the blankets on the bed. There’s a cloth-backed chair and I sit down. The smell of beer and tobacco comes from the fabric. I sit like this for ten minutes or

so, watching him, wanting him to wake up in his own time. Small, I think to myself. He looks small. Not like the bear of a man I remember. I wonder how much he's shrunk, and how much I've grown.

His breathing changes and the blankets shift. His eyes open, but only just. Tiny patches of damp linger at their edges like surface water on autumn roads.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey."

"I'm coming home," I tell him. "I'm coming back to Szant Gabor."

The corners of his mouth turn up. His fingers are weak on my hand, but they squeeze with all the strength he has. I could leave it there. I could say nothing more, go to bed, sit here through as many days as Dad has left, holding his hand and wiping away the sweat, but that wouldn't be right. I'm tired of happiness and hope that are based on fantasy; I'm tired of seeing beauty in shiny surfaces, depth in reflections of the sky. However short his time, if there's a chance of showing him the contours and shadows beneath the surface I have to take it.

"I'll make sure there's always a vineyard at Szant Gabor," I say. "We'll always make Tokaji the proper way. I'll make sure, but it's not something I can do myself. I'll get a manager, the best I can; I'll oversee him, keep him to the task, but that's not the job for me. I'm going to have a studio here, here in the house. I'll make art, I'll make beautiful things and sell them all over the world, to the same people with the same fine taste who buy our wine. And," I carry on. That should have been it but there's more. Peter's right. I mustn't second guess my parents. "I'm going to make a few of the rooms into a research centre. I'll put facilities in – desks, computers, conference phones, you know the kind of thing. Anyone who wants to study Tokaj will be able to come and base their work in Szant Gabor."

Dad looks at me. His expression is so thin. He has no strength left to conceal or dissemble. He wears every emotion on his glistening skin. I want to look away to preserve his dignity, as though he's naked.

"Yeah," I say. "Including Mum."

He stops trying to look at me and lies with his gaze fixed at the ceiling. I know he's walking through the cellars with her like they did eighteen years ago, tasting wines and discussing how they've aged since the last time they tasted them.

"Goodnight, Dad," I say, and kiss his forehead gently. "I love you."

songs from the other side of the wall

He murmurs something back, but it's indistinguishable. He's somewhere else.

As I approach the door, there's a gasp behind me. I turn. No! Please not yet.

It's OK. He's just woken up. He's tries to support the weight of his head. His eyebrows lower, and squeeze a drop of water out of the corner of each eye. "Such a long time," he says. The weight's too much; his head falls back, and before the door closes I hear the sound of shallow snoring.

A crust begins to form on the pools of fat floating in my gulyas.

“You don’t like pepper, Camus.”

He carries on batting my ankle with his paw. What does he care about nostalgia and regret? The only way he feels time passing is when the smell of freshly stewed meat fades and cools, and finally goes rancid. Chunks of beef, left to go slowly bad, are the closest he gets to the sense of a wasted life.

His claws are in but he’s quite insistent.

“Go on, then.” I put the bowl down and he lowers his head to sniff. He pulls his nose back in disgust, sits aloof for a moment, then reaches in with his paw and scoops out a big chunk of beef. He rolls it around the floor, leaving a gritty red stain, settles on his haunches, puts his head on one side and, holding the meat between his paws, tears off a chunk with his incisors.

“You’re right,” I say. Why wait till tomorrow to make the call?

It takes six rings before she picks up. “Hello?”

“Mum, it’s me.”

“Sandrine?” I imagine her rubbing her face, screwing up her eyes and trying to work out whether she’s awake or in a dream. “What is it?”

So many things. Which comes first? “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“Sorry for what I said.”

“Sandrine, I’m sorry too, I’m sorry I let us part like that; I’m sorry I didn’t come after you. I’m sorry for a hundred different things, but it’s the middle of the night. Couldn’t sorry wait until the morning?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Too much waiting. That’s the problem. That’s always been the problem. Things can wait till tomorrow; and if they can wait for tomorrow they can wait for the day after, and before you know where you are someone’s died.” I pause. My lip’s trembling like a moth in a jam jar. Mum doesn’t fill the gap. I swallow and carry on. “I.” I can’t get the words out. I watch Camus finishing off the last fibres of meat. His way’s so simple. If something needs doing he does it. Behind those intelligent looking eyes, there’s nothing. No complications or anxieties. No sense of what might have been or what might be. Just a reflex reaction to a subtle change in smell.

“I read Claire’s diaries,” I say eventually.

“Diaries? How did you get Claire’s diaries?”

“That doesn’t matter. Please listen because if I don’t say this now I don’t know if I’ll be able to say it again. The morning you left, Claire saw me at the window. She felt, she thought she’d fallen in love with me. She made you leave because she couldn’t bear you to find out, or me. She didn’t want to ruin things between you and me. She did it for you. Anyway, I’m sorry I blamed you.”

“You know, Sandrine, you’re right. What I said was stupid. I wanted to call you; I wanted to hold you; and every time I picked up the phone I told myself it was better to wait till things had time to settle.”

“That’s not how things work, Mum. Situations never do settle. People just get set; and once that happens they can’t move at all. They just stand there, fixed in space, and stare at each other across this gap. And you’re close enough to see the desperation in each others’ eyes but no matter how far you stretch out your arms you can never touch.”

“I love you, Sandrine.”

“I love you too.”

Mum thinks that’s the end of the conversation. I can hear it in the cadence of her voice. She waits for me to put down the phone, but I don’t. She must think we’re playing at *who’s going to hang up first*. I have to say something before she does.

“I’m turning part of the house into a research centre.” I don’t know where else to start. “There’ll be a self-contained flat, and a study, and all the whizzy techie stuff a researcher could need. Will you come and try it out?”

“Sandrine, if you really want to see me, I’ll come. I’d love to come. You don’t have to entice me.”

“Yeah, I do. Research is what you do, Mum. You research; Szant Gabor makes wine. Things are always best on their own terms, don’t you think? If you want someone to be with you, it’s the least you can do to find a way they can be themselves at the same time.”

“You think too much about other people.”

“No I don’t. You know what? I spent my whole life obsessed with causes; fighting for this and protesting for that. And in the end, none of it was about anything but me. And not even me; just this ghost I thought was me.”

“It sounds like a pretty big project. Why now?”

She's asked. Thank God she's asked, or I'd end up talking rubbish all night.

"I'm moving back here for good."

"Why?"

"So I can look after the vineyard."

That's it. There's a click on the line, the sound of shuffling. She knows.

"Mum, if there's stuff to say then come. Please. Don't leave it."

"How long?"

"A couple of days; a week."

There's nothing. Not the rub of fabric shifting on a seat; no muttering, no sobbing, no clack of shoes on the floor or chink of glass. Nothing. Like one of us has taken a piece of time, stretched it out, and wrapped it around the two of us; so we're frozen while the world carries on without us.

It must be several minutes we sit like this. I wonder even if she's stopped breathing.

Then from nowhere there's a scream so loud it comes out of the headset and traces the lines of sweat across every inch of my body. I drop the phone but I can still hear it. It's as loud as it was next to my ear. I stare at the small object on the bed. It's totally inanimate but it feels so alive, squirming, slithering, like some blood-soaked thing I've given birth to. I stare so hard I swear I can see it crawl across the bed clothes and up my thigh and force its way inside me. I put my hands over my eyes and scream. The whole bubble of time surrounding us fills with the sound of our screams, but no one outside hears a thing.

The sky's already fading. I wait for Mum outside on the steps, wrapped in two layers of fleece. Dad's sleeping in his room, although it's barely sleeping. The only difference from being awake is the speed of his rasping breath. I told him I loved him again this morning, and held his hand while he tried to say something back. Gyorgy was here for a few hours. He closed the door, and the couple of times I went to see if he was OK all I could hear was a sobbing that seemed to shake the whole house. The doctor left me his number and told me to call him any time if I needed him. I said, "I'm eighteen, not stupid. I'll call you when he's gone."

I see her cab coming up the drive a long time before it finally pulls up. I wonder what she's thinking as she sees the house get larger, and the figure of her daughter get clearer. I wonder if she even notices, or if she's staring at Dad's window, willing it to stay lit just a tiny bit longer.

She pays the driver, and we hug on the driveway. I don't know what to say and neither does she, so we hold each other a while longer and make shapes with our hands between each others' shoulder blades.

"I'll take you up," I say, picking up her bag. It's light.

"Dad," I say, opening the door. It creaks and then falls silent. I swallow and hold my breath. It's OK. I hear the sound of his lungs struggling for air. It sounds like the latch on a gate trying to open when it's too rusted to lift more than a millimetre or so.

"Dad, Mum's here."

I think there may be a flicker of an eyelid but it's most likely a tic. I step across the boards until I'm next to him. Mum's beside me. I try to notice whether she flinches or pulls back, whether her skin twitches with whole-body tears, but I sense nothing. She's totally still, like she's gone somewhere and left her body behind.

His skin looks so fragile, stretched away from his bones by gravity. It's hard to imagine the delicate wines passing like lovers through the hands hanging limp out of the side of the covers. I take one of them. It's cold, clammy, lifeless. His chest is still moving but he's not here. *Goodbye* I say under my breath, kissing the knuckles, not wiping away the film of sweat that sticks to my lips. I hold the hand out and place it in Mum's. She takes it like

the action's a reflex, as if she doesn't even realise I'm there, so I retrace my steps and close the door.

"Hey, Camus, want some fish? I thought I'd bake us some fogas for dinner." He's curled by the door jamb, and raises his head slightly when I say fish, but he doesn't move.

"Come on," I say, heading down the corridor for the stairs. But he's not coming.

"Yeah, I know." I make my way down to the kitchen and start preparing things. Maybe the smell of our favourite fish will reach him.

I wonder what they're doing up there, those two hollow bodies that somehow managed to put me together. It's always been impossible to imagine them sharing anything. I've thought of them as two opposites that could never meet, like the numbers that add to seven on a die; I've always been the solid thing between them. Now I'm on the outside and there's nothing I can do to get in.

"Sandrine!"

I shake. The kitchen's full with the smell of baked fish.

"Sandrine!"

I run up the stairs. Camus shoots past me going the other way and I know.

Mum's there, outside his door like a sentry. I run past her. She holds out an arm to stop me and I push it aside. Who does she think she is? I should have been here. She's just turned up and the moment she gets here he's gone. I want to scream it's unfair and punch the bedclothes; I want to pound my fists into Dad's motionless body for dying without me. But I don't. I bury myself into his chest. The silence is so strange. No wheezing; no heartbeat.

The room dissolves. It seems like he's putting his arm around me, and I stop feeling mad. I understand now that he was waiting, for me to come home, and for her. I understand what an act of will and faith it was to persuade his broken body to hold on.

"Did he wake up?" I ask.

"We said our goodbyes." Mum stands in the doorway. The light floods in from behind her, like it wants to wash away his death with brightness. She's slender without being thin; I can almost smell the quality of the clothes that form her silhouette. Did he manage that? Did his winemaker's nose suck in

one last bouquet; recognise she was there, and exhale her with his dying breath?

A burst of jealousy shoots through my stomach like a stitch. I want to know what happened. I want that last moment for myself. For a second I hate her. I hate her so deeply because I know she was hundreds of kilometres away all that time when I was just a few rooms down the landing; yet all that time she was with him and I wasn't. Only it's not her I hate, it's me.

It's still semi-dark in here, but the light is pushing its way in. It's as though the room's caught between the worlds of the living and the dead, like the dark line water makes on the sand as the tide retreats, rapidly lightening in the sun. I know if I think hard enough I can still hear him. He's telling me we were never apart at all. He's telling me he was there all the time, and that was enough.

I put coffee on the table and for a moment I have to check to see Mum's still here. It's like she's a part of the room. She sits, her arms in front of her and her back straight, as though this is the chair she's always sat on. *But it is*, she seems to say.

But you've been away so long; my whole life I answer. *What time could possibly be longer than a whole life?*

Don't be silly. I've been here all along. It's you who've been gone, Sandrine.

She drinks, the mug moulded to her hands like it's the only mug she ever drank from, and I realise she'll never leave.

All my life a rope has joined us, and I've felt the tug coming insistently and incessantly from the other end. It's only now I see this rope isn't there to drag me out of Hungary. It's there to lead Mum back. My whole life it's me who's been slowly pulling her in. And now I'm done.

It's New Year's Eve. A year ago Claire was alive and my life hadn't even got started. Now I barely think of her at all. Mum's making sure the house is set up right as a research centre. Gyorgy's helping her too much. She knows he's got a huge crush on her. She doesn't lead him on, but she enjoys having him around. And he makes sure Gabor gets into his stride running the aspects of the vineyard Dad used to manage.

I've spoken to Peter once on the phone. He's promised to help with distribution of fashion and wine once we get the studio running in the New Year, but he's sworn me to secrecy not to tell Yang who he is. "I don't belong in her world," he said, "and she doesn't belong in mine. It's better that way."

"What happened to letting people make their own choices?"

"That is my choice," he said.

Our pieces both won prizes at the exhibition, and the College begged us to stay. "That'll look great on our website," said Yang when she opened the letter saying hers was the best piece in the show.

"No doubts?"

"Fuck off, Szandi!"

She's been so light these past few days. It's like there was a dark film settled over her before, and I never noticed until it lifted. There's no slouch, no stiffness as she moves round the flat, packing and labelling and working out where things will fit in the new space, even though she hasn't seen it yet. I haven't seen her with a joint for over a week; she doesn't drink more than a pilsner in the evening, and she eats three huge meals a day.

"You won't come?" she asks, taking my hand and trying to pull me out the door.

"I want to finish packing."

"Ah well, if you're sure."

"I'm sure. Say goodbye to everyone for me. Tell them to come and pick grapes next winter."

"You've got a business head on you already," she says. The smile fills her entire face and seems to carry on down her body and out to the tips of her fingers. I've never seen her looking so happy. The thought occurs maybe she's happy because she's saying goodbye; but that's not it. She loves

Budapest; she loves her friends, her studio, even Professor Nemeth with his old-fashioned courtesies.

This overwhelming surplus of pleasure is all because of me, and the thought of our new life together.

“I love you,” I say, and throw my arms around her, kissing her so hard I can barely breathe.

“I love you too, Szandi,” she says, and closes the door.

There’s very little left to pack, and soon the last few things are tucked away. All that’s left is crockery for breakfast, a pack of coffee, a change of clothes, toiletries, and a few pencils and paper on the side in case inspiration strikes in the night.

I make a last sweep of the place. Nothing. It’s only seven, so I decide to be thorough and check under the bed and under the cushions of the sofa, hoping I might find money, not mice or something gross that fell off a plate weeks ago.

It’s not at all obvious. The frayed manila could easily be mistaken for the hessian lining of the sofa, but I’m bored so I give it a tug anyway. It’s a folder, a tattered document holder. It feels thick so I open it.

When I see what’s inside I gag. I throw it to the floor and scream. It falls open as it hits the wood, and a photograph floats over the floor like it’s on a cushion of air. I reach out a hand and pick up the ornately-covered Paperblank notebook. Inside are the pages of writing I expect to find. Every so often some are missing, neat tear marks nestling in the stitching.

I stare at it for more than an hour. The object is beautiful. Its cover is a rich purple with a gold and black filigree design, straps of purple leatherette holding the weakened spine in place. Inside the back cover is a brief text telling the history of the design. It ends, “this journal is dedicated to the beautiful fabrics of the Jacquard loom silk weaving tradition of France.” I close it again. Claire’s words hold no interest.

The photo’s lying face up on the floor. As I pick it up I notice something underneath. It’s the paper wallet for an electronic door key, the kind they use in hotels. *Intervcontinental* it says. I look closer, at the details of the hotel in small print on the bottom. What I see only confirms what I already know. *Bucharest*. I open it up, and out flutters a sliver of petrol-blue silk.

I place the photo on my knee. It’s in colour but I can tell from the chiaroscuro it’s old. There’s a woman and a man, standing side by side but in a way that makes it clear they’re not a couple. She’s wearing a tiny, red and

yellow print dress, and has black, bobbed hair. He's wearing a suit so sharp if he stood any closer he'd cut the dress from her skin. I turn it over, but I know what will be written on the back.

Uncle Pete? I trace the curve of Yang's distinctive *n*.

The events of a year ago are so clear it feels like the clocks have wound back exactly 365 days, and I'm watching them unfold in front of me. There's Yang, sitting at the front table in the Grey Wolf. She seems so real I can't tell whether it's a memory or a dream, or whether I'm actually there.

She's in Bucharest to find her long lost uncle. She's planning to meet him on New Year's Day, so she's come out to kill time before midnight, and ended up at the Grey Wolf, unaware she's about to see her cousin Michael take the stage. This gawky blonde picks up a guitar, and Yang falls in love. At once, before she hears a word, and she has no idea why. The thread that runs through me to Claire, and Sylvie, and the part of her family she's never known, is as invisible to her as it is to me.

She won't leave anything to chance so she heads for a wi-fi hotspot and googles the gig. From there she finds *Songs from the Other Side of the Wall*, and reads about a woman I'm in love with. For Yang, love doesn't bring paralysis; it doesn't dull her faculties, it sharpens them. She lives even more fully in the world than ever. Click. Click. She removes the anonymity that's kept everyone else complacently distant from me as easily as if she's shelling an egg. Click, and she knows exactly who Claire is.

Later that night, as she heads for her rendezvous, she sees Michael and Claire, sees them die. At the exact same moment my world slows down, hers speeds up. She dives under the wave of the crowd, she takes the diary and the silk from Claire as she falls, grabs a letter from inside a coat pocket, follows me back, and leaves it at my hotel.

In the year since then, she has been the hand gently pushing me, the ghost at my shoulder, whispering in my ear.

"I'm yours," I whisper back. "Push me as hard as you can; shout from one side of the Danube to the other. I'm yours."

Now she has me and our lives wrap around each other, she's so light it's like she's living in a bubble of hydrogen; only what's lifting her off the ground is me. What if I let her down? The feeling of responsibility makes me vertiginous, and I have to sit. She doesn't care. She'd go with me to outer space if I asked. I couldn't let her down, not if the house in Tokaj collapsed

around us and we never sold so much as a T-shirt. She wouldn't hold it against me, not for a second.

The depth of her patience and love is terrifying.

I can hardly breathe. I can only sit in my flat, paralysed, and wonder if I'll ever be able to stand again. The unconditional freedom she offers me is too much. I can do anything, or be anything. I'm not *anything*, though. I'm Sandrine, and I'm barely eighteen years old. My Dad's dead. My Mum's been absent for all but a handful of days of my life. Yang, Mum, Dad, Claire, even *Sandanieceta* in her own, fucked up way – they love me without asking anything in return. And I've loved twice, with an intensity most people will never feel in eighty years, let alone eighteen. My whole life I've dealt in absolutes, big pictures, global politics and grand ideas.

And I'm exhausted. So utterly exhausted I know if I carry on for another moment I'll go into such a deep sleep I'll never wake up.

I pour a couple of generous scoops of Arabica into the cafetiere, which I place on the table. I take my keys from my jeans pocket, and put them beside it.

I open the cover of the diary, and fold the spine down at a blank page, making sure it will stay open. I take a pencil from the kitchen side, and scribble a note:

Ninety-nine balloons with string; and one without.

Sorry

By the time the door closes behind me it's too late to change my mind. But as I head down the stairs and out of the building's front door, the thought of going back slips away into the winter mist that's curling round the city's ankles. There's a moment of blackness, like a screen, as my eyes adjust to being outside. On it, for what I know will be the last time, I see Radko as I imagined him over a year ago, cheek to the pavement, a single black eye slowly going grey. I don't ask myself what the other eye is doing. I know.

Radko's eyes are two Sandrines, who split apart the day Mum left. Sandrine the world can see, Sandrine who dreams, *Sandrinechanteuse* whose eye flickers in REM like a cursor on the screen; who floats above the world, protected by a web of unconditional love so it never leaves a mark upon her; she has gone. But the other Sandrine, the Sandrine who pressed herself so hard against the edges of time and space she sometimes left them altogether;

she remains. She doesn't dream; she doesn't sleep. Her eyes are open and she's wide awake.

That Sandrine starts to walk through the streets of Víziváros, down the hill to the river, towards the New Year celebrations.

Across in Pest I see something pulsing, and focus my eyes. A child has let go its balloon, and I watch the light play on its surface as it floats over the Danube. Up, up it goes, rising so slowly it seems almost to hover above the water. In a few minutes it will be beyond the reach of streetlamps and the fireworks and the moon reflected off the river.

It's almost midnight, and I'll be late for the big countdown, but I don't mind.

I watch the balloon, until it finally escapes my sight, its skin stops reflecting back the light, and its edges blur and fade completely in the darkness.

Standing on the Szechenyi Bridge, I see the black, rippling skin of water below me. It bends and distorts the fireworks crackling overhead. *What now?* I think. As I stare into the river I wonder whether I expect to see the answer there like flotsam sucked to the surface from somewhere deep below.

Over the slow roar of the river and the sound of celebrations I hear my phone like a voice calling from far away. I don't need to look to see who's called.

"Hey."

"Happy New Year, Sandrine."

"Yeah," I say. "It is."

"Your voice sounds half an octave deeper than usual," says Peter. "You sound like your head's so heavy you can hardly support its weight, and the words are dripping out of you as slow as resin."

"Yeah. I can't take my eyes off the river."

"The answer's not there, Sandrine."

"I know," I say, and I realise that I *do* know. It takes a strength I don't think I have, but I pull my head up so I'm standing straight, turn, and, so slowly it's imperceptible until I notice Pest seems larger than it did before, begin to walk.

"We won't ever speak again, will we?" I say. A weight so heavy it feels like it will pull me through the bridge suddenly seems to be concentrated in my phone. It's all I can do to keep holding it to my ear.

“No, Sandrine. I don’t think we will.” There’s a rushing noise, like the whole river’s been sucked dry.

“What now?” I say, but the line is dead.

“What now?” I shout, but the sound disappears into the night. “What now?” I mouth, staring at the screen on my phone. It feels light in my hand again. *Just one more question*, I think, scrolling through my directory to find Peter’s number. It’s not there. I find my call history, but there’s nothing all day. I feel stone scrape the fabric on my back as I slide to the sidewalk, still staring at the empty screen.

What now? Right now I’m going to cry. I’m going to cry like the rain that soaks the Tokaj Foothills before it becomes the late autumn mist.

I sit in the lee of the bridge with my knees to my chest and weep. “Dad,” I sob. Again and again I cry for him into the darkness. But he’s not there.

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songs from the other side of the wall

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The Ghost at My Shoulder: Literary Reflections on Coming of Age in Post-communist Hungary¹

One Hundred Balloons Without String

Sandrine, with a Hungarian father, an estranged English mother², and a French name³, makes her way through the streets of Budapest where “the mist...wraps itself around [her] like the breath of a thousand ghosts”, to her lover’s studio. There she meets Yang, three quarters Chinese, with traces of an English family that vanishes at the novel’s end in a sulphurous puff of magic realism.

It’s the middle of the night – 3am, the 3am “eternal” of the KLF’s 1990s anthem – a time outside of time. The older sculptress has called her lover to see her new work, *One Hundred Balloons Without String*⁴.

“I’m standing in front of a glass tank about a metre high,” Sandrine describes, “the same deep and twice as long. Inside are loads of little red balloons. They’re just hovering in space, refusing to fall to earth or float off into the sky. Some of them are clustered together so it looks like they’re

¹ Paper delivered at the conference *Ghosts of the Past* at the University of East London, June 12, 2009.

² Her mother walked out the day the Berlin Wall came down, when Sandrine was a week old.

³ My thanks to Pal Nyiri for pointing out the difficulty of registering the name with this spelling. This led me to play even further on Sandrine’s “resident of nowhere” status by having her explain her father had to register her name as Szandrine which, as she puts it “makes no sense in Hungarian or French”. The name Sandrine comes from Sandrine Bonnaire, star of *M Hire*, released shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the first foreign film Sandrine’s father, Marko, has seen. Newly enthused by post-Communist possibilities – especially in relation to the French, whose money reinvigorates his vineyard – he names his daughter after the actress. Bonnaire’s subsequent heartbreaking film about her relationships with her own real-life daughter adds a further note of poignancy to the naming.

⁴ A reference, of course, to German band Nena’s protest song 99 Luftbalons, often mistranslated at the time as “99 Red Balloons”. The reference is made even more explicit at the end of the novel. The sculpture is explained in the novel to be a parody of Damien Hirst’s classic musing on the nature of identity and the tensions and divisions at play within our persons and our discourse, *Mother and Child Divided*. Yang makes the piece by placing plastic balls into a gelatine solution “chemicals suspended in extract of cow,” as she puts it. Art is a central theme in the novel, and is dominated – as an expression of Sandrine and Yang’s aspirations to “The West” – by the work of Young British Artists.

supporting each other, but I walk all the way around the tank and there's clear air surrounding every one of them."

Yang explains:

"You're born and you open your eyes and all around you see this cat's cradle of ropes and cords and strings. Family, rules, race, sex"

But this connectedness in life, like that in the sculpture, is just an appearance:

"if you look at life from every angle you see there isn't a cat's cradle at all. There's nothing touching anything else."

"I made this for you," says Yang, but Sandrine doesn't yet grasp the sculptures importance.

The next day a letter arrives from her father's oldest friend, and events overtake her. Marko, her father, is dying, and his last wish is for her to return and take over the vineyard in the Tokaji foothills that has been in the family for over 300 years. Sandrine must choose between past and present, family and lover, city and country, the timeless craft of viticulture and the endlessly changing ideas of art.

Ghosts Hunting in Pairs

As Yang sleeps, Sandrine is transported back to the night of 31st December 2006⁵. She is in Bucharest, singing at a concert to mark Romania's accession to the European Union. As midnight approaches she jostles her way through the streets with a teenager's confidence that life is finally beginning. 2007 is the year she, like Romania, will join "The West". She mistakes the crowds' celebrations for her own naïve optimism.

⁵ The narrative mechanics of the shift are deliberately designed to reflect the devices in Haruki Murakami's "Norwegian Wood". Sandrine's age initially had very little to do with a desire to explore post-communist identity, and everything to do with my love for Murakami's novel. and a desire to recreate it in Central Europe.

“I didn’t see the ghosts standing at every shoulder, pushing them on,” she recalls, “ghosts of the thousands who simply disappeared from the world, drawing substance again for one night from the beery breath of the masses.”

The main body of the novel takes us to the narrative present near the end of 2007, as Sandrine tries to see her life through the lens of her impending decision.

Playing with the layers of meaning of ghosts, shades, shadows, the hands pulling the shadow puppets’ strings, I wanted this novel to explore whether a human being can ever be the unhaunted subject of their own lives, like a balloon in Yang’s sculpture, comfortably occupying its place in relation to every other balloon; dependent for that place on none of them.

Originally entitled *Late Harvest*, and told through the eyes of Sandrine’s mother, Jenny, in the end I chose Sandrine herself as my narrator (and the title of her blog as the title for the novel) because her coming of age is a germane, if trite, synecdoche for looking at post-communist Hungary – and the Hungarian wine industry especially – which in turn offers a crystallisation of the forward- and backward-looking forces at work on every human life.

As her memories unfold, we realise how much more complex her decision is than simply a choice between the future and the past. Sandrine sees her life in terms of more and more polarities, until she feels trapped in the apparent cat’s cradle of Yang’s sculpture. It is in the nature of ghosts/shades/shadows always and only to come in opposites (and of oppositional pairs that they cast shadows/shades/ghosts at each other), and this is their particular problematic for subjectivity. Shadows, whether we flee them or embrace them, will always force themselves upon our lives as the horizon demarcating our subjective self, so that it is never “we” who flee or embrace. Sandrine has always constructed her identity in terms of ghosts, positing herself as one thing in opposition to another; and as such her life has never been – and threatens never TO be – lived by her.

The attempt to define oneself, as Sandrine does, in relation to a shadow, introduces into one’s life what Derrida would call a double reading. The shadow you see on the floor in front of you exists because of the light shining from behind you. Literally, one can only see the future in the light of the past, the opposite of which is equally true. The attempt to define oneself

in these categories – “the future”, “the West”, “the world of art”, “the world of internet friendship and virtual chatrooms” – results in the inevitable positing of oneself in a diaspora, more specifically a double diaspora, separated at once from the thing one is not but desires to be; and the thing one flees that one fears to be.

The resultant life, perceived as subjective, is an inevitable restless dialectic that results in an endless shuttling of the self between poles; a shuttling that manifests itself as anxiety and doubt, an inability to decide or act. It is the life of constant motion that GOES nowhere. A life lived in exile from oneself⁶.

Eszencia

So how does this dialectical shadow play function in the case of Sandrine’s choice between past and future; vineyard and art college? Allow me a brief viticultural diversion. Tokaji is one of the world’s oldest, and mythologically rich, wines. In late autumn, the micro climate of the Tokaji Hegyalja sometimes brings a mist that blankets the vines and infects the grapes with botrytis, shrivelling them until all excess water disappears and only the concentrated, slightly acid natural sugar remains. Pickers select only the rotten grapes, which they pile into huge baskets – *puttunynos*. Before the harvest is pressed, a tiny amount of juice leaks out under the natural weight of the grapes, and it is this liquid, so rich in sugar it ferments barely if at all, that becomes the legendary, fabulously expensive *Eszencia*, which ages and improves for centuries.

It is a centuries-old process, one not without its own symbolic tensions between past and future. After years of communism that saw the winemaking process altered to meet qualitative and quantitative demand, Marko – like many of his real-life counterparts – welcomed money from Western European wine producers in order to return to the region’s traditional methods and standards. As a result, instead of gracing the tables

⁶ This is the opposite of Kristeva’s injunction to embrace the stranger within, which I exegete here as the acknowledgement that the individual, to be a true subject, contains the absolute Other. For the exile, the Other is always outside – what is fled from and run towards; the result being the self is always also somehow external.

of Emperors and Tsars, his wines now line the shelves of our modern palaces, the luxury malls.

The Cosmopolitanism of the Airport Emporium

Back in the novel's present, as the end of 2007 approaches, Sandrine's makes a choice she believes can balance the conflicting pulls on her life. She will return to the vineyard, but she will hire in a manager – a Tokaj man, fed by the soil of the Tokaji Hegyalja, not someone parachuted in by the vineyard's French financiers. And she will convert half the vast old house into a fashion studio where she and Yang will design limited edition T-shirts – to be sold to the same luxury outlets around the world as Szant Gabór's finest wines. She will commit herself to neither East nor West, but to both, which is to say, of course, to neither, but rather to the glitzy airport emporia that exist outside both time and space.

Sandrine's choice achieves nothing, changes nothing. But this stasis results not form inaction. Rather she acts constantly, oscillating from Past to future, from art to wine, from Marko to Yang. And the "decision" she makes is nothing more than a perpetuation of this oscillation. A vineyard that is also a studio, a house with two wings, one given over to Tokaji, the other to fashion, a physical manifestation of the life of endless movement between the arms of ghosts, a life destined to lead nowhere but eventual exhaustion. Like passengers in the airport lounge, galaxies that appear only as a milky cloud, TV sets scrolling through endless channels, it is not stillness and inactivity that grey out her world, but unrelenting activity.

The Bottom of the Well

Is she condemned to this life, flitting like the moth Camus the vineyard's cat chases night after night along the landing banisters, until its wings no longer have the strength to keep it in flight?

No; there is one more act in the account of her coming of age, as she fully understands the implications of Yang's disconnected red balloons. At this point theory borrows its language from the world of real shadows, whilst the book moves into territory of more traditional ghosts. There are two sources of light that cause shadows to disappear – from above and from all around. These stand on the one hand for absolute individualism; and on the

other for a connectedness to “everything” that represents, for want of a better term, a radical cosmopolitanism. The two are inextricable. Each person’s singularity is definable only by knowing their connection not to selected things but to everything – only absolute connectedness actually allows the individual to BE.

How so? Because the specific is always in relation to the universal, it can only be in absolute universality (by considering the individual in relation to EVERYTHING) that we achieve absolute specificity. Because, as we weave through it in our subjectivity, this absolute other MUST endlessly shift (not in itself but in relation to our subjectivity – the other’s shifting in relation to it being the definition of our subjectivity) we see in this polarity an endlessly elusive, infinitesimal viscosity. The membrane between the infinite and the specific is infinitely elastic as against the plasticity of all membranes between finite polarities. This membrane is the tiny sheen of sweat and fluid that keeps lovers always deliciously separate in their togetherness.

Whilst at first sight this radical cosmopolitanism is one and the same as the homogenous airport emporium, the limbo to which Sandrine first condemned herself, her art, and her father’s wine, it is actually the opposite. Both exist both everywhere and nowhere, but in different ways. The airport is a way of being IN the world that reduces it to its shiny surface. Life in the airport lounge cries out “I want to be part of the world” “I’m the same as you” – its nature is the same fleeing from and towards of any life lived in shadows. In the airport emporium “the world” is a shiny, infinitely viscous and homogenous thing, absolute (but not in a substantive way) surface, absolute triviality, absolute kitsch. Whereas radical cosmopolitan cries out “I am part of the world”, and for her that being is not a statement of desire or fear, fleeing to or from, but a statement of simultaneous wonder and horror at what IS.

The radical cosmopolitanism of the individual who stands in relation to the Absolute Other of infinite othernesses is always in motion, always subject. So there is never the indecision and doubt of the person suspended between ghosts. Movement is never the fleeing-seeking eternal shuttle of anxiety and doubt, it is the intersubjective interplay in which subject and Subject, self and Other each always move – sliding effortlessly against one another – with supreme confidence and purpose.

As 2007 ends, her father dead, Sandrine packs her things and waits for Yang to return from the New Year celebrations to leave Budapest for the

vineyard. But they never make the journey. Finally understanding the importance of Yang's sculpture, Sandrine heads out into the night:

“I pour a couple of generous scoops of Arabica into the caffetiere, which I place on the table. I take my keys from my jeans pocket, and put them beside it...I take a pencil from the kitchen side, and scribble a note:

*Ninety-nine balloons with string; and one without.
Sorry.”*

The novel comes full circle as she makes her way again through the streets of Budapest to the Szechenyi Bridge. There she stops, pulls her knees up to her chest as though removing herself from the world altogether, realising at last the world is not an infinitely viscous surface, a single homogenised thing; but an infinitely complicated, shattered, broken, fragmented, terrifying, and marvellous.

“What now?” she asks herself again and again, before she finally answers:

“Right now I'm going to cry. I'm going to cry like the rain that soaks the Tokaj Foothills before it becomes the late autumn mist.”

The ghostly mist of the novel's opening – the mist that swaddles her in polarities and tensions, anxiety and doubt – has given way to the transcendent mist of the Tokaji Hegyelja, a mist that brings infection, but an infection that's the necessary precursor for the unpressed, unpressured grape to mature into its mythical Essence.

We leave Sandrine on the bridge at a moment of absolute solitude and absolute connectedness. We have reached another moment outside of time, one we know can't last beyond its existence on the page. Sandrine has become the radical cosmopolitan subject whose definition is always to BE in a shifting, erotic relation to the world. Like Schrödinger's cat, we close the cover on her knowing the instant we do, her position will change; her life will, at last, begin.

99 Balloons; and 26 Drafts

Songs from the Other Side of the Wall started life on a damp February morning in Caffé Nero next to Piccadilly Station in Manchester. I was angry with the online writing world, and disillusioned with writing in general. I'd just come off the back of writing a thriller, *The Company of Fellows*, a vain attempt to produce something that somebody might want to buy. It felt like I'd spent the past year trying to jump through hoops to be commercial, and still people told me they didn't get my characters, my world was too isolated, my style too literary.

To hell with it, I thought. I'm going to write the book I want to write. And it'll be as obscure, awkward, and obfuscatory as I choose to make it.

So began the story of *Late Harvest*, a novel about the effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall on six different lives – told from six points of view, woven together in, well, any way I chose.

So what happened? I guess I capitulated. Eventually I went from six points of view to just three, those of Jenny, her daughter Sandrine, and Claire, the woman who bridged the gap between them. My online critique groups all agreed. They “admired” my work. Being a child of the 80s, that brought only one thing to mind: Sir Humphrey Appleby's commendation of Jim Hacker's “brave” political decisions. But I didn't care. I was going to stick with the awkwardness. And if I was thinning out narrators, I was going to damn well make up for it by adding and mixing up timelines!

Until I woke up one day, read through what I had, and realised what a wonderful metaphor Sandrine's life was for post-communist Hungary. And in an instant the story became hers. Which meant a new title. *Late Harvest* was great, and snappy, and a super word play on the Tokaji pudding wine at the heart of the story. But it was always intended to refer to the journey through the story of Jenny, the 50-something mother who's spent her life meandering without purpose. It didn't really fit a seventeen year-old girl. So, as a holding title until something better came along, I used the title of Sandrine's blog, *Songs from the Other Side of the Wall*. And nothing ever did come along.

With the decision to make it Sandrine's story came a whole load of problems and authorly demons. But the one that never left me was the demon of structure.

All the time, things seemed to be going well on the surface. I was number one book on the site *Youwriteon*, so I must be doing something that was OK. But behind the scenes, in my critiquing group at *The Bookshed*, murmurs were turning into fights. Why should I obey the rules of storytelling? I wanted to know. And who says they're the rules anyway? Dwight V Swain, apparently. And it's all about conflicts and arcs, and stuff that seems to bear more relation to medieval knights chasing dragons than the delicate, stream of consciousness worlds of Murakami and Kundera that I wanted to inhabit. No, damn them, I was going to stick to my wavy timelines, my flitting and "light touch" movements.

Only I kind of new they were right. This was actually more of a traditional story than I thought. It was the story of a young girl forced to choose between the old and the new, pulled in two directions and almost torn apart by the opposing forces. And the story was about the sense of helplessness she felt in the grips of a world that seemed so much bigger than her.

And that's what gave the story the structure you see here, although it was far from the end of the road as far as both minor and, indeed, major tinkering was concerned. The story you've just read was the 26th draft in total.

So here, in the order they appeared, are the various openings the novel has had in its brief but turbulent life. You will find some pieces familiar; others will seem like an alien world. But all were an essential part of the journey that led to the novel as it is today.

Feb 28 2008

Sometimes it feels as though a single event changes the world forever. Claire knew that wasn't true. It's a myth that journalists and politicians hawk to sell a few more papers or put a downpayment on their place in the history books. The public buy it of course. Schoolkids swallow the story as well, to the great relief of their teachers. Even undergraduates and the majority of postgraduates find it makes their essays easier if they go along with the idea that the fortunes of nations turn can turn on a pinhead. But Claire had spent the last three years, and endless trips to the communities around Lake Balaton in Hungary, carefully gathering data that put the lie to this. That there are faultlines running through history she could hardly deny. But these are only ever the product of deep, inexorable processes that have been working away unseen for generations. The events that make the news are just the ripples that hit the surface from a stone that dropped an eternity away.

So Claire was happy to sit on the bed and watch the story unfold on television. There was no need for her to be part of the crowd like so many of her fellow students were. They had gone to Berlin days, even weeks ago. They wanted to be there to smell the first must of powdered cement as the structure tumbled. They needed the frottage of pressed sweat and celebration to make it real. They dreamed of clawing through the crowds and coming home with a grubby, graffitied shard of history. The only thing that mattered to them was that they could say they had been there the moment the Berlin Wall came down, and Europe changed forever.

Claire cradled the phone on her shoulder and tore off another slice of pizza.

"Christ, are you watching this?" Michael shouted down the phone.

"Yeah, yeah." Why did her brother have to be so melodramatic always?

"Who'd have ever imagined it, C? No more Checkpoint Charlie; no more John Le Carré."

"If you'd been paying any attention at all for the last seven years," said Claire, "you'd realise that I imagined it ages ago."

"Stop being such a cynic, why don't you! This is history, for God's sake."

"No, Michael, this isn't history, it's the news." Well, maybe that's not strictly true, she thought, looking at the pile of papers by her bed, the thesis that was one draft at most away from being ready to submit. It was of some

academic interest, of course, but only because of the insight it gave into how people made and reacted to the news. It was sociology.

She wiped tomato sauce off her hands onto the sheets and picked up a few pages. Her thoughts had wandered away from her brother's voice at the end of the phone. Perhaps she should round off her thesis with a footnote about today's events. Maybe that was just the angle she needed to kickstart her brain and finally get her writing again. She looked at her introduction. It was no use. The more she stared the more the words just jumped around the page and taunted her; did anything, in fact, except make sense, or tell her how she could whip them into suitable shape to submit.

"What?" she said, aware that the voice at the end of the phone had gone quiet.

"I said I think I'm going to go out there. Do you want to come?"

Claire sighed. "No, I don't want to come. You don't get it do you? I can't possibly go anywhere until I've finished this fucking thesis."

"Oh, I get it," he said just before she put the phone down. But she wasn't listening.

Apr 15 2008

One morning, when his daughter was ten, Marko was standing in front of the mirror shaving. He looked at his reflection and felt the skin on his neck. They both paid testament to the care he took over his appearance; but instead of feeling proud, he felt agonisingly sad.

“How ridiculous do you think you are, old man?” he said to his reflection, which looked no older than his forty-three years. “Who’s it for, eh? Your daughter? What does she care if your chin’s smooth or hairy?”

And it was hardly likely that he would ever be in a position out here to impress a woman, even if he could bring himself to be in female company and feel anything except Jenny’s absence. No, as he watched his fingers skilfully guide the cutthroat to excise the last whiskers, he realised for the first time why he carried on shaving. He wanted to keep his hand in so that one day he could teach his son. But, of course, he would never have a son.

He rinsed off the blade, dried it on a towel, and folded it back into its blue enamel handle. He gave himself a final once over in the mirror, a last look at the bare-skinned face that was already his past. Over the shoulder of his reflection he saw Sandrine standing in the doorway. She was staring, he realised, but not at him.

“Hey, Sandrine!” he called.

“What’s that?” the little girl asked. He turned round and saw that she was pointing at the razor.

Ah he thought, *What is it indeed! A tradition that belongs to my past? An expression of hopes I once had? An old man’s last attempt to hold onto the possibilities of his youth?* “It’s a razor,” he said. “My father gave it to me. My grandfather gave it to him.”

For a second time Marko felt a wave of sadness. This time it was not for the son he didn’t have, but for the daughter he did. He was sad because he knew that his desire for a son was silly and selfish when he already had a daughter who was the most beautiful thing in the world.

“Now,” he said, seeing that she was captivated by the depth of light that the enamel held, and believing that this was as good a way as any to relieve the guilt he was experiencing. “I would like to give it to you.”

He held out the razor to her and watched her face as she took it. It was as though she had sucked the light from inside it into her pale blue eyes.

“Be careful with it,” he said. “It’s not a toy. The blade is very sharp.” But it was impossible to tell if she had heard. She was somewhere else altogether. That, he realised, was why he had wanted a son. To shave with his son would have made them both happy, and it would have brought them together. He knew that giving Sandrine the razor had made her happy; and that made him happy; but their happiness was separate.

As he ran his hand over his neck and wondered if his stubble wasn’t growing back already, he understood that he had discovered a fundamental truth of parenthood. Against all other loves, loving your child meant knowing that your mutual happiness could only be enjoyed separately, and not together. Being a parent meant being in a state of perpetual nostalgia.

May 4 2008

At 57, in her first academic appointment, Dr Jennifer Clay is the new Departmental Lecturer in Hungarian Studies at Oxford University.

Claire, so crippled by depression that all she is capable of is shuffling papers for the academics who once told her that she would be a professor by the age of 35, is, at 37, the Department's Administrator.

Although she sees him only once or twice a year, Claire texts, e-mails, and messages her brother Michael every day as he chases freedom and anti-globalisation riots around the world.

Sandrine also messages Michael daily to swap the lyrics they write for protest songs.

Sandrine's father, Marko, has brought her up on his own in Hungary since the day, one week after her birth, when Jennifer walked out on them.

Instead of fighting with her father or looking for a mother she doesn't even know exists, Sandrine wastes the daytimes drinking coffee with her boyfriend Istvan.

The first of September 2006 was the only day when all of these sentences were or ever will be true at the same time; which happens to be the date today.

June 30 2008

Violence has a rhythm. Quiet-quiet-loud-quiet, like a cheap pop song. Repeat it several times and you have an incident, like an album. Repeat it more again and you have a war, then a period. In the end you have history, compressed to the point of being just noise.

On October 1 2006 Radko Dokic was beaten to death as he walked home from work. It was one of thousands of acts of brief and largely unreported viciousness that mark the final aftershock of the fall of the Soviet Bloc. It's only worth mentioning at all because it happened in the small wine-producing village of Tokaj in northeast Hungary where I spent the 17 years of my life to that point.

On January 1 2007, Claire and Michael Tyler were crushed to death when a group of Hungarian fascists sparked riots in Bucharest. Michael, rock star and activist, was one of the most famous men in Europe so his death was more widely reported. It's only worth mentioning because he'd invited me to sing at the New Year celebrations. His sister Claire was a virtual recluse whose death was tagged onto his if it got space at all. She was the woman I loved.

On January 2 2007, when I sat at my laptop struggling to think of anything to post on my blog, I think the words I couldn't find were these:

Love has a rhythm. Loud-loud-quiet-loud, like a symphony, like Beethoven's Ninth with its *Ode to Joy*.

I'm glad I couldn't find, and never posted them on *Songs from the Other Side of the Wall*, because there are so many reasons why they make me sick.

The Deflowering Duet⁷

A 17th century Westminster Divine solves a conundrum for two fictional 21st century lovers

In March this year I sat, waiting for a train in Caffé Nero in Manchester, and began writing *Songs From the Other Side of the Wall*, the story of the love between 18 year-old Hungarian art student Sandrine, and three-quarter Chinese older woman, Yang. No sooner had I started than I hit a terminal problem. As Sandrine narrates at the outset:

“The thin layers of sweat and skin that separated us seemed to melt together. I pushed down on her a little harder. I wanted the boundary to disappear altogether. I wanted my heart to leap out of my chest and start beating in hers. But it wouldn’t. I love you was all I wanted her to know, but I couldn’t tell her.”

This is the story of two journeys. Or rather, of a single journey walked on two feet. It is a theologian’s search for a language in which it is possible to talk about erotic love. It is an author’s search for a way to write that love. Each leg informs the other, but also trips, tugs, wrongfoots, the other, much like the interplay of erotic love itself.

PRO(BL)EM⁸

Erotic love is a paradoxical paradigm; and a paradigmatic paradox. It is the love of the equal but different, of commensurate incommensurables. In Plato it is the love that takes place along a single axis, a vertical axis – lover and beloved, flesh and spirit, demand and supply, human and divine – a single line, the schematic of the phallus. Deconstructing it as she does, Irigaray points us to the other Plato, the Plato of Timaeus, of the cross, chiasmus, of lips on lips, and lips on lips. But two axes – one vertical, one

⁷ Delivered at the conference *Love in Our World* at the University of Manchester, November 28, 2008. It should be noted that the novel at that stage ended with Sandrine watching the balloon disappearing over the Szechenyi Bridge.

⁸ Passim Irigaray, Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, transl. Burke, C, Cornell university Press, 1993.

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horizontal – will suffice no better than one. Unless. The ends meet, lips on lips, lips on lips, bent to breaking in a labial ellipse. Entrance and exit. Bend too far and the labia become a womb-like circle – a one instead of two, not inviting, expelling, constantly in flux, but containing, stagnating.

How does she answer the love that expectantly waits, hidden in its difference inside this womb of oneness? With tongues of angels – the two prised eternally apart by mucus that is infinitely thick, by the third, the gelatinous, the porous, but impassable between. Lovers reach *through* the between *to* each other, never coming together, not without a part that comes apart. Heidegger's ontic differences vanish, shrivel, collapse in on themselves, lacking the imporosity to remain porous only to the beloved other. Lovers differ ontologically, their being must *be* differently, standing alone and apart in the mucus, loaning only a part to the mutual.

But this interpenetration is impenetrable. Not a collapse into two poles on a single pole, but a failure to come together at all, points pointlessly floating, emitting occasional pulses too weak to reach the dying pulses from other points.

RESPONSE

Such is Irigaray's unanswerable riposte for the naïve theologian of erotic love. A love between two subjects, equal enough to both be subject, different enough to be two? If they are two they cannot relate. If they relate then one will always consume the other.

Thomas Gataker wrote a series of marriage sermons for his Rotherhithe pulpit in the 1620s. Twenty years later he was one of the Westminster Divines. He was one second rate misogynist among the many his age had to offer. Except for one sentence.

God's providence is more speciall in a wife than in wealtb⁹

An unremarkable statement, were it not for the fact that Gataker was a Ramist¹⁰. Ramism was a proto-structuralist system of classification that

⁹ Gataker, T., *A Good Wife Gods Gift*, London, 1623.

¹⁰ Named after Peter Ramus, 1515-1572. For the importance of Ramism in Puritan thought, especially that of William Perkins, see McKim, D K, *The Functions of Ramism in William Perkins'* 218

proceeded iteratively, placing an object first in the largest – most general – set of which it was a part, then placing it in ever smaller sets within this set until it had reached the smallest – most special – group of which it was a part.

Theology, Sixteenth Century Journal 1985 (16), pp503-517; Howell, W S, *Logic and Rhetoric in England 1500-1700*, New Jersey, 1956. Neither McKim nor Howell mentions Gataker. The assertion is the author's, based on the fact that Perkins held a fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge from 1584-1595, during which time Gataker was a student at the College. Perkins' influence is clear in Gataker's sermons. The categorical organisation that proceeds from doctrine to reason to use put forward in Perkins' 1592 treatise, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, for example, is followed directly in the marginal notes to, among others, Gataker's *A Marriage Feast*, London, 1624. The relation between predestination and providence in Reformed thought is not straightforward. For a basic discussion see, Pelikan, J, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, Chicago, 1984, pp218-221. Certainly by the time of Gataker it is not true that providence refers to creation as a whole, whilst predestination refers to humans, which is the basic distinction that Pelikan makes. In fact it is precisely this distinction that the use of Ramist categories breaks down. The other difference that is not intended between wealth and marriage is that of mediacy. This is a distinction it is very easy to draw from the fact that people work for their wealth, and it is one that Gataker draws elsewhere in *A Good Wife* (see, for example, pp7-8) whereas God gives Eve directly to Adam, but it is not necessarily the one to draw here. The assertion here is that general providence relates to creation as a whole, whereas special providence relates¹⁰ Gataker, T., *A Good Wife Gods Gift*, London, 1623.

¹⁰ Named after Peter Ramus, 1515-1572. For the importance of Ramism in Puritan thought, especially that of William Perkins, see McKim, D K, *The Functions of Ramism in William Perkins' Theology*, Sixteenth Century Journal 1985 (16), pp503-517; Howell, W S, *Logic and Rhetoric in England 1500-1700*, New Jersey, 1956. Neither McKim nor Howell mentions Gataker. The assertion is the author's, based on the fact that Perkins held a fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge from 1584-1595, during which time Gataker was a student at the College. Perkins' influence is clear in Gataker's sermons. The categorical organisation that proceeds from doctrine to reason to use put forward in Perkins' 1592 treatise, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, for example, is followed directly in the marginal notes to, among others, Gataker's *A Marriage Feast*, London, 1624. The relation between predestination and providence in Reformed thought is not straightforward. For a basic discussion see, Pelikan, J, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, Chicago, 1984, pp218-221. Certainly by the time of Gataker it is not true that providence refers to creation as a whole, whilst predestination refers to humans, which is the basic distinction that Pelikan makes. In fact it is precisely this distinction that the use of Ramist categories breaks down. The other difference that is not intended between wealth and marriage is that of mediacy. This is a distinction it is very easy to draw from the fact that people work for their to a particular class within that, namely created beings, and in this case humans. That marriage is "more special" one can relate to the fact that not all humans have the vocation to marry (so marriage is not a particular calling, and certainly the choice of *this* wife is not a vocation from God – as there is a danger of using the term special providence to imply. Rather, marriage, undertaken through the revelation of mutual affection as it unfolds, is the default setting out of which God may by vocation lift some into celibacy). This may not be his intention, but the theological structure is there in Gataker, and the combination of Ramism and his use of the term, alongside the traditional misogynist topoi, are what single this text out as an important moment.

So what? So by calling something a matter of Special Providence, Gataker is not contrasting it with General Providence. Rather he is placing it within the scope of General Providence, whose qualities apply to it *a fortiori*. General Providence refers to creation, with its own being, discourse, and epistemology; so Special Providence must refer to beings who share this being, discourse, and epistemology. Marriage, then, is a relation of two particular beings with a shared being. Ontically different, ontologically the same.

This is where our language of erotic love begins. Ontic difference; ontological sameness. Irigaray was too quick to dismiss the model, too quick to dismiss ontological sameness, because she did not take seriously the issue of ontic difference which is, in fact, an almost fatal obstacle to the possibility of love. Almost. The obstacle is this. Where there is a sameness between lovers with respect to something other than Being, we cannot vouchsafe the possibility of erotic love.

But hold on. What future then for Sandrine and Yang, our lesbian lovers? Or for any lovers of the same sex? Or species? But as theologians when we speak about the relation of General Providence and Being, we do not mean Being as a passive receptacle, we mean the sphere of salvation history. Ontology is not creation but creatureliness, not objectivity but subjectivity. By ontic sameness we mean the various uniforms our subjectivity wears, badges that all too easily replace subjectivity with complacency, or avariciously proselytise other subjectivities, consuming them in the process. We mean culture, race, family, gender, history, even language. For erotic love to be assured, it has to be performed in the absence of any samenesses save subjectivity itself. Love has to be for its own sake and no other. Where two people come together who share some other sameness, their coming together is all too easily collapses into that shared sameness. They become objects of that sameness not co-subjects within it – at the bidding of culture and not bending it to their bidding.

Such erotic love is almost impossible in theory and maybe – as Kant once said, unfound in practice. Almost.

AUTHOR, AUTHOR

As an author, I want to write erotic love. I want my characters to be many things. Above all I want them to be lovers. But for the author, erotic love presents a layer of problematic beyond the ones it offers up to the theologian. The theologian must find a way of talking about love. The author must get inside that love and portray its reality. The author must breathe life into her characters' love.

Writing itself undermines this endeavour. A novel employs language – language the bringer together, the bridger of difference and forger of alliance. Language, a sameness, a commonality. Language, the enemy of love; love which exists only in unreflective doing.

This isn't a new observation. In his critical masterpiece, *The Immediate Erotic Stages*¹¹, Kierkegaard argued that, because it is created afresh with each performance – indeed has no life outside of the performance, only music in general, and *Don Giovanni* in particular, can ever really portray love. We might want to add installation art. We think, for example, of the endless repetitions of action in, for example, Steve McQueen's Turner Prize winning falling house¹². This endless repetition obliterates everything objective in what is portrayed so that it transcends materiality and becomes pure interpretation; so that it exists only in the viewer's mind.

Art plays a key role in *Songs From the Other Side of the Wall*. At the story's chronological beginning, Sandrine is a songwriter and blogger. Her most important relationships take place online, with people she never meets. They are verbal interactions in the sticky between of cyberspace, always one degree removed from the real Sandrine. As the story progresses she turns her back on the written word, giving up her desire to study Languages in favour of Art. As a sculptress, she continues this journey, turning her back on any form of interpretative text, and eventually on words that have any meaning whatsoever.

Her final sculpture is a life-sized video installation, with two screens on opposite sides of the room, each showing film of the sleeping Yang. In one Yang's eyes are closed in deep sleep, in the other her eyelids flicker in REM. Two speakers accompany the film, each an endless loop of Sandrine's voice, one repeating "I see you sleep," the other "I see you dream," the repetition

¹¹ In Kierkegaard, S, *Either/Or*, transl. Hong E.H., Hong H.V., Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹² McQueen, Steve, *Deadpan*, 16mm film, 1997 (winner of the 1999 Turner Prize)

eventually creating the transcendent quality of McQueen's collapsing house. Over time the two disconnected bodies and disconnected voices lose every quality other than the act that each performs, although those acts can never be separated from each other. What Sandrine has created is a representation of erotic love that is the formal equivalent of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

But it is still a simulacrum. She might as well have entitled the piece *This is not Erotic Love*, rather than the deliberately meaningless *I see you Sleep, I see you Dream*. Nonetheless, in imagining the sculpture, as Sandrine, through the exaggerated use of metaphor throughout the novel's first person narrative, has educated the reader to do, the reader is to some extent able to become a part of the sculpture and experience its erotic interplay. If Sandrine's sculpture, through its infinite repetition, transcends its materiality, then it can create its effect without existing at all. In a way its existence only in the novel matters not.

Art only takes the author so far. Sandrine still narrates her sculpture to us univocally. She portrays a dual subjectivity to us but there is still only one real subject. Her. The problem lies in the nature of narrative itself. As long as language portrays love at all there will only be one subject.

So how does the author, who *must* narrate, avoid the univocality of language? Modernism's answer was to negate content on the altar of form. Rather than eliminate language from the equation, it made language, structure, form the *only* part of the equation. Language becomes ontology in which essentially nonsensical words retain their absolute ontic difference¹³. The modernist author uses disjunctive words to force the reader back onto form, creating a hollow structure¹⁴ which the reader floods with meaning and performance.

But modernism won't do either. I am not interested in erotic love between me and my reader, worse still in the masturbatory experience into which this formally contentless art always collapses. Sandrine and Yang are not the hollow vessels for some act of authorial rape. The love I want to write is theirs.

¹³ This is McQueen's approach, an approach that find its most elegiac exemplar in Sam Taylor-Wood's haunting video *Brontosaurus*, in which a naked man performs a rave dance to the tune of Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (Taylor-Wood, S., *Brontosaurus*, video, 1995).

¹⁴ Eliot's *Hollow Man*?

The Nobel Prize Academy awarded their 2004 Prize for Literature to Elfriede Jelinek, for “her musical flow of voices and counter-voices.”¹⁵ It is true that in works such as *The Piano Teacher* Jelinek’s technique of constant cutting and switching between voices creates a discourse that comes alive on the page. But a conversation of one voice then another is not erotic love. It is one subject and then the next and not intersubjectivity. Literature lacks the capacity, as a medium, that music has for layering, overlapping. The best we can hope for by using two different narrative strands is an approximation of love, a suggestion. We can offer the colour either side, but the reader’s imagination alone can supply the missing shade of blue.

So what tool was left to me? By undermining Sandrine’s narration I have tried, like a *midrashic* scholar or fibre-optic cable, to use one set of words to convey two sets of meanings. There are gaps in Sandrine’s narratives; periods in which she knows that she has been taken out of herself, has existed in another space, one she can in no way recall. There are dark black nodes at the root of her subjective actions, knots she cannot herself unpick. And throughout the novel pages from the diary of Claire, the woman she believes she loves at the start of the novel, arrive by untraceable courier. Sandrine’s quest for information about Claire, a woman she met only once but with whom she never spoke, forms the novel’s structural framework. The pages of her diary reveal Claire’s obsession with Sandrine. Claire’s voice pulls and guides Sandrine through the novel. Only in the penultimate scene does Sandrine discover, when she finds the gutted book under Yang’s bed, that, from months before their seemingly chance meeting, Yang has been sending her the pages from Claire’s diary.

The final weapon in an author’s war chest is the ending. If narrating erotic love renders it univocal and strips one subject of their subjectivity, then *not* narrating allows that second subjectivity to remain elusive. Like Sandrine’s sculpture, which does not need to exist at all to produce its effect in the reader’s mind, the love the author fails to vocalise she fails to

¹⁵ The Nobel Prize in Literature 2004 Press Release, Swedish Academy, 2004. The Presentation Speech highlights the difference between Jelinek’s attempts to get inside her characters and bring readers into the characters’ experience through her unrelenting narrative technique, and contrasts this with the narcissism of modernism (confining their comments rather generously to modernist authors, without implicating the readers who are equally complicit in the enterprise).

univocalise. It is the technique Charlotte Bronte famously employs at the end of *Villette*.

At the end of *Songs from the Other side of the Wall*, Sandrine leaves the half-empty diary on the table, along with the keys to the home that she and Yang were due to share. She has acknowledged and responded to the subjectivity that Yang has been injecting into her inner and outer life, although the meaning of the response goes without explanation. Heading out into Budapest to celebrate New Year, she reaches the Széchenyi Bridge, linking the towns of Buda and Pest. There, in a reflection of the opening scene that culminates every device I use in the book to render erotic love possible, she sees a single balloon, cut free of its string, floating over the Danube. She stops in her tracks, forgets about the countdown to midnight, and watches. The story ends as the balloon rises, on the point of, but not quite, disappearing beyond the reflective reaches of the light, and into space.

Have I managed to overcome the obstacles inherent in my chosen medium? Are Sandrine and Yang really lovers? I can't say whether I have completed the task successfully. But if it hadn't been for another piece of writing, a throwaway remark by a seventeenth century misogynist cleric, I would have considered it impossible and never attempted to start.

songs from the other side of the wall

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