

standing on the sidelines, looking in.



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this book is dedicated to those who understand themselves as 'those', who realise how horrifying and wonderful it is to live in this world and how those two things can morph into one another, fusing to create our experience of the world. this book is also dedicated to those who can put up with me talking shit like that for a real goddamned long time.

Friday,

Hot breath, the occasional spurt of cold air from a distant air conditioner, flapping various flaps under a low red light. Under my feet, glasses shuffle and slide across the floor, the plastic cracked and bent from stilettoed stabs and heavy boots, worn for trendiness rather than purpose. Why I still have a tie on his beyond me, how I haven't tied it around my head is something that I will never quite understand, and somewhere out there, the noise of a glass hitting the floor turns a few heads - but that might just be the dancing.

You see, my friend and I are in the midst of something which is one tempo change from becoming a complete mosh pit, and I realise my laces aren't done up. However, my shoes will stay on, I tell myself, not noticing as my wallet bounces up towards the upper lip of my jacket pocket. Earlier on, I would have plagued my own mind with questions about what I wanted to avoid - and then came the first of the beer sloshes. Another slosh of beer misses me, and I shuffle out of the way a quarter of a second late, to be in time with the music. She makes eye contact with me, and leans in to apologise, unknowingly tipping more of her beer on the floor in the process. Surprise is had at how wet her feet are now, and how empty her drink is. Is that pity I'm feeling? I suppose it is. Pity like the pity I felt for that man standing behind the electricity box on that busy road, attempting to shield his weary face from the tight puffer jackets the scorn from inside the doorway of the nearby fast food place. A single nurse coming back from her late night shift turns her head away from the scene as she takes the bus back home. He gets up, staggers around with a comportment that makes the pity increase, he's not uncoordinated enough to look as if he's drunk, so I realise he's taking this in. This isn't the movement of someone who's not going to remember this, whose body is merely doing its job of expelling poisonous or intoxicating materials, this is the face of someone who's realised every choice he's made in the last few hours (and indeed, throughout the whole of his life) has led up to this moment, standing, puking puddles of expensive dinner behind a club he can't be

bothered to pay to get back in. He puts his hand back on the electricity box, and I see his stamp. I wonder why he came out here to vomit? There was quite a queue for the toilet, inside.

“Mate, are you done in there?” calls out a voice from outside the cubicle. “Seriously, I’m bursting for a wizz right now.” A light banging follows, he can’t move his hands around too much for fear of letting his bladder go. Little does he know, his bladder is going to do its own thing, regardless of the movement of his hands. The banging stops. I leave, he goes in, I look up at the bathroom mirror and my head is fuzzy, my stubble has grown, my collar is all wrong. Why do I have a collar tonight, of all times? Oh, that’s right, the memory of how we got here comes back. And speaking of we, my friend had just come into the bathroom, looking remarkably unfazed and sober. He walks into a cubicle, slickly cutting in front of a hopelessly drunk man and avoiding the couple on their way out, and the light from the ceiling casts a shadow of his activity on the floor. He gets his phone out of his pocket, and I go back to washing my hands. I check my nose for residue, despite the fact that I haven’t done anything - but why did I check? Some part of the memory floodgate has been left open, the part that tells of stories from clubs before where people have been drugged against their will, and I then step back and think,

“Well, clearly no one could have forced me to take drugs through my nose like that. you don’t spike people through their noses.”

I think back through the evening and there are gaps in the picture, mind you, so who knows what happened in those brief intervals. The man who went for a piss and my friend exit the stalls at the same time, and the guy’s pants are all wet, and I’m caught up in the terrible cinematicity of it all, thinking that somehow, this was meant to be. Just like how the muffled noise of the band stopped when I walked out of the room. They’re a good band, and my friend has now grabbed my hand and is shaking it up and down. He’s telling me about a girl that he’s met on the dance floor, he tells me that she’s got the nicest dress on he’s ever seen, and some other stuff about how she looks that sails over me, and to the piss guy, who emphatically agrees with my friend about something. I walk back from the sink and dry my

hands on my jeans - the dryers don't work, and I look at them for a second. They've been painted to match the colour of the wall, and some of the paint has dripped and solidified near where the heating element is. Some machine, I think, looking back at my friend, who is checking his own face in the mirror. He smiles, and then makes some other comment to his newfound friend. A gesture is shared, and they high-five, and I bump into someone who's barely conscious, floating into me like I was yet another handrail to climb using. The stairs are inviting, gravity beckons me back downstairs and deposits me in the centre of the dance floor. Unfortunately, it's a song that other people seem to know, so I move my mouth in the same way as some of the other people, hoping to glean a chorus or two. Maybe it would be funny to make up lyrics and sing them, and just claim that they're some version of the song you used to sing when you were a kid. The bar beckons again, as well. More than the desire to sing, called upon by the a-melodic crowds but squandered by the torn up vocal cords of someone who's just recovered from oesophageal torture. Did I throw up at some point? Oh, christ, what is that on my shirt? No, it's just a pin that I was given...

But by who? I look around for someone, and then back down at my jacket, which now bears a pin depicting a cool, rubberneck-style moon, which actually looks quite good. I'm very glad that I got that, almost as glad as the rum and coke I'm holding in my hands. It's a very good one, as well, a real sweet spiced rum with what might as well be vanilla coke. Actually, that's a really good idea. Vanilla coke and rum would be a really, really good idea. But don't get your phone out to write it down just yet. Go somewhere calmer. The spectre of my friend and his friend (not his new one) haunts me, I see a flash of red-beige as his jacket catches the light, the bright monochromatic light. Oh, I just want to sing sometimes! But you're now burdened with a drink, and have an idea you want to get out of your head. I go downstairs and type something into my notes, and that's all that that is. Someone a few tables over is making out pretty goddamn hard, which is fun to sneak glances at, thinking that neither of you know what's going on. Did you make eye contact? Is she ignoring him in order to make eye contact with the rest of the

room? Is that an invitation, or a cry for help, or should I just keep drinking this really, really nice drink. I think that I should. Oh, right, how much did this cost me? Best think about that one later, you're paying club prices so it's probably better to think about that one later. Your wallet is going to hurt. Was it a double? Better have been, with that price. Some other people ask if they can sit at my table, and since I'm just one person and they are five, and this table is made for four, I oblige, and two burly metalhead are now pissed off and squished next to me. I'm the furthest in the booth, as well, so there's not an option to leave. Is there a hold that I can grab to lever myself into the conversation? Their shirts, as well as the shirts of the people on the other side, are emblazoned with unreadably spiky text, presumably denoting a band, some of them with tour dates underneath. I could only guess which sort of thing they like - it's probably black metal, rather than something like melodic death metal or perhaps post-metal. How do you think they'd respond if I asked them if they liked Tool?

Poorly, it seems. Well, they seemed to be angry at me until they realised I was just trying to find some common ground. The notes app comes out once more and gets a list of bands that seem cool, and I must remember not to delete my cool idea for another cocktail that I just thought of. Three of them are wearing full face makeup, which is only obvious when the lights swivel round in the right direction. How they're even allowed to go out like this is beyond me, especially to somewhere that doesn't even specialise in metal. I mean, if you're going to go out like this in order to look special, then at least... wait, no, if they went to a metal place, all of the people there would look like them. I ask them why they're here if there's not metal on, and they say that the next act is this band from the local area. They should be, by my terrible body clock, be on in about an hour from now. Well, that gives me, I thought, an hour to get utterly shitfaced before assaulting my ears in a small, acoustically challenged room. We talk for a while, and once I'm finished with my drink, they realise they've sort of trapped me in. My friend is at the downstairs bar and looks at me and makes some sort of hand signal. I nod, not knowing, and he gives a thumbs up back. They get up out of the booth, and I go

upstairs and the metal band that they were talking about is on. Oh, well, some of the more brightly coloured and clothed people from earlier are filing out of the building, and all I can do is stare as the tallest heels I have ever seen fail to make it down stairs without so much as the grace of a dying whale. The air gets warmer, and my hand begins to freeze off, I've got another cocktail, and it's wonderful, almost as wonderful as the last one I got. But I can't tell what this one is - is there a sign for this cocktail that my friend made that I missed? I ask him what it is, but he said that his friend bought it for him, to which I can't really say anything.

The band are pretty damn good. I find myself burning the ice cubes of my drink in a futile attempt to cool down, while simultaneously trying to get a good look at the fretboard fuckery that is going on before me. There's no bassist, either, which is a first for bands. Most bassists seem permanently miserable when they're playing live, which is to be expected when you play an instrument that sounds like that. But perhaps the power behind a single tuned-down drop D might give you something to smile about. Anyway, I've now walked out of the main musical area and I find that my ears have a slight pressure in them, not a ringing noise yet - oh, no, there's the ringing noise. Well, I suppose that's just part of life in these sorts of events.

I see the people wearing band shirts over in the same area they were sitting in a while ago, why is that?

"So it wasn't good enough for you?" I say, thinking to myself 'why am I talking to these people again' - but they agree with me. They're spouting something about tone, and I think one of the musicians has had unhappy relations with one of the people at the table. But I'm not going to pry any further.

"So what happened there?" I say, with both a heavy emphasis on the 'there' and also my self-consciousness, which is being beaten down by the cocktails coursing through me. Part of me likes the openness, it's... well, freeing, to put it plainly, but perhaps asking someone you barely know whether or not they've had relations with someone from this random band that you've -

"Nah, it was mutual." he says, with the tone of someone who's trying to convince, rather than just tell.

"It was mutual. I don't hold it against her." The rest of the group look at him with a mixture of pity and support, they don't know how it was for this guy. Neither do I, to be honest.

"Was it really mutual?"

One of the other guys at the table smiles, and sinks his head down into his chest, eyes raised to look at the other guy's spluttering mouth.

"Yes it was." he says, getting defensive. "Look, I've been over this by myself, can we just drop it?"

Someone on the table keeps the thread going, "Working through this by yourself is clearly not the best way to go about this, Andy, you've been saying this for the past few weeks now and it hasn't helped."

Andy, as is now revealed to me, gets up and walks to the bar and says he's going to get another drink. I think I hear him mutter something about bullshit or something else, but it might have been one of the other full tables around us. The place is noticeably busier, probably because of all the people moving downstairs. I see my friend walking around with a few other people, and a girl with a particularly nice dress. You can tell this is a special occasion, or perhaps she's just very rich. Or stylish. Or both! Thoughts of attributes that you might find attractive come sinking through your eyes, mediated by a thousand varied conversations (well, usually monologues on the behalf of the other person) of drunk people saying what they want. Well, I'm drunk, so why not say what you want?

"Hey, are you alright?" I say to Andy at the bar.

"Look, I know I was a bit of a dickhead back there." he says, looking away from the bartender making his drink, (the bartender stops the theatrics once he begins talking), "But the reason I come here is to listen to some music with my friends." He pauses and breathes, and raises his voice. "I'm just trying to stay away from that absolute cow."

I'm thinking, 'you still can', but that won't help at this point. "You still can." still escapes my mouth somehow.

"I know I can. That's what makes it worse for me. I could be better, I could go and do something with my night, right now, but I don't think that's going to happen. I don't like the music all that much and it's made worse by the fact that she's right fucking there."

“Alright.” I say, having switched my attention back to the bartender, the sloshing of drinks and the rhythmic shaking. “So, what are you gonna do?” then exits me, the last couple of syllables congealing together.

“I don’t know. I think I might just go back to my accom.”

Taken aback by the shortening of ‘accommodation’ to ‘accom’, I say, “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you located?”

“Uhh... right next to the... blue tower block with the glass on one side. You know that one, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m like five minutes walk away from there.”

“Yeah, but you’re two hours walk away from it now.”

“I’ve got the bus route back. I’m fine. I’m not too drunk.” he says, struggling to pull his card out of his wallet.”

“Ah, sure mate, sure.” I say, turning toward somewhere else so I don’t have to look at his face any more. “Well, you’ve got this drink now, so why leave now?”

“Oh, this’ll be gone in a flash.”

“Right.”

We walk back to the table and have a decent conversation with their friends again. They don’t speak to him about the relationship thing, which seems to indicate this sort of thing has happened before a few times in the last weeks. To clip a tote edges of the sore wound is enough pain to make him want to find a lasting bandage, whatever that might be. He finishes his drink and goes and gets another one, getting much quicker service at the bar this time. I see the people around me getting happier, and the average mood lifts as we go back upstairs, they’ve finished their ‘dance-happy crowd pleasers’ part of their set and are on to their serious stuff. The five or six of us work our way to the front of the set, and I’m back up, standing on those little benches at the side, swaying and shuffling my way through yet more glass and plastic. Someone comments on my shoes, and for a moment, everything is well. I can see Adam down at the front, looking back into the crowd, drink held up high, and he’s lobbed it right at his ex-girlfriend, glass and all. The glass misses, a small splash of drink hits the guitarist, who stops

playing and grabs a microphone, inciting war on the now-fugitive Andy.

“What the fuck, man? Come back here and say you’re sorry.” A small voice says from behind him, “Bass drum’s fucked.” The glass has gone through the drum’s front side. She doesn’t know that it was him.

“Alright, christ, guys, seriously, we’ve been told this venue has been on the edge for quite some time now, what with all the noise warnings and all, and uh... right...”

Some muttering between the two of them. I’m still standing on the benches, watching the bassist mope by herself. Wait, I didn’t think there was a bassist. Earlier, there definitely wasn’t one. Is she late? Well, she’s now waving at the metal friends in the front row, and she’s now speaking to them, squatting above a pedalboard, and - oh, she’s figured out Andy must have been with them. She walks over and tells the drummer, who just calmly puts her sticks away, and walks out. The others try and stop her.

“So what the fuck are we going to do if we can’t get out of this shitty town, right?” she says, a bit too close to the still-on microphone. Some people take offence to this. A plastic cup is lobbed. A security guard walks out and attempts to quell the crowd. A small chant forms, and people are herded out. Well, only a few people, but enough to ruin the mood of the place. I see my friends somewhere else, and as people file out, someone’s left a drink at the bar. I ask someone at the bar if they just made this, and they say, “Well, someone paid for it but just went, so, uh, I was going to have it, but since you asked.”

“No, have it.”

“Go on, it’s a friday night.”

Not wanting (nor capable) of coming up with a more generous retort, I downed the lot in a horrifying time. Think there was a bit of ice that went right down me, too. Well, at least I assume that feeling was ice. Anyway, the people at the bar are handing out jackets to people, and the drunk ones are still rifling through their own pockets, trying to corroborate their self-remembered checklists of ‘phone, wallet, keys’ with what they can find in their various garments. Some of them have far too many pockets. One is patting his jacket down like it’s going through airport security, and

another has felt a bundle of keys inside an inside pocket and is attempting to Heimlich them out of some hole in the fabric, wherever that might appear. Well, I'm glad for once that I've got enough pockets to put everything on without needing a jacket. Ah, shit, my jacket! I rush back, wading through a bored crowd that's experiencing the hell of the lights being turned back on, and I see it. Marked, stained, and most certainly needing a wash, but it's still there. The pin is gone, though! Despite not having that pin for more than about a week, the emotional attachment was there, and the fleeting nature of the ownership of the pin makes it all the more criminally sad why it disappeared almost immediately. Oh well, I guess that's what happens when you take those sorts of things to these sorts of things. Just glad the jacket itself wasn't stolen, to be perfectly honest.

My friends (the ones I came with, not the metal ones) are standing outside in the smoking area, and I wave at them as I go past. Despite having the stamp clearly on my arm, the security refuse to let me in and so I have to awkwardly lean over the rails in order to speak to my friends. They think I'm trying to get back in in order to get another round in before everyone has to leave - wait, in fact, why *does* everyone have to leave?

"Excuse me," I say, feeling some redundancy coming along, "but why does everyone have to leave?"

"Noise complains." he says, fully omitting the 't'.

"Well, it certainly does" comes the response, and you're looking at him now, and he's looking at you with an extremely strange look. He knows what you meant and you knew what he meant, yet you didn't give him the benefit of the doubt, and now he's going to give you even less of the benefit of the doubt when you lean back over the fence and topple the fence over because you're leaning on it too hard.

"Come on mate, get up." he says, not understanding that I'm actually supposed to be here. I show him my wrist but he's... alright, he helped me up, that's actually quite nice of him. My friends are going to some other nightclub that I've not really enjoyed in the past, so I might shop around for something more interesting in the future. I mean, the rest of the night. It's yet to be 1! The night is young. I'm pretty young, too. A lot of of these people are young. Life will be long, we all think,

but then those bouncer guys get ya, I think, looking at some guy being scorned, largely for being a guy. You never see them talking like this to girls, someone chimes in, and a small knowing laugh is shared throughout the rest of the smoking area, before the guy turns his attention to us, closes the door to the club, and opens the side of the smoking area, signalling in no way that anyone is meant to leave. In fact, for someone that does his job, I'd say it's done rather nonchalantly. Which makes it all the more surprising when he says, "I opened the area. Leave. You're going now."

Of course, since I'm not inside the smoking area right now, I stay right where I am as people film past me onto the street and partially onto the road, which is a little concerning since this is one of the bigger roads out of town, but I'm going to let it slide because no cars have come along yet. The taxis have not yet been informed of the influx of drunks needing transport out onto the streets.

"Want to come to this cafe we've found on google maps?" says the friend's friend.

"Sounds good."

"Oh, wait, you live here right?"

"Yeah."

"So you probably know it."

"Probably."

"Well, this is the Clinic Cafe."

"Oh, the one for the hospital, right."

"Hmm?"

"Isn't it supposed to be for people who work at the hospital?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

"Well, I think it's for nurses doing night shifts and stuff like that. So if a bunch of people come there then people aren't going to be able to get their coffees."

He looks at me. "Actually, alright, you know anywhere else?"

I shake my head, I can't think of anywhere in this part of town. I don't come this way often - and down the road is Andy, driving what I hope is his own car, and I also hope he's sobered up a little bit since I last saw him. One of his friends screams down the road. Andy pulls up rather skilfully to the curb, which is what I would have said if this wasn't definitely complete luck on behalf of Andy's impaired neurones.

“Oh, fuck, you didn’t mention you’d driven?”

“Well, I got-ta car, so, what do you want me to do... do with it? Park it *all the time*?”

“No, but you’re drunk.”

“You’re drunk!”

“Yes, but the thing is I know that and I’m not driving a car all the way back across town.”

“Aww, come on, it’s 1am, it’s a 15 minute drive, what’s the worst that could happen?” He rests his arm on the window edge and opens the back windows, letting the cold air flow in and letting me get a better look at the shit that covers the back two rows of seats. Various cables and bits of junk from previous late night trips to drive through restaurants. God, it really is a seven-seater car. I think he must have got this off of his parents while also inheriting all of the smoke smells that this thing has. Unless he smokes himself, or - ah ha, he has friends that do. One of them gets in the far side of the car, almost opening the door into the path of a car. He then pulls out a vape, to add to the charm of the car, and sweeps some trash out of his own footwell, much like my dancing on the benches earlier.

“So have you found a better cafe?” my friend comes over, supported by his friend, whose gaze keeps driving to the other side of the road, where a guy and girl are making out in a phone booth, unaware that the side without frosted glass or adverts faces out onto the road.

“No, but-”

“I’m not interested in a no. I’m interested in a ‘yes’. You’ve got to be a yes man.”

One of the metal people steps in. “That’s not how being a yes man works.”

“God, you’re boring.”

“Oh, right? I’m boring for trying to... ah fuck this.” She tells Andy to get out of the car, and he refuses. A light fog is settling in. My friends are trying to head one way, and the car is still idling, light wisps come in through the headlights. Maybe they’ll automatically switch, but given the state that the car is in it’s probably not going to.

Andy’s friend - who I’ve just been able to figure out is called Kate - says, “Who’s coming back to our flat?” Her friends say yes, I say yes and they seem alright with that, my friends say yes for virtue of saying yes, but

they say they're going to stay here for a little bit. Some sort of contact information is exchanged as I buckle myself in and I'm thinking, wait a second, I'm not going to let Andy, a man drunker than I am, drive the car. So, of course, Kate takes over. Well, at least I thought she would. She's actually had more to drink than him, and would definitely get us into some sort of situation. Plus, she mentions she's not so good at parking, and some people laugh, knowing that it's a self-deprecatory joke. I didn't, not at the time, at least. Anyway, some people are still milling around outside and lo and behold, Andy's ex is sober, and she wants to get back to where she lives quickly, and is happy to drive her friends home, despite being residually pissed off from a good gig getting cancelled. She's one block over from where we are, so we shove Andy right in the back and tell him to sit on the back row with one of the metal guys, Kate and Andy's ex sit at the front and the remaining four people are squished into the middle. Why someone wasn't put in the back with Andy, I will never know. I would have volunteered to go and sit back there, too!

With the car fully loaded, we sit back and enjoy the ride. Oh, shit, I forgot that Andy's in the back. How is he not going to forget to lie down or be quiet. He's been making strange moaning sounds near the floor for a few minutes now, and the cobblestones of the middle of town are only going so far as to hide the noise. We could probably pass it off as some kind of engine noise.

"So, how come's you're here?" she says, looking into the rear view mirror, expecting to find me but instead getting an eyeful of stained roof. She adjusts the mirror.

"Uh, well, I just found these people and now I'm here."

"No, I mean, like, why are you *here*?"

"Is that some philosophical question, or?"

"It can be."

Kate butts in. "You don't have to answer, it's part of her shtick. She asks this to everyone to sort of... uh, vet them out."

"Well, what do you think?" No introduction, no names, no small talk, just trying to get at what I think is the fundamental nature of reality, day one. That's fine with me, all things considered.

"A series of events, some of which I don't understand."

“So you’re a-” she starts, before I continue the late second half of my pre-planned response, “Please don’t read anything into that.”

“I’ll try not to.”

We didn’t say anything after that. She drives into the car park and I lean over the back seat, Andy has now fallen asleep. He gently rolls onto his front as the car stops. Probably don’t want to leave him like that for too long.

“This good?” says Andy’s ex, who might have said her name at some point, but I think it’s best not to guess at this point. She pulls a beanie out of her bag and puts it on, and opens the door.

“I thought you lived on the other side of this car park?” says Kate, confused as to whether the car’s positioning comes from generosity or mere confusion.

Looking in through the half-open door, Andy’s ex says, “There’s more of you. Thankfully no Andy. And look, this guy’s...” she continues, opening the back door, causing the big guy to nearly fall out of the car.

“Come on, time for bed.” she says. “You’ve got a big day tomorrow, right?”

“Issuh friday, Kathy...” says the guy, slumping back up and untucking part of his shirt. “I don’t have to be up tomorrow.”

“Well, no, I mean, you are getting up early, because we’ve got to go to the big store out of town to prepare for *another party* tomorrow.” says Kathy, which is close enough to Kate that I’m going to have some trouble with it. Maybe I should write it down? I can’t get my phone out of my pocket because I’m still so squished in. The person on the other side of the car opens the door and I’m immediately more free, the air is almost bitterly cold and white, with light floating drops of water around, and I’m not where I live. Oh well, hopefully something is going on, wait, no, that’s why you’re in the car to start with.

“Right, so how far is it to your place?”

“Just here.” says Kate, pointing. I think it’s Kate, anyway, not Kathy. Wait, no, Kathy is the other- no, I was right the first time. She’s got gloves on now, I didn’t realise it was that cold until a lick of wind went down my slightly unbuttoned shirt. Where’s my tie gone? Oh well, it wasn’t a very nice tie. A cheap blue tie I remember getting last year. No real memories were had

with it, it's not... anything, really. I suppose that's what a lot of things are, things stained with memory. So I get out of the car fully, for what feels like the second time, and the others get out as well. One of them is going to walk Kathy back to her place, and all of the rest of us head back to Kate's place. There could be snow tomorrow, according to someone in the group. Well, I don't believe it for a second, and I put my hands in my pockets and look at everything, wordless for a few minutes. Out here, the buildings are sparse and the fog makes them look even further apart. The tower block is a way out in the distance, a red dot at the top of a nearby crane just about suggests it. Five minutes? Perhaps. But I don't want to walk five more seconds in this cold than I have to. They struggle to open the main door to their place, and their lobby isn't much warmer. I see the beige walls get more and more sticky as we move up the stairs, the worn-off gloss of the paint contrasting with the matte finish on the grey handrails. They look like half-attempted gobstoppers, and the paint feels different all the way through, I glide my hand up them, not scared of getting a splinter because of - and this train of thought is postponed by me hitting a lump of gum on the underside of the rail, which lowers my opinion of the people in this place. They're going upstairs, they say, to get drinks and then go back down to the lounge, where they say lots of people are.

There's a bottle of spiced rum on the counter, and I ask someone if it's good. They say it's not so good.

"Can I have some?"

"Sure, have the lot."

There's only about a quarter of a bottle left, so it's not so bad to drink the lot. Actually, it's not so bad at all. I think this is alright to drink neat, and yup, it's alright to drink neat. A few people have got out a few bowls of rice based snacks, and shoving a few of those in my face from time to time helps stop my mouth from feeling like it's being eroded. My friend texts me, asking me where I am, he's downstairs already, and it turns out we've been up here for about half an hour. Usually I'm quite good at gauging the time, but oh well, here it comes, the first burp where I can smell my own... haha, wonderful. It's good to think that you're thinking about this. The lift made me feel woozy - why didn't we use it the first time, though?

“There’s no stairs to the basement on this side of the building.” Which I think sounds very safe. But I don’t let that bother me for too long. I need to just let go. Probably should have been to the bathroom while we were up in their flat. Hmm, they’ve just pointed me in the direction of a bathroom, and I go in and it’s empty. Grey, white and reasonably clean, with a small inlet window at the top of the room to make it feel even more like a prison than usual. And here comes someone else, and lo and behold, they obey the urinal rule. Wonderful. They’re done and just waltz back out the door without washing their hands. So do I.

Everyone’s back out in the main room, including my friends, who come over and chat to me, saying something about planning something for tomorrow night.

“But it’s friday night *now*.”

“Yes, but by the time your hungover fucking brain gets up in the morning, it’ll be saturday afternoon, and nowhere is open then. So we need to get things done now.”

“Like what?”

“Like... I dunno, what about those guys over there?”
I look over there.

“They’ve got beer pong.”

“Ok, so we tell people to bring cups.”

“No, you’ve got to play it with those red cups, mate, come *ooooon* you know how it is.”

“So we’ve got to play the game?” I say, reuniting myself with the spiced rum from earlier. Must remember to buy this stuff for some point in the future. Perhaps get a nice bottle for myself. Must be fifty quid or-

“I don’t see why not.” says my friend, walking over to the table and promptly embarrassing himself. After a few more shots are exchanged, I realise that actually his miss wasn’t so embarrassing as you thought. They’re lining up now, taking turns, and you’re up next, and you cheer, and take a ball out of a cup and hand it over to, no, no, *I’m* supposed to drink? Oh, joy, they’re much better at this than me so I’m going to get even more drunk throughout the evening. Such joy. I throw, it bounces twice, and it hits the rim, and bounces around for a few seconds, and then goes in. I hit my hand on the table on the way up to jump up, and it’s almost a bad feeling, but the good feeling counteracts the bad

feeling, the feeling of winning. The good feeling. Right, what to do when I'm out of play, when the hand is dead and the night is still going, and young.

They're playing a game that involves exactly twenty (20) red plastic cups (perhaps Solo cups) and some ping-pong balls which are to be thrown at the other person's end of the table. Whoever is standing at the other end of the table at the time of the shot has to drink the contents of the cup (preferably removing the ball first) and then remove the cup from play. Sometimes, after a cup is removed, the field is rearranged into a symmetrical or otherwise pleasing arrangement at the discretion of the players. The overall aim of the game is to...

To what? To get drunk? Then, surely, optimising for drunkenness, they should all go and drink some cheap spirits, rather than beer. But they're not playing for drunkenness. But towards what other goal are they going? There's no scoring system, no measure of the whoops and cheers you get when you sink a particularly difficult overhead shot or bounce it off of a nearby wall, there's no measurements at all. Even the measures of drunkenness are subjective to each player. So, then the question arises, why do they play? Right now, I'm situated in some town in the middle of England, playing beer pong with a group of people I've never met before. Half of these people, judging by their reactions to one another, haven't met each other before, either. So why are we playing some communal game that seems to stem from everyone's collective fetishisation of american fraternity culture? Or is it just popular of its own accord? I can't seem to think that there's anything that accounts for this sort of cultural shift. There aren't even any americans here to weigh in on the issue, not that there is an issue to weigh in on. I don't think anyone would argue this is cultural appropriation, not in the slightest.

Perhaps we can see the sorts of values this game reflects reflected in the grander nature of the world itself, we can see everyone wants something, everyone can get something if we were all to go utterly apeshit and try and get it for ourselves (compare drunkenness and power) but in the end, we end up making these games for ourselves because that's what we do. If life was just an endless mess of people clambering over

one another in order to get anything and everything they wanted, then there'd be no time for looking back or thinking about anything, there would be no time to recount or tell stories because as soon as the dust settles, the new generation of struggle comes back again. These games are what make us human, the struggle of one against other, the problem of one against another, and there is, there stands that girl in that dress that your friend was talking about. You straighten his shirt, his collar no longer lopsided, his breath slightly freshened by some gum that he got from some other random person. You send him on his way.

But the question comes back to why do you, no, why does *anyone* do these sorts of things? Because they're fun, that's why. Because the simple joy of throwing, of goal-oriented bodily comportment, that's what we distract ourselves with. So, how can it be both the fundamental process and a distraction from what people angrily looking down at us youngsters having fun call 'the fundamental process'. Well, it's because that's the point. The point is, I think, that we do these things because there is nothing else do to. Not as in 'there is nothing else except beer pong to play' (though I do see a certain lack of Settlers Of Catan boards...) but in the sense that the things that we make ourselves do really are the only things we do. We could sit at home and not move until we died of whatever we died from, but nobody does that. Almost no one. Even the people who come close to doing that usually remember to eat pizza.

But I'm not here to answer some fundamental question, or even approach what the fundamental process is, I'm here to have a good time. And I'm all out of ping pong balls.

"Hand me another, Jake." I say to my friend, who smiles by himself, and waves to someone else.

"Sure." he says, and looks back to the big game.

And there, we played beer pong until the night became morning, drinking all, all the way. At some point in there, you threw up, but it was over and done with in seconds, the throwing up. There's no primary memory of it whatsoever, just the first, pre-beer pong memory of the grey bathroom interspersed with the vague feeling of gut and chest nausea. I wake up somewhere where I'm not supposed to be, and my head doesn't hurt as

much as I think it should. Until I raise it and it hits a low,
low, low bookshelf.

Saturday,

It's a saturday. I've just hit a low bookshelf with my head. I feel worse because of this. I focus my vision, having slept in everything but my shoes, I've still got everything on me except - oh, goodness, I've gone and lost my phone. Except, when I get up to see what else is going on, the kitchen counter is covered with phones. Some of them are charging. I find my one and - oh, no, that's someone else's, unless I changed my background to that overnight. There shouldn't be anything like that.

To my relief, the only image of the night is blurry, and pointed at the floor beneath the beer pong table. It's quite a nice shot, to be honest. Blurry. Out of focus, too. So it's likely I tried to take a picture inconspicuously, as to not ruin the flavour of any given moment with a prepared photograph. There's nothing worse, in my view, than killing the flow of something that's going on right before your very eyes just so you can have a digital copy of it that you might just end up not caring about at some point down the line. Well, I say that, but it seems to be that I spend more and more of my time scrolling through my camera roll, looking at where I've got to now. Not that I think I peaked in the past or anything, I'm just saying that I spend more and more time going over this sort of thing in a sort of self-reflective way. My phone isn't even fully charged, that's how long we've been asleep for. Yet, aside from the mild headache, partly the bookshelf, partly the large damage my liver suffered, I feel fine. I wonder what everyone else is doing. They're all still asleep. My phone reads 9:03AM. Wow, I should probably go back to sleep if I'm going to do that all again tonight. But I probably won't do anything like that again tonight.

It's still foggy outside, the fields look almost inviting but the cold glass is a reminder of what it's like out there. Having a cup of tea out of someone's kettle now, and I lie back down and sleep again, head the other way this time. Why would you have a bookshelf *there*?

11:30AM. Possibly a little bit too late, but other people are stirring around every now and then, and here comes my friend. He's looking happy, but worse for wear, his eyes are strikingly grey and his hair absolutely

ruined, almost matted and greasy. This man's definitely going to need to have a shower. So, I tell him to do so, he smells quite strongly of beer too, and that might fix it. I hear him walk into the shower room, wordless, and the fact that he knows where it is is interesting. But then I hear the sound of retching, and head back into the kitchen and offer a word of sympathy on the way past. He looks back at me and smiles, saying "Better out than in," a sentiment which I very much shared yesterday. So what are we doing today?

"Well, you've all got to go home and we're all going to go over to Jonah's later for a party. And by we, we mean you too. I mean, your poor friend over there invited us. He's not doing too good out of last night, is he?" she says, (note use of the word 'she' instead of Kate/Kathy), pouring herself an instant coffee. "You want one?"

"Oh, I've had some tea already."

"Anything for food? Hangover?"

"No, all good on that front." I start, and as she moves off I say, "But I did bash my head on that cupboard, uh, shelf thing you have above the sofa. Maybe an aspirin?"

"Sure, sounds good." She reaches into a cupboard of medical supplies and roots around for a few seconds before throwing a crumpled and nearly-empty blister pack of white pills at me. The foil is unlabelled, nor is there any writing on the pills. There's only one left. Oh well, most of the stuff in that drawer is cold and flu stuff, so what's the worst that could happen?

About half an hour later, I start my walk home in the cold winter air, tieless, shirt crumpled from an odd sleeping angle, and jacket not providing me with enough warmth, and probably about thirty five pounds out of pocket. Oh well, at least it's not a long walk to where I am. I get a text from my parents back home and it says that it's snowing where they are. The garden ornaments are covered in a thin layer of pure snow, and I can see where a fox has trailed through it, leaving delicate dents, like a patterned mattress. Oh, god, I've probably got to do some washing when I get back, my flatmates probably haven't done anything with that either. There's probably more than just a few bowls in the dishwasher, too. Well, can't let that bother me. No headphones for the walk back, the only sounds are the

occasional car going past and the rustle of my own clothes. Sundays back at home are busier than Saturdays here.

A seagull cries overhead, which is odd, because we're not even near to the sea. A lull in the valley ahead has filled with fog, and my phone rings again. It's my friend, Jack, and I can hear the sounds of the flat in the background.

"Why'd you leave?"

"I've got shit to sort out before tonight."

"I didn't think we were doing tonight."

"I didn't think I was doing tonight until you told me, last night!"

"Alright, uh, do you know when and where we're meeting?"

"I'm not a hundred percent sure right now. I'll call some people. Can you get me Kate's phone number?"

"What, are you planning on doing something special tonight then?"

"No, it's—"

He laughs, "Oh, you get like this when this sort of thing happens. Alright, I'll leave you two to it. By the way, she's very generous with the biscuits."

"Oh, I should turn around then."

"Why not? What are you even doing right now?"

"Walking home to get my shit in order before..."

"Before what?"

"Actually, no, I can just do this on Sunday. I'm coming back. We'll go out for lunch at the market then."

"Sounds like a plan."

We did go and have lunch at the market. I had a cheese and gammon bagel and Jack had some sort of panini thing from this nice elderly couple's stand. But that was about it in terms of things you could just buy and eat. Everything else was cured meat and the like. Kate (think I've finally got that one down) didn't have anything. But something more interesting happened before then that might be worth mentioning.

We got back into the car, and Kate starts it up, she adjusts the seat a little (despite the fact that her and Kathy are the exact same height) and the mirror too. She stifles a scream and I stop myself from almost heading back to sleep. I scrub the windows to see outside, thinking there's someone outside with a knife

or something, but it's the middle of the day in a car park that other people are in right now, so... oh, right, it's... she sees Andy get up off of the backseat. Well, that was where he was the entire evening.

"What the fuck, guys?"

"What?"

"Have we been driving all night? Where's Kathy? You're drunker than I am, you can't drive."

"Andy, it's the middle of the day." she says, rather overly clearly, which has pissed Andy off.

"Of course it fuckin' is! I get it now, you just left me in the car after we parked here last night! Bloody miracle I had my jacket still on, otherwise I would have just about frozen to death."

"Look, I'm sorry, the only person sober enough to remember was the one person who we didn't want to know you were in here."

Andy looks into the mirror for a second and folds the seat forwards. "Do you not see what's wrong with that?"

"Well..." starts Kate, "We just forgot."

"It's fucking cold in here now! You're still wearing gloves! Look at this fucker!" he says, pointing to the nervous Jack, whose breath is starting to condense. "That's how cold this shitty car gets. You know this, you drive it enough."

"Alright, sorry."

"I could have slept in my own bed last night, but no, you decided to leave me in here."

"I get it!" she shouts, still looking in the mirror. "It's not like you're a dog in a hot car though."

"Oh, very funny." he says, folding the seat forwards and asking me to move out of the way. "Feel like shit right now."

"Wouldn't have been any better if we had told Kathy you were back there!"

"I could have explained myself!"

"Your last attempt to explain yourself," starts Kate, interrupted by the back car door unlocking, "wasn't exactly the most subtle gesture."

"Fine, I threw a bit of cold ice at her. Big deal."

"And the glass, Andy."

"That wasn't intentional! It slipped!"

"Is that what you said that made you break up, then?"

“Oh, yeah, oh, real funny. Kick a man while he’s down. This is *our* car, you know. I might need it for something right now.”

He closes the door, and I shuffle back into place. He starts walking back to the car and knocks on the window just as Kathy starts fiddling with the air-conditioning and window heating settings.

“So where are you guys going? I’m starving.”

And that’s the tale of how I ended up having to pay for another cheese and gammon bagel. I was thinking about downgrading him to just ham, but I felt that would be a little stingy. I really felt as if Andy was owed something after the misfortune that befell him last night, but the system of karma over the last few weeks for him had apparently swung back and forth quite a lot. On the way to the market, he told a tale about how he’d fallen off his bike on the way into work the other week, and we asked him why he didn’t just drive, and he stuttered and stammered to come up with something that proved to us that he really cycled. To add to this, Kate said that she’d never even seen him cycle. He didn’t seem like the physical sort of person to cycle, but he did have the smug aura of one. That made Jack laugh quite a lot, and he told his own little story about when he used to be a paper boy. These stories are always quainter than the last time he told them, embellishments like pies on windowsills come through where there were previously rottweilers on dead-grass lawns. Still, they were fun enough to not care about the truth behind them. That’s the sort of thing that he lived for. The harmless lie, and lies that he would admit to being caught out on, to the extent that very few people actually asked him about anything anymore. They took his word as gospel - in the true sense of the word, in that we could see that it was allegorical at best, and probably not his own story. Maybe one of his parents used to do the paper round or something. Either way, the town centre in the middle of the day was actually quite nice, the sun didn’t really make anything seem warmer because of the layers of clouds that got in its way. But we still sat outside for a while, doing what anyone over the age of 45 would consider ‘loitering’ in the forum outside the cathedral. There were some interesting people walking by, today was a good day for people-spotting. There were the

lesser-spotted tourists (why anyone would come here on a cold October day was well beyond me) and the slightly more common inner-city chavs. Now, those were a wonderful sight. I suggested that we move over towards the edge of the centre of town nearer where all the shitty food places are, because somehow the very sight of organic produce just seems to repel tank tops, lazy sociopolitical statements, and whole-arm tattoos.

“I don’t think whole arm tattoos are a bad thing.” says Kate.

“Neither do I, but that’s because you’re thinking about them on the pert skin of a twenty-something person you’re interested in, not Dave, 49 from Peterborough.”

“Fairs. Plus the skin colour just doesn’t go well with the faded green.”

“Oh, that’s horrible. Are you sure you don’t want to go sit over somewhere where we might be able to see more of these wonderful specimens?”

“No, I’m good right here. Bench has just warmed up. Bloody concrete benches take ages to warm up.”

Andy chimes in, “Do any of you guys have tattoos?”

Three no’s. “So there’s no chance on any advice of getting a tattoo then?”

“My advice is to *don’t do that.*” says Jack. I had a friend who thought it might be a funny idea to give someone else a stick and poke on the back of their neck. Made it so hard to get a job.”

“What, where did she work then?”

“Trainee nurse.”

A round of pained expressions, and a ‘oh wow’ from Andy.

Jack continues, “Yeah, it wasn’t a gang symbol or anything, i think it was a drawing of a flower. But it looked like someone had drawn it on her while she was asleep and they were trying to do it as quick as possible so she didn’t wake up.”

I respond, “Oh, wow. I bet people trusted her.”

“You want to know what the worst part about it was?”

“Go on, what.”

“She had really short hair. Double whammy. See, she used to go on about how people her age would do a little bit of a double take, but after that, nothing said, but old people - and as you know, they’re like, most of

the people who go to that hospital - they fucking freak out. They're like, 'oh goodness me, this person is going to give me my IV with heroin in it or something.'

"Don't some IVs do that anyway?" says Kate.

Jack thinks for a second. "Good point."

"Say, have any of you watched *Trainspotting*?" says Andy, expecting an intrigued round of 'no's'.

"Yes, we were all 17 once." says Jack.

I look back at him, "That's unfair. I think it's an interesting film. I like it."

"Would it be as interesting without the heroin?"

"Well, would Harry Potter be any good without the magic?"

"It's not any good anyway." he laughs, we all laugh, some more confidently than others, but then he continues, "I'm just saying that a lot of what you might like about that film is just pure shock value. Like that bit where the guy shits the bed and, like, twisted-Hanna-Barbera-style accidentally flings it onto the family of the girl he's just slept with."

"Well, yeah, that bit is gross, but there are some parts that are wonderful. The sinking into the carpet bit."

"Well, yeah, but that's more like a music video within the film."

"Isn't the film worth watching just for that one bit?" I say, to which Kate charges in with - "Oh, god, it's not just that one bit, right? You do know there's more to that film than just drugs? The 'shite being Scottish' bit, the baby scene, the horror present throughout the film, the climax - oh! The *Lust For Life* bit - there's another music video for you. And the bit where he goes down the toilet."

Andy says, "That's like *another* music video too. The whole thing is basically one giant music video."

Jack responds with, "That's my point. All style, no substance. It's like they came up with all the cool ideas and had to figure out some way of sticking them together and that came right at the end of the production process. It's like they had loads of funky bits of film from like eight different films and just slapped 'em right together."

"You know it's based on a book, right?" I say.

"Why don't we watch it tonight, then?" says Kate.

"Ah, uh, this afternoon, because we're going out later."

“Oh yeah,” says Jack, nudging me, “This fella told me you were organising something for later on?”

“Oh, we’re going to round to Jonah’s. There’s something on there.”

“What sort of thing?” Jack says, slightly pained. “Oh, they’re not going to have a halloween party in the middle of October to get it over and done with, are they?”

“Doesn’t feel like October weather anymore, though, does it?” says Kate.

“You haven’t answered no yet. Please just tell me that it’s going to be something normal and I can finish my sandwich and we can go and get ready.”

“There’s a requirement for getting in. You have to wear something yellow.”

Andy happily chimes in, “Well, that’s not a problem for me, I found this pin last night that’ll get me in.”

I look over and there it bloody well is! My pin from a few days ago.

“Oh, my god, someone found it.”

“No, I’ve had this thing for like a week now.”

“Where’d you get it from then?”

“Some guy was giving them out at some event.”

“Where and when?”

“Uh, Sceptre, and this was like last saturday.”

“Oh, right.”

“Did you get one too?”

“Yes, I lost it last night, I just wondered if you’d picked mine up by accident.”

“Oh, no worries. Anyway, we’re heading *where* tonight?”

“Jonah’s. Wear something yellow. Be at... I’ll text you the address... and I think it starts at 6:30, and they’re doing food, too. Might be nice if you bring some sort of drink or something to make the evening easier for them. Well, actually, you and I are going out of town to pick up a crate of beer. Or two.”

“All the way out?” sighs Andy.

“Christ, Andy, it’s not like you’re walking there,” says Kate, “Look, just get back in the car. We’ll go now. We’ll take these two stragglers along with us, too.”

Jack gets up slowly. “I’m no longer a straggler! I’ve got things to do! Yellow clothes to find!” I follow suit, and say something about people watching and finding something equally distasteful to wear. We both, head in

opposite directions, just wanting to go home and get a quick bit of rest first.

I got in at 3, slept for what felt like fifteen minutes, and lo and behold, it's now 6:30, and I'm in my own room, and I own nothing that is even close to being yellow. Except for my tie, which I no longer have. Oh, surely my flatmate won't mind if I pick up this extremely awful shirt of his in this mustard yellow, will he?

I get there at about 7:15, after happening upon a bus that took me nearly exactly where I needed to go. On the way there, a local pensioner tries to strike up a conversation with me, but I have to get off before anything more than small talk is exchanged. She compliments me on my nice shirt, which makes me all the more disgusted that I have to wear it. But the compliment warms my heart as well. Such is the duality of the mustard shirt.

"What's up, cunts?" he says to me, and just me, Jonah is well and truly drunk by this point - I know it's Jonah because I remember him. He's a friend of my friend. Well, actually, sort of my friend, but I haven't spoken to him in a good long while. His shirt is unbuttoned to a much greater degree than I would have liked to have seen, almost to the fucking *belly button*, and to add to that the flimsy fabric of the shirt isn't doing the rest of his physique any favours. The stairway is blocked off with mock police tape, and guarded by another friend who I have a brief conversation with about Jonah. All of the cupboards have been taped shut as well, he doesn't want anyone interfering with his nice plates - no, we're to take from the plastic plate pile that's slowly growing. People are putting their remain-soaked plates back on top of the pile, and now all the clean ones are buried under an insurmountable pile of gross plates. I'm not drunk enough to be alright with moving slimy plates of spaghetti residue around until I find something that I might want to eat off of. Besides, once I reach that point, I probably won't mind just eating off of the gross plates.

Anyway, already, people have filled up on food and are taking it light with the dancing and drinking, which I feel was Jonah's plan all along, but I think that in the end, this is not going to pay off. People are still going to be sick, and they're going to be a sick a *lot*. At least, that's what my hope for this evening is. I catch a

glimpse of him walking out of the utility room saying, “Look, guys, I appreciate the honesty and all, but please stop dealing drugs in there. Like, come on.” He walks out, and Jack walks out a second later, and he sees me, and he smiles and runs over to give me a hug, and halfway through asking me where I’ve been, he sees that I have the same shirt as he does. And he’s fucking beaming at this point. He shouts “Mustard Bros!” as loud as you fucking like and we hug some more. His irises are barely even visible at this point.

“So what have you been up to?”

“Mainly dancing.”

“I bet.”

“Want to join? Or have you had too much to eat? There’s lots of people out in the garden.”

“What are they doing?”

“Anything. They’ve gone right to the back. This garden is really long.”

“How long?”

“You’ll see.”

His excited temperament made me think that reality was going to be far from his description, but no, it really was that long. Every time someone lit up right at the end it looked like the shimmering of a star in a hazy night sky. As we head further back, from the front room to the kitchen to the patio, the music gets more eclectic, until right at the end are some of the metal guys we saw earlier, trying to hog the speaker for as long as possible so some other people didn’t play their obscure micro genre to bits on it. I feel quite bad for that speaker, not necessarily for the borderline wet grass that it was planted in, nor the caked mud around the edges, but just the sheer lo-fi-ness of all the music going through it made it sound like it was on the edge of short circuiting. Well, there was no pleasing this crowd. I sat around for a while making small talk and trying not to get drunk yet, and I always noticed that there was one person smiling their head off or headbanging to the music, and nigh on everyone else was just sat there, having to endure it. But this was better than the alternative, which was playing something like Creep and having everyone walk away in horror. Actually, that might be quite funny to try and do. But how? Mid-way through formulating a plan to see what the least pleasurable song (well, to these people,

at least) that I could get played on the speaker was, I see... that standing up is harder than it was. Not a lot, but noticeably. A second-hand high, is what I would tell my parents. The smell of cigarette smoke I would attribute to waiting for the bus downwind of some old fat bloke having a fag. Well, this was no more. I could smoke of my own accord, I could drink of my own accord, but alas, nothing really seems to entice. I think maybe my body remembers what happened last night more than my brain does. Is there a difference between the two? Oh, come on, man, that's for later, you know how this goes, you get drunk, you get sad and small-'e' existential, and then you overcome all of that stuff and go right on back to being happy. Like a little dip in a rollercoaster ride. The rollercoaster ride of life. Much like the absolute roller coaster ride that I'm facing having to walk back down the garden. And I do mean *down*, this thing is steep, and inbetween the abundance of patio heaters and picnic blankets, the grass has turned to borderline mulch. And the flat shoes that I wore aren't helping either. But why am I going back in, I'm not drunk, or stoned, well, not to a great degree. It's like the threat of hearing two ABBA songs back to back has called me back inside. I like to live dangerously, after all. So what about something to do? Well, perhaps I could go all the way back up and go and visit the bushes, where all sorts of magical things were said to be happening. But for now, the utility area works fine, it's been turned into an impromptu bar, where people of all ages can come up and attempt to impress a member of the preferred sex with their subpar bartending skills. Except Jack, he can actually do this somehow, what's going on there? I mean, I just don't know how to describe it. It's rehearsed. He sees me, he puts down a martini and declares it finished with a twist of lemon rind. What joy.

"Yo, what's going on with you?"

"Not much."

"Nah, man, that's a lie. Don't lie."

"No, literally nothing has happened."

"No one stays outside for that long unless something really nice happened... you know how it is."

"Jack, I-"

"Don't worry, I've got something that'll make that easier. Come with me."

“Don’t try and sell me viagra again, Jack.”

He laughs. “Oh god, you remember that? I sure as fuck don’t.”

“Yeah, and the accent you pulled all night once you got stoned out of your skull.”

“Oh, n-no, please just leave that. Look it’s this.” He pulls out a small, mint-looking object and hands it to me.

“What’s in it?”

“Well, I’ve done one so that’s all you should want to know. It’s ecstasy. Just so you do actually know. Now, come to the side, put it in your mouth, and hug me for like a full minute.”

I look up at him for a moment. “Thanks, seriously.”

“No problem.”

We hugged for a while, for his benefit largely.

“Oh, that’s a tenner.” he says, straight-faced for his current state. He loses control of this face before I can even say anything, and bursts out laughing.

“Mustard Brothers?” he says, similarly deadpan.

“Indeed.” He hugs me again, and I leave to find the rest of the party. But instead of walking there, back up the hill to where I was before or the promised land of the bushes, I walk down into the front room, and above the scattered clacking of hard shoes on wood floor, I hear the shuffling of fabric on fabric, and the overpowering, bone-shaking sound of *I’m Only Human*.

Now, at this point, my previous experiences with this song have been poor, if not outright terrible. Blasted in a car with people I didn’t particularly like just because they were getting me from A to B back home, blasted by one of my dad’s friends with poor taste, played ever so softly on the radio in mum’s car so that all I can hear is his off-putting voice, wanting to simultaneously turn it up to get a better mix, but also wanting to turn it off entirely by virtue of it being *I’m Only Human*. So at that volume it stayed. And here I stayed, the volume of the speaker stack is all the way up, and if you get close enough to it you can hear the noise of the cones themselves deforming, you can hear their shaking and distorting while also deafening yourself in the process. Well, time to do something that I’ve never done to this song (knowingly) before. Dance.

How do you go about dancing to this thing? It’s not high-energy enough to - oh, oh, the DJ has just

rammed it straight into the chorus of *American Boy*, and song which, while having more of an appropriate nature for the dance floor, is still not exactly what one would call a 'banger'. Well, that doesn't matter, because I'm in a circle of people, and I begin doing this thing with my foot that looks more and more like Jewish dancing the more I think about it, but everyone else is doing it more and more, and we're collectively getting lower and lower until people have to take their hands off of each other's shoulders and they look up at everyone around them who's almost cheering them on, we're all here, doing this thing, with absolutely no outside influence. The song ends, a few people have exited the circle by now.

"What the fuck was that?" says one of the guys in the circle. "I was following you."

"I was following you!" says someone else. It seemed like we had each picked someone else in the group to copy, and the net was interwoven such that everyone ended up doing a low-swinging pseudo-Hora. God, why do these things happen? One can only guess. A few more songs go by and the same group of people sticks around, my ankles are dead from smoothly bouncing up and down on them when no other type of dancing feels appropriate. My shirt is still clean, unfortunately, this is the one day where things stay normal and it's this bloody shirt, oh, god, well, I think I should drink some. Not much is really going on in terms of the desire to hug people. Maybe Jack's around somewhere else - I see him also bobbing up and down, we share a look and my hand smacks against someone's face as I raise it up to try and wave. Worst of all, he didn't even see the wave. Oh well, best try again, then. I float back outside after a while, and on the patio are a few people trying to wrap up a little more, the fire in the middle seems like something bad's going to happen. I go over and speak to Jonah, who's just put another set of logs on the fire, and he says, "Mate, I'm not sure what's more of a threat, people dying of cold or people walking into the fire pit."

"Hardly a pit, but I see what you're on about."

"Yeah." he says, looking over my shoulder at the table of drinks he's set up. "Say, you wouldn't mind going out and getting some drinks for us, would you?"

“No, not at all. What do you want?” I say, and he hands me a £50 note - an *old* one, at that.

“Knock yourself out.”

“Seriously? Mate, this is fantastic.”

“Well, I don’t mean just get stuff for yourself. If you try and Irish exit now I won’t be best pleased.”

We both laugh, and I go back to a pleasant smile. Am I smiling because of the drugs? I don’t feel anything yet, perhaps I should just drink and see how that goes. But I did see this chart on the internet that said that they were dangerous to mix, or at the very least not advisable. I remember the time that I told Jack that ketamine and alcohol were an incredibly bad combination, and he said that he was just lucky and had gotten away with it for a while. Well, perhaps enjoy your kidney stones later down the line, you lovable, dangerously dumb man. Alright, now it’s time to recruit people for my trip to the shops. There’s a few people who are loitering around in the door, but they’re just waiting to go home probably. So it’s probably not a good idea to give any of them the money.

“Jack! Jack, Jack, come with me to the store down the street before it shuts.”

“Why? You want some gum or something?”

“No, no, we’re going to get more alcohol. Jonah told us to get some.”

“Why doesn’t he just get it himself?”

“Because he’s stopping people from falling into the fire.”

“Why’s he got a fire going? Sounds a bit stupid, eh what with all these drunk idiots flying around.”

“Not everyone’s drunk, Jack.”

“Yeah, some people are on molly, too.”

I look at him with a disappointed but knowing glare, much like a parent to an infant who’s acting innocent but is covered in chocolate streaks. “Come on, mate, it’s ten minutes there and back.”

“I’m... I’m trying to have a good time here, can’t you just tend to the fire and then he can go and do it himself.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I’ll find someone else.” I say, bumping into someone else. “Zach! Oh, wow, I didn’t realise you were here.” I say, to which Zach responds by continuing to dance. “Oh, shit, uh, how are you man?”

“Wonderful.”

“Hey, I need an extra pair of hands to bring back some drinks from the store down the road.”

“Uh huuuuuh.”

“Would you be down to help me?” I say, with Jack looking back over at me, thinking I’m clearly trying to take advantage of this man who’s out of his mind.

“Well, naaaah, not really, but I do need a break.”

“Cool. This’ll be as simple as you like.”

“Sounds great, man.” he says, “I don’t have any money though.”

“You don’t have to pay.” he walks out of the front room and retrieves his jacket from under a pile of similar jackets. “Which way to we go then?”

The outside world is now only illuminated by the odd streetlamp and the cold, faint glow of the sun below the horizon, but we’re almost there now. We have a quick (well, quick in terms of the amount of words said) chat about what’s going on tonight, and how he’s been. I haven’t spoken to him for a few years now, and he says his life is going pretty good. He did hit a rough patch when he got caught picking hallucinogenic mushrooms from the back of the park at the edge of town. I think they had some people set up there to catch them Why go to all the effort to catch them if you could just cut them down? Or hell, sell them and give the money to some worthwhile cause somewhere. Even giving money to repair the church roof would have been a better use of everyone’s time than trying to catch this curly-haired nutcase. Every time he goofily smiles it reminds me of every prediction we ever made about him. He probably sold Jake the MDMA we had. I shouldn’t ask him about it right now, lest he try and fork over a baggie inside the corner shop. I make him wait outside, too. Not because I don’t trust him, but I definitely don’t trust intoxicated him. They’re really two different people. Wiry, neurotic, but then calm and laid back beyond belief. It’s like Jekyll and Hyde. I pick out a bunch of cases of beer and a cheap (ish) bottle of spiced rum, and struggle to carry them all to the counter. Wait, spirits not behind the counter? I don’t think this guy gives a shit. Judging by the way he took the old £50 without question and didn’t ask for ID (well, I haven’t shaved for a while now), he really doesn’t give any shits. Or fucks too, well perhaps

the amount of 'no dogs', 'no more than 3 schoolchildren' signs says otherwise, but I don't think that he really gives anything. And he doesn't give change, either, because the total is over £50. So I chip in with a few pounds, all is well. He checks the note this time. I can see that he doesn't think it's real, but then he checks it with his little pen and lo and behold, nothing.

"Are you buying this for your little brother?"

"What?" He points to the window and there's Zach, standing right up against the glass, looking cross-eyed at the condensation of his own breath on the wall.

"No, he's here to help me carry it home for my parents."

"Sure, man."

I stick the rum in my coat pocket and carry the rest of the stuff out to Zach, who luckily enough, hasn't done anything even dumber than the things he's already been doing.

"What were you doing?"

"It was fun, man, don't get mad."

"Alright, now help me carry these back." I say to him, and he looks confused.

"I thought I was just coming here to accompany you." he says, looking quite sorry.

"Can you at least take this Carlsberg? It's only 4 cans."

"Sure." We quickly depart before the guy decides that he suddenly gives a fuck, and we walk down the path to Jonah's front door, and I admire the subtle brokenness of the black and white tiles, and the quaint little picket fence, and the horde of people dressed in black puffer jackets standing outside the door.

"So why can't we get in?"

"Cos you weren't invited." says Jonah, holding the door a smidge open, the chain taut. He sees me and Zach and sighs. "Look these guys are here with drinks and that, so they can come in."

"So then we can come in."

"You weren't invited."

"Yeah but we know a lot of people here."

"And I know a lot of celebrities who go to the Oscars but you don't see me there every year." he tries to close the door but one of them has their foot in the door.

"Mate, my fucking shoes, man." says one of them, visibly angry now.

“Then get your foot out of the door.” Jonah’s angry too, and some other people are standing and watching behind the door. “You’re not wearing yellow either.”

“What? Look, we can’t just leave now.” says another.

Jonah slams the door with the help of one of his friends standing behind him, and the guy pulls his foot out of the door. Jonah then walks to the upstairs window and says, “You can pass the drinks up here.”

“How?” says Zach, looking up at possibly Jonah, possibly the night sky.

“I’ll pass down a rope. Tie the things to the rope and then I’ll pull it up.”

“What about us?”

“Look, we’ll figure that out later.”

I look up at him with disdain. He’s trying his hardest, he’s probably the only person in here who’s entirely sober, and he’s just left us out here in the cold. Zach is just existing by himself right now, he’s really going for whatever he’s going for. Some low hanging leaves off of the tree that they have in their front garden are prime targets for his teeth. Why is he trying to bite the leaves?

Anyway, Jonah passes the rope down, and one of the guys standing next to the door complains through the letterbox. We tie some of the drinks to the rope and they go up, and up, except the Carlsberg, which slips out and falls onto the grass. They don’t explode, but when someone opens them, they sure will. Zach’s still holding onto them, and for someone who didn’t want to carry anything ten minutes ago, he sure is holding this thing tight. Like a newborn. He looks so wonderful looking after these beers that I almost forget I’m locked out of a party. Well, maybe Jonah and his friends will try and pull us up with the rope. I don’t think they’re good for that, though. But I think that Zach could cling to that rope for all he’s worth right now. Perhaps we could do some shimmying up the drainpipes. Oh god, they’re really going to have to try for this one.

Another five minutes pass and no sign of Jonah or anyone else. I get a call on my phone that says I have to go round the side. But as soon as we move on, the other follow us round, and now we’re standing on the other side of a locked wooden gate. I look round and try not to say anything, but I think I recognise one of the people from the other night.

“Did one of you go to Sceptre last night?”

“Yeah mate.” says the guy.

“Oh, right, nice. Band was shit towards the end, wasn't it?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I saw you in the toilets.”

“Why you asking about that.” he says, in a put-on accent compared to last night.

“You were absolutely bursting for a piss. Almost broke the stall door down. Well, you were just moaning and knocking.” He gets angry at me. His friends are looking at him, and also looking at me. He the starts laughing.

“You've got me messed up with some other guy.”

“Maybe I do.” I say. But I know a guy in there who knows your name.

“Lots of people know me but I ain't ever seen you before.” he says, his friends no longer looking to support him.

“Alright, fine.”

We wait outside the door for a little while longer, and Zach decides to crack open a beer. It sprays everywhere, including on my shirt. Oh well, not a big deal. For us, at least.

“Ah, what the fuck bro.” says one of the others. “Fucking drink it next time, jeez.” Zach looks apologetic and downs the whole can. It's then that I see an idea in his head. Jonah comes around to the gate a few minutes later, and Zach says that it's just us now. Jonah opens the gate a little bit, Zach cracks open another can and throws it at their feet, while running backwards into me and forcing us through the door, and Jonah tries to shut the gate, scraping the wooden edge against my face as I fall through. The other guys stepped back because of the exploding can, and one of them kicks it at the wall. We're all inside, and they are certifiably not.

“Well fuck you man. Fucking soaked.”

“You're not supposed to be here!” says Jonah, confident in the strength of the flimsy looking gate. They pick up the can and throw it over the wall, and Jonah takes the brunt of the beer.

“Well, there's more where that came from.” he picks up another and thrashes it over the other side. They shout abuse at him and kick at the gate, which somehow holds up. Although it doesn't look like it'll

hold for much longer. I see that people on the patio are walking around the corner to see what's going on, but Jonah funnels them all back in.

“So who's looking after the fire if you're here?” I ask him, and he briskly walks back to his post like nothing happened. But something has happened. The baking at the gate has stopped, the beer in inside on the table, and my jacket still has a bottle of run inside. I take it out to thunderous cheering throughout the patio, pouring extremely mis-measured and innacurate shots into cups and onto people's laps. I see someone sitting by the fire, their phone sitting on their left leg, and I watch as a line of whatever is poured out. I can't look away. The phone wobbles from side to side, almost rocking to the very fringes of the thigh before it finally settles back down. Another person is huddled over, and it's at this point I don't think I should be looking any more. But these are people that I know. These are people that I at the very least tangentially know. And I see the flames licking away at the cover of the fire pit, heating a strip up to glow a dim red, and the powder spills onto the floor with a simple readjustment of the leg, and he calls out in anguish, and Jonah look on and sighs, sitting on his single garden chair, wondering how many discarded bottles are going to be on the lawn by the end of the night. I can see he has visions of having to bend over for a full hour picking up discarded cigarette butts, or perhaps roaches. Or glasses that he told people not to take out of the cupboards. I walk back into the main room, and start dancing again for a little while. The guys are still outside, clearly they haven't been invited anywhere else, or they're just waiting for someone to open the door by accident. The door guard, Henry, decides to strike up a conversation with a girl who's trying to leave to go somewhere else. I look over at him and I can see he's not just trying to chat her up, he's also trying to chat her out of leaving. But she's going to a wedding, man, can't you see? At the very least, she's made up a wedding to try and get out of talking to you. But he's opened the door to let her go out without having the chain on the door and -

Moments later, a great sigh of sadness arrives. The dance room clears out as the wannabe roadmen walk in and begin to ask (or, more linguistically accurately, 'aks') people about where other people are. They've been lied

to about who is here, but that's not going to stop them from sinking time into this place. They trundle up the garden in front of an extremely angry Jonah, who's got a lot of questions to answer, and Jack follows them around as well.

"Hey, are you the guy that, uh, pissed himself in the bathrooms at Sceptre last night?"

"No way man."

"Alright, then how come I know you're actually called Brian?"

"No man. My name's Manuel."

"Nah, your name is Brian Johnson. You told me. I remember you, man." says Jack, extremely drunkly and slurred the whole way through. Some of Brian's friends are looking at him like he's just committed a crime. Well, I suppose they all have, thinking about it. But Brian has no response.

"Bro your first name isn't Manuel?" Why'd you lie to us? Brian? Get fucking lost, man. Jesus." says one of them. For once the extremely short-tempered nature of roadmen is working to my advantage. The others laugh a little, but then take him back up towards the end of the garden. It's not sure if they still like him. He follows at the end of the group, found out, seen through.

Jonah gives up and decides to see if he can just allocate them a space to sit by themselves, and he decides that the shed is the best place. A veritable 'VIP' area and mainly empty of spiders, they sit in there and promise not to steal anything or kill anyone. And so, Jonah works his way down the rest of the garden, saying that everyone has to come upstairs because the police are being called. That's right, he's decided that the best way to get rid of them is to call the police on his own party. I watch him hide the pile of jackets in the front room and voluntarily call the police to his own house. How he thinks this is going to work, I don't know. A few people loiter outside, the metal group moves to the patio, and the fire is still burning. Jonah corrals the reformed front room dancing group into the upstairs bedrooms, where some continue to shimmy. But not many. The police arrive, and ask what's going on. I'm still downstairs, they jokingly ask about the fake police tape on the floor and continue walking to the back. There, they open the door to the shed, and find the roadmen inside with a light on, drinking the rum that

Jonah gave them a little angry, I was going to claim that for myself after the ordeal that I had put myself through. But the police ask them to leave, and they leave. A surprisingly calm ordeal, despite the fact that one of them bitterly shouts “Fucking feds” on the way out. And the party can continue. Except now, people are making out on the beds and in the bathrooms. Jonah has simply replaced one problem with another. His parents bathroom has been invaded and locked, with god knows what going on behind closed doors. I’ve been following him around most of the time, occasionally collecting pieces of rubbish and disposing of them where I saw fit. I saw a guy who really desperately needed a piss walk in on a couple trying to get it on, and without warning, just start going into the toilet. Truly horrifying stuff for everyone involved. Many scenes like that sprinkle the evening with a glint of both wonder and sadness. How do things get like this? Well, things aren’t going too well for Andy, who’s currently standing at the edge of the dance floor, moping around.

“She said she wasn’t on the market.”

“What, did she reject you?”

“No, she just said she wasn’t on the market right now. Her exact words.” I give him a hug.

“Perhaps you might want to not just mope around.” I say, perhaps unhelpfully.

“Look, I haven’t known you for very long, so you probably don’t get my style for these sort of things.”

“What, obsess over one person for ages and when it doesn’t work out, obsess over anyone that comes within ten miles of you?”

He looks at me and sits down on a nearby chair. “Yes, that’s how it always is. I just want Kathy to realise that things could be okay between the two of us, they don’t... *have* to be hostile.”

“So why don’t you go and speak to her?”

“She’s not here, that’s why.”

I’ve seen her moving around near the bottom of the bushes with a few people listening to some *Built To Spill*, so I know she’s here. “She is. I’ll show you.”

“I don’t believe you, but right now I need a breath of fresh air, so I trust you. Even though I haven’t known you for that long.”

“Alright, man.” I say, giving him another, smaller hug as he gets up. We walk to the end of the garden and I

see Jonah slouched further in his chair, picking at the embers of the fire, wishing somehow that he'd bought marshmallows - but only if he was the only person allowed to toast them. Andy sees Kathy, and she sees him too, it's hard to miss him. He has a yellow jacket on, easily the most yellow object anyone's worn. It has a wasp emblem on the front. Not a bad jacket, to be perfectly honest. It works well when worn with confidence, though, which is something that Andy seems to lack right now. But no, here he goes, he's walking up to her. I lean on the shed, pretending to wait my turn for a joint. How the police didn't smell anything is utterly beyond me. Anyway, the conversation went a little something like this.

"How've you been?"

"Bad. I had to drive a bunch of your friends back home last night after my band got booed off stage. Someone threw a glass at us because they thought we sucked."

Andy's face freezes. He has a choice now. He tightens his chest and admits his guilt.

"I knew that. I was just wondering if you'd lie to me about something like that. But you were in a right state. Where'd you end up spending the night?"

"In the back of the car that you drove home. I was on the floor by the time you'd started it up." Kathy laughs and says, "Well, that's a very you thing to do."

"You know what, I'm really sorry for throwing that glass."

"I know. I saw your face. You looked so mortified after that. Your voice *broke* when you tried to shout something, but I couldn't hear you. Look, just tell me you're sorry for that. That is all I ask."

"I'm sorry."

"Thanks." says Kathy, not quite as pissed off as I had imagined her to be. "Can you get me a drink?" Is this a very polite way of saying 'go away'? Well, rather than use this as an opportunity to move on with his life, Andy slides along the grass and falls over on his way to get a drink. He comes back with a can of beer, and he hands it to her, and is halfway through a phoneme before the can explodes in her hands, covering them both in beer. My neck gets a few drops, but nothing like the jet they've both encountered. She goes back inside and Andy follows her, apologising profusely. I would have

wanted to explain why the beer did that, but I can't right now. I haven't talked for so long. My eyes and throat are dry, I get myself some water and then wash my hands and boy, does it feel good. Feeling the lukewarm water run over my hands. The soap, every nerve ending firing so that I can feel the wonder that is - well, everything. Someone stops me from drinking too much water, that is, namely, Jack, who stops to give me a hug too. He asks me something and I nod. It's a nodding kind of day right now. And it will be for a little while longer, baby. The air's too cold outside but the kitchen is just right. Someone fiddles with the gas knobs but Jonah puts a stop to that, no more tending to the fire duty. The dancing continues, the movement goes up and down and I sweat and swear I can feel a give in the floor. I don't think these people have a basement but I wouldn't put it past them. He's standing there next to Kathy now, and Kate is looking on in horror as they talk to one another like they're the best of friends, she says to me that she just wants Andy to have learned his lesson, and you sit there and agree with all that she says, but then say something about it being meant to be. Of course, she knows more than you, but what does that matter. Someone's queued up something interesting on the playlist, and I look over at the tablet being used, the DJ - or what I believed to be a DJ - is now gone, the free-for-all of the dance floor taking shape in the constantly shifting order of the evening. The queue bumps and shuffles into the wall, and people walk into and out of the cupboard under the stairs. I bump into Jack again and he cries out "Mustard Bros!" at full volume in the middle of the corridor and I can do nothing but reciprocate, a third time and we're harmonising poorly, and we're sitting behind the drinks table, wondering if anyone will come over and speak to us. But it doesn't matter if they don't, it's fine, Kate walks back in looking drunker than before, and a man that I once heard about having A-Levels at the tender age of ten has just had too much to drink. He looks longingly at the kitchen sink with his left hand over his stomach, but can't bring himself to do anything more than just stand there. We've moved our chairs into the middle of the room now, well, shuffling towards the edge to let the ebb and flow of people into and out of the lounge happen, various different kinds of songs

putting some people off and clearly turning others on. I get a hug from someone other than Jack, to my delight, and the tide flows back out again. Kate walk out of the room and walks over to me, and she asks me a question and I nod my head back and forth for a little while, but she tells me to stop, she's braiding my hair and how is she doing this? I have a single hair tie in my pocket, and she has one in hers. One cheap thick black one, one metal-bound one with a blue and gold pattern. Much nicer, it is, to be asymmetrical, washed up and down with the tides, and the sides of the walls are my guide as I ride the waves back towards the place I call my home now, the centre of the dance floor, the middle of the side room where people are chatting and drinking, occasionally burning themselves on the now-re-uncovered Aga. Hopefully Jonah has enough tape for this one, too. He takes his hands and moves people gently away, saying words that they can't understand but they understand the tone behind the words, and that is to move into another room.

"Are you alright mate." he says, like he's had to say this a million times before.

"Yes."

"Good."

I walk back out somewhere else, hips clipped by an overzealous couple reaching back out to stop the door from opening too far, but both wanting to show off something that they've earned. Trophies for each other, the bridge is crossed and the door slams back shut, the little magnetic catch waiting to buckle against the next passionate repositioning of the hands, all that's keeping them from being back in the corridor like everyone else. Is a line for the cupboard forming? No one (or two) wants to be seen as the person who's waiting in line for something like this. No, you've just got to move with your other, and hope that the tide takes you out of the room when the door hangs open. Or is it just closed because the last people left it closed? Better let some other more adventurous sod find that out. It's getting too cold outside, and the world out there is slowing down. A few people have left, and the whole party is more spread out. You see Jonah out of the corner of your eye, drinking silently next to a few other people, having a laugh about the things he's seen. Some people yell from upstairs, they're in his brother's bedroom

playing table football right now, and despite the table being far too small for eight people to play at once, they do so, innumerable arms sticking to the sticks, between others cradling cans with their free hands. Is this worth it? The wilful destruction of the property of another when a solid plastic ball goes flying out of the table and cracks a glass portrait? Who knows. But the game must continue, as must the music. And it isn't going to be over until... well, the sun comes up or something. Jonah is drunker now and claims that his parents are coming home tomorrow afternoon, which is good for some of us who are still able to see where we are, but you're wondering now how you're going to get home, and the you and I is a gap to be bridged. You don't feel like you're in your own body anymore, experiencing the thrill of warm water running over your hands for the third time this hour, but that's only because I'm not that part of you. I'm not the part that lags behind, the conscious choice behind every puzzled look and pained expression as I watch someone make a regrettable decision. I feel fine. You feel fine. And we are the same, sometimes. The world has a glint of meaning to it tonight, it doesn't feel like beer pong is the only reason why any of us live, there's more to that, right, there's *got* to be more to it all than that, because if this is all there is, then what's to stop me from drinking myself into oblivion any and every night? Obviously, the financial constraint, but let's say there aren't those. The tolerance? Physical situation aside, there is nothing stopping me from going and drinking every night and day of the year. 'But that's the point!' I seem to scream to myself from inside my eyes, the physical situations that you find yourself in *do* limit your freedom in some way or another. You're not seven feet tall, so you could never reach anything off of the top of the cupboards in the kitchen without a stepladder. You're not dextrous enough to become a power metal soloist. You've spent time doing things when you could have done other things. Like how your tenth birthday was spent outdoors in the park with two friends, or how your teeth fell out when you were little. That happens to everyone. This all happens to everyone. But right now I see seas of faces, changing with the storm of the music and it sweeps them off themselves, it's not the bodies in the

room moving around that means anything, it's the being there in the world with the bodies.

Take a hypothetical universe, with infinite time and space, and there is only one thing, one fundamental thing in this universe. It moves from side to side with immense speed, affecting the place around it with gravity. But nothing else is around it. Does the movement mean anything without a signpost to fly by at seventy-five miles an hour, a not-so-sly middle finger stuck up at a town's feeble cry of 'Drive Safe' while the music blares and the deer crosses the dark road before you even see it. Is the movement, all the movement, worth it if no one else sees it? If a tree falls over on the dance floor, do you pick her up and ask her if she's okay?

"I'm fine. God, I hate heels."

"Why'd you wear them?"

"My boyfriend. But lots of people have spoken to me so maybe it's not so bad."

"People would speak to you anyway. I'm speaking to you right now!"

"Well, that's because you asked me if I was okay."

There's no point in continuing this conversation, she takes her shoes off and puts them on the side, and now she has to constantly look down for fear of being trodden on. But the call of the music comes back once again, and she looks up, boots and stiletto shoes coming crashing down with immense force. No yelling yet, so she's still alright. But if she fell over and yelled with all her might, then would anyone hear her? Of course, that's how the relations between people work. Because of the fact that we're people. And that might very well be the fundamental question, because, try as I might (and I have throughout the course of the evening) you can make windows into other people's minds, but never quite get to the bottom of them. Or the centre.

I once knew someone who tried to make these things into real structures that he could work around, the first layer, the second layer, the third layer, and so on, right the way down until the ???CORE (his particular, video-game inspired way of putting it) and then there might have been some things beyond that, too. But that didn't reveal the true extent of the problem.

Communication is difficult sometimes. Well, all of the time. There are paintings on the wall in Jonah's house, some of which are deeply abstract, I didn't see his parents as the sort of people who liked that sort of thing, but then again, I've never spoken to them, so what do I know? Communication is nigh impossible sometimes, you don't, and can never know all the way into someone else. Perhaps you might be able to predict that they're going to order a cheese and gammon bagel, but you didn't expect them to, once the bagel was finished, begin eating the paper wrapper it came in. They could, at any time, while you're having a conversation with them, punch you as hard as they can, in the face. Or the chest. Again, who's to say about these sorts of things? But one of the under-appreciated attributes of humans is that, most of the time, for most us us, we don't do these sorts of things. Life has the potential to be anything, but instead, usually remains within the confines of what is popular and/or fun to do. And perhaps that isn't such a bad thing after all. To live as if you had unlimited freedom would be both impossible and extremely annoying for the people around you a lot of the time. Is Bill coming into work today? No, he's decided to become a sheep herder in Peru. A lot of the things that we do run on things like that not happening. In fact, a lot of the things that we do rely on things not happening. Things not happening is one of the fundamental reasons why humans are like this. It's very easy to just get on the road and cruise to the finish. Never mind the fallen tree blocking the route.

So then, there's another thing about that. If we imagine, let's say, a low-riding sports car, racing along a thin country lane, arrive at the aforementioned fallen tree, then what do we do? We can't move the tree, and the car won't go over. So we sit. But what about if a rugged 4X4 is to arrive on the scene and simply drive around it? Sounds good, right? So the thing that makes the 4X4 better is the fact that it can go on all terrains? Well, not exactly, the thing that makes it better is that it can go on all terrains *and come back*. A car that leaves the road for good is lost. Perhaps it's worth it to have moments of unpredictability is a sea of predictability, because otherwise, the unpredictable becomes predictable in and of itself. And what do we get with unpredictability? Endless movement. Revolutions, war,

conflict, things shifting from side to side, back and forth with a million observers all watching at once. And that, on most humans, is exhausting. The fact that we have to expend energy to get from one place to another is bad enough for a lot of people. Let alone walking alone through a muddy trench. But the opposite is just as bad, as well. Complacency breeds complacency, the cupboard door closes and the lovers embrace for it is all they know they want to do, never wanting to let go for fear of the outside world. And when a prying hand opens the door, the lovers slam it shut again. And the worst part about it is that they don't even think that they're in isolation.

“OH GOD, MY FUCKING TOE.”

See, that's something that could definitely have been predicted. She stumbles off to the side to put her shoes back on, and grabs her coat in the process, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Jonah's friend, by the door, is looking for someone else now. “What's a nice girl like you doing with those?” He says, with all the charm of a 65-year-old teacher who's just walked behind the pavilion of his sports ground. Does he actually think hat girls shouldn't smoke? As in, specifically *girls*? Their lungs probably aren't as big. But he is definitely not thinking about that right now, opaque as his mind may be. Maybe it's a line from a film. Oh, we were supposed to watch *Trainspotting* earlier... perhaps Jonah will let us use the front room to watch a film afterwards. People will probably start filing out at about 12. Is there a curfew? Of course not, we're all 18 now. At least I think so. I see the ghost of Zach walk past the door, he's extremely pale and not looking like he's having a good time. I go over to him and his eyes don't focus on me. They're looking right through me. Perhaps I'm the ghost? Perhaps ghosts can't see other people? Perhaps - no, he's just extremely spaced out. Hand like an action figure, he clasps the glass that I give him and I swear I could have seen the glass bend. He sips robotically, and I send him on his way to someone else who can keep him from immediately sipping his way to the bottom of the glass. I wonder where he is right now. I wonder what he's seeing. I hate to think that if I asked him he'd just say something like 'pretty patterns, man' or something similar. Like something you'd see in

Cheech & Chong. Oh god, that's probably his favourite movie.

"So Jack, what's your favourite film?"

"Uh, probably... I don't know, Hot Fuzz."

"You like Hot Fuzz?"

"Why not? It's a good film."

"But you slagged Trainspotting off for being all spectacle and no substance." I would have liked to have said, but the words for 'spectacle' and 'substance' have been long since displaced. Despite this, the overall meaning of the sentence carries through, unharmed by my forgetfulness.

"No, they're not the same thing. Hot Fuzz is an obviously fictional story. Trainspotting looks like it could have actually happened."

"Isn't that supposed to be a good thing? Like a sign that the story works?"

We keep on talking for a while, and eventually come to the conclusion that Hot Fuzz is a good movie, but Shaun Of The Dead might be just as good. Well, I think it's a little bit better, all things considered. Perhaps a zombie film wouldn't be the best thing to watch in the run-up to Halloween, considering that Jack jeered at a house that had a pumpkin outside earlier this week.

"Well it's gonna be rotten by the time we get to Halloween!"

"Maybe it was plastic."

"Doesn't change the fact that it was a pumpkin."

"But it wasn't a pumpkin." I say, being the eternal devil's advocate.

"It looked like one."

We have another discussion about pumpkins and knowledge, and I half-remember something that I read by this Gettier guy, and I'm almost certain I re-read this thing like two weeks ago. Perhaps you're not sober. Perhaps it's better to just say, right now, 'yeah, that's a good film', or, 'yeah, that's a totally flawless view of justified belief' but we're not there right now, are we? So you wanted to ask someone a question, and you asked a leading question in order to discuss what other people's favourite movies might be, and eventually, you got into a discussion about the nature of knowledge. Well done. I change the subject by pushing it back in the opposite direction.

“Alright, so what do you think Zach’s favourite film is?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see into his mind or anything.”

I’ve been looking around for a clock or something with the time on it for quite some time now, neglecting my phone. Flashes of snapchat come up, but I can never get close enough to the photo in order to see the time. Oh, the pitfalls of party life. The oven has been turned off at the wall, as has the microwave. Jonah has stopped drinking and is attempting to sober up as much as possible, and, dressed almost entirely in yellow, makes an announcement.

“Alright, so, it turns out my parents are going to be back by midnight or... uh, thereabouts, so, can we just get all the shit tidied up so you can just go when you go?”

A high pitched voice from down the garden shouts something slurring and abusive towards him.

“Some of you may be upset.” Says Jonah, not really understanding that only one or two people are very pissed off. A bottle is thrown down the garden towards the back windows of the house, and Jonah moves to block it, but backs out when he realises that it’s going to hurt either way. The bottle crashes against the windowsill, and thankfully doesn’t break anything. Well, the plastic is a little chipped, but it’s nothing compared to the damage that would have been done if it had hit the window. And then, another bottle hits the window. The outer layer of glazing shatters but doesn’t fall apart. It looks stunning, and both Jonah and Zach are staring at it, for very different reasons. I watch as he runs up the garden to try and find the culprit, while a one of his helpers trundles out with a dustpan and brush. Some yelling and crying from the end of the garden, like hearing foxes yelp play at night. Except with a little bit more swearing. I go back inside, Jack is confused as to why everything’s quiet outside except for some screaming. People begin to leave. I finally see the time - it’s 10:30. I’m not leaving just yet, but I do get the chance to help Jonah with a few of his things. “I’ll pick up the bottles”, he says, not having the co-ordination to pick up butts or dropped joints. He looks at me and says, “Thank you for helping.” You notice his slight limp as he’s walking, as well, what happened to him up

there? You think it's probably best to just leave him to it. So you do. There aren't all that many loose ends lying around, so you start on the cans, wanting at sprint and slide to the next one, having the energy to do a thousand more things but never quite having the will. Perhaps another can will help - well, one of the ones you just picked up has been wrenched in half, aluminium strips jutting out the side and justifying you using a single hand for one can for fear of cutting yourself. The sight of the party still going on lets my guard down for me, we still have the metal people there, minus Andy and Kathy, who are still missing. Well, I say missing, but they're about as missing as everyone else right now, moving from one place to the other, the tide getting thinner now, the corridor straits dry up and they're left bare, the glossy seashells that adorn the nooks and crannies are now visible, and how they haven't fallen off is nothing short of a miracle on Jonah's behalf.

Perhaps it isn't so much of a miracle after all. Jonah is planning for the worst, it seems, he's opening up hastily rearranged cupboards filled with elaborate ornaments, he's occasionally looking over in the window with utter terror, it seems to hit him with the same feelings every single time. Worry. Fear. I walk over to him, asking to move a group of people who are chatting over cans of Stella Artois (and I mean over, they line the floor in the kitchen). He doesn't speak to them like they have any will in the matter. They could just stand where they are and stop him from retrieving yet more ornaments. But they don't. They see his panic and disperse, and absorb some of his panic in the process. It's like if other people around you are feeling the same emotion, you feel justified in having that emotion and are bound to feel it more. Right?

"Nah, I just have good vibes most, if not all of the time." says Zach, who I most recently saw crying at the foot of a tree down at the edge of the garden.

"So what have you been up to, then?"

"Oh, crying at the foot of a tree up at the end of the garden. Amazing. I couldn't believe it. Just... amazing."

"Fair enough."

"Yeah, fair enough." says Zach, sort of agreeing with himself. But I'm not going to be the one who puts him down. I'm going to leave that job to Jonah, who is

about to walk straight through him and me, carrying a candelabra with several candles in his other hand. Zach asks me if Jonah is Jewish, but I just say he's missing a few candles for that. Zach laughs, and goes to the sink and looks longingly into the waste disposal.

"Did you drop something in there?"

"No, just a pull tab from a can."

"Oh, alright."

That thought keeps swirling around my head, and perhaps it might be good for Jonah to know about it, but he seems to be dead set on moving things around, and moving people out of the house. It's gotten extremely cold outside, a bitter wind has picked up and I'm not sure if I can be bothered to walk all the way home. So, is it worth it asking if I can stay the night? My mouth opens yet he is not there anymore, whisked away by his own desire to place down yet more seashells. The paintings are in a rather better condition than both of us expect. I see Andy and Kathy yet again, sitting on two old wingback chairs in the bookshelf corner of the front room, like an old couple recounting tales. They're not even sitting in the same chair, despite the fact that there's definitely enough room for the two of them. But they look happy together, which is very odd. I'm just glad Kate isn't around to see this whole thing happen again. But then, I do bump into Kate later, when it's nearly 11.

"How's you?" she asks.

"Good."

"So, uh, what have you been doing?"

I gesture to the party around me.

"Right, I shouldn't have said 'what', I meant 'who'..." she says, a heavy emphasis on the 'who' and she looks behind me and then at me, expecting some sort of answer. Do I just say, "I've been going around by myself." or what? Is there an expected answer?

"You've gone red." she says. "Bright red!" and laughs, and pats me on the back. "So who was it then?"

A small part of me loves how that's the automatic assumption of embarrassment, but I go ahead and say a name that neither of us know. It doesn't sound like a particularly convincing fake name, either.

"Oh, suuuuuure, and I got with Andy."

"Well Andy's with Kathy right now."

She stops and looks at me.

“Where? In what... fucking *where*?”

I don't really want to tell her for fear of ruining whatever Andy and Kathy are talking about right now, I mean, they might just be talking. They were probably just talking in the front room, I say, and she walks, trailing a hand across the wall to feel the bumps in the textured wallpaper. I do the same, it reminds me of being back home, and in that moment, I pull out my phone and see if anyone's called me or texted me. Empty of notifications, bar a reminder from my settings to update to the latest version. Oh, wonder. Unburdened by communication. In the digital realm, at least. Is it worse than in the physical world? I'd say, absolutely. To move your fingers, wait for a dense, interconnected stream of computers and satellites to work their magic, and then hope that the other person can get the nuance behind the thing that you're saying, and then they do the exact same thing back to you, it's less of a game of poker, it's more of a game of Chinese Whispers. I think, do they still call it that? And by they, do I just mean people on the internet, or the actual schoolchildren in the playground who play it?

The anonymity of the internet is a wonderful thing, a freeing, almost carnivalesque thing, but it's not the same anymore. True anonymity isn't maintained. Connected phone numbers, profile photos, people giving away stacks upon stacks of camera rolls just to enable a single facial recognition feature. Plus, there are still some who hold on to their anonymity through all this, and when some become representations of people on the internet, and others stay as faceless text-outputting machines, the bridge is broken. Those suited, green-faced 'trolls' that many rant about are still real people, it's just that they've removed themselves from the hate machine by a single step. To be anonymous in this sense is not to bypass all criticism or immediately turn yourself into an emotionless robot, you can still be the victim of hate yourself, but others might not see it that way. In fact, I would argue that for a lot of people, a lot of the time, even with profile pictures, even with knowledge of the other person in real life, still don't think the person on their screen is real. It's conditioning from the early days of internet anonymity.

God, what am I even talking about? You've not even been on the internet since the early days, and we look around the corner, and I expect to see Andy and Kathy, but the chairs are empty. It's like they knew. Of course they knew, they heard our conversation from just around the corner, I wouldn't be surprised if they had left to go somewhere else.

"They're not here."

"Well, they were earlier."

"How do I know that?"

"You don't." I say, annoyed that she's annoyed.

"Look, I don't mean to get annoyed, it's just that when they get together and then they have another breakup, I have to be the shoulder for both of them to cry on, and if they're both on my shoulders at the same time, then they fight even more and it gets even worse."

She looks at me seriously, soberly. "I love both of them, they've been my friends since like Year 3, but christ, they're fucking aggravating sometimes."

I try and empathise with her, and she claims that there really is no couple who've been on and off as much as they have. Like a light switch at a rave, she says. Like the tides. Like the tides indeed. We're standing in the thin corridor, she's telling me stories of how they first met, their first relationship, the fact that she's lost count of how many times - Jonah barges past - that they were together, that the longest time that they've been together has been 8 months, and that was because one of them was abroad on an exchange for 6 of those months - Jonah carries a lamp, the plug trailing on the ground, almost begging to be snagged - and that every relationship is like a date for normal people.

"They're just fucked up in *exactly* the same way." she says, extremely excited. "Like, literally exactly the same way." She looks over her shoulder again. "Remember when he threw that beer at her the other night?" I try and get out a yeah, but, "Yeah, so, earlier this year, probably like about March or something, she does the exact same thing to him. He's waiting tables at Satty's, and she just covers him with a drink on her way out of the place. Ruined his uniform and all." I laugh.

"So why do they keep coming back together?"

"We used to think their lips were like magnetic or something. Could not separate them for more than a few months. They'd always find some stupid reason to

get back together. And it looks like they've done that tonight... again."

"Sounds good for them."

"For the next few weeks, sure."

"Perhaps it's some sort of thing based on the seasons or the phases of the moon."

"Oh, I remember once where I tried to make a thing about that. Like I was trying to predict when they'd next break up. I was right about them breaking up on a specific day, but I was wrong because this was the fourth time that they'd broken up since I made the prediction."

"What's the shortest time they've been together?"

"Ten seconds."

"No fucking way!"

"Yeah, it was at this thing, it was outside, it was dark, and they kissed thinking that they were other people, but they... well, I say immediately recognised each other once they'd moved back. And then walked off."

I was in complete awe of this. How could these people even keep it together? Have they lived in the same area all their lives? We talk for a little while and after what feels like the longest time, she turns to me and says, "You do know your hair is still braided, right?"

"I hadn't really thought about it much." I say, going to the long mirror in the kitchen. "Why do they have a mirror in the kitchen?" She laughs, and Jonah walks past saying, "To admire our glorious food creations." We both laugh, and walk outside, where someone has restarted the fire. Jonah doesn't care though, he couldn't care less if someone got burnt at this point if it meant that it saved yet another candle holder. How many of them do they even have? You'd think that they wouldn't need this many candles if the place is going to be this bright. Lights, lamps, even a strip light below every kitchen cupboard. They do like their lights in here, I say, and she says, "Why don't we go outside, where it's darker, then?"

So we move outside and just talk for a while, inbetween two contrasting musical groups, Jonah brushing past every once in a while in a not-so-subtle attempt to get people out. But, eventually, he stops coming by. Perhaps there were more candles to pick up. It's cold, bitterly cold, so we go and get our jackets and sit in the shed, with the door open, looking over,

looking down at the world. The glint of the ends of various smokable objects, the fire still going, slowly, Jonah wondering if people are going to start dismantling the fence for more firewood, presumably. I share his worries, but right now, I can't really concentrate on anything other than the way the conversation seems to work with the world, when things out there seem to stir and move, the conversation builds and we get near to whatever the point is.

Actually, what is the point? Have I ever finished a conversation and wished I had said no more and no less at any point? Have I ever been truly satisfied with the outcome of talking with another person? And what is the point? What is *the* point? To find out what films other people like? The reasoning behind their picks? Their life stories that lead up to the reason why they pick those films? No! A thousand times no! It is the fact that they are fundamentally other, they are, by virtue of they-ness, *not you*. They aren't you. They can empathise, they can sympathise, they can help, hinder, hurt, hate, love, fight, break up, get back together, but they're not you. And that's the problem. It's like the human experience of the world is an old film recording, recording at one second per second. If you wanted to show someone your entire film, then it would take them their entire life. That's why we talk about these things. Because talking about how I moved one leg in front of the other to get from one place to another isn't important, because we know this from our own experience. We talk to overcome that impenetrable barrier, the iron curtain that wraps itself around our psyche by virtue of being human. The brain is so wonderful and so complex, it's almost a shame I'm drinking so much. But, the brain, in all its wisdom, thinks that me drinking is good. It, when we choose to, decides that drinking is something that would be good. Or taking drugs. My phone buzzes, I turn it off. We keep talking, we talk about the nature behind talking, we talk about the meaning behind that, and after a while, it becomes hard. It's a grey area. Dig deep enough anywhere and you find that things are not as simple as they seem. A black and white picture, zoomed in to the seam, might be a sea of stripes, of all sorts of colour and nuance.

“Except the Nazis.” she says. “They were pretty bad.” I laugh, and, for a split second, wonder whether this grand theory of greyness applies or not. A lot of the time, we like to imagine ourselves as cut and dry, fully formed, invincible islands in a vast sea, and rational to the core. But no. The world isn’t like that, we’re not like that. People do idiotic things all the time, and we do things that those people would call idiotic as well. And the problem is wondering what’s right. And right now, what feels right to do is just sit, and talk. Why, I’m not sure. All I’m saying is that this feels like the right thing to do. Eventually, the fire beckons back again, there’s some more firewood in the shed so we bring it down to see if we can help the cause. Wordlessly, we nervously place logs onto the fire, skittering at the sight of flame and burning embers. There are no tongs. There’s nothing there to help us.

We sit by the fire for a good long time, just looking into it, occasionally looking up to see if anyone else is looking into it.

Eventually, people begin clearing out from the patio, leaving fewer and fewer people to look on. Jonah walks outside for the last time, and turns off some of the lights in the kitchen, and he walks past us when he tells people to come inside, for his parents are about to arrive back. I can’t see the oversized kitchen clock for the smashed window, but I know it’s late. And Kate, well, the bleached matte legs of the garden chairs are warm, and they bounce between pockets of moss on the edge of the asymmetric tiles. I try and lift myself up, but she puts a hand on the arm of my chair. I don’t need to move closer, because she’s already got a hand near mine. The fire is all, now, we stopped talking a while ago. The plastic handles slowly melt off of their metal frames, and the drips of sludge that make it to the edge burst into strange green and blue flames. But the smell never makes it to us. Oh, never that far. We exchange a look, a scared look, a ‘do you want to go first’ look, the look of someone who’s doing something with, and truly with, another person. My hands are cold, but not when they’re near the fire. And especially not when they’re in hers.

We see the dregs of people walking in, of yet more couples wailing together, show tunes, hot tracks, and

wordless movement. Especially the last one, the dresses stick in the mud but they don't care, the flow of moving from one place to another is what they're about right now, and no grass on the hem is going to slow anyone down. Jonah comes out into the garden, armed with a flashlight, and I hear the click after he walks past us. A few muffled cries, a particular spot invaded later, and it seems like everyone but us is gone. Jonah walks around in the kitchen for a few more... I'm not sure how long, to be perfectly honest. He almost looks like he's being wheeled around in there, he doesn't bob up and down much while he walks, and we can't see his legs over the bottom of the windows. We laugh. He walks out and smiles, the lights turn back on to full brightness, and we get up.

"My parents are here. Come on guys, I'm really sorry you can't stay the night." It seems like he's had to deliver the bad news a few times over. I smile and walk back in, the fire is dying now, but no one needs to tend it anymore. Yet, there he sits, outside, on his fire-watching chair, waiting for his parents to walk into the kitchen and see the broken window. He waits, and as we close the front door behind us, I see his face looking sideways out into a figure behind the shattered window, questioning, perhaps, maybe scolding. But I hope they understand. One thing's for sure, we sure as hell aren't going round Jonah's for any big events in the next few months. It's a shame. That shed really is nice. I wonder if everyone's out from upstairs, too. I just hope there's no lasting effect for him. She turns me round.

"So what are you doing now?"

"Now?" I say, unaware that there was another now to be had. I was sort of stuck in the last hour or so, and now, the cold air un-warmed by fiery currents, I wonder if there really needs to be another there, especially if it means walking.

"Yeah, loads of people are going to this cafe in the middle of town."

"What, the italian one?"

"Yeah, Satty's. Late nights."

"Sounds good. But it's like an hour's walk away?"

"Not if you know the shortcuts."

"So then it's fifty-five minutes?"

We laugh, and I realise that the time shouldn't be what I'm focusing on. Well, I can if I want to. But it's not

in either of our interests. If we wanted, if we were capable, we could summon our Year 6 cross-country legs, and, armed with the comfort of jackets and cargo trousers, jog our way all the way there. Couldn't be more than twenty minutes that way. The old field I used to jog round was only a kilometre or so, that can't be much longer than what we'd have to do? But the running doesn't stem from a need to be somewhere on time. We have all of the time in the world right now, the saturday is long, it can and will stretch into sunday. It will, tomorrow, be sunday. And that's what we're running for.

"Hey, it's past midnight!" she says, looking over at the church clock at the end of the street. It's uplit by a warm orange light, much like the outer streets in this town. Sometimes, they feel too warm, but right now, the psychological benefit of them is working wonders. Well, I mean there's probably some other reasons why I don't care that I'm cold. And if, oh, and if the world is so cruel to have everything be sensory input, if there is nothing more, then why do I want to be out here, in the cold, running along with someone, the cold wind in our faces, the lights of cars pulling into and out of driveways lighting up our blurry, forgotten legs as we sprint past. Why does this feel good? In fact, why does this feel like anything at all? Why do we have the capability to feel anything even *half* as good as what I'm feeling right now? And, my arm clips a lamppost, suddenly, the biological fetters clamp shut again, and it fucking hurts.

"You... you alright?" she gets out between breaths. I'm not really focused on what she's saying, the fact that the air condenses around us is fine. I look at her, and close my eyes for a second, shake my head and yawn - but not in a tired way, in a way that acts against tiredness, in a way that says "Suppress me not, body!"

"Seriously though, are you ok."

"Yes, I'm all good."

"Should we stop running?"

"Pr... well, uh, yeah, probably."

"Great."

We look back, and I can still see Jonah's house. It's going to be a long walk. And yes, again, I think, 'but that's alright' and, it really is alright. It really, right now, out of all the times that I've had in my life ever, pretty damn alright. And, lo and behold, I pause a quick chat

about what the best Pixar film is (a topic which people hold surprisingly strong and unwavering opinions on) to receive a text from Jack.

[will be at states in about 15 mins]

[states]

[satty's]

[for fucks sake]

[how's you]

[good, don't have time to chat]

[how's kate]

[oh sure, ;)]

[i found a friend for myself too]

“Who's texting you?”

“Jack. The guy who wore that yellow tie.”

[you coming?]

[yes]

[be there in 40]

I was not, as I claimed, ‘there in 40’, we ended up walking along the side of the park rather than right through the closed market streets, stands still set up for tomorrow morning. In fact, I wonder what I'm going to end up doing later today. I giggle at little at the possibility, and Kate asks me what's up.

“Nothing.” We walk up to the restaurant, and it's closed. In the reflection, we see a gaggle of people sitting around on the benches, some of them have been dragged around to form some sort of triangle, and they inform us, even more bluntly than the sign that says “CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS”, that it's “fucking shut”.

“So what are we doing?” I ask.

“What does it fucking look like mate?” says a guy, barely taking the vape out of his mouth, the smoke billowing across of the rest of the gaggle. Kate steps forward and says something about not being such a cunt for just asking a question.

“Why don't we go to the hospital cafe? That's definitely going to be open.” says Jack, friend in hand.

“Yeah, but it's for the people who work there.”

“Does anyone work there?”

“What, so they can sneak fifty people into there? No fucking chance mate.” A round of agreement. “I think

they'll take one look a'us and rightly kick us right out." Another round of agreement.

"Does anyone else have any ideas?"

A round of nothing.

Twenty-five or so minutes of walking later, we're there, collectively stood outside the Clinic Cafe - as it's so tightly named. Fifty might have been a bit of an overestimation, but we head on inside, and the disinterested cashier sits up. He's watching a film on his phone behind the counter, and you can see the despair in his eyes as we order a half-dozen coffees, a dozen assorted bits of cake, and another dozen teas. It's nearly 2AM by this point. Everyone is groggy, except Zach, who's beaming looking into the fluorescents. We have to keep shifting him around every so often so he doesn't burn his retinas out. A few minutes later, this older lady comes toddling out into the counter area, and looks at us with delight.

"You'll like this, everyone." she says, with the vigour of a school lunch lady. In fact, several people in the group probably recognised her. She points downwards to the tray on the counter. It's an entire brownie. One, singular, pan-sized brownie. Understanding the utter state most of us are in, we watch as she places the entire tray down on one table. Chairs screech and shuffle along the linoleum, and soon, everyone is equipped with a freshly-warm fork, and poised to strike. Yet, no one goes first. No one feels like that. The coffee jug and tea jug are passed around first. It feels right that way. Wordless, Zach restrains his left arm with his right, stopping what would have been the first cut. The lunch lady looks on.

"Oh, I'm actually glad you lot came. Would have been a shame if this had to go to waste."

"So, do you not get a lot of people in here then?" says Jack, inbetween sips of coffee and arm reshuffling with his new 'friend'.

"Not since the Greggs round the corner opened up. I'm surprised people were willing to walk the extra minute! Good for their legs, maybe."

"But not good for you?"

"Not really."

"Well, we're happy to help." he says, plunging his fork into the brownie, immediately followed by a dozen

others. The pure, borderline glistening surface of the brownie now riddled with pockmarks, it's not safe to eat in the knowledge that someone else was the one to ruin its pure perfection. Oh, and it tastes pretty good too. Nothing else needs to go with this, despite what anyone may think. I can see a few people taking sips of their drinks to wash it down, but they surely must remember the challenges of primary school desserts? The ever so slight dryness to everything, or abnormal colourings that would stain your bowl as if it had been dipped in highlighter ink, or one particular mousse which claimed to be strawberry but anyone with an tongue would say otherwise. It was dubbed 'Substance X' as such, and was only to be eaten unless everything else had run out, and yes, that was including the sweetcorn. Oh, the bounty of that that we got every lunch. One of the only things that people would take from the salad bar. Once, a kid from the year below had a plate of it for lunch. No one batted an eye. Just corn. Not even bread, the other staple food. Once, bread was not valued highly, but then, butter arrived. Suddenly, the market value of bread was tied to the value of butter. And, demand was high and supply was short. And once people realised that even before you'd gotten to your table you could sneak a few packets of butter into your pocket, all hope was gone. You'd frequently turn up to lunch early, just for the butter, only to find out the class next door to you had been let out five minutes earlier, and now you have to trade up for the butter. Oh, a long time was spent trading up for butter. It was rumoured that people were going to start bringing in their own stuff. But the teachers said that they'd take it away if we did. So people had to get creative. But, alas, we were in Year 5, and so the chicanery which seems so obvious to us today, did not occur. We just got on with our lives, and lived in the butter-world we had developed for ourselves. Until, that was, they switched providers for our lunches and they got rid of the butter. For context, the butter wasn't even good. It was borderline tasteless and unsalted at that. I guess you can thank them for looking after our arteries. But just imagining the scenes that would have occurred if one day, *salted* butter were to appear on the market, well, that would change everything. The brownie is nearly done now, the

occasional burnt patch sticks to the ground and Zach is watching them as if they will pounce on him.

“I’m not getting anything from Andy.” says one of the metalheads. “He’s just not saying anything.”

Kate laughs. “He’s away with Kathy again.”

“How do you know?”

“He saw them.” she says, pointing to me.

“What does he know?”

“I don’t know.” says Kate. “But it seemed like something that they would do. It’s been a few weeks, wouldn’t you say this was bound to happen?”

“Yeah.” says one of them, laughing. “God, three fucking weeks and they’re back together.”

“I thought it was two?” says another. They laugh together, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that they’re not here right now, and we are. Not that we hate them or anything, but it’s just a lot nicer not having to put up with their weird interactions towards the group. And plus, it would be really awkward. Speaking of awkward, there’s Jack, going ham in the corner - however you take that to be - and it makes us wonder why young love is so romanticised. The lights are still blisteringly white, and the barista serves us the last of the hot drinks. The lunch lady walks back out and asks us if we’d like anything else, and we say no, but she says we can stay here for a while. Before walking out, I see her turn up some dial on the wall. She seems to like this. Two people are walking past the cafe with Greggs bags. She seems to not like this.

“Does anyone remember jam and coconut cake?” someone shouts over the general din. We all take notice, and begin talking about it ourselves, some fondly, some not too impressed by the congealed nature of the jam, the fact that you could peel it off and eat it by itself, and just lob the cake under the table. I wonder how the kids at my old school are doing now. I wonder if they’re doing the same things that I did. I should visit again, perhaps. It feels right to hope that they’re still throwing things about, the teachers occasionally stepping in to keep the din from approaching tinnitus-inducing levels. I remembered how, before every lunch, someone said grace before anyone was allowed to go up and get food, but, there was a book of different ones to choose from. And this one was always chosen, not because of the fact that it

was particularly intriguing, or thought provoking, or even particularly true, but we chose it because it was the shortest one. Something like two and a half lines. In and out. None of that thanking God for the work that the farmers have done. Perhaps that's why it subconsciously appealed to us all. Or, more likely, because we were hungry little bastards and just wanted some goddamned jacket potatoes. With tuna, or cheese, or baked beans for those who felt that way inclined.

"No, baked beans were the best, what are you talking about, mate?" says someone else, prompting a whole different discussion. One guy takes his phone out and starts writing down the order of preference of jacket potatoes, trying to see if he can find the overall favourite. I talk around for a little while, but after five minutes of analysis, the results are inconclusive, and the data is messy anyway. I think cheese was overly the least favourite, but the sample size and the lack of variation within the sample is a big worry. The lunch lady brings out a round of jacket potatoes for some experimental evidence, to thunderous applause.

"Keep the stats to your physics A-level." someone shouts, and a round of laughs ensues. "Why don't we see what our favourite A-levels were?" Someone shouts, assuming that everyone in the room has favourite A-levels, or has done them at all. In fact, is it better to just eschew A-levels for more specialised teaching at university level? Because a lot of courses that require things like maths, further maths, and biology, keep going with all of those concepts. But then you just bring the specialisation of people further forward. And that's a real issue, I think, because having the option to choose your entire future path - well, your first choice of path, anyway, you can always change it in the future, but again, the limitations of the world begin to lead you in certain directions. Like how that sentence veered off in one direction, but never fully ended. Look, you can see, the 'because' is floating, it hasn't been given a proper ending. Well, here I am to give it one. It's my job, after all. Because of that, it's incredibly imposing to... well... do just that. All over human history you can see people who got into something with the promise of X, and never quite did reach that, and sit in offices packed to the brim with

people doing the exact same thing as them, some getting what they want, some not. But I feel that if you have something that you 'want' out of life, like you're treating it as some sort of game, then what do you do when it's done? Your life is now purposeless - but, of course, you can choose to start again. If your life's purpose was to make a million pounds, and you do just that, then do you make two million pounds? Is that the same thing as the first million? You could invest your first million into a company you made in order to make another million, and so on and so forth. But you could give it all away to someone you think deserves it, or someone you thought completely undeserving of it, or whatnot. The possibilities are quite literally endless - or thereabouts. Too many to consider. That's another feature of the human condition. Not only are we infinitely isolated from other people (we can never *be* someone else *per se*), but we're also infinitely isolated from uncountably infinitely many choices we could have made at some point. There are always 'what if's', and will always be. Even if you're glad you didn't go down a certain route, the possibility of inquiry is still open. So there we all are, together, down separate channels, and with no hope of unbounded unity.

I'd like to return to the idea of the total separation between people, specifically the film reel idea. Let's say, at some point in the future, we invent a machine that can record all sensory input and compress it down to a single second of output. Somehow, I am hooked up to that output, and the machine is turned on. I receive an entire life's worth of information in a second, and it's amazing and horrifying all at once, I remember everything the person remembered, I forget everything they forgot when they died, and, most importantly, I die. But I'm not them. I have the option, post-death, to think over their thoughts, I could, for that second, reflect on their life as if it was a subset of my own. And if we argue that the machine 'turns off' the part of me that is me, plays a second of someone else's life, and then turns me back on, then will I recollect anything? Will it mean anything? No.

We could see this thing as a sort of ultimate art. Every thing that they made, I not only get to see the finished product, but I also get to see how it was made, and the reasons for making it. Every word written, every

syllable said, every random movement, every looking up at the sky while sleeping, wondering if anyone will care about this moment. But this condensed tableau is only part of the the full picture. If we want to see how the other people interacted with that person, then we will need access into their minds as well, and so on and so forth, all the way back to the dawn of consciousness, of ego. And because some humans have died, we will never have the full set. It would be an incomplete archive. Like watching a TV show without the first series. Something's there, something might have happened there that might be important, a joke we don't get that we only get the setup to - we never heard the punchline because everyone just knows it. And those who claim that eternal knowledge of everything is the way to go about this problem don't see the problem with what they do. Recording, documenting is a wonderful thing to do, but if we are to spend all our time recording and documenting, then what will we end up doing? Recording and documenting the past recording and documenting?

Sitting back and watching the fire from afar every once in a while is wonderful, to deconstruct is to understand the world, but it is not the same sort of experience as unfettered interaction. Physical and metaphysical questions aside, the act of touch is a million times more meaningful than thinking about touching. Thoughts are cheap. Actions aren't. And we're still talking, but this time, it's just the two of us, we've dispersed to a side table, hands together as if we're both praying. But not together. Not yet.

The lunch lady walks out again. "They're coming in for their morning shifts in about ten minutes, so you might want to get a wriggle on." We discuss, rather diplomatically, who will pay. And there, there is a tip jar. Every coin, every note still in the wallet, goes right in. Numerous 'keep the change's, we are just thankful to have people like her around. And she tells us, if we ever need someplace to go to get warm food, any hour of the day, any day of the year, then she's right here.

We thank her on our way out, though a few people remain, calling cabs or parents to pick them up, desperately hoping for someone to pick up. But we pick our feet up, walking through town as a group,

commenting on the occasional halloween decoration, and the even rarer christmas decoration. We stand on the main street, where I stood twelve hours earlier, the true opposite of the day. Where I once saw a bastion of idealised goods, of people trading what they wanted, when they wanted, high quality meats and veg, I now see a slight rain come down yet again, the small puddles vibrate with the droplets. We stand under the thing in the junction between the two market roads, next to another church. It's still windy, but at least it isn't raining now. We stand and chat for a while, people move out and peel off back into the wind. Kate and I, after having another chat about films, and partially getting on to music, decide collectively to go and speak to Jack, who's sitting on one of the only seats, his new girlfriend sitting sprawled across him.

Kate laughs and bends over to talk to Jack.

"Is she sober?"

"Sober as you like."

"Well, I don't like being sober." says Kate, "But I get what you're saying." The girl on Jack's lap sits up, and I realise none of us have really spoken to her. None of us know her.

"Are you going home yet, love?" says Jack, the 'love' not quite jovial enough to be purely affectionate.

"Yeah, I've got loads of work to do."

"Oh, what kind?"

"English."

"Oh, nice, where are you studying?" says Jack, and Kate begins to look on with confusion. I wonder why he hasn't asked this before.

"Oh, Northwoods."

Jack pauses, looking horrified for a second, and then he goes back to attempting to be suave. Kate and I, however, retain our horror.

"There's a college called Northwoods too?" he says, clinging on to his last ounce of hope.

"No, it's just a sixth form."

"Oh." Jack wants - and you don't have to be qualified in psychoanalysis to see this - to get the girl off his lap immediately. Kate turns away of embarrassment, and goes to talk to someone else.

"We'll have to talk then, I've got to go home soon."

"Why? You could come back to mine?" she says.

"Nah, I've got work tomorrow."

“But you said you didn’t have anything to do?”

“They needed me for a shift. You can come and say hi if you like, but I probably won’t be in the front.”

“Oh, alright.” she says, probably understanding the situation, but not viewing it as negatively as Jack. She gets up, and definitely non-accidentally elbows him in the groin. A little bit of spite coming through? Maybe, maybe. But she can’t walk home by herself, not now at the very least. “I’m really cold.” she says.

“I know, it’s freezing.” says Jack, avoiding giving her his jumper so he has to see her again. Some other people are heading home, and one person’s just pulled up in their car, somehow having weaved around the bollard barriers. She gets in the back, looking back at Jack most of the way there. The car cinematically pulls away. Jack is still in shock.

“So, you spent a whole evening talking to this girl and you never figured out she was 17 or something?”

“She could be 18.” he says. “And yes, I know, I’m 25, but come on, it wasn’t exactly obvious, was it?”

Kate and I look at him. While it wasn’t necessarily obvious from looks alone, the behaviour was definitely someone who wasn’t as old as most of us are. Admittedly, Jack is a few years older than me, but what does that matter? Actually, as it turns out, quite a lot. Soon, a lot of people are talking about the ‘half your age plus seven’ rule for the lower bound of people you can date, and also the minimum dating age. 25 divided by two is 12.5, says someone, and they finish it off with the conclusion that anyone under 19. But, then someone counter-argues with the fact that this allows 20 year olds and 17 year olds to date (at the edge of turning 20, just turned 17, the case is very specific). Clearly, the system is not 100% correct. Some people argue for more complicated formulae, but it goes unheard. Anything more than the $x/2 + 7$ rule is too difficult to think about for any period of time. Someone suggests something with exponents. It’s too much. Perhaps we should just survey people and see what they actually think. But people are starting to leave now as they think about the actual relationships they’ve got now. Kate and I wait around with Jack for a while. Jack looks saddened, but also sort of relieved. But mostly sad. He was looking forwards to later, whatever that was going to mean for him.

“Cheer up, buddy.” I say, trying to be as condescending as possible. “It’s like Trainspotting.” Kate laughs. “Oh yeah, I didn’t think of that. How ironic that you don’t like that film...”

“Oh my god, she probably wears a uniform, too. We’re going to have to watch it now, Jack.” He groans and laughs at the same time.

“Alright, we’ll watch it at some point. I’m fucking freezing out here with my jumper, I think I left my jacket at Jonah’s, but I’ll pick it up in a few days. Not a big deal.” He gets up and walks off into the darkness, the wind picking up as he does. We move off with the ever-increasing threat of the wind that rips through the town, corralled and swept along streets and back alleys, blasting us with something. Where it comes from, I don’t know. The fact that we can’t predict the weather more than a few days in advance is somewhat astounding to me, with all of our technological gifts, we must be able to do something, right? Oh well, it’s only another half hour to my place. But are we even going back to my place?

“Are we even going back to a place?”

“I think we both need to just sleep.” says Kate, looking straight onwards, seemingly ignoring the fact that we’re walking in one direction.

“But your place is west.”

“A very long way west.” she says, lying, on purpose.

“Oh, alright.” I respond, and we walk back. Jack, who lives in the same block as me, is also walking back, but they stop to have a quick vape break. It’s just us, now, and I can feel the thread that binds me to this world slowly fading. I tire, and tire some more as we get closer and closer. She peels off a street before me, and we hug, this time, not wanting to feel our own shape, but to feel the other. In my building, the stairs are barely functional, and my kitchen is completely filled to the brim with rubbish. Pots and pans stacked in such a way that shouldn’t be possible. Do I do them? I do my lot. I do exactly what is required of me, and no more. But, stepping back and looking at the whole picture, all I can hear is a cry to keep it down, someone’s trying to watch a film in the front room.

“If you did your washing, I wouldn’t have to do this.”

I say, wondering what the hell is going on in there. It can’t just be a film, it’s this late at night and someone’s

still conscious enough to pay full attention to a film? Not in my experience has this happened. After quietening down a little bit, trying to make the dishes clink into one another a little bit less, I head into the front room. They're sitting on the sofa and are pretty much completely naked. I close the door again and hear an even more muffled "What the fuck? I told you not to come in." I'm too mortified to even say that he didn't tell me not to come in. Sleep is very much welcomed, my arms are tired from being mechanical and moving back and forth, back and forth and back, back and froth, the washing up liquid froths up and gets a little bit on my shirt. Shit, I have to get the shirt back in his room. It's clean, I clean it off some more just to be on the safe side, and put it back on the hangar and all is well. I wonder how Kate's been, and just as I'm ready to go to sleep, Jack texts me again. My head is still spinning.

[So how did it go with Kate eh]

[Pretty fucking well i imagine]

[lol]

[It went well]

[She back at your's]

[no]

[she went home]

[we were both really tired]

[I'm surprised]

[After sitting around doing fuck all day]

[why?]

[oh hhaha]

[yeah I'm gonna go to sleep rn]

[Yeah alright man]

[Catch you tomorrow]

[I spoke to zach before he went missing]

[He said he could hook us up with some acid]

[sounds like a plan, Sam]

[wonderful!]

[hold on, missing?]

[Yeah no one could find him]

[Just wondered the fuck off]

[*Wandered]

[is he ok?]

[No idea]

[None]

[He just vanished after we left the place]

[fuck]
[is there anyone looking for him]

[Prboalby]

[Eeveryone just went home after the cafe anyway]

[He's at home guaranteed]

[call him then]

[He didn't have his phone]

[Said it was bad vibes]

[shit]

[well I hope he's OK]

[ok gn]

[Alright see you at mine at like 12]

[too early]

[2]

[Ok]

[Gn]

I can't go and look for him, but, at the same time, it's not exactly my responsibility. But, he doesn't seem like the sort of person that can't find their way home. Apparently, I've been described as some sort of homing pigeon. I just find my way home if it's really late and I'm wasted or something like that. So much so that, last year, I'd often end up in my place with five or six other people who I'd apparently promised free bedding to. Well, in retrospect, I did have a really nice rug until the guy who owned it moved out and this idiot replaced him. I can hear two sets of heavy footsteps, and briefly one, and then two again, and a shoulder or elbow bashing against my wall. Wouldn't mind it so much if I was on the other side of the room. In fact, yes, that's what I should do. Move my bed to the other side of the room. Right now? Sure, why not. I've got the energy for it. A sudden burst. I drag my bed halfway across the room before I remember the people below me are probably sleeping, or at the very least trying to. So I slide it *gently*, whatever that means. But then I remember, the headboard is at the other end. Do I sleep at the other end of the bed for once? Is it worth it? I think about rotating the bed, but is all this change worth it?

I lay in bed for twenty minutes and can't sleep, so I scrape the bed across the floor back to where it was. I fall asleep pretty quickly after that.

Sunday?

I lay awake well before noon, thinking how I should have arranged to meet Jack earlier on in the day. But I can't go back on what I said now, I might inadvertently end up proving to him that he's right. Right about what, though? Does it matter that he told me to come at 12? But if I had to come at 12, then I'd have to leave well before then. I text Kate, and realise that I forgot to ask if she'd got home safe. She responds with, "how are u even awake now". Seems like I'm more of a morning person than I thought. Or maybe I'm more of a music person than the average young person. I don't think any young people I know are really morning people. Except Jonah, that is. I get up properly, see my flatmate in bed (he 'forgot' to close the door again) and then I walk into the kitchen. The two parts of the sink are equally full again. Does he just generate mess while he sleeps? Or did they make themselves a meal while I was asleep? I want to make him come and clean some of it up so I can actually use the sink and the countertop, but no, it's a sunday, let sleeping dogs lie. Cereal and... we're out of milk. Still wet from the previous night, and at the top of the bin. Well, god damn it. I look at his parts of the fridge. Bare, the occasional slice of cheese, noodles, pasta shapes (somehow) and a pile of Snickers bars. I take one out and eat it with my dry cereal. Thankfully it's one of those ones that you can sort of stomach so long as you keep drinking water to wash the dust down. I turn on the TV, which is odd. I don't usually watch TV, but this feels a lot nicer than - oh, right, probably don't want to sit on that part of the sofa, either. No sir. The remote has a small splotch of gunk on the bottom side. It's quite dark, so, in a way, I am relieved, in another, I am most definitely not. The news has been and gone, and pretty much anyone who watches the news these days is over fifty, so why don't we see what other crap is on. Daytime television o'clock, 11am, I see my mum doing the ironing as the sunday sun streams in through the window, the blinds halfway down and diluting the white rays of light to make them almost orange. A slight mist, an even slighter smell of, well, I don't think I could

put a name to it. But, I'm sure if I smelt it again, I could pick it out for you in an instant. I'm sure that my mum's friend, who used to help out with our cleaning every month or so, is permanently associated with that smell. I can't think of her without thinking of the various sprays, wipes and chemicals which kept the place looking nice the rest of the time. The shiny, ever so slightly wet table surfaces, then, at eye level. The warm kitchen floor, residually heated from being mopped, still had a film of soap on the top, that would be taken off with a second go. Running out of there and into the thin, bare carpeted areas was just lovely. To have clean feet and not a care in the world. But now, in here, the world inside is cold, and I haven't looked out of the window yet. Well, I haven't been trying. It just looks very grey outside, a greyness that seems to seep through the windows. When it's cold, these windows seem to weep. But what's inside and outside don't match up. I'm happy, right now. Right, right now. It's 12 o'clock. I just spent the last few hours watching bits of TV, I watched a documentary on boats. I watched a few episodes of an american show I haven't watched in ages. And it's all alright. I check my phone and Jonah seems to be pissed off. He's added about 50 people to a chat called "Virtual Assistant Theft". On it, is him complaining that his family's virtual assistant (what sort it is does not seem to concern him) was stolen. The way he doesn't mention the brand name feels like he's trying to keep an eyewitness in protection, it's quite funny. But someone makes a sketch out of his description, and some other people laugh.

[Guys it's not funny the window broke AND one of
you fuckers stole the virtual assistant]
[We didn't even use it that much]

Immediately, people accuse the roadmen of doing it, and, despite the lack of any evidence, that seems to be the sort of thing they would do. To be told to leave, to come anyway, to be sectioned off and then forcibly removed, I can understand how that would piss them off. Whether it's justified or not is another matter - it isn't. But who are we to come down so harshly on one side or another? Well, if we look at what happened again, then it might feel easy to come to a conclusion. I

feel like I keep going around in circles whenever I think or talk about law. The law is the law, they say, well, that is true, but that is not a foundation that it can rely on. A building cannot be built on its own roof and stand up. In fact, a building cannot be built on its own roof. But, if we take roof to mean 'top' then whatever we add to the top of the building becomes the new roof. So, if we were to make a building in a circle, then whatever side of the circle was oriented 'upwards' (again, another frame-of-reference dependent term) would be the roof. But, what about if there were no other objects to orient itself against? What would be the roof? Who knows. Definitely not these guys, pottering around in front of rows of cameras and paid audiences. What the fuck are half these cunts even doing? Without sounding like your average social media commentator, of course. There's *nuance* in being a cunt. You can't just go out and try to act like one, you have to really get into the groove of it. You have to be so far gone that you don't understand why your actions are bad, and once you're there, it's very difficult to prise you out again. But it can be done. There are many people in history who have followed that path, from their inherent human neutrality to utter cunt-ishness, and then back again. Makes you think.

The weather forecast might be worth paying attention to. High chance of snow for the day? Count me in, I've got lots of gloves, a nice thick jacket, and some salopettes from a few years back when I went skiing. Not a hundred percent sure why I still have them around, it hasn't snowed in what feels like years. But, at least I haven't grown out of them. Haven't really grown at all, to be honest. I think I stopped growing when I was about 15. But either way, I now have about an hour and a half to get ready and then go over to Jack's, and he's presumably got something for us to do there. Well, I assumed he's got a particular something for us to do. I put on some clothes, and leave the salopettes at home, but the heavy jacket comes with me. And, an hour later, partially out of boredom, I find myself standing outside Jack's door. The paint is starting to peel off the front of it, and the letterbox is rusting quickly, too. Seems a lot better for wear since he moved in.

"You said two!" he says, looking out of the upstairs window. He says it again, but turns away, I can hear him through the closed window and the closed door.

Doesn't feel like there's a lot of structure to this house. Every time I go there and you step, it almost feels like the floor gives way ever so slightly. And, of course, it does. He got some carpet to prevent his office chair from sounding like a machine gun sliding over the slightly separated floorboards upstairs. And it's one of those places where the floor is littered with those little nails, same as Jonah's. Just not quite as big. And he doesn't live with his parents, which is a big plus. I wonder how Jonah is, actually.

"You said you wanted to come at two because it was too late." Jack says, opening the door, quickly hurrying me inside, and closing it again. "Christ, you've wrapped up warm."

"Well it's cold outside."

"I can see that! The corners of my bedroom window were frosting up before the heating turned back on in the middle of the night."

"Your heating turns off at night?"

"Well, you don't need it. You're out cold."

"Very cold, in your case."

"Ha, ha." he retorts, hurt, and quite possibly very cold. He's wearing a jumper and almost assuredly a shirt underneath that. "I feel the cold very easily."

"Bet you do."

"Alright, well, have you eaten?"

"Not a whole lot."

"Perfect. I was going to have some fruit for lunch. Zach said it was really good while, uh, tripping."

"Do you think there'd be anything that he says is actually bad?"

"Yeah, actually. He rattled off a fairly comprehensive list of things. Phones, animals, mirrors, cameras, sudden movements, outside intervention. All that sort of stuff. Things that would make you either paranoid or forget about yourself. I mean, you could try to see all those things, I don't think it would be thaaat bad."

"That bad?"

"I dunno, man. Anyway, yeah, he seemed to know what he was talking about. So I would probably follow his advice."

"Sure." I say, pausing to look around the place. "Where is Zach, anyway? Is he still missing?"

"No one's found him yet, but then again, he might just be in his flat, alone."

“Fair enough. But someone should call him.”

“Alright, we’ll call him now.” says Jack, walking into the kitchen, placing his phone down on the island. “But he wouldn’t want us to get all angry over it.”

“He might still be outside. And considering how he wasn’t wearing a lot.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“...ehhh. Maybe.”

The phone rings. No answer.

“Maybe his phone is dead. What are we supposed to do then?”

“I have no idea.” says Jack. “Look, there are probably other people trying sort this out.” I text the *Virtual Assistant Theft* chat in order to see if anyone has found Zach. A few no’s, someone says he’s in his house. I ask how they know, and it’s still inconclusive. I give up. All this time, Jack has been writing a note on a cardboard box with a marker.

“DO NOT LEAVE THE HOUSE. YOU ARE ON ACID. BE CALM.” it says, in very un-calming block capitals. He looks back at me. “This’ll keep us inside. It has to be a little scary, otherwise we’ll probably just ignore it.”

A little weirded out by the fact that he expects us to lose this much psychological autonomy, I laugh a little bit. He smiles, and rips a side of the box, propping it up on the letter holding cage. “Now hopefully that stays there.” He looks back after walking down the hallway.

“Now, it’s just me in today, the others are away on holiday, so it’s just me. No one is going to come home, and if they do, we have the window to look out and see who it is.” He seems to have this all planned out. Perhaps too planned. But i’m not sure right now, it’s been a long time since I’ve really had to plan anything for myself. I forget the nervous tension between spontaneity and planning. Because it’s difficult to rely on spontaneity to have a good time by itself, but if you’re one of those people who just goes around and does things like clockwork, then, well, I suppose that can be fun, but there’s no scope for going outside of those boundaries. Right now, he’s just set the heating on a little bit, and I’ve only just taken my jacket and shoes off. My socks are the little duck ones I got back when I wrote a story about some ducks, and everyone thought I was obsessed with them. Maybe I was.

Jack stands around, looking at various things.

“Do you think these’ll break?” he says, looking at a small sculpture that he made when he was younger on the window ledge.

“No, of course not.” I say, having not noticed them up until this point. A multicoloured snake with interesting patterns, haphazardly painted on. He wondered if Jack thought it was good at the time.

“When did you make this?”

“Year 2. I was apparently a budding artist, but that didn’t pan out all that well.”

“Ah, right.” I said, wondering how badly he wanted to be an artist. The question would have to wait until some point in the future, though. I didn’t want to put him in a bad spot right now.

“Oh, fuck!” says Jack. “I must have left my wallet back at Jonah’s.”

“And the wallet has the stuff in it?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, right. No big deal, we can just drive over there and pick it up.”

“Sounds good.”

He takes the cardboard sign off of the letter box, and we walk down the road until we get to his car. It’s very, very cold inside, and my breath fogs up once more.

“Jesus, even the steering wheel feels like ice.”

The car starts fine, surprisingly enough, and we head over to Jonah’s, and I’m wondering what the hell is going on with the weather. It’s not even the end of autumn yet, and the weather is still getting worse. I turn the radio on, and, ominously enough, there’s a weather warning about snow. I don’t remember driving in the snow. Must be whenever I go to see my parents, it snows after I get there, and it’s all melted by the time I get back. Or something like that. Anyway, we pull up to the kerb and quickly get out of the car. We walk onto his front garden, and there’s a toppled bin, so Jack pulls it back upright. Unfortunately, it’s extremely heavy, so he struggles. Worse still, there’s shuffling from inside. Maybe a cat has got stuck in there? Who knows - well, I know now, it’s Zach, shaken, still on another level. He smells of residue of everything. He looks at me and Jack, and awakes to the world.

“What the fuck, Zach?”

“It was cold.”

“Why didn’t you just knock on the door?”

“It sounded like Jonah’s parents were angry.”

“Why didn’t you go back home?”

“I left my keys inside.”

Jack and I simultaneously ‘aaaah’ and then almost begin to continue on with our day like nothing weird is happening. Jonah arrives at the door, and he’s looking on in shock.

“Why didn’t you come inside, Zach?”

“Locked door. Sounded like your parents...” he says, quietening down, “were pretty pissed off at you.”

“Yeah, they were. But I think we’ve got it figured out now. They know it wasn’t me.” he says, like that makes a whole lot of difference. Zach effortlessly frees himself from the bin, and then trips over the doorframe on his way in.

“Mind that.” says Jonah, quietly laughing. Jack walks in and asks him where the jackets are. Jonah points to the dining room, where a few jackets are splayed out in a neat pile. “There’s three left.” He picks out his quickly and walks out. On the way out, he stops and points at the cupboard under the stairs, and looks at Jonah.

“You probably want to get that deep cleaned.” he says, laughing. He looks at Jonah with a wry look, and perhaps a small amount of guilt. Oh dear, I really hope that he’s not guilty in that way. Jonah goes over to the cupboard and gets down on his knees, and opens the door. He screams, and shuffles back on his knees like something in there has died. Zach screams too.

“What the fuck, guys!” he says, to the just-awoken Andy and Kathy. I start laughing. “Oh my god, so that’s where they’d gone.” I say, thinking that an image will make Kate laugh. But I’ve left my phone back at Jack’s, oh well. But how else would she believe me.

“Oh mate, take a picture of this.” I say to Jack, Andy attempting to block the light coming in from the kitchen from reaching his eyes. They are not exactly fully clothed. Jack looks around the door and laughs, Andy is trying to shut the door again and put his shirt back on. Jack gets a picture of him, scowling at the camera, Kathy still barely awake. He wrenches himself upright and bangs his head on the frame on the way up. I laugh again.

“Oh, come on man. Don’t you see how this is funny?” I say. He doesn’t respond. But I don’t care. He

goes and picks up the last two jackets, and gives the other to Kathy. Kathy says 'thanks for the party' to Jonah, and apologises somewhat. Jonah reaches in there and grabs a torch, and points it into the cupboard.

"Do I turn this on." he says, deadpan, not wanting to see the horrors that might lie within. Jack and I look at each other.

"You do." Jack says. Andy has just finished zipping up his jacket and patting himself down. He says 'thanks' to Jonah as well, but no more. They walk out in silence, the door slamming behind them. Jonah turns on the torch and something's there. Zach and him laugh.

"Young love."

"Can't beat it." Jack says, looking at a pair of boxer shorts with a rip down the centre. "I'm surprised the cupboard was big enough to move around in."

"Well, you should know very well." says Jonah, and I laugh a little. He doesn't know about their interesting chat last night. I shan't bring it up. We've got to be off.

"Well, we've got to be off." says Jack. "Thanks so much for the party though, and I'll keep a look out for your thing that you lost."

"Keep an eye out for some fucking replacement waste disposals too. Some cunt put a bit of metal in it and it broke. Jammed." I think that I might know something to do with that, but yet again, it's not really worth bringing up. Zach doesn't know what he did. Jack sympathises with Jonah, but he probably doesn't have a waste disposer. Maybe he should put a sign over that saying 'do not touch' for the trip. That sounds like something he would do. We wave goodbye to Jonah and Zach, and get back in the car and drive off. The fog is settling in even more now. And the radio signal is a little fuzzy now. Maybe there's a storm coming in from somewhere. Not that I know where the tower is. I can really still feel the wind gently coming through the car, some vent somewhere is open and I can just feel the cold. I just hope that Jonah's ok. We drive past Andy and Kathy and Jack honks at them. Andy twitchily turns around, perhaps he doesn't realise it was us. Jack waves out of the window, and we keep on driving. I take Jack's phone out of his pocket and send the image of Andy to myself. Have to wait until we get back to send it to Kate. Must remember. Very funny

image. We talk about what the fuck we've just witnessed for the whole drive, and until halfway there, we forget to mention Zach in the bin. Like, how did he decide that was a good idea? How did Andy and Kathy not wake up when everyone was storming out? Did they *intentionally* stay the night? Seems like a really weird thing to do, to stay the night at someone's without them knowing. At least there were no easily discernible stains. I just wouldn't wish Jonah to go in there with a UV light. It would probably look like a 3D Pollock. I shiver at the thought, but mostly at the cold.

My breath condensing is now moved away by a blast of warm air. It's only just started really heating the car up once we pull up near Jack's house. His jacket gets caught on the door on the way out. How it does, I have little to no idea. There didn't seem to be anything for it to get caught on. We walk back inside, his gloved hands struggling with the key. It's a really old fashioned key, one of the ones that has a long, thin pole with the bit at the end. My only experience with keys like that is in sheds and very old doors. And this doesn't look like a very old door. But at least it's not one of those comically large ones with buck-tooth bits. And when I say bits, I mean 'key bits' in the strict sense of the word. I'm not using bits as some kind of substitute word for 'whatcha-call-it' in order to sound less silly. No, that's locksmith terminology right there. How I know this, yet I do not know the subtleties of various important sociopolitical issues around the world, is an utter mystery. Clearly, my brain power is being put to good use doing the things that I do. It's not even entirely my fault. My brain asks me to do things like 'drink' and 'do drugs' despite the fact that it is chemically altered or withered by those things. But, as he procures three tabs from his wallet, I know this is going to be different somehow.

"Why three?"

"Oh, I thought there were going to be three of us. I thought Zach might be free."

"Yeah, it's probably best he's having a nice relaxing day." I say, Jack nodding in agreement, walking over to the kitchen counter to get a pair of scissors so he can cut the package open. "Properly sealed stuff. Really good."

He looks like he's going to laugh. "My flatmate is left handed so he has all left handed stuff. Borderline unusable. I think I might just... oh, no, we're good." He puts the scissors down, after wrangling them out of his hands. "The grips are just wrong."

He takes the middle one and cuts it in half. "Alright, so we'll do one and a half each. They're not all that strong, so it should be fine." He looks at me, I look at him, we both know what to do. We sit in the front room for a while, excited, I'm fizzing, my jumper is warm now, my heart is racing. I don't know what to expect. Well, I sort of know what to expect. But this isn't like before. This isn't like before.

"What do you want to watch?" he asks, I'm not thinking of anything that I want to watch, to be honest, but I'm wondering what he wants to watch. Do I suggest Trainspotting? As a joke? As something cool to watch visually? I think he'll understand.

"Trainspotting."

"Ha, ha. I mean, sure, works for me." Jack says, with only a tinge of sarcasm audible. I think he wants to watch it again, genuinely, unlike how he talked about it yesterday.

"Isn't it odd that we went to the market just yesterday?" I ask. "It feels a lot longer." He disagrees, and goes over to the TV console. Inside, he has a DVD of Trainspotting, surprisingly enough. "My parents gave it to me as a joke. It originally had a post-it note on the disc saying, 'What not to do.' Well, I'm listening to their advice right now, eh?" I laugh, and readjust my tongue. I move it forwards, and backwards, almost appreciating the feeling that it has. Hopefully I won't be concentrating on it too much in the future. I remember seeing a video about how big the tongue actually is, about how it's a huge blob of wet muscle or something like that. But now isn't the time to be thinking about things like that. It's time to be looking at the DVD menu, and the trailers that come before the film. We can't skip them, the remote that Jack has is insufficient in its functionality. The curtains stay silent and still, as curtains unperturbed by wind do. The windows are all shut, but reaching my hand back towards them doesn't feel like it, there's a small current coming from tiny gaps in the mechanisms. On a summer's day, these would be the finest things to press your face right up against but,

as it would be summer, it wouldn't be cold outside, and the windows wouldn't have that coolness to them. Such is the duality of the seasons, I think, laughing at how pretentious I understand I am. Is understanding your own pretentiousness pretentious in itself? Probably not.

I look at Jack, and he just smiles and nods, without even turning his head to see me. But I realise he's nodding to the sound of the film, the menu comes up, and he presses play. On we go. Nothing's really happening yet, to be perfectly honest. All of the subtle movement that I keep seeing might just be my expectations rather than what is actually taking place. Wait, actually taking place? I'm going to have to hold that thought, though, because the intro starts, and Lust For Life is now playing. I sit there and watch the film with Jack, occasionally laughing, occasionally sitting in complete silence, because why think about anything else other than the film right now? Why indeed.

"God, this guy is 26." says Jack, looking at wikipedia on his phone. "I could ruin my life in a year, couldn't I?" He looks at me and then looks at his phone again. He puts it back in the kitchen. "Yeah, I forgot. Sorry." Walking back, he's just sliding his feet along the floor until they crash into the carpet, and he stumbles. He's missed one of the best parts of the film, but at the very least he's now here for the bit where Renton lists off all of the items he's keeping in the room to get off of heroin. I think that Jonah was probably thinking along those lines when he was preparing for everyone to come over. Hopefully he wasn't planning on his house looking quite as bad as Renton's flat by the end of the night.

"Shame we had to leave early."

Jack looks at me, confused, and then he looks less confused, and then reverts to being very confused.

"Leave where?"

"Jonah's."

"Oh."

I think perhaps why I said that is because I assumed it was the only place that we had to leave early in the last few hours. But maybe he thought I said 'have' instead of 'had'. We keep watching the film. Things come and go, the bathroom scene, and then, the nightclub.

"It's strange, isn't it." I say. "You basically did the whole of this part of the film over two nights. Except she's not like, 15 or something."

"And I didn't pick her up in the nightclub."

"That's why I said two nights."

"Ah, well, sort of."

Is it that big of a coincidence? Maybe our chat about *Trainspotting* on Saturday morning had influenced his behaviour enough that he picked up the girl that he did? Of course, it's not for me to say whether or not that is the case. I think we would still be comparing him to Renton if he hadn't been to a nightclub the day before. So it's definitely the accidental going out with an underage girl. Well, actually, not underage, but just someone who it would have been odd to continue. I mean, she could have been exaggerating when she said that she went to the sixth form. She could potentially have only been doing her GCSEs'. But hopefully, at that point, Jack would have known what was going on. We hoped. Well, I currently hope. And I currently hope that things start moving, but I know my brain is going to be convinced that things are normal for the longest time until it can no longer suppress the various chemicals flowing through it - and I know I said I was above a chemically reductive view of the brain, but right now, that is **categorically** what is going on. The feeling of sitting somewhere and not feeling anything, but when you get up and start moving the thing finally hits you, and it's no longer stable? Right?

"Did you just ask a question?" says Jack, after I had made some sort of closing statement, a finishing 'hmmm?' after asking myself a question. I'm not sure who's feeling it more - me for asking a question out loud to myself in front of another person, or Jack for not realising that I had asked a question. Well, I **think**, he's probably just engrossed in the film or something like that. And the curtains aren't so still anymore, I'm aware of my arm on the sofa's edge, sitting there, motionless, and I move my arm to prod it. Ah, no, the other one. Well, anyway, the film continues on and we're still downstairs, and we've exchanged words about the film a few times, talking about how things look interesting. Someone's just been hit by a glass, and we decide to turn it off. What a great film. What a film indeed. What a film. Wow, you're not even that high yet. Is high the right

word to use? Well, you're getting higher by going up the stairs, and you make a joke about it to Jack. He laughs heartily, and it resonates to you. It's almost like you can see it. Whatever 'it' is. Is it just the vibrations of air in the air? Can you actually see the vibrations of air? Is it possible to do so? I think if you had something really loud then you could. It feels like you could.

"So what's upstairs?" I ask, bursting and brushing my hand up the wall to feel the texture of the light blue paint. He responds with "It's my music. It's all upstairs." I'd never really got onto the topic of what sort of music he liked before, but now, I'm presented with a foot of records (not just one 12", mind you) and their covers are all moving in different ways. This one is the same sort of blue as the wall with a woman's face on it, and some text. Not my ideal album cover with all the text on it, but Jack reassures me that this will be really, really good. He spends a while moving the head back and forth over the record, trying to find the right spot. Eventually, he catches the ending notes of a song I think I remember, and then it begins.

The train-track drum line, the voice moving up and down in time with the guitars which fade in, and are they even, yes, no they're guitars, and the lyrics are repeating. Oh, I need rock right now, and she runs to the river and the sea, and it runs to the sea itself and it's all boiling and running into the sea. And then, the imagery. The fervour, the sinner man takes a look heavenwards, and the Lord (capital L for this sort of thing) tells him to run to the devil, and the 'il' of the devil isn't even there, but *my God* this is something. The instruments have been doing the same thing for so long now yet it doesn't even matter, they're building like three people playing a piano at the same time, and the clapping comes in in the background, homeward, homeward, to the devil, to the devil, to the rivers and seas that melt into one another, a joyous, powerful resonating- it's gone elsewhere. The song breaks down before reforming with the same backbone that it always had, the train is still there and it drives forward, from the river to the sea and back again, all over the place, the skittered feet of the nervous sprinting from place to place, wondering whether or not we will wonder any more. But now, it's all fallen apart, the stereo sounding clapping resonates and fills the room again, and yet

again, it's all there and all there, and the piano is back, with yet another melody, you can tell that they're out of breath, but it doesn't matter, and some lovely chords and other such things grace my ears as the grace of God himself blessed this track with. The drums return, but not triumphantly, not calling anything to themselves or anything pompous like that, and the rivers and seas are boiling once more. Why do they care whether or not the sea is boiling? I wonder what that would do to the ocean ecosystem - but I'm sure that the God featured in this song would make it right, the 'p' of 'praying' feels like it has power behind it, but sometimes that's because it sort of distorts the mic. I can see a tapestry of things laid out before me, the relatively small speakers of Jack's room envelop us, I look over at him and it's very clear he is off with the sinner man too, he's galloping from place to place on his - and there, things stop again, the voice sounds like a saxophone or trumpet solo in the best possible way, and then, we have the ending, I can see the needle is nearing the edge of the record, but it might be a while yet. It might feel like a million years. And they might just be the best years of my life, seeing how I need whatever she needs. Whatever the sinner man needs to finish the - oh! It's all back again, back and forth, stabs of instrument, a rousing finale, and then **finally**, the drums kick out, but not in the way that I expect. They just keep going - oh! And other things are back in, they **stood** to the wayside throughout the whole thing but never did they tip forth into the centre of the thing like this. And just like that, other things come crashing in, it feels like the room is having instruments thrown at it, but then, it all ends again, and this time, it's actually **hhere**.

And then it ends, as it started. Just without leading into the next song. The gentle click of the arm heading back to the **resting** place. Click. Jack pulls out the box which he keeps the records in and I leaf through them. There are sporadic covers that I recognise, but nothing that's immediately taken me. I have to choose between *Meddle* and *Close To The Edge*. Well, I do like both of them, but it's a question of which will be better for the both of us. After showing both of them to him, Jack points at *Meddle*, and smiles and nods.

“One of my favourites. Like, of all time. Plus I think it would work really well.” he says. I’m thinking there’s a pattern to the music we’ve listened to so far. Blue, minimalistic album covers where the last song is the longest, and also best. Well, at least that’s what he said he **thought** about *Pastel Blues*. So Meddle plays, and we listen to the first side, and there’s some cool moments here and there, but nothing that revolutionises the world. Of course, it’s all as expected, there are some nice moments, and also ‘Seamus’, which could just have been left off, if we’re being honest. At least it was the last song on the side, there’s no more of that sort of thing. Wait, so now, what are we up to? He’s flipping the record over, and I know what’s coming next. The opening bloop takes me away to another world, and you’re outside of you for the first time in about 12 hours. You wonder if your dopamine receptors are going to be fucked by the end of this.

“Do you think that doing this directly after MD was a bad idea?”

“Oh, no, it turns out that the stuff last night was completely fake.”

“What? Then what was the hugging about?”

“Oh, I just like hugging people when I’m drunk. You must like hugging people too.” He laughs.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why not?”

“I was avoiding drinking because of the MD. I’m not a big fan of the two together.”

“Ah, fair enough. And sorry for not telling you. Uh, sorry. Yeah, sorry.”

The word ‘sorry’ seems to fit with the mood of the song at this point I’m reminded of a project in Year 11 where we had to make stills for a music video for a song of our choice. I, being the idiot that I was, chose *Echoes*. Three stills per minute, is what we were told, so that’s a hefty 75 stills for me to complete. Thankfully, I loved the song at the time, and all my brain can begin to do is interpolate those frames to make the video I once wished I had the capability to make. I still want to make that video, I liked the ideas I had. Maybe I could make it with relatively minimal effort. I think there’s other videos I’d want to make as well. Something’s there. Something is there indeed. So why am I now going off script? I think the middle of the stills that I made weren’t

exactly three-a-minute. How could you even make three images a minute out of this? So then why am I seeing a technicolour rendition of what feels like two cosmologically scaled whales talking to one another. And to think, oh, and to think that this isn't considered one of their best works! I want to get out my laptop and show him the slides.

Well, that's because I'm more of a... 'The Wall' kind of guy. But I've already listened to that while on plenty of drugs, and that was special. So I might not ever do it again to somehow, arbitrarily 'preserve' its speciality. Plus, he doesn't have it on vinyl, so it might be rude to suggest that we ditch the hi-fi and grab his housemate's bluetooth speaker.

"Do they ever get angry at you for playing this loud?"

"One of them does, but that's only because she doesn't like the sort of music I do. The other is fine with it, he's walked in here a few times and said 'turn this shit up!' Or words to that extent..."

I'm actually taken aback by the fact that I don't know the names of these people. I have down Jack for several years now, and it seems to me that I still don't know an awful lot about him. I mean, we've done lots of fun things together, but nothing to actually sit back and talk about what we did before then. I think maybe because, when we first met, things were a little hectic. I suppose we sort of got to know each other when the things that we were doing right there and then were the most important things in the world. We didn't have time to recollect, to share our pasts. And I suppose that's why we're friends, maybe because if we knew more about one another rather than just knowing what we've done over the past few years, then maybe we wouldn't be friends.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we'd be friends if we'd known each other when we were, uh, let's say, in Year 2?"

"Probably."

That's all I needed. Well - is it? Do I really think that that's how it would have gone? Because back in Year 2, he could have been the type of person Year 2 me would have hated, or vice versa. He might have been the guy who always wanted to sit in this specific corner of the mat, and this specific corner of the room. Arbitrary stuff

like that. But then again, I've seen friends disown friends because of political beliefs. To me, there doesn't seem like much in the way of difference between not liking someone because you wanted that seat in your little classroom, and because their opinions differ from yours. In both scenarios, you have the option to talk to them about it, to reason, to perhaps get someone who's more well informed to weigh in on the situation. But when you're very young, you don't have that sort of reasoning. It's not like little John is going to sit little Fraser down and have a nuanced discussion with him about why taking up a seat on the table is wrong. There's not going to be any possibility for debate there. It's a simple exchange. I want this, you have it, I cry. But some people seem to be like that, even now. Maybe it's not worth putting up with those sorts of people in the long run, to simply sit on another table and talk to other people. I'd say I know Jack very well now, and despite the fact that we're both in our twenties, leaving him to find other friends feels like a huge problem. It feels like if I leave to go and interact with other people, then nothing will ever replace him. But you'd still have (statistically) another sixty years to go out and find new people! You knowing Jack would be but a tiny portion of your life by the end of it. If you live to see a hundred, then the time that you've known Jack would be five, maybe six percent of it. Does that make him insignificant? Well, if I was to go away tomorrow and live a life filled with adventure and intrigue, then maybe it would be. But it could also eventually represent the best years of my life, which is what I fear will happen. Not necessarily in a 'life is doomed to get worse' kind of way, but in the way that makes me dread to become one of those people who sit around and wish that they'd done something with their 'best years'. After all, we lose our mobility before we figure out its use.

I look over to Jack as the end of the song approaches. He looks back at me, and I just try and say something, but it comes out as nonsense. Loops spinning inside my head, trying their hardest to refine every thought down to its essence, but only coming up with, "This is cool because we're on drugs."

And yes, it is. But it's a horrible shame to have to whittle down these phrases until they become nothing. It's like taking a block of marble, and chipping away at it

until it becomes a beautiful sculpture, but because that means nothing to you, you keep going until there's nothing left. I remember saying that every human is equipped with the tools they need to tackle their problems. But if you give someone a chisel and a block of marble, and tell them to 'have at it' then when do they stop? Someone who gives up without having made so much as a dent has failed in finding what was there, and someone who reduces the block to dust has tried too hard. When do we stop? Clearly, somewhere inbetween.

Some people would adopt a fatalistic position, saying that the block is just how it is. Others would grind away and never look back, constantly reforming, redefining, deconstructing. So *where is the middle ground?* It's such a horrid question. And the song just seems to keep going, the screaming of the whales is still there in my head. Is this what it all means? Probably not. But what else do we have to do other than chisel? Listen to this song and it'll tell you. Sweeping, building, intensifying, it's all there, and all you have to do is chisel and find out.

But, of course, this analogy only goes so far, in that other people exist. Other people, and, to a lesser extent, things. They exist, and they tell you to do things which aren't chiseling. If you ignore them, then what are you going to chisel? You're not going to have any experience of the world to reflect off of, your final product is just going to be what you've 'inherently' come up with, which will be... well, maybe it could be very good. I think I've chiselled my way too far into this analogy. Perhaps Jack will be able to help me find the words I'm looking for. Ah, no, he's gotten to the point where *he's* finding it hard to speak for all the loops. And I think the loops are settling in now. We're still chiselling. So where do we stop? Meta-analysis of thought is good and all, but it stops becoming grounded, useful, practical very quickly. But not doing it is the greatest disservice anyone can do to themselves as a being. Still chiselling, I think to myself. But where do we stop? We have to find what the middle ground is. Too much, and you chisel all the way to the centre, and there's nothing at the centre to 'reveal' there's no treasure chest there's nothing 'there' as such it's just more of the same thing. And the universe is much the same. You can break

things down in to their constituent components, droplets, shards, shavings, molecules, atoms, hell, even whatever the fuck quarks are, but does it just keep going? Are we at the bottom, or can we go further? Is it worth trying to see if we can go further? Is it worth thinking about whether it's worth trying to see if we can go further? And so on and so forth, right, right, until the eventual end. But the end is just a destruction, a removal, a nothing. We have to stop somewhere. We have to stop somewhere? Maybe this block is infinitely large, and you have the option to carve out a small section in your own image, never knowing the wonder/horror that the rest of the block might bring. Maybe that's a better analogy. But clearly, we have to find some way of bringing the analogy back on road. Like the 4X4 I thought about earlier - that's where I'd put that. A car that leaves the road for good is lost. So it comes back, and...

"Hey man." says Jack, and the world turns towards him. Waiting. They wait. "You good?" He asks of me. He's smiling so very hard. And the song has finished, but it might have finished a long time ago now. I have no idea what on earth the time is. I look around, thinking there might be a clock. But why can't I see the rest of the room? Ah, moving my head is a better idea. I know where all of my limbs are now. None of them were lost, but sometimes it's hard to see through the fog of the inner thought. Especially when the fog is as turbulent as this. "You good?" he asks again. And I stop looking for the clock.

"Where's your clock?" I say, laughing. He points at his groin and says, "What, this?" and makes a feeble attempt at, well, I'm not sure what he's trying to do right now. But one thing's for sure, and that is that is that he knows I'm alright. He knows I'm alright. We're both very on drugs right now, a fact as that I am now acutely aware of. The wall edges lap against one another, the sensuous details are just, well, indescribable. The graining of the wood is just...

So it comes back, and carries on driving along the road. But who's to say the road is good? Well, me, I made the analogy, so the road is necessarily the 'good' thing in this scenario. Again, it's all analogy. It's all fucking analogy! Every film, every album, every, every book, every every that has ever been ever has always

been analogy! That's what it's all about! But what's *it*? I daren't ask Jack, he seems like he's having too much fun over in his corner right now, admiring his sofa from afar. He gets up, and says, "I've just remembered that my housemate has this absolutely amazing plant." I expect this to be an allusion to weed, but no, sitting in his housemate's room, there is possibly the most beautiful plant in my entire life. The way the concentrically arranged leaves seem to almost swirl, the patterns that they make are mathematically designed to be the most efficient they can be, but yet they don't look look like they are designed in that way. Would you call this design? Imagine not understanding how leaf budding works or something like that, and thinking that this creation was made at the hands of a merciful god! With a lowercase 'g'. The reds and the yellows are just utterly something else. They are beyond anything that I've seen in this flat so far. And I finally get to see the time. But, Jack informs me that this alarm clock by his housemate's bedside hasn't been wound in ages, and is probably wrong. I wonder if the old adage is correct this time. A broken clock is right twice a day. But only once if it's a twenty-four hour clock, and never if it has a date readout attached to it. Of course, no one is going to bother to say all of that. Far too clunky. Just like half of the other stuff on this desk.

"Do you think we should be in here for anything other than looking at the plant?"

"Haha, the plant. You talk about it like it's some completely out of this world thing or something." But he still looks at it like it's from somewhere else, like a child looking into a basket of colourful stones with the longing of a child looking into a box of stones that his mother has just told him to ignore. The man says that he can have one for free, but only if he buys two. This is a good enough deal that the grubby hand reaches into its own pocket but it grabbed away by the mother, who says, "No, you've bought too many of these!" Her bag rattles with similar stones. But the sulphur looks so enticing out here, in the sun and the sun, where the smell is carried away in the fraction of a second, painting the air downwind with odours he'd rather confine to the bathroom, if even. You look back at this boy, he's you! He's assuredly you, shorter, cares about less things but also deeply cares about a few given

abstract principles - he wants a rock, he gets a rock. Straight off the ground. Different sorts of rocks, some of them possibly dredged up by great machines that roll by, some of them chipped off cliffs and rolled along the sea floor until their roundness is something else. Something far beyond what human craftsmen can make. The notches in the rocks on the housemate's desk that resemble blotched, cracked and drying skin, the patches remind you of a gentle bruise you once suffered while trying to get more rocks. More rocks, more rocks, more rocks. And that was in and of itself. That was a pursuit to end all pursuit! More would simply make me happier. It wasn't determined, to use an analogy from maths, by the rate of change of the number of rocks in my possession, it was the rocks themselves, as if each one I picked up off of the ground was suddenly imbued with a force of its own, as immutable and unchangeable as gravity. Which is why it tore me apart to break them up, the 140-or-so strong collection from any given afternoon had to be whittled down into a group however small the adult near me was willing to put up with, scattered over the floor of my room. And that was a real pursuit. I look at the desk once more and see a few of those rocks. Not, of course, any of the rocks I remember, but they might be, through some magnificent coincidence, from the same places I've picked them up. Perhaps this person has some of my rejects from long past. A hag-stone of this size and quality would have not gone unnoticed by the prying eye of the rock-gatherer.

And so the collection grew and grew, until one day, the rocks weren't there any more. I'd gotten a perfect ten by ten grid of the best rocks, in my opinion. They were tiger-patterned, they had holes in them, or minute fossils, or tiny gemstones. And the little twinkle of quartz in the side of the rock made me a hundred times happier than any store-bought rock in the end. A lump of quartz the size of a baby's forearm didn't bring nearly as much joy as a mere glint, so little as to not even be sure whether it was actually quartz or not. The rocks were simply gone, though! Just gone. I fell to my feet and just existed for a little while. Nothing could really convince me otherwise. I just was there in the world. Of course, looking back, it seems like a silly thing to get angry about, but those rocks, and I mean this now,

meant something to me. Each one of them was recognisable to me. It pains me to say I can't remember any of their names - that is, if I named them! A hundred or so holes in my heart, shot through with scatter-shot pellets of rocks I once wanted to keep. And I know what you say, that 'material possessions are bad, man' and yes, there are problems with the overconsumption of material possessions, but the thing is, with things like this, they're not 'possessions' but extensions of ourselves within the world! It's not the same thing as a Saudi billionaire buying his son yet another Ferrari (even though I hear they're predisposed to Bugattis nowadays) because in that scenario, the memories do not outweigh the costs. And by costs, I mean, environmental, economic, and the cost to the son of having a father that feels he needs to buy his affection rather than actually spending time together. Those rocks are stained, no *soaked* in memories, each one of them a character in a play, brushed off like background actors. Yes, I was tempted to try again with the collection, but no amount of new things could fill the void. And thus began the purposeless pursuits. More video games. More time spent doing things I wanted, rather than had to. More money.

They say that money can't buy you happiness. It can, and it will, everyone knows this on some level, but it's like stage one. Once you realise that there's something more than the collecting, or when the collecting is not the end in and of itself, then the collecting dies. With my rocks, that was it, I was harvesting resources from the world, and with my time and effort, scrutinising them, selecting, curating, even. Worthy of a museum, I suppose. But with money, it's all fungible, you can get another fiver and it will be worth the exact same amount of money. One could say that rocks fall under the same category, but I had imparted so much of myself into these rocks that, had I a proper concept of how much my time was worth, would not have parted with the collection for anything less than a significant sum of money. Those rocks were from somewhere else - that somewhere else being in my mind. Yes, the rocks existed, they had a value, they might have even had a monetary value (however small), but nothing that their physical existence could have done would have compared to the value they had in my

mind. I can picture it now, nervous parents hoping that they raised their seven year old with a good enough sense of finances that the nice man offering to pay two million pounds for them isn't turned away with a bashful, 'no, I found them, they're mine'. Such is the way of the hypothetical world. Rocks were so cool.

Jack is still fucking looking at the plant. I'm almost worrying that someone is looking at us, and maybe we've spent a really long time looking! The light coming in through the window has gotten a little dimmer! I can see someone across the street from the window! But we were in the other room. We're good. Jack asks me if I'm good when I come walking back into the room, and it's a yes from me. It's a yes, indeed, from me.

"So if you're good, do you want to do something?" he asks, candidly. I say I don't know.

"Are you warm right now?" he asks. I'm pretty warm, a fact that I communicate to him by simply nodding. He gets up, not that he wasn't very up to begin with, but I wonder how he's been holding himself taut for that long. It feels like it would hurt to stoop and look for so long. And it does! Oh, it does.

"Want to go outside then?" He asks, and we look down the stairs, out of the door to that particular room, and we see the little note we've written for ourselves. It reads like an invitation now, a challenge to disobey. But right now, I don't feel like disobeying all that much.

"Come on!" he says, and all of a sudden, I'm round to the occasion. I mean, it's nice and warm in here, and it's a wonderful afternoon outside, it doesn't look bitter and cold like the other nights - then again, that might just be the drugs. I suppose it very well could be the drugs, in fact, it's almost assuredly them. The clouds don't usually look like this. But how *e/se* would they look so wonderful? It's like a little filter inbetween me and absolute reality has been removed. It's like I've cleaned my glasses, if I wore glasses. I wonder how my life would be different if I wore glasses. But now is not the time for hypotheticals, now is the time for putting my gloves and scarf on! And they're not even my gloves, or my scarf! Things are simply just wonderful. And even though it's cold outside, I can still laugh at the way that that that little piece of cardboard tumbles to the floor. We both laugh, heartily, it seems. Jack locks his door and carefully puts his keys in his pocket, and

zips up the pocket. He pats the pocket and winks at me, slowly.

“Better be safe than sorry. I mean, locked out of our own house.” It’s nice that he thinks of me as an ‘our’. And without getting too philosophical, it’s nice for me to be able to appreciate that. To think that this was the very same person who coaxed me outside on Friday night, wanting to go out to a club because he’d just finished something he had to keep working towards. But I don’t actually know what that thing was. Right now, there’s something in his life which he considered so important as to have not gone out clubbing for two weeks straight, and it’s recently been finished, but I don’t even know what it is? I look over at him, expecting to glean some response from his expression. But he doesn’t know what I’m thinking right now. And that’s where my mouth comes in. I say, “So what was the thing that you didn’t go out clubbing for again?” Maybe I’ve just forgotten because of the drugs. I think that might be the case. But I look again, and there’s not even a container where a memory used to be, stolen away by the clutches of misfiring neurological receptors inside my head. No, there’s no diamond *and* no case.

“Oh, it was just a video I was working on. Had to get it out for someone, but there’s not really much to it.”

“And you couldn’t go out, not even for a single day?”

“No, not really. Well, I mean, I could have, but it would have meant that I would have had to had to...” He trails, off, intriguingly. “No, fuck, I can’t remember that either. It’s nothing serious. It wasn’t a bad thing.”

“Oh, right.” I really don’t know how to feel right now. There are four distinct possibilities right now. Either it’s serious and he’s lying, or it’s not serious and he’s telling the truth, or I’m overthinking this, or... I don’t think there was a fourth one. And the third one is a part of the other two. In fact, the third is literally the first two. The thoughts loop together and annihilate. I can only safely say I’m overthinking this. He looks alright.

“What do you remember?”

“Nothing.” he says, almost without trying to think of what might be there. He’s hidden the case and the diamond within it. But in order to hide it truly, even he would need to have forgotten where they are. And, as I’ve learned recently, analogising makes things less

clear. I should speak more clearly about the things I want to know.

“So are you ok?” I ask, shuffling my hood back down to the side of my face, opening up a whole new world of perspective for me. I almost think about putting it back up because it’s cold, or maybe to just relive the same experience, but I’m not sure. He looks at me and says, “I think we should just keep walking.” Clearly, something is up there. And as much as a fresh nerve is ripe for the striking, right now, I don’t feel like doing that. Too much. Far too much, right now. A part of me wants to play to the cinematicity of the whole situation and just hold off - it would be like the romance in a romance film being solved at the ten-minute mark. Of course, that’s not all of the reasons why I’m holding off. Is that a... oh, never mind. You got into this situation in your own head by overthinking things, overthinking things can’t get you out of this situation right now. Stop thinking. Stop thinking.

creak crackle leaves under feet nerves move subtly under toes and socks and shoes shuffle sensuously in ways i’ve never felt before did jack tell me about the washing my hands thing yesterday that was utterly wonderful and to now know i was sober is the best thing in the world is there anything in the world? you don’t have to read this bit, i think to myself, skipping over chapters of my own life while playing it all forwards at half-speed, all at once, like ten televisions pointed at me, looming and showing their various faces all at once. all at once. it just happens right now and it happens right now and it happens right now and it happens right now what doesn’t happen right now might happen one day if the actuation comes into being but you’re just saying - no! - thinking words, let alone actually moving your limbs and it’s happened again. i see my legs moving and almost sprinting at quarter-speed underneath my body (but they are my body, i should mean to say i mean torso and the legs keep moving and they keep moving without me thinking about how they’re moving i keep breathing without me thinking about how i’m doing that how *am* i doing that surely the process is something hardwired into us, something that most of us don’t forget how to do even the patients in care homes who have forgotten the

names and faces of their loved ones still understand that they have to breathe, their hearts to beat, there is something about the human experience that means being tied to these unquestionable basilisks of biology but also finding our own freedoms within that - in fact, screw what i said about not needing to read this bit! my legs are at eight-speed now, the world isn't normal anymore, i see cars flying past at speeds that make me recoil from the road, and the road itself doesn't look right an imposing part of humanity on the world but we are the world and the things that we make are all technically natural, even the chemicals that we put in our bodies to make ourselves feel better (anything from practical food to recreational drugs that we're on right now, i wonder if anyone can see that we're on drugs are demonised somewhat within modern society but can't they see that we're not all just hippies who want to fuck each other in a great big screw pile of pile of - no pile! don't do that don't go down that road things can only and only get worse from there) this is true because everything is made from the same 'stuff' as it was and i put stuff in the things because it's just different from the things that are different, like the human experience of those things - and try as they might, the determinists are determined in their course to try and chop that section off their data-driven destiny is not defined by search for knowledge but in fact a deep fear of it the number crunching and all that jazz

“You okay?” says Jack.

“Yeah.” I reply.

just slinks back behind the totem of science to avoid asking the harder questions it's all well and good some people understand the very complex and intricate nature of, well, let's say, rocket engines, to choose, an incredibly, easy metaphor (that is wrong) or perhaps how the heart works or how to save old people from death but what do they understand about themselves. a lot of them treat themselves like objects with specific purposes i was once told by an exchange student of a girl she knew that was born into an incredibly rich family and had lots of friends warm supporting parents and the like she had everything she ever wanted but that was the problem - she stopped wanting things because

the only things that she wanted were measurable in some way, she might have wanted a hundred million of whatever currency, but she didn't think of what to do with that you can only buy so many ferraris before things become utterly pointless and that's what i'm trying to say the physical ownership of things is limited by the fact that we can form attachments to things as humans the collector with his hundred exotic cars might not have an attachment to any of them but to the concept of having a hundred of something really expensive, or an attachment to the concept of money, or the related phenomena it brings. i've seen miserable people who are poor and happy people who are rich. it means not. it assuredly, means not. this is horrible. the girl in the story was said to have committed suicide as a result of thoughts like these, except of course, she's actually living them i didn't believe the exchange student at first but there was a news article about it and everyone was acting all surprised and that and the worst thing about it was that there was no lack of love behind the scenes, there was no abuse of any kind, no overbearing parenting, no pushiness to do whatever nor a complete lack of pushing. goldilocks can still choose to throw the good bowl out of the window.) and my legs still move but slower once again and we're nearing the top of the hill, i once again tune back in to the world and hear the shuffling of my coat against the back of my neck.

I'm not sure how long it's been now, but we're at the top of the hill that overlooks the town. Jack stays still, and we have a wonderful view of the sunset, one where the grey-white-pink clouds seem to blend into the distance rather than stick out profusely. But they almost billow with potential, potential for... snow.

"Do you know if it's going to snow?"

"No." Jack says. He's probably very, very trapped in the same loops that I was in. We don't seem to be exiting them at the same time. And I'm going to try and stay out in the middle for as long as possible before I'm pulled back in by myself. Or should I use the word 'out'? Either way, Jack seems alright once again. He asks me if I'm all good, and then pats himself down. There's a bench nearby, and I sit down and it's very warm. We sit and talk for a little while about what sort of music we want to put on when we get back.

He says he just wanted to watch the sunset for now, and as the sun goes further down, we keep talking. But we're both on the dance floor again, it's friday night, we're talking to each other with the din of the world between us, movement, nostalgia, misremembered choruses to songs I don't even know I know, dredged up from family car trips listening to some boring radio station. Jack looks at me, the night is still very young, and neither of us are drunk yet.

"Do you think I have a chance to pull tonight?"

"I'm going to be honest, no." I respond, he looks at me with a smile and laughs, and I barely hear the laugh, but the two people inbetween us do. They look away, and almost seem to scoff. But whatever, we're just here to have fun right now. It's been five minutes since we got in and I can already feel some people looking at us in a way that makes me melt into the ground, I can't move anymore! I could never move, I could never dance all that well, joints stiff and stringy simultaneously. And the world is still looking at me.

"My friend's going to be here in a bit." says Jack, just trying to make observations, while almost screaming into my ear. I think, "Oh yeah, sure, yeah he is, and you're going to have all the sex you've ever wanted." But it doesn't come out like that, it's a nod, a smile, a borderline wink, and we spin away into our groups, and I see some people in the corner of the room up high. I wonder how they got there. I wonder how I got here!

To think just a few hours ago I was in a cafe with some other people, meeting them on a whim. I had a sandwich there, it was decent, but nothing too special. Hadn't seen any of these people in a long time, and I was very much enjoying the conversation since Jack had disappeared earlier last week. I was wondering when his response times would drop below three days, and perhaps I was pushing him a little too hard to talk to me. But you can be worried without it being overbearing, right? Sure, yeah, you can, I reassure myself. I sit and chat to these people for a good long while, it's like the talk that we're going to have later today at the Clinic Cafe. Of course, I don't know that, but I do now. This isn't a very good recollection, is it?

"So what are you thinking about?" Jack asks, and I say I'm just thinking about the sunset, and also friday night. "I was really glad you came."

“Yeah, me too.” he says. “I got a lot out of that.”

“The cafe you were at beforehand was nice, but I don’t think I’ll go there again. They were a little rude to me.”

“That’s because they don’t know you. The guy’s a total bastard to everyone who doesn’t act the same way he does.”

“Really? Oh well, I guess I don’t... don’t feel as bad about him not liking me.” says Jack. “It’s nice to know that someone’s mean to everyone and not just you. It’s nice to know that someone has a method to their abuse.”

“Oh yeah.” I say, trying not to pry. “Absolutely.”

“So what do you think we should do with the rest of this day?” I just wait, and keep on looking. We’re not talking anymore, just watching the sun go down again. The clouds are still pregnant with the weight of the whatever inside them. Maybe it’s going to rain. I want to check something to figure out whether it’s going to rain, but I don’t think it will this evening. It’s too good for that. It’s going to stay dry, right? I don’t want to have to walk back home in the rain. We don’t even have an umbrella between us. Jack didn’t prepare for this! What an **unususual** impulse for someone usually so practical. Oh well. I can still hear his voice through the glass of the cafe windows, and I pressed my forehead up to the glass and smushed my nose on it, and he laughs like we’re five again, even though we weren’t five together. It feels like it’s less likely we would have been friends in the past. Not just due to him moving house, but also a myriad of different factors which would have been different. Plus, the proportional age difference would have been much larger. It’s very easy for an 86-year old and an 81-year old to have commonalities, but when you’re 14 and 9, then that’s a completely different story. The gaps thin, the borders are not crossed but the segments overlap, the lines remain but they are still just lines, infinitely thin, mathematically precise, in and out, black and white, never fully definable with what we think we want to see in the way we want to see it too and then the next part of the sentence is the following subsequently i take his arm around my shoulder and we hug each other in the middle of the cafe to laughter and some applause from someone who’s already had too much to drink despite it only being five in the afternoon

- how was it five in the afternoon then again we had spent a long time in there was a lot of money pooled on the dish in the middle of the table to pay for all the drinks we'd gotten and forgotten in the past but jack has nothing to pay for, he sits, he almost looks tired, but relieved.

I think he's relieved. I don't see anything else other than the faintly tired expression that he has, too. He's like that now, as well, retinas working harder and harder to amplify the image, like a walk though a dark forest in the twilight when your vision goes grainy, like noise between the channels. But I can see there's something behind that now. But back then, in the cafe, we sit and we chat, and he meets a few people I know, waving with meek hands, and he suggests that we go out later. Now, I didn't have any plans for tonight, and neither did any of these people, but I guess we did now. The owner of the cafe begins to curtail our fun at about eight past noon, yet he closes at six usually. What a nice person, I wonder if Jack knows that. He was just keeping it open for us! Not for any cynical reason like he thought he could get more money out of us, oh no, something far nicer than that. To let us exist somewhere where no one had to be 'the host' where that was delegated to an unknown other who merely takes the money and watches over to make sure nothing's gone wrong. And I suppose that was what made us enthusiastic about the club we were supposed to be heading to. And we did head there, for a long, long time, it felt like a very long way there (there were too many of us there for us to get a cab there were no available seats on the buses to get there either and there were no bikes or cars people were willing to drive there)

Some kind people offered to give us a lift there, but I think that they might have been a little overwhelmed with that many people in their car. Oh, absolutely, absolutely. But now that I think about it, aren't those the people that... isn't that Andy's car? Oh dear, and to think that I'd never seen Andy before. I probably have done. I don't know anything about him. We could have gone to the same sixth form, for god's sake, and I don't know! It was a pretty big sixth form, after all. But the car could not take everyone, and thus we had to decline. And we weren't letting them shuttle us back and forth. it wasn't raining, or snowing, or anything like that, it was

just cold. And they did that out of the warmth of their hearts. But I haven't said anything about my certainty of who did it, yet my feelings towards Andy and his related group are now more positive than they were beforehand. Even the imagined scenarios which happen in here might somehow affect the world. Oh well, oh well indeed. A speech filler used to convey the fact that I'm thinking slower than my brain can transcribe. I think that's the wrong word, though, so I just sit back and try not to overthink things again. Just think about the breathing, the breathing in and out and in and out, again! The world is dark and quiet now, and I know that they don't close the gates ever, so we're good to stay in here and long as we want. But we don't want to stay that much longer. In my head, I quickly return to where I was before the interruption, and find myself floating down the road yet again - no, we've got to wind forwards a bit now, we're standing in the queue to get in, and I've been warned by a very drunk person that 'this place is a fucking scam!' Except with the word 'fucking' stretched out, a long fricative, and an extremely shifted u sound (more like an 'ooo'). The way the word seems to burst out of him as if he's trying to hold back is quite impressive as well, what's not so impressive is the scattershot spit that also comes flying out. It doesn't hit me, but if I had been even a little bit closer, it definitely would have. Not that I wanted to hit people in the queue, after all, it's the worst place to start a fight, especially if the queue is cordoned in. Actually, why does this place need a cordon? Why does this place need three bouncers, all standing around and doing the typical bouncer-y thing of attempting to look tough, like a human peacock, but only with hi-vis jackets instead of elaborate feathers. Three bouncers! I mean, one halfwit is enough, but it's not like that when you put more of them together they get smarter. No, they just try and outdo each other to see how many attractive women they can let in in order to coax more idiots in the queue inside. There's the smoking area, too, this was before I destroyed one of the corners. Ah, the things I didn't know at this point. I bet you don't usually think about when you might think about this moment in the future, unless it's something really, really weird. But it can't be too weird, because then your mind is just taken up by the weirdness.

Speaking of being taken up by the weirdness, Jack is bobbing his head unwittingly to the music in the queue now, and I watch him get more and more into the groove of things. They search his pockets when we get to the front of the queue, but not mine. I wonder if they thought he was on something or other. I don't blame them, he told me he was meeting a friend there, and for all I knew, that friend was a girl-friend and he just wanted to warm up so he could dance more. Of course, I think that that's a little cynical of me, but when am I not cynical? Well, I suppose I wasn't cynical when I first got to the bar and saw the drinks prices. I wasn't immediately thinking, 'I can get this cheaper by making it myself!' I was thinking that the vibe of the drinks might play into the vibe of the evening - some girl in front of us in the queue was abusing the word 'vibe' and I feel it had somewhat rubbed off on me. The bar is packed, so for now I forgo the trial of trying to fight my way to the front. I suppose there are a few different ways you can go about sliding in first at the bar. Jack's pretty good at this, and I suggested to him that he could write a guide on it, or make a little film about it as a sort of parody of an old public information film. What happened to those? They used to have a lot of distinctive charm, they'd pick certain people for their particular tone of voice that was in vogue (the slightly nasal, upper-middle class voice) and the whole thing would have an air of poor acting that was sort of rounded off by the poor quality of the picture and the audio. Of course, it's not necessarily 'worse quality', in fact, the empirical 'quality' of the film image was probably a lot better than any digital medium, even nowadays, just because of the size of the silver halide crystals. And to think there is technically a 'resolution' to film is just odd, to be honest. It's as analog as you can get with images. But yes, the bar. The bar! What a place to be when you're taller than the average person. Jack's not particularly vertically gifted, so he sends me up to get his first drink. Well, we're both together, standing there because... why not? Two people can get to the point faster than one can - the point being the obtaining of a drink. But it seems that every time we're close to getting served, something would happen and we'd be yet another two to three minutes away from getting that drink. First, a glass was broken, the crowd

behind the bar builds up, someone from the back room comes out into the fore and works their magic with a dustpan and brush. Later on, I hear the crunch of glass underfoot as another bartender is walking along. That little thing slows things down a bit again.

“You can see how this takes ages to get under control.” Says Jack, looking around in a sea of backs. I nod and keep trying to figure out what song they’re playing upstairs. A man squeezes through to the front of the bar rather forcefully, asks the bartender something, and then immediately leaves. I wonder if we could try and pull the same thing. It’s not like they’re keeping track of this many people in order to determine who to serve first. One of them shouts, “There’s a bar upstairs and it’s almost empty.” I can see the people at the back peel away immediately, whereas a few more people wonder if the time that they’ve sunk into this bar is worth it. To know that you could have gotten a drink almost ten minutes ago if you’d only known there was a bar upstairs seems to crush Jack. I wonder if he’s alright if he feels he really needs this drink to get through the night.

Eventually, we get to the counter and the bartender looks at Jack, hesitates for a second and they both begin talking at the same time.

“What do you-”

“I’ll have a-”

They pause. The bartender retreats from the taps.

“I’ll have a coke, please.”

I look at Jack and think, ‘Bold move, but I don’t think that’s the best thing to get around here...’ He smiles and says, “I don’t want to get too drunk. It’s only Friday night and I didn’t have anything to drink while we were in the cafe, so...” and then trails off, wondering about something else. I don’t really blame him for wandering off like this, but his coke is poured pretty quickly, and a fiver handed over gets a measly amount of change back (he’s almost regretting his decision right now) and we’re both sat at a table, fully sober, waiting for his friend.

“He’s, uh, a really nice guy. Met him through work a few months ago, and we’ve been going out ever since.”

The ambiguous wording of ‘going out’ should have been a clue to why Jack (currently, remember, we’re still on acid) is so reticent. Maybe he’s spent two weeks

away with someone that he, you know, *likes*. In that sense of the word. The ideas swell and swirl, and I wake up to the evening and Jack's sitting there, silent, and it's a tense silence, like the silence after someone's said something. A tense, thundering silence, one that feels like it has to be punctuated with an exclamation, in the most '-clam-' sense of the word. He looks at me on the bench, and I look back at him. What has he been up to for those last two weeks? A nerve was touched earlier, and I'm still looking. Is this the interpersonal connection happening right now? Am I looking at someone with the full understanding of what is going on inside their head, and vice versa for me? Maybe. Best find out.

"So what were you doing for these past few weeks."

"Uh..." he pauses, I'd probably pause if someone asked me the same thing in the state I am now, he's still pausing, enough for me to think in subordinate sentences, he continues to pause, and it's getting to the point where I'm thinking he's just zoned out entirely. "Visiting my parents." Oh, right, of course. I do remember that time seems relative for us right now. Maybe that gap felt like a really long time for me but a really short time for him. Maybe he answered normally. I ask him, "Did you have to think about that last question." A short, sharp, almost defensive "No." is his response. I wonder. I wonder indeed now. He's clearly dialled in to the conversation to some degree, otherwise he would have just zoned out again. But no. And yet again, I feel like I've touched a nerve, he's not talking to me in the same way the he was, jovially listing off his favourite songs during the interludes between the sides of vinyl. I didn't absorb any of them at all, but the way that song titles read out one after the other just seemed to flow into one another one after the other and it was all good and fine and good and fine and good and fine and good fine and-

I'm still sitting there in the club, few other people seem to be on their own or in small groups, and Jack and I don't want to impose ourselves on a bigger group. But what happened to the rest of the people in the cafe? Well, I can say for sure that they're not here now. I can't exactly remember how they dissipated into the day. Perhaps they just didn't find the entry fee very friendly (even though it was only a fiver) or some other

moral objection to nightclubs they may have had. But I don't see that. I think that right now, I'm perfectly happy to have paid five pounds to get in. Good people, and the coke that Jack has looks very well-presented. So then what are we doing? We're not drinking right now, that's for sure, and we're not anywhere else either. He's been to this place before, and tries to reassure me that upstairs is far better. I can hear the muffled shouts from upstairs once more as a certain song is played over another. The remixes, the shuffling, and we shuffle our way upstairs once Jack finishes his drink, we're standing once more together, where we were earlier, and all of a sudden, Jack pauses and pats himself down, his long jacket flapping up and down as his ankles bob. It's his phone, and his brightness is set to the highest setting, briefly blinding some poor sod who stood next to him. He answers the phone and quickly moves to somewhere quieter. Not wanting to lose him a this point in the evening, I followed him over to the other side of the room, and then somewhere else when he didn't think that was quiet enough. We head outside to the smoking balcony (why this place has a balcony is utterly beyond me with the sheer quantity of people pressing up against it. It seems like some of the things in these places are just designed to generate lawsuits, or at the very least test the edge cases of sobriety laws. Can you be held responsible if they fall off the side because they were drinking? I'm not sure. I think that it would assuredly be poor form to do so. But anyway, the balcony is patrolled but still cramped, I'm sure a security guard couldn't get to a ground-bound jumper in time. So, we're out there, and he says that his friend is on his way now, and that he's going to be here in... half an hour! Well, that's half an hour that Jack's going to be sober for. I don't see why he can't get a drink in beforehand, but he says it's a tradition. I think that it's because he's trying to impress the friend and doesn't want to embarrass himself by being drunk. But, and I know I've said this like a dozen times so far in this book, I can't see into other people's minds. You know when someone in your family sometimes said, "Well, I'm not a mind reader!" when you asked about something that someone else was doing, well, they're right. But obviously, in this case, some simple extrapolation might have given your little child some

sense of control over the events. It's interesting how we consider knowledge of the events to be equivalent to control over said events. I don't think that's the case. We might be able to act in ways that pertain to what we know, and... I think it's the wrong time for this sort of thing. It hasn't built to it. It feels like an interjected rant, and we're *still* on that little balcony thing, looking over the crowds below, but still interested in what's going on inside. Jack says he needs to go to the bathroom, and I decide that I have nothing better to do than to accompany him. He looks around, I look around, and already there are people clambering over one another, but I don't see their movement as creepy or ghastly, I now see it for what it is. Just people being horny. Just classic people being sexually attracted to one another. Looking at this memory seems to cast a light on it, the light of retrospective. And it's very easy to think you see lots more detail when you're looking over something for the second time. But, the reality is that the experience, by virtue of being a 'second time', is completely irretrievable in a conventional sense. It is impossible to experience something exactly the same twice. If something unlikely but interesting happened to you one day, you might think it very cool, but if something like that happened two days in a row, then you might start to get used to it. And, yes, you could always forget, but that would be like experiencing it for the first time. I suppose it sort of... well, hold on a second, I'm going to try and formulate this in a more logical way.

Beings can have experiences. If a being has an experience, then it will apply knowledge of that experience to future experiences. If a being encounters an experience that it has already had, it cannot be said to be either a 'new' experience or 'the same experience'. It is not new because it has already had that physical experience. It is also not the same experience because of the prior knowledge. Therefore, it is impossible to experience the same thing twice.

Yes, that sounds good, there's definitely nothing wrong with that, not counting the definitions of the words I use, the syntax, the awkward phrasings, the run-on sentences, the fact that 'new' experience means a state of physical affairs whereas 'the same experience' takes into consideration the state of the being's psychological makeup (and yes, we're *past* that

being a purely physical thing by this point) and also the fact that the sentence picking apart the entire 'logical' idea has now run on for longer than the idea itself.

I mean, it's possible for the sentence picking apart the sentences to run on for longer than the sentence itself. I wonder what the text has the highest text-to-scholarship ratio. Might be something like a short and popular Shakespeare play, perhaps Macbeth. I can't remember which one's the shortest, actually. But then most of the really short ones are the king plays, and they're kind of less interesting than the others. Still sort of crazy to think that just one person made all of those plays. I mean, it's so amazing that you might think that it was actually a group of people instead of just one person! And, yes, some people do think that. There's probably some forum where they discuss it somewhere. Anyway, I'm just trying to think of some other contenders for that ratio. Perhaps some extremely short mathematical paper. Or perhaps the Bible? It's long, but it's got a *lot* of people talking about it. If you can count Genesis as a separate text, then I wonder if there's more analysis there. Or perhaps the first bit of Genesis. I think there's probably been much heated debate about that over the years. One might be able to say too much, even.

But now the meta-meta-analysis of the meta-analytic sentence has run on for just as long as the meta-analytic sentence and the original sentence combined! Surely this is not a good thing, right? There's almost no 'original' sentence to speak of now, buried well underneath fossilised strata of 'dull' meta-analysis and meta-meta-analysis. Even the word 'meta' is becoming satiated. But what are we supposed to do in this moment other than pore over what's happened before? And even then, looking back at the sentence, it *itself* is a meta-statement about experience, rather than just a meta-0 (ie. not meta) description of reality. Of course, meta-0 statements don't necessarily describe reality. Someone saying 'This film is boring' is not commenting on the actual nature of the film itself, they are merely saying 'I think that this film is boring'. But then, why not actually say that? People reinforce their own beliefs when they are stated like unfalsifiable descriptions of the world as-is. People are open to change and can perhaps even display to others a sense of humility and

self-understanding if their beliefs are expressed like opinions. Of course, one could say this opens up the gates for a dictatorship of relativism, everyone allowed to hold any expression or opinion they want without fear of repercussion because 'everything is opinion'. And yes, everything is opinion, but opinions reflect what we actually think about things, and if we think that if someone else thinks something else in the light of many other beliefs, then we should be able to point out how their beliefs are contradictory, and don't serve their interests. Plus, proving somebody wrong is one thing, making them realise that they're wrong is another thing entirely. The satisfaction of understanding something and coming to terms with it yourself is much greater than being told it outright. It's like a parent who explains things rather than saying 'because I said so'. My head drops and I snap back in.

"How's your parents, Jack?"

"They're alright. My mum's doing well for herself."

"Oh, good, that's good to know. What about your dad?"

"He's... alright. I don't know, really. He's just..." He trails off again and looks into the evening sky. It's getting quite dark now, and I see a whole section of streetlamps flick on at once. Incredible. I feel that while in this state, your body tries to limit change in what it's seeing until it can do so no more. That's why the drop-in felt so sudden. It's your brain saying, "Nothing's changing. We're not seeing swirly patterns today. Oh no." Of course, it loses to a simple chemical, and eventually slides into something. It's amazing how the darkness sort of seemed to fade in in segments, and only when I looked up. It's like I'd paused for thought and paused the world in the process. Perhaps thought really does work like that. It's weird to think that thoughts take up any time at all. I mean, I suppose the electrochemical impulses that move through the brain have to, well, move, so that takes time, but it's odd to think that it's just being mediated by time. It feels like it should happen instantaneously. And what the fuck is up with memory, right? I mean, how do you 'retrieve' a memory? Especially one that's triggered by a strange sound or scent. It's just absolutely wild how this stuff works. Utterly amazing! And I'm seeing. I'm *seeing*. I may not see the world for what it is in every sense of

the word (a basic example is that I can't see ultraviolet light) but it's self-consistent, and that's what matters. The self-consistency is what makes me, me, and distinguishes me from the rest of the world. I have my memories, my beliefs, all of that, ready to retrieve and also continuing through to the future. What a joy it is to be alive! Oh wow, right now, it's just wonderful. And Jack moves and shuffles in the corner of my vision and he's just still shuffling there, the blurred outline in the periphery fuzzy due to the low light conditions. And he's still there, but I'm not sure if he's still moving.

Meta-statements like "I'm finding this film boring" don't illuminate the world, they illuminate the things which observe the world and give it meaning. They allow us to understand the thought processes which go on in other people. And rather than just assuming that everyone will take your statements to mean "I'm finding X very much like Y", actually preface your statements with "I find" or "I think that". That way, interpersonal connections can be meaningful, and arguments can be reasoned over in a much calmer fashion. These are the windows which we make into minds, and you have to make them yourself if you want to be able to see out.

You have to make them yourself if you want to be able to communicate. You have to communicate to communicate. You have to communicate. Communicate. Converse. Interact. Talk. Just talk, for God's sake!

"He's just what?"

"I don't know. It seems like he's changed over the past few years."

"..." (I don't say anything, but it reads to him as 'in what way?' or 'go on, I'm listening', all without the need of speech.)

"It just feels like he's gotten increasingly bitter and twisted about practically everything and anything." He continues, "He hasn't spoken to my mum in quite some time." The details aren't necessary. I say that I'm sorry, and he understand that for what it is without having to say, "But why? You didn't do anything!", like some pedants I know do. That's what talking is. It's a game and you've just failed.

"I just want him back." Jack says, weighed down. "I just can't believe that what was him is just all gone now." He slumps back on the bench. My continued

silence seems to no longer indicate interest, but disengagement. We sense this, somehow.

“So what’s he been doing? To make him... terrible, that is.” Jack looks over at me. “You’ve never mentioned this before.”

“Oh, no, it’s not really been a problem before.” he says. “I just thought it was part of getting older.”

“But then I went to visit him.”

“Was that why you weren’t around?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I would have understood.” I say, and perhaps it comes off as a little arrogant. The shutters begin sliding down his mind. I can see them. “At least, I think I would have, anyway.” They raise slightly. He’s still ruminating.

“Thanks, mate.” says Jack.

“I know I can count on you.” he continues, happier than he was a few seconds ago. “But I stayed there for far too long. I don’t know why I did.”

“What happened?”

“Well, he just hit me.”

“What?”

“Yeah. He hit me. He’s, what, forty, forty-five? And he decided to hit me. Screaming and yelling and crying.” I’m still sitting in silence, but this time through shock. Why would his dad decide to do this?

“Did he ever do this before?”

“No, all throughout my childhood he was fine. That’s why I said this is only a recent development.”

“Jesus, I’m so sorry for you.”

“It’s alright, it really is. But I really didn’t... that’s not the reason why I felt bad. He hit me, we’d had an argument over my career decisions.”

“Does he not want you to go into filmmaking?”

“No, he just wants me to do something.” He says. “I’m old enough so that I should have something to show for my life.” I’m now wondering whether taking acid at this point in time was a good idea. His current state of mind is just not particularly good. “That’s what he said. And then I said that he was twice my age and had nothing to show for it, not even a successful marriage! At that point, I wished there could have been someone else there to back me up, because he just reached across the table and hit me.”

“I’m glad I didn’t break a bone in my face or something or other.”

“But did you tell anyone?”

“I didn’t think it was worth it. He was right, well, not about the hitting, but about whether I’d done something or not.” He pauses again, and thinks. I look out into the night sky and nothing is there anymore. The lights are grey, blurry, and almost dimmed out by the fog rolling in again. It’s like it’s just us. It’s quite cold, but not any worse than it was when we left.

“When he was my age, and he didn’t tell me this, I know this from my mum, he had his own company set up that sold tools to local tradespeople. He had set things up and had done things for himself. About as reliable as you could be.” says Jack. “But what am I? I’m a trainee filmmaker with no money to my name, and I’ve got debt at that.”

I try and console him, but he keeps going. “I don’t think I’ll be able to beat him at what he did with his company. There’s no way. But I will beat him by having a single fucking friend. Because everyone that he met was always just another fucking tool to him, just another thing for him to use to try and grow himself without having to interact with anyone else. All these people who relied on him, and yet such a little distinct... well, uh, such a lack of anything besides that.” The windows have been washed cleaner than they were, the fog does nothing to obscure my view of what he thinks. I hope there’s still some connection between him and his father now. I hope there is. Because to have such a bond ruined by this argument would be a waste. And the worst thing about it is that he might just be right. To sit and think about how you’re going to work all day isn’t the same thing as getting some actual work done.

“Do you think he just wants you to find the exact same kind of fulfilment he did?” I ask.

“Yes. He wants nothing but for me to take over things, and now he’s getting older, he’s getting more and more desperate. I mean, he’s told me that there are sixteen-year olds who have more proficiency in the things that he does than me. And yes, they probably do. And the worst thing is...” he pauses. “And the worst thing is that they probably go home and there are people who love them for the things they do.” He begins tearing up. “I feel like such an idiot right now. There’s nothing I can do to move into this career. I don’t

like what he does in the slightest. But there seems to be little else to do.”

“So how did he come to make the company that he made?” I ask, and we look at each other for a few seconds, and then collectively back out into the horizon.

“Well, my mum told me, that, uh... long ago, when they first met, he wanted to go into music, and wanted to be something of a rockstar. Of course, dreams like that fade away a lot of the time, and his dad told him to go into metalworking. Of course, he ended up doing that and making tools for people.”

“But...” I say, cancelling the sentence. In my head, I’m now thinking in overdrive. Your dad’s story is just your story but with a different ending! Dreams of doing something big but never getting around to doing them! Filling that void with work and letting the work rid the rest of your life of meaning! Christ, Jack, it’s not that difficult to see the fucking parallels.

“Are you really that stupid to not see the parallels?”

He looks at me, horrified. He looks like he wants to hit me, he begins to move his arm, and immediately flops forward, burying his head in his lap and screaming the words ‘oh’, ‘why’ and ‘God’ in various orders. I reach over to his hunched shoulder and tap it. He shirks away, probably transfixed by the muddy, gritty floor.

“I’m just... I... I’m sorry.” I say. “I didn’t mean to hurt you right then. I honestly didn’t mean to say that.”

“Then what did you mean to say? It wouldn’t have stopped you from thinking it?” I can see him becoming trapped in these sad loops, decaying over time and ripping themselves apart with unnecessary conclusions and statements, burdening themselves with addenda until the force of the spinning rips itself apart. Compare with good loops, where the spinning flings off the excess and reveals the inner thought, if there is any. It’s possible to loop until there is nothing. In fact, both will eventually get you there, but one is a more pleasurable experience than the other. Nothing is a wonderful thing and a horrible thing. To have nothing to look forward to is both freeing and depressing. And I suppose we could return to the idea of the chiselled marble block, we have nothing to look forwards to at the bottom. There really is nothing there until we mark out our own boundaries to stop. That’s the most important thing. We make those

boundaries. Boundaries. The edge of the self. The distinction between the self and the world is humanity's greatest tool and its biggest problem. We are part of the world, any shaman or teetotal can tell you that, but we are distinct from it at the same time. Throwing yourself into the world and wanting your ego to be dissolved repeatedly and unendingly doesn't 'open your mind', it reduces you to a mushy husk in which no ego-strength can be found. And again, the strength of the self was useful in determining what what what back then, but now the self has grown above all else. The leaves need pruning back. And my God, the leaves need pruning back. So the question is, how far to prune them?

The council have decided to turn the trees bare-knuckled for the winter and the autumn, their stumpy thick branches looking almost like fists. And yet it never solves any problems. Sure, the wet roads are clear of slippery leaves without any time-intensive maintenance, but *fucking hell* does it look drab. There is a word for this process, but I remember when I was young, I didn't know anything about that. Collecting rocks was my thing. Perhaps I should have gone into leaves. There's an art (in the adult sense) to that. There's skill required in the preservation. But feeling that something is somehow better or more worthy of your time than something else just because it's more 'art' is probably the wrong way to go. And driving through those dark, wet, rainy roads with my parents, thinking 'wow, the leaves on the sides of the pavements and kerbs look lovely' but never wanting to express that sentiment, because why? You don't have to go around pointing out things all the time, you don't have to explicitly acknowledge something for it to be well and truly understood. I suppose the fact that I still remember these things is a testament to their lasting power as images. Of course they are. You're brought up in a world where cars, roads and trees are normal things, but even in this normalcy, under the not-quite-sodium streetlamps, there's some joy to be found there. And yes, it might have been because of the fact I knew I was going to be home soon. So, why are they phasing out these lamps and cutting down the trees? Road safety? Is that it? Is the removal of the colour orange from the natural world, leaving it only to the domain of rust, really a good thing? Of course, the sunset still exists, but we

have sun visors and sunglasses for that. We'll find a way to block it out sooner or later, to have some sort of artificial sun which casts soft shadows so drivers don't think that that fox walking across the road is something to brake for. And there goes another orange creature. Wait, isn't the word 'coppicing'? I think I remember having a conversation with someone at some point and they told me this word and it was interesting, fascinating even to know that someone had made a word about it. The internet told me that there were even more, similar words relating to the practice.

But is it even 'coppicing'? That word means removing all the branches from the top of a tree. These ones still had everything thicker than an average leg. It wasn't to promote growth, either. We could tell that, the way they grew back every summer seemed more stunted than the last, with all the scars of branches past. Maybe they were just 'cut back' and the nuances of this word miss what they intended to do. Because they certainly weren't promoting growth. But they were trying to, however roundabout, trying to promote growth in people by having them not die.

But 'not dying' doesn't necessarily mean improving, or even staying the same. A lot of what we get a lot out of isn't safe, it isn't within boundaries, we get enjoyment from finding new things, going down new streets, and while there is intense (and I mean intense) comfort in revisiting old places, that in itself is still a risk. Would I go back to somewhere I loved as a child only to find that it's been turned into a car park? Who knows. That would be unsafe. There would be the possibility of hurt. And we can't have that, not ever! The trees and shrubs die by the roadside and we wither with them. It's not 'coppicing' if I were to go over and look at what the local council had called it, then I would be bombarded with all sorts of talk around the topic, adjectives used as ammunition against anyone who might want to know what's going on. And the worst thing, and I know I think this a lot, but, bear with me, the worst thing is that underneath all those adjectives and weasel-words you might just find... absolutely nothing. No substance. Nothing 'there'. Not even the dust of where the block once was. Just people trying to make work for themselves to promote themselves, and again, the worst thing about this is that they might not even be

doing it out of pure self-interest. These are genuine people who can be tricked or perhaps knowingly enter these projects. And all the time, they have the option to not do these things. Quite a lot of the time, in their want to simplify the world for themselves, confuse 'must' with 'can'. "I must go to the concert tonight", is a false statement. Of course, it's unhelpful to have to append any nuance to a sentence, people can't just say, "I can go to the concert tonight, and I should because I might find it enjoyable." To talk like this in this case would make you be insufferable. But with more complex topics, like "You must vote for the Lib Dems", this complexity begins to be almost necessary for productive conversation. "You can vote for the Lib Dems, and you should because their colour is orange." Oh, and, of course, don't forget to append your 'I think' at the start. So, "You must vote for the Lib Dems" becomes, "I think you should vote for the Lib Dems, and this is because their colour is orange." Minor changes, it seems, but ones that foster an extreme change in the way your thoughts are viewed by other people. But this statement says nothing, I must remind you, about the inherent facts of whether or not it is good to vote for the Lib Dems. In fact, this statement almost exclusively says things about the speaker themselves. It says, "I think that you like the colour orange, the Lib Dems are orange, I think that you should vote for them." Even better. It leaves no assumption unsaid. And that's the worst thing. Assumptions left unsaid. Even things which you might think are common ground might need to be established. Once your words are past the iron gates of other people's minds, it's up to them how they respond it. Perhaps they shred your letter up and rearrange the letters to spell out "I think that you like Robert E. Lee, + the Governor o' South Carolina, I think that you should meet mad frgh." And then they say that they hate frghs and would never meet one in their life, and you're wondering, "What the fuck is a frgh?"

And what is a frgh? It's halfway between an 'argh' and a 'frog'. Someone got angry halfway though writing the word frog. Or they slammed their finger on the keyboard. All the letters are roughly in the same place, they're right next to each other. I'm visualising the QWERTY keyboard as I think. Yeah, I might get my

phone out to check, but no, no phones, nothing like that right now to ruin the cinematicity of the moment. The trees don't sway in the gentle wind, for the wind is too gentle and the trees too stout. And the world clicks darker again as I wake up from my thoughts.

"So what are you going to do about your dad?"

"The only thing I can do. Work, myself."

"But surely you can explain that hitting you was wrong?"

"Yeah, and I'm sure he knows that too, if he wanted to kill me, he might have been able to do that, but... well he might not have been. But still, it's... he knows that he's just..." Jack stops, I feel as if he's realising he doesn't know what his dad's thinking. And of course he doesn't. We can predict, but not exactly. Complicated thoughts are probably swirling around his head too. And the fact that he didn't see the irony in what he said earlier is almost saddening. But he still looks confused.

"He's not mad at you for doing the things you want to do, he seems to be angry because you're not doing *anything*, let alone the things you said you wanted to do." I say. "He wants you to succeed, and he's trying to tell you that the way he succeeded is much likelier to, well, happen." I continue, and wonder if I'm coming across as an asshole. I can't, try as I might, relate to having been hit by my father at any point. Not in any hateful way, though. Always play fighting - or was it? No. It wasn't. And that, I'm sure of. I feel slightly betrayed by my imperfect memory, but clearly, an image like that would have lasted. And I'm really, honestly, secure in that knowledge. Nothing to be teased out by regressive therapy, and that I'm sure of. The fact that I'm going over this so much worries me though, the thoughts begin to spin and spiral and tumble until all is revealed at the end, and it's nothing. It's nothing.

"Jack, you alright?"

"I just wish he would understand." Jack says. "I just wish I was successful. I don't want to have to, after all these years, admit defeat and come to his company. I don't want to have to work as an understudy with all the kids who do work experience here. It would be demeaning, and he'd engineer it to be that way. I think he's become an expert psychological manipulator. And

my mum understood that.” He sighs. “But above all, I wish I could do something with my life.”

“But you can!” I say, thinking abstractly, thinking as if all is unburdened by the body and the spirit. He looks at me sadly. I understand the look. The look that says, when you clip your arm running along and suddenly the rest of the world defocuses, all you’re thinking about is the pain. The body restricts, like all good mediums of expression, but sometimes it becomes a prison. Jack knows this. He’s thrown himself into all these situations, Friday and Saturday night, in order to escape the fact that he has to pick up the chisel once more and start carving. He’s scared that there’s nothing there. And you know what? I *know* this. I fucking understand. Yes, I may not have been hit, or experienced a parental divorce, or have just swiftly exited a relationship with a girl that could have been big trouble, but my fucking God, I really, utterly get this shit now. He looks at me and I look at him. The weight of the clouds is insurmountable now, I feel like I have to fold my neck to fit under them.

“I know I can.” says Jack. “That’s the worst thing.”

He hugs me, and I hug him back. Finally, snow begins to fall from the sky. It’s gotten very cold now. The biggest flakes cast tiny flickering shadows as they move across the streetlamps. Jack perks up. He understands what is to be done, and what he decides is to be done is to walk to the very top of the hill, he says there’s a recently-installed telescope there. And, he claims, it’s free. I don’t believe him, for all my experience with these things is that they ask for 50p (or, if they’re really going for it, a pound) and then immediately steal your money and refuse to give you any sort of view. I wonder where the money for those things goes to. I think they could make a killing if they said that the money was used to fund local projects or something. Some adjective soup, ‘local’, ‘development’, ‘community’, ‘charity’, that sort of stuff. Maybe a ‘heritage’ or ‘trust’ for good measure. Wonderful. But as we approach the top of the hill, the snowfall gets stronger and stronger. I wonder how many people are looking wondrously out of their windows at the world right now. That’s a lot of ‘w’ noises right there, and as Jack excitedly presses his face up to the eyepieces, he says, “Wow, I forgot you can see literally everything

from up here.” He swivels around for a while. “Jonah’s house backs out onto the hill, we might be able to see his garden from here!” I know where Jonah’s is roughly, so I point him in the general area, but he sees nothing. I have a go, and I also see nothing. He must be behind a row of trees. I’m surprised that the trees are capable of covering up so much of the view, considering their bristly nature. Not exactly dense foliage anymore. But that doesn’t the snow from building up on even the thinnest boughs. The trees we see towards the bottom of the hill have kept their leaves and will likely sag soon. The snow picks up even more, the clouds still feel full and despite the fact that we’ve spent what feels like ages up here. We see people walking around in the lobbies of the tall buildings, and maybe make some stories about them.

“So, how’s your son?” asks one of them to another. The way she says it makes you think something’s up. She knows something that you know.

“He’s fine.” You very much know he’s sitting there, in that room, as we speak, just playing games or browsing the internet, and he’s not doing anything. His father has yet to come home from work, and judging by your living arrangements, not much will change.

“He’s trying to look for a job now.” you say. “He’s going to move out with our help, and we’ll find a smaller, cosier place out of town. Plus, it would put him closer to his work.” She nods. You nod, almost at the same time. You agree with her agreement. All is well. But there’s something there, she knows that what you’ve just said isn’t true, and you know it too, and all it would take is one ‘slip of judgement’ to just say that you were lying and ask for help, but she doesn’t. They reach out to each other, hug, and continue on their separate ways. A man hurriedly walks down the corridor on the other side of the building, his hat clenched to his head, brim tinged white with snow, you’d like to think. He’s just come home from his job in the big city, he’s been on the train for an hour and he just wants to get inside and watch some TV. But he struggles with the key, and perhaps this is the day that he finally asks someone to come and help fix it, but no, the key eventually opens the door, like it does every time. Every single time. Jack and I wonder about what sort of dreams this man will have. Are his dreams full of

anthropomorphised locks telling him that he can never unlock his full potential? Or some other poor pun based on those premises. A proper, 1950s' Disney style animation, the metal bending unrealistically but being all the better for it? Or perhaps a Gerald Scarfe sort of thing, like the hammers. That could be quite good. Or some sick fusion between the two, with the grotesque spilling and sliding of forms that Scarfe loves to have combined with the cartoonish style of that era of Disney. I think that'd be something really interesting to watch. The other way would feel like a bad parody. The horrific, sketch-like creatures acting in cartoonish ways would reduce them to objects to be laughed at. While making certain beloved characters grotesque and horrifying would be interesting. Well, could be interesting, I've seen my fair share of shirts which have a cartoon character drinking.

Actually, I suppose there is something appealing about a shirt which has Charlie Brown with grit and gristle, or perhaps Ren and Stimpy with some drugs, or Spongebob sporting gang insignia and wielding a Desert Eagle. Something about the fall of idols. Something about the fact that it's just funny when you see someone with a Tasmanian Devil shirt out in public that very bluntly declares how little shit this person is going to take. It's also nice when a shirt says a lot about a person. Of course, book, cover, and all that, but do you think any significant insight into whatever is going on is going to be had by someone wearing a stretched out, faded Bugs Bunny smoking weed shirt? No. But there might be something in thinking that these fictional worlds can decay. It's interesting to imagine playing a video game like Super Mario Bros. and having the world be a little bit worse off every time you play it. The pipes and blocks chipped and stained with the blood of goombas past.

We wonder what his flat is like, whether he has old things from ages past or he's determined to be as forward thinking as possible, always getting the latest phone, always getting the latest TV even though he doesn't watch TV all that much anymore because work encroaches on his life so much. Another person is struggling to put on a dressing gown. I've never seen someone struggle to put on a dressing gown.

“Why did they install this thing?”

“What, the telescope?”

“Yeah, I just... you can see into people’s rooms.”

“Feels wrong, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Still looking though, aren’t ya?”

“Yeah.”

Did we want a peep show out of this? Would putting in a pound make some girl on the top floor start to strip? We laughed at the prospect. There was no slot, and the person trying to put the dressing gown on was indiscernible, but there was no hair to be seen.

“But there is hair! It’s just blonde.”

“No, he’s bald.”

“I will go over and check then.”

“Good luck!” we laugh together and swap over the use of the telescope.

“Oh fuck, he’s gone.”

“You might be looking in the wrong window, it moved when I passed it.”

We point the telescope in the other direction.

“The moon is very bright.”

“Indeed.”

“I can’t see any of the craters or anything.”

“Oh. Yeah, I suppose it’s just far too foggy.”

“Yeah. And the snow and everything. I’m surprised we can see the block.”

“Well most of the snow’s on the other side.”

The snow gets thicker by the minute, and eventually, we can’t see very much at all. Some snow melts and gets on the lens, and we can’t clean it off without leaving some sort of residue. We readjust our gloves and feel chills down our wrists, before walking off down the hill, in utter awe as the snow builds up and covers everything. The occasional child runs out of a doorway, screaming in their front garden about the wonder that is snow. I wonder if it would lose its magic if we saw it more often. Well, of course it would. Well, maybe it wouldn’t. I thought of the Inuits, or whether the Canadians think snow is special. Of course, they have their everyday lives to attend to, of course driving in the snow is going to be painful, or skidding across the floor on black ice, but I feel that the first snowfall is somehow still wonderful. Like you can get used to something but not get tired of it. It’s not like a drug that you become more and more tolerant to, oh no, it’s like something

which becomes part of the furniture. Like how other people would think the hills that border our town are wonderful and characterful, but for us, they're still beautiful, but that beauty seeps into us, we might not acknowledge it, but they make us happier for existing. Much more than that tower block - despite our fun antics earlier. Places that look interesting or nice seem to rub off on people. Put someone in a new build in a new town and watch them try to live. But then there's a problem there as well - how did the first people to live in certain areas build their own culture? I remember reading something about the construction of a new city in the desert, and something about it having more Michelin starred chefs per capita than anywhere else in the world. How do you demand such things? Because it's not about the money, if that were the case, then everywhere with money would be a cultural haven. But they're not. Quite often we find that the most interesting places have far less money than the big, glitzy capital cities or financial hubs. So back to this city, it's quite interesting how they sort of expect culture to seep out of everywhere they invest money into. But this was how it happened in the past? The places which were prosperous in their development were able to create great works of art or significant cultural milestones. So, how do we create culture without thinking about it? Because I think that seems to be the only way we can do something like that. It's similar to how you can't go into an experience with the expectations that it will be a life changing event. That seems to diminish the impact that it has. You can't expect to make culture, you can't ever try to force something like that, because it arises from things we can't control. War, for example, comes from interpersonal conflict, either in the case of individual people, or states made up of those people, fighting one-on-one like Leviathans. You can't force these things to happen because it will be interesting. Having someone pull the strings behind the argument makes it less meaningful. You can't do something just because you know everything that will happen because of it. Like how we didn't mean to bump into those metal people last night and end up having a much better night and day because of it, or how I didn't mean to go to that party and end up with someone. All of the best experience's he's had that he regards as 'wonderful' I

suppose were unforeseen. Our expectations of these evenings were not just met, they were surpassed. And I suppose if you were going somewhere and expecting nothing to happen, but still trying for things, then when something does happen, it does make it all the more special. It feels like you've earned it, rather than finally getting something you feel you deserve. It's not the thing itself that changes, it's our relation to the things themselves that mediates how we feel. "We can't thank ourselves for making this meal", the king thinks, sitting in front of a feast cooked by his loyal servants, "But we can thank ourselves being able to enjoy it."

"Jack, do you like this place?"

"Yeah, but I'd like to go somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure."

Perhaps change is all we need. Perhaps after a while living in the big city, you need to retire to the countryside, or perhaps after a long life of slow living in those fields, the city is what you could do with to infuse some vigour and spice into your later years. People aren't happy with what they are because they're not happy with no change. Most people act like they dislike change, and yes, on a surface level, many of them do, but we don't think for a second that they'd be happy doing the same thing over and over again for the rest of their lives. Another fundamental human problem. We don't want change for stability, but we want change for variety. Of course, individual tastes vary, but there are few who haven't experienced this problem. Nostalgia against excitement for the future, against fear for the future. And a lot of things that we fear about the future are related to change. Climate change flooding your house or burning your crops. War. Pestilence. All those sorts of things are change. But what do we do as humans? We change ourselves to move into those different grooves. We're capable of having fun in the Blitz, to make beautiful music during slavery, to write beautiful works of literature in the toughest, grittiest of situations. And to think that that will all disappear. Never!

"You won't stop making films, will you?"

"Well, I think I might one day."

"Why?"

"I'll die at some point. But before then, never!"

“How do you think you’ll die?”

“No idea.”

“No, I... do you have any idea?”

“Probably cancer or heart disease.”

“Boring.”

“Yeah, I know, boring. But it’s likely.”

“Well I wish you an interesting life.”

“Don’t you mean an interesting death?”

“Well, I suppose the ideal way to go is very uninteresting. I don’t want to die in a car accident or get murdered or something like that.”

“Fair enough.”

“But what would be the most ‘you’ way to die?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, like a hairdresser getting stabbed with scissors or something.”

“Uh... still don’t really... I suppose I could get crushed by a stage light.”

“See! That’s funny.”

“It’s not that funny, I don’t think. I’d be dead.”

“Yes, but imagine what your gravestone would say. Imagine someone fifty years after your death walking past your gravestone and seeing, ‘Famous filmmaker, crushed by stage light.’ Funny, right?”

“Well, yeah. But why’d you have your... the reason for your death on your tombstone?”

“Well, if you died in a funny way and you were a funny guy, then you’d have to, right? It would fit.”

“Yeah, I suppose it would.”

“So, what do you think the most... you... way to die would be?”

“Probably... in my sleep. Just nothing happening. Just because.”

“And you called *me* boring!”

“Oh, oh well then. But I think it fits.”

“I think it does too.”

“Are you saying I’m boring?”

We laugh and open the gate to leave the park. But how are we back in the park? I could have sworn I...

“Did we go back in the park after walking around for a bit?”

“Maybe.”

“Alright, I think it’s time we head back. It’s getting dark now.”

“Sure.”

We begin walking back to Jack’s house and the feet are going once again the feeling of the feeling of something to do with the firing of neutrons and neutron stars blowing up or whatever they do up in the sky but i can’t see that right now like stars in the night sky that blow up and maybe one day i’ll see a supernova that i can see in the sky even in the daytime one time they said it might happen on the news when i was small and when i was small i remember reading in a book that halley’s comet would return in like the 2060s or something so i remember marking it down on a big calendar or something or other as a date for the future and now each and every second i look up into the future and the sky that it contains or perhaps it’s the other way round i am not entirely sure we keep walking along a pavement and a car rolls past us i recoil from the kerb i know what i’m doing i know why i feel this way it’s because they’re threatening me oh god are they threatening me seriously, uh, wha-

“It’s just a car man, chill out.” says Jack.

but do i have to chill out what about if the person on that road in that car upon those wheels of rubber and steel understand that we are well doing something that we’re not supposed to do they were driving slowly and suddenly their red lights at the back what are they called what are they called oh brake lights and they flash on for a quick second slowing down before a speed bump not just lifting but actually braking for a speed bump i mean the car didn’t look like something that they’re slowing down by the side of the road now and jack has stopped walking jack has stopped walking why is this he has stopped walking they’re stopped and jack has stopped and i am keeping on not walking i’m sitting well not sitting but you know whatever the opposite of walking is anyway the car is at the side of the road and it would be awkward to cross over to the other side of the road but i think we’re going to have to do that in order to uh do better for ourselves i don’t think interacting with a real life human person in our state would really work i think i’m actually not too far

gone when i'm not like this spinning around with thought loops in my head and yet again jack has stopped walking does he keep going oh my god they're getting out of the car and they're getting out of the car and there are more of them and they walk up the road towards us JACK please let's move the other way at least to the other side of the road or something and they're heading... they're carrying bags and heading into their house. Right. Wonderful.

“Oh thank god.” says Jack. “I was shitting myself there. Jesus christ. Why.”

We wait for a minute or so and then walk forwards. I start thinking again, but then eventually, once we cross the threshold of the door, someone calls out to us from the door. “What are you lot doing?”

Jack doesn't want to talk to this man. It's not worth it. But I swear to god he looked right at me. The guy looked me dead in the eyes and saw that there was no iris left. He could tell. We walked right on by. Fuck that guy. Maybe he was being friendly though. But we don't look like particularly threatening people. Jack looks at me and for once and for once it is clear that we both have absolutely no idea what is going on. I mean, we just really do not understand what is going on. And yeah, I just don't get it. It's a thing to think about, like why do humans eat other smaller animals to survive? Because we're adapted to doing it, of course. But being adapted to do something is just a good personal reason for doing something, and says nothing of the wider consequences of that act. A man who is built tall and strong, with no conscience to mediate that strength, may be adapted to (or, to use a synonym, suited for) killing other people. And yes, while the man would be good at doing such a thing, and such a thing might bring him fulfilment and joy, that does not mean that that person has any right to kill other people! But of course, we're analogising. We're comparing getting pleasure from killing animals to getting pleasure from killing humans. And, that lies the thing that this conversation boils down to. You can talk about the aforementioned analogy and come up with counterexamples all day long, but that doesn't get to the thing at the core of the question. It's always how

things like these are. You talk about missing going out for a week, and then you talk about going to visit your parents, and then you talk about the strained relationship with your parents, and then you talk about the strained relationship with your own achievement in relation to those parents. That's the real root of the issue. That is, as far as I know, as far as it goes for Jack. Maybe there's something that he's not telling me. But you can see how all of these conversations boil down in this manner, and in the state I am in now, I feel like I can see to the root of what's going on. Or at least try and think that there is a root. Like I know that he was hiding something. Like I knew that there was something wrong. And this applies to the killing animals conversation too. You can talk about things like whether veal should be acceptable, but the real root of the conversation (as these things always do) stem from the fundamental human problems. We're not other people. We're definitely not other animals, and that's yet another degree of separation. We don't even have the tools to try and peer into their minds or let them understand us. Seriously, animal language? What the hell is up with that? We understand that they convey basic emotions, perhaps certain pheromones in ant colonies might say this, that, or the other, but the thing is that we don't understand that. The phenomenology of being human seems unique, and so does the experience of being any individual human. Impossible to be anyone other than yourself. Doomed to be in this way. Haunted by the fact that you are utterly alone in terms of perfect connections. There will always be that thing that someone else you know and love didn't tell you about just because they thought it wasn't worth mentioning. How can you describe a lifetime's worth of life without skipping a few bits? Of course not. You can never experience someone's existence without essentially resetting yourself and becoming a blank slate, thus becoming indistinguishable from them. You would have had to have been them from the start and not known anything else about becoming them. You must have lived exactly as they did, and *exactly*. Thus, it is impossible to be other people. Well, that or something very similar to that. Of course it's not exactly that, do you really expect me to put together a coherent argument in my state? Of course not! Of course not.

Jack isn't able to hear or see what I'm thinking right now, and I think that if I tried to explain this to him, it might be a little lost in translation. To have time to put your thoughts onto paper might help things. To have more time might help things. To stop rushing might help things. Because after all, haste makes waste. But taking things too slowly does the opposite! If you spend too long doing something, then there's wasted time in there as well. It's like if you spend a really long time deliberating about the trolley problem and your action ends up not mattering. You pull the lever after the five people have died. You acted and nothing came of it. And that's another human problem. Because of the fact that we take time to make decisions, we have to factor that into our decision making. You might be able to try and spend 60 years waltzing between professions and trying to find the one that is perfect for you, but you can't do that and always expect to find the perfect job for you. Perhaps the perfect job for you ceased to exist a long time ago, and you can't bring it back because there's no demand or no resources, or perhaps not even the knowledge of what that job could have been. We don't know what we don't know. There might be a limit to our human understanding that we are about to violently crash into, or perhaps there is a near-infinite realm of understanding that humans are going to be able to venture out into forever and ever. Essentially, we have limited time and we have to factor that into our decisions. We have limited time before death. Limited time to make decisions and section ourselves off from certain parts of what we could be. I mean, if I decide to spend the rest of my life training to become a pilot and then being a pilot, then I've sectioned myself off from becoming a full time chef. Of course, you have the capability to do both, but it's hard. And that difficulty is enticing sometimes. But in most lives, people pick a path and go down that one path. Because that's a good thing to do. A lot of the time, it works, it's a little unfulfilling sometimes, but having singular path and something that you've worked towards for a long time is something to be proud of! I mean, if you could have a family with a loving spouse and perhaps children, then that's something that you've made and it's all the more *special* because of the singularity of it. You can go and have another go, but that's not really the same. It's like

if you go racing and you do a real fast lap, and you're in the flow of a certain whatever, you're 'in the zone' so to speak, but christ, if someone were to take you out of that car and give you another one, there's a chance that it'll be better, but even if it is, sometimes you can be so in the groove of the previous one that even if the new one is faster, my goodness, it can be slower. Too much power. Or perhaps it's just worse and you can never hope to recapture the lap times you once got because of this car's crap engine. Analogies only go so far, but I feel this one works for this specific case. And it's not necessarily bad in that it objectifies your spouse and children as a tool to gain more and more of an abstract quantity. In this case, it represents lower lap times, in the non-metaphorical case, happiness and fulfilment. There are important differences, but I would be lying if I didn't say that people, even ones in long and long-lasting relationships, objectify each other. Because you're not them, no matter how close you can get. And that distance means that it's impossible to think as they do. By interpreting the words in their conversations using your lens, you are making hundreds of assumptions and inadvertently objectifying. Words are only approximations of things. Written words are even worse. They lose the nuance of the spoken word and the actual person to person communication. This can be useful sometimes when impartiality or some sort of neutrality is necessary, or perhaps personal expression is unneeded, but a lot of the time, something is lost in the mere act of slowing things down. Being allowed to 'backspace out' a heated rant, or strange stumblings, or idiosyncratic quirks of speech. There was a guy at my school who always mistook 'sacred' for 'scared' and he didn't - to my understanding - have dyslexia or anything like that. He just always did it, and eventually I think he just incorporated it into his speech because of how strange it was, and how we all knew him for it.

However, without sounding too much like an essay for school, the way in which we move still conveys the same imagery, but they are personal things to a greater degree. They've got a greater degree of connection to the self and arguably say more about the self than any prose or words might do. People say that actions speak louder than words, and they might just be right. Action is completely severed from words. You might say one

thing and mean another, or do another. I suppose they are right when they say that the only thing that shows us our character are our actions. And words can be actions. You can express hate through words, but it's harder to show that - you might as well just avoid the nuance of words and go over and hit them. That's another important thing. Physical proximity to other humans. We are not voids. Having (or at least attempting to have) real connections with other humans really is the best thing you can do at any point in time. It's why some games thrive and others don't. Take poker, for example, the game is not just in the cards, but in interacting with other people. If the game was to be played against online players, it would be a lot less entertaining. Not being able to see the subtle facial expressions is the nuance that is lost through a screen. In fact, think of the screen as another layer of thick, distorted glass in front of that window. You might be able to see what someone is doing through it, but my god, is it blurry. And also they have the ability to pull down a blackout curtain and walk away at any time. It is communication, right, but it's not the same sort of thing. It's really not the same thing. It's harder to make friends in this way, at least that's been our experience in it.

“Do you think it's harder to make friends online?”

“Why'd you ask?”

“No particular reason. I'm not, like, uh, lonely, or anything like that. Just, because.”

“Well, yeah, it's harder because you don't see them in real life.”

“But I mean you still do technically see them.”

“Sure. But it's not the same.”

When something is the same but also not the same, then it could be an analogy. Computer communication is an analogy for real communication. Largely the same, but with a few key differences that stop it from being the same thing exactly. And they can't be the same thing, if we were to change computer communication so that the person was physically transported to you through the work of a computer, than that would just be facilitating real communication. And we can see the fact that computer-based communication is bad in that it strives to be more like real-life communication, yet real-life communication does not strive to be anything else.

When do we have our deepest conversations with people? Late, late at night, in the dark perhaps, nothing else around to distract, just two brains that have experienced different things trying to reconcile those differences with one another. Differences. Of course that's why we don't get other people, because we're different. And that's another incredibly important thing that stems from the fact that we are not other people. By virtue of not being other people, we are different from them. There are a variety of differences in the world, some more disparate than others, but we are not the same person, people might share a lot of the same traits and experiences, in fact, they might be genetically identical, but they are not the same. Nothing in the genes can account for the experience of being not other people. Nothing can replace not being someone else.

Jack and I walk along for a while and we stop when we get to his front door. He checks his pockets, and can't seem to find his keys.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't, uh, find my keys. Can't find 'em."

"So, are we just going to sit outside?"

"Yeah."

"It's fucking cold though."

Another car drives past us.

"Check again."

As he ruffles his coat, the sound makes me think of something in the past. Being small and having a coat of my own, a plastic coat which I used to wear everywhere in the winter months, and as far as I could in the spring before the slight icy chill of the wind gave way into the wonderful summer. I remember having grit and gravel in those pockets from putting my sandy, clay-covered, mud-stained hands back in there. I remember wanting to one day turn them out and see what lied in there, but never getting around to it before my parents gave the coat away to a family friend with a child a little younger than I was. Of course, I guessed this was because the coat scarcely protected my forearms at the time they took it away. It wasn't right for me. But the patches which had been sewn into it from the scrapes and bumps had imparted themselves on me. The cuts had healed, but there were scabs of fabric on the coat,

unfitting, some flapping off into the wind, but it was *mine* for fuck's sake. Did I have a say in when it went? Of course not, I was like seven, and if I had had control over it, it would have been kept, but not stored properly, and it would have gone missing, and I would have probably been even sadder than I was after it had been given to someone else. At least in that case it may have made them happier. But would you be happy if you got someone else's tatty old coat? Probably not. They don't transfer. Some things just don't transfer. Worth a million pounds to one, and nothing to the other. One man's trash is another's treasure.

Sometimes I hate the fact that little tidbits like this, little allegorical snippets are just full of truth and intrigue. Of course, again, analogy warning, words lie, et cetera, but I feel that a lot of the time, the fact that we lie (or are not 100% true to our own desire for expression) to other people with our words and the things that we do, and... I'm just worried that other people aren't. Right now, I'm walking along still - wait, no, we're still outside the house, and Jack is still stumbling to find his keys. But I'm worried about the fact that those windows exist. That they can be closed off at any time. That we are limited by our bodies in terms of what we can do, what we can act upon, who we can meet and where we can go. And the most fucked up thing there is... well, I'm talking to Jack right now about where his keys are, and we're laughing because he says he can feel them in his jacket pocket, but they're not really materialising. And that's fine. But the most utterly fucked up thing in this world is that other people could just not be. And there'd be no way of you being able to tell the difference. Well, no way that I'd be able to tell the difference between. You can talk all you want, but there's always a degree of separation, twins raised from birth to share their lives and careers together, never splitting apart, hell, sharing their wikipedia page when they get old and famous and die because they never strayed far from each other, and yet there is still always something separating something. Existing as a human, or more specifically, coming into existence as a human, is a bifurcation of being. Another thing exists as a result, something which, through lived experience, doesn't *feel* like it's just part of the world. And that's another human problem. Being grounded in

the world entirely, our bodies are made of physical components, the chemicals that sway around our body, as much as it's very 'free-spirited' to dismiss them and say we live our lives entirely of our own volition, we don't, hormones, blood oxygen, whatever you want to name, they all contribute to the being of a human, but that's not all there is. Necessary, but not sufficient. Because that's not how it is. Christ, I feel like I'm swirling around in loops, and things feel alright now. Apparently, according to the clock in the kitchen, we've been outside for two and a half hours. That seems like a long time and no time at all at the same time. Every time I walk past the kitchen doorway in order to move around, I catch a glimpse of the timer on the oven. It barely moves sometimes, and then jumps forwards in great half-hour chunks. I suppose that's what happens when you watch some strange episode of *Seinfeld* when you're several hundred micrograms deep. And it's about this time, when the characters say the funny things to each other on the screen, that I realise something. I look over at Jack, and his hair ripples backwards. He's sort of got hair that looks like it's layered all the way back, and I say this having no experience as a hairdresser. But do you need to be experienced as a hairdresser in order to make an inane comment about somebody's hair? I think they call it a 'flock of seagulls' haircut, and I guess that might be right. Maybe it's just me reading too much into the haircut. Can you read too much into a haircut? I suppose you might be able to read something into a haircut, but generally, haircuts serve as decent indicators of the values and the types of people that that person could be. But, I would never say that they would be entirely defined by the kind of hair that they have. There's obviously a lot of stereotyping with hair, as it's just as much of a visible feature on everyone as skin colour, or nose shape, or... hell, chin structure.

What was it I realised? Oh, never mind, I'm sure it wasn't that important. Jack and I continue watching *Seinfeld* for quite some time, and I get up, and not a single episode has passed. Things really are quite odd. I am on the edge of my seat for some of the dullest, most mundane things. It really shows me, and us in general, how captivating these structured scenarios are, how the way in which they are engineered and presented trumps

over mundane physical reality. Of course your life is going to have interesting moments, but not as many in such a small period of time as the people on TV. Why make a show about all the drama-free parts? Why make a show about a person who sits indoors all day and plays *World Of Warcraft*? Because we don't like that. The mundane is obvious to us, and it is used as a tool to be played off of in most 'mundane' sitcoms. But I suppose I'm reading too much into this. I mean, Jerry Seinfeld, in his own show, called 'Seinfeld' is the standup comedian that he is in real life, in the show. Adding to that, there are segments of real comedy that he just performs, seemingly without much connection to the rest of the show. It's like he takes a look at the events that he has just witnessed as a human being, and then processed them down into witty bits of humour-paste. And I'm not trying to use the word 'paste' in a disparaging way. I mean, pate is paste, and that's quite a nice thing, at least some people think so. It's interesting how the word has negative connotations, connotations of blandness, of homogeneity, when used to describe something, but in reality, a lot of pastes have been developed over the years in order to try and make the things which they go on to more interesting. Wallpaper paste is the basis for wallpaper, which can make rooms several times more interesting. A lot of spreads could technically be categorised as pastes, too. But on the other hand, you have the related word 'pasty' and I suppose that also has its own, separate negative connotations, that of sickness, pallidness, not moving. But these pastes might not be the most interesting thing on the world on their own, but without them, the thing that you're making doesn't try to work. You can't have something complicated without the bare essentials which make up that something. It would be like having all of the gears to compose a clock out of, but no hands and no face. And by that, I mean the clock having no hands and no face. Of course, you having no hands and no face while attempting to build the clock would make it harder, but it wouldn't make it impossible. Just like trying to put wallpaper up without some kind of adhesive paste. I wonder what the definition of paste is on some sort of dictionary.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

“You have a dictionary anywhere?”

“I know one of my flatmates has a german to english dictionary. It’s proper big, though, so it’ll be, like, detailed.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Why’d you want it?”

“I want to look up a definition.”

“No shit.”

We go upstairs, and in a remarkably short amount of time, find the dictionary on a long bookshelf, directly above a double sofa. Why people do this, I don’t know. We look up the definition of the word ‘paste’. More words are thrown up. ‘Pounded’. ‘Soft’. ‘Moist’. We have a little chuckle at that last one. ‘Moist’. Wow, the wiktionary entry for ‘moist’ actually has a reference to how it’s used in sexual slang. Absolutely made my day. We need to eat something. There’s some fruit in the kitchen. But first, to attend to the placing of the book.

“No, if you put it back exactly where it was, then she’ll suspect something.”

“But then, what?”

“What do you mean what?”

“Where do we put it.”

“No idea.”

We leave the book on her desk, quietly. Also on her desk is a crumpled up receipt. I pick it up and inspect it both sides before finally deciding to file it away in the rubbish bin under her desk. That way she might appreciate the little bit of tidying we’ve done for her.

“Ah, yeah.” says Jack.

We walk out, checking behind us for any other disturbances that we might have made. But there’s probably nothing. Where there is something, well, there’s, something. But that’s not what we’re looking for. We’re looking for something. Called ‘fruit’. There’s some fruit in the kitchen, and that should be really, really nice to eat. Yeah, really nice right there. Absolutely lovely, no matter how much I’m concentrating on this. I can feel it going down my throat, I can feel the nerves firing. Why are there nerves down there? Oh yeah, the gag reflex, that’s... something that’s helped me a few times. I’ve become acquainted with the epiglottis one too many times now. But the fruit itself isn’t what’s making the fruit taste

good. I'm interpreting the taste of the fruit as something good, just as someone with a different palate might think that this fruit tastes bad. Something is giving *enjoyment* of the fruit that doesn't necessarily boil down to chemicals (I know I say that 'I know I say that a lot' a lot) and that feels important right now. But what feels more important is the fact that I'm eating the fruit, enjoying the fruit, and not currently choking on the fruit. Because that would be a bad thing.

"Do you think choking on fruit would be a very 'me' way to die?"

"Not really. It's too boring."

"Nice to know you don't think I'm boring."

"Hmm?"

"What?"

"I didn't say anything about you being boring."

It's true, he hasn't, I've just inferred it. It's fascinating. But I must say, "Oh, right, sorry."

"I don't think you're boring though."

"Thanks."

We continue eating fruit. He's probably thinking more about how not to choke on the fruit, but it's not the kind of thing that you can choke on very easily, it's quite mushy in that regard. Do I think I'd be able to massage it down my throat in case of an emergency? I shouldn't have to think about this at this point. I shouldn't have to think about anything other than the feeling and the taste of the fruit as I eat it. There are quite a few things on this selection (yes, there is a selection, Jack has seemingly gone to some effort to prepare this) that I wouldn't usually go for, but yet, I find myself quite enjoying the less-crunchy apples that he has procured. I don't think I'm doing this out of pity for the selection either, or out of social pressure, I think I might just be hungry and there seems to be nothing else to eat.

"I think that's enough fruit for the day..."

"The day?" I say. "It's definitely the night, right now."

"Ah, but if this was the summer, you wouldn't be saying the same thing, would you? It'd still be light, and the afternoon would still be continuing on. It's hardly six."

"Well, I suppose that's, uh, right. I mean, it doesn't feel like the afternoon, that's for sure. But there are some times of the year, like in the middle of December

or something, where it never truly feels like it's ever the afternoon."

"True."

What an agreeable conversation. The conversation is, in fact, but not in *fact*, so agreeable, that we forget that the original point of the conversation was supposed to be about not eating more fruit, and we thus eat more fruit. Wait, if I'm remembering this part of that conversation, then, surely, well, we have to...

"Jack, why are we still eating fruit?"

We both laugh, he remembers what we had to do and we stop eating the fruit. Perhaps this is why the fall happened, because we kept getting distracted. The window opens up once more, the curtains and blinds blow away and the cold air comes in through there. It might be worth seeing the plant again. The plant is still there, and we move the books around some more in order to try and disguise our intentions again. We can't decide whether this or that angle works better for this specific thing that we want to convey. We want to convey that the dictionary was used, but not 'used' used, but just lightly used for a quick peruse, not a serious deep thing, but also for serious purposes, not just looking up silly words in german. It's horrible, what if we were to move other things in order to show that we weren't just trying to find the dictionary - or, perhaps, that we didn't immediately know where it was and we had to move other things to find it, because if Jack knows exactly where the dictionary is, then it shows an over-understanding of her bedroom, and this might be considered creepy.

"What do you think of the angle?" I ask.

"It's too creepy." he says. "I think we should put it back."

I'm not sure what I think about this move. Putting it back? But we'd have to check the entire thing for marks? Would we disturb the light cover of dust on any of the surrounding books, especially with our collective lack of spatial awareness - or is it a hyper-awareness that's the problem? Either way, I can see Jack's hand reaching out to touch the book in order to pick it up, and my goodness, he's actually put it away. And I can see where it was, my god, I can see where it was to the fullest extent. It's like there's a hole where the book was. We have to fill it with something. But what is, aside

from the book itself, exactly book-shaped? There is literally a clearing inbetween the loose, fallen sticky notes on the desk, and it has to not look like the size of the book. But then again, most of the other books on the shelf are of that size. But if you were going to have a desk so messy as to have loose things just laying around on it any which way (especially if they had the capability to be stuck on a wall), then why wouldn't you just put any book on top of the notes? Surely, that means that the notes must be moved so that there is no reasonable space for a book to be placed on - but not in a perfect pattern which minimises the available area, but a semi-random pattern which strikes a balance between "a pattern similar this little pattern-significance (no rows and columns, et cetera) could conceivably have arisen from pseudo-random chance" and minimisation of available table area. I begin to shuffle the notes around, but oh, the horror, every single time I move one of them, a hole the exact size and shape of the note opens up. Maybe, I think, I should just leave this alone. Jack has been messing with the book and the book order so much that you can see his fingerprints all over everything.

"Hey, I think we should probably just either get out of here or just look at the plant again."

"Fair enough."

He walks out of the room and I follow suit, thinking about the hollow holes on the way out. But as soon as the door is closed, and I peek through again, the holes have disappeared, they look alright, and although I can't see it, the bookshelf with the dictionary looks alright as well. It, I should say, seems alright. I know, well, I know that I don't *know*, but I believe that Jack will have done a good job in putting the book back where it was supposed to go and making the rest of the shelf look like nothing had changed. It's like as soon as we touched anything in there, it broke. It felt like it had completely broken, and that there was no amount of interaction that we could give to it in order to make it look right again. In fact, every single interaction with the objects, even the ones which would make the objects look indistinguishable to how they were before, looked awful to us. To know, personally, that we had touched the books was enough. But to have forgotten, or to not know, that's what we were trying to do. To forget our

previous interactions with said objects and attempt to see the world and only see it. To not have to interact or touch, just for a little while, at the very least. To just exist without that physical ‘limiter’, the body.

“What do you think you would do if you could just... go anywhere?”

“I’d love to go somewhere warm.”

“No, but like, you’re not capable of feeling anything.”

“Oh, like a ghost or something?”

“Not really, but...” I’m now thinking, yeah, I suppose this is like a ghost. But it’s not the same. “Perhaps more of a spirit than a ghost.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Not really, right?”

“Well, I mean, some people use the word ‘spirit’ to mean ‘ghost’.”

“And others use it to mean cheap vodka.”

He laughs, and I think the point has been made.

“So, what was your point?” he asks.

“I just wondered what you’d do without a body.”

“I can’t really imagine not having a body. How would you see?”

“Well...” and it’s true, we do need the senses that we have in our bodies in order to see, hear, touch, so clearly that’s not the important thing. I abandon the question, and get back to what I was doing. What was I doing? Thinking. Ah yes, getting *back* to thinking, as if I had spent the last few seconds not thinking. It implies a departure, and a return from somewhere else. But where was that somewhere else?

To be honest (to myself), I’ve been thinking a lot recently about how a lot of the things I say have just been me talking out of my arse. Closed windows? Chipping away at the marble? All these grandiose theories of love, hatred, humanity, fundamental experience, all rolled into one drug-fuelled binge over the course of a weekend. What a ‘roof’ is if it’s in space, static, relative to nothing? And yes, it’s true, purple thoughts instead of purple prose, all this flowery saying-something-but-meaning-another, all the self-referential understandings of my own misunderstandings, of the constant pointing out of analogies, terminologies, getting lost in trains of thought, and nothing actually happening between them. For fuck’s sake, I gave Jack advice on how to live his life as if I had any idea how to

live mine! At least he has someone behind him, egging him on, I suppose it's not helpful if the egging on is violent, and the reasons deeply misguided and seemingly built on fear, but yet again, this is only what I've sort of assumed about this - he could just be lying. He could just be lying. There is no way for me to check if he's telling the truth right now. And I don't want to ask right now. I don't want to.

Oh, god, what about if he was just lying and I couldn't understand anything he said? What about if he was just... there, existing as a bag of bones with electrochemical impulses flowing through the various nerves and veins, controlling his every move as if he was some kind of automaton? If he's just not real, he's just standing there and everything that I say to him is just processed, there's no actual thought going into anything that he says? I know that I'm not like that because I can... I mean, there's no reason for me to believe that I am anything but a sack of chemicals and bones other than the fact that I am experiencing this right now. I mean, how the fuck am I 'experiencing' this right now? There shouldn't be anything to experience! There is no reason for anything other than humans like I've just described. And this is horrifying. He could be basically what I would consider a computer. A robot. An automaton. Soul-dead, and just moving around the record player and putting things in the record player according to some strange impulse, a nerve firing in some distant location in the brain making him think that this is the perfect record to put on in this particular circumstance.

A terrifying thought rings out, "I am the only person in this world." And for all I know, I very well could be. I very, exceedingly well could be. But then what? If I'm the only one, or if we're all 'like me' then out of what primordial soup did this come from? This *feeling*, more complex than can be accounted for by years of intense studies of the meticulous flow of ATP into and out of membranes. And I feel like something is missing at the core of this feeling, like the books we moved earlier, like the conversation we had earlier. There was something there. There is something in the marble sometimes! There's something there, as well as the development of (wo)man, we have to consider the development of the very thing that lets us consider anything at all. It's not

just an 'emergent' property, it's not something that we have control over, we can't study it, not for lack of desire, but for lack of ability. To think that we have any handle on the very nature of the non-reducible aspects of the human experience is to think that science is a much more powerful tool than it is. And it's a powerful tool anyway, we have many things for which to thank it. But it shouldn't be the way forward by itself, it is not an 'everything' unto itself, we cannot understand why things happen without first understanding why it's not reducible in that way. And the purple thoughts come back, to think I'm thinking in this way, concisely and collectedly, it's not right, I'm not saying anything that anyone else on this planet (provided other people aren't just automata) wouldn't understand unless they had forgotten how insane it was to just exist in any way at all. Oh, the man who says "But I am just what I can explain!" Whether he's referring to science, or religion, or anything other than their own experience of the world, is not being true to the very nature of their existence. But this is not to condone anything else that can be got away with by using 'vague' words. Some things really are bullshit. New Age 'quantum healing', other unfalsifiable things that are invented to get away with selling all sorts of worthless rubbish.

"Shouldn't have eaten that much fruit." says Jack, and for a brief moment, I am aware that I am not conscious of my thoughts of him being a mere automaton. I do not think, while I am engaging in conversation with him, that he is just 'like a robot'. I can see the nuance, the facial expressions (however contorted and amplified by the drugs they are) the underlying things which he's trying to say under the things he actually says, and I become aware that I didn't immediately default to thinking of him as a blank slate, a person-sized void of consciousness. That's it. It's hard to go around living your life like this, it's a good thing that it's very easy to forget that you don't know what other people are thinking. You don't even know if other people are thinking as such. But, you, by virtue of being you, whoever you are, must know that you can think, because if you didn't have the capability to think that, then you wouldn't be 'you'. And because you can't get reliable feedback from external observers about whether or not they are 'real', the only person who can

verify your existence - is you. I look at myself in the mirror and see my facial features static when I look closely at them, but they wander off a little bit, attempting to Picasso-ify themselves. But I quickly look back and check up on them. It's strange how 'up on' and 'upon' are - you know what, stop thinking for a little bit for once? Just listen to the music. And know that no matter how hard you try, no other human interaction will ever be meaningful in that you utterly understand them. There will always be something which is hidden, some un-describable, un-transferable experience which they have had by virtue of being them and, not you! And not you! Perhaps the reason why I'm thinking like this is because I really need to... wait, no we've already eaten all the fruit. All of it? I thought we only had a little bit?

"What happened to the grape stems?"

"I put them in the bin."

"And the banana peels?"

"I think they went in the bin too."

"Good to know."

He gives me a thumbs up and goes back to fiddling with a few dials on the front of the large turntable they have, and nothing seems to be audibly changing. Perhaps it's a good thing that he's not able to mess with the treble or the bass, or we might be in for some kind of unholy racket. I wonder if this house is... no, it's semi-detached. There are people that you can hear through the wall, which is weird. But I don't think you can hear them right now. A car passes outside and the headlights light up the room with bright stripes for a split second, but I get to see it all and it's implanted on my retinas. In that one moment, I understood what it was to be a car headlamp. The trappings of acid thoughts. What would it be like to be anything else? And that's something that we can never truly know. We can how how it would be to have the body of a bird, perhaps some technology can get us there in the future, but there seems to be nothing that can really give us the experience of being a bird without, as I have said earlier, getting rid of most of the things that make you, 'you'. Well, not when talking about birds. I think I'm just going to flap my mouth open and shut for a while because I like the sound that it makes when the teeth clack together and the music is in time with them somehow - is he holding the record down to slow it

down to be in time with my clacking? And I slowly rise to my feet and begin tapping. And he keeps it going, finger slowly trailing over whatever he's playing - I can't say I know the song, but right now, that doesn't matter. That doesn't matter at all. I tap away on the floor. The floor makes a good noise when the cup created by the ball of my foot hits it in just the right way with some light socks on. I could almost go on for hours about this feeling, oh, this feeling that something interesting is happening right now! The thing that you can't do right now is stop to think about how this is all going to be thought about later! You can't just pause a wonderful moment like this in order to break it down! The cinematicity! We're jamming! He's scratching the record back and forth across the deck and all I can say is that I'm surprised this man doesn't do some DJ'ing in his spare time. We keep going for a few more... I'm not entirely sure. And I start going for both feet off the floor occasionally, but the noise is still the same. We're quite lucky that no one lives underneath us. Or anyone is in the general vicinity. I'd love to hear this recorded back so I can see how it was. Knowing us, it would probably be terrible.

"Do you DJ in your spare time?"

"A little."

Of course. Of fucking course. And we laugh for a good, well, I don't really know how long, trying and sometimes failing to make something out of this record and my insatiable tapping. I wonder if it's worth it to go and find two objects which could be used as drumsticks. I go downstairs and find two wooden spoons, which resonate on the floor even better than my socks and don't leave so much as a dent.

"So where do you DJ?"

"Couple of local places."

"How come you've never told me?"

"I'm not very good still." he says, the record coming to a complete stop with a scratch like out of some movie that I can't remember the name of. "Plus I know you're not into that sort of thing." "What's the movie with the freeze frame and the record scratch?" "Oh, if it's you, then that's different, of course, I'd come and see you do something you enjoy." I say. "But to not mention it is criminal." "I mean, this is so fun. I can't believe I do this and get paid sometimes."

“Sometimes.” We both laugh and the music continues. Well, the ‘music’ as such doesn’t continue, but the music that we are making as a result of it does. I say ‘as a result of it’ but there’s nothing about the record which he’s playing that specifically means that we have to make this. There’s nothing forcing us to act in this manner, for me to tap the wooden spoons against the floor in time with his music, we’re simply doing so because doing so feels good. But not in a hedonistic sense. There’s a sense of participation, co-operation, something else to finish off the trio ending in ‘-ation’ - give me a break, I’m having to think on the fly and tap in time with the beat! But you’re not having to think about the beat all that much, are you? Oh, no, that’s just instinct. But are irregular time signatures really instinct? Sure, why not. Right now, we’re just jamming using some unorthodox instruments and some cool ideas. Of course things are going to be all good. It’s dark now, and the lights are now off, all I can see are the glowing control panel sections of the turntable - there’s many more dots there than I remember. But the curtains are open and the snow begins to fall heavier. The status lights aren’t a real replacement for the stars, but they’re close enough. And the snow looks like stars, anyway. For a brief moment I can see the stars falling, as if they’re all hurtling past us, and we’re moving, and I get a horrifying sense of perspective. In some sense, this is what happens. The stars only move because we move underneath them. I suppose that’s quite cool.

“You stopped.”

“Stopped drumming? Oh, yeah, sorry.”

We continue for a second, and my mind stops focusing on the bright lights, I can see where they were on my retinas, I can see my hands blurring, running into and clipping through their own trails, as someone once told me would happen. I just didn’t expect it to be this visible in the dark. And my mind stops focusing on the bright lights, you see, and it stops focusing on them in order to move their focus towards... Jack. He’s there, he’s smiling, moving the thing back and forth, wearing out the needle faster than usual, but still not fast enough to make any difference to the evening. And he looks at me, and we look into each other’s eyes, and then, oh, right then, I see it. The other person as they truly are. Right now, there’s nothing to be said, because

all understanding is had. Nothing needs to be elaborated on, because it's already all there. Talking would be extraneous, mentioning the fact that talking would be extraneous would be extremely extraneous, and so on and so forth. I think back to the times that I've done things with other people, the conversation I had with Kate, the conversations I've had in the past, the real things which have mattered to me over the years and how none of it was the thinking, it was always the doing. It was always the actual going out, the swinging between tree branches in the park, the drinking ourselves to death, the beer pong which warranted the analysis, not the analysis itself. The analysis was wonderful in its own right, but without the actual event to base it on, it would be like writing a review for a restaurant that you haven't been to yet! Trying to do that would be impossible, like, there would be nothing to input off of, nothing to infer or be interested about. But at the same time, we do exist in a vacuum, we are locked away from people and possibilities, and possibilities of people, and the past, and the future, living at one second per second. We are always putting away things which we could have done, having to confront hundreds of decisions each and every day, and sometimes it does get too much to bear. People really do commit suicide over the smallest things - but that's because they're not small to them. People ruin their lives based on rumour, on miscommunication, they throw their health away over petty disputes and being comfortable with the way that they're living until the very moment at which they are not. Living in the present is an eternal curse, like a zipper that converges the disparate strands of future possibility into one thing that happened, into a steady, concrete flow of time, that happens at one second per second. But what does a second mean when taken outside of the idea of human perception? Surely, nothing. Your second, for all I know, could be longer than my second, or perhaps the experiences of a bat or a cat or a rat would be sufficiently different enough to notice some change there. To see the things that we do, to have the experiences that we have, are meaningful because of their location in time. Because it feels like a one-way street to us, right? You can't just go back in time, they say, with their complex explanations of how

the physical world works. And yes, you can't just go back in time, they're right. But what does it mean to go forward in time? Surely, we must see time as something that happens due to our experience of the world, right, because how would time appear to a rock? It would pass away in an instant, the entire universe and everything in it gone in a blip. Observers hold it back. And once again, the tree that falls in the forest with no one to hear it cannot really fall at all. The sound waves propagate, but with no-one to listen in, what does that mean? It's easy to think of us still existing, as the tree as falling in some remote part of the world (whether that be the earth or the universe as a whole, it does not matter) and for us to just miss the tree, for the noise to travel but not be heard by anyone. Perhaps we might justify hearing the tree by saying that it has some sort of butterfly effect, something in the future which affects us more noticeably. Then we might be said to have heard the tree, despite its physical non-proximity to us when it fell. But that still presupposes the existence of an observer to give anything meaning. What is a tree without an observer, let alone the sound it makes when it falls? That's why observers really do matter. Not cameras, not cells, but humans. Observing one another (of course, it is impossible to observe another 'person' as they truly exist), or observing a thing, the effects which we see really are different. Two people talking face to face, versus two people talking behind closed doors, versus two people typing at each other over the internet. These aren't the same ideas, each level of abstraction provides alienation from the original concept of communication. Even the idea of speaking in a certain language is abstraction. Even the idea of bodily movement in order to express certain things is still pretty abstract.

But clearly, it isn't just meaningless noise, there are patterns to be found in what we (think?) we experience. And the most important one of those things is the sense of self in the world. We carve out a space for ourselves, and collide with others, we communicate, we make art, we make laws, we collide on a daily basis when we don't do X, Y or Z because of something or another. It seems that in the modern world, almost everything we do is a collision with other people - the people who design the things that we use, the people that make the

things we see, the people that populate our newspapers and our internet feeds, they're all represented by the things that they make. The tiles on my roof. The chairs I sit in. The videos I watch.

So one of the best things to do in this life is to find other people and understand them - but, of course, do not mistake 'understand' for 'talk with forever'. To substantiate yourself, to put meat on the bones of life, you actually have to go out and do things. Go on some sort of adventure, inside, outside, but most importantly, with other people, in the physical world. And only then can you think about what you've done.

I look over at Jack, playing with the record player again, and I'm still drumming, but it's become slow, it's slowing to a halt, we're hitting the beats once every few seconds at this point, and it slows down until there will never be another beat. He gently lifts the tonearm, removing all noise. The room is silent, no pipes running through the walls, no cars moving outside, and the world fills with snow outside. A slight melt collects at the edges of each of the smaller panes that make up the larger window, and the snow falls harder and harder, the flakes fluttering more vigorously and filling up the front garden. It's when the wind calms down and the snow stops falling, much, much later on, we're still looking out of the window, our breaths only condensing nearer the window, away from the warmth of the paint-dripped radiator on the other side of the room. A blanket covers both of us, I haven't prised my eyes away from the window long enough to tell if it's the same one. Whatever. We've probably looked at the snow for longer than we should have. The sun begins to rise, that's how late things are getting. The snow is blinding, the world is not going to function the same with all of it everywhere. It's more than either of us have seen in our lives here. There might be a foot out there. I can see where the start form on the top of the plastic bins and the brick walls, where the snow presses itself down and smooths off the top. And underneath that snow, there's something there. Like when we have a conversation, it's brushing off the snow to reveal the reality underneath. Perhaps it'll be muddy, trampled, perhaps the precious fragility of the snow hid some horrible metal interior, icy, formless, no grip to be had, nothing to be pulled at. There might be feral hibernating

animals down there, or yet more things buried deep within warrens, waiting for the time to strike. But none of that can be known if the snow isn't cleared away first. And there can be no revealing, no understanding, without fracture, change, destruction first. The Ancient Greeks knew this, their first 'god' as such is one of chaos. Because order in a world that is meant to be orderly from the start is meaningless. "It's just the natural order of things" would be everything's justification. But here, in this world fraught with conflict, of war, violence, corruption, theft, throwing beer glasses at ex-girlfriend drummers, hatred, hatred of films, disgust, jealousy, nausea, sickness, death, plague, famine, the word 'moist', people who use the word 'moist' in a feeble attempt to make other people feel sick, and people who meta-analyse it all, there's the possibility of reunification. It may seem hard - no! - it is hard, and an arduous task in every sense of the word. It's impossible to know what others are thinking, they might want to backstab, they might hide their nice intentions behind a frightening exterior, they might hide their frightening intentions behind a nice exterior, there's so many layers of distorted glass between you another other people *without* the effects of communication coming into play that it all, sometimes, seems hopeless. Like two repelling particles, like the graph of 1 over x , like coming at each other from indifferentiable angles, but still ending up travelling apart. You can't touch anyone, says the fact-generator, and that's true, but what does it mean for us? Nothing. The sensation of touch is still there. But not being able to touch anyone's mind, of being able to reach in there and understand fully? That's what means something. There'll always be room for error, two infinitely small points fired at one another will always miss, unless they occupy the same place. You can't be other people. I know this, I look over at Jack and I see his face looking out onto the snow, with the sunrise not discernible, but making the whole place brighter in increments. Some long shadows, and the feeling that all the snow will melt away soon, so we should use it while it's there. Use it, run, have a snowball fight, put some warm clothes on, sled, ski, slide, skate, and avoid the yellow bits. The snowfall is dying now. I don't know when it will melt, a day, a week, perhaps bits of grit-infused slush will stay in cold kerb

divots for a month to come if there's no good weather. I don't know what we're going to do today, it's a monday, I'm supposed to be going in to work in a few hours. I don't know if I can do it. But sitting here, rotting, thinking about thinking, spinning spirals of thought that lead to nothing isn't working. Rules give structure, but not being able to break them would be torture. It's good to think about thinking, but there has to be some sort of grounding in the real world for it to mean anything. Like a restaurant review. A meta-grounding! Like an idea of what to carve in the marble. Of who to consult, to think about in memory of, to dedicate to, to look forward to seeing. There might be nothing in the marble, no 'centre', no 'artefact', no 'holy grail' to be located and exhumed, paraded and celebrated as the way that we should all go. But there might be ways of finding something just as meaningful. He looks at me, and I look back. We both turn to look back outside. The cold coming off of the windows is comforting. I'm not sure of what he has to do today, maybe he has a day off, or something. A great plane turns circles in the sky which we can barely see. The birds are heard, the snow is past, the sun is out, the world is once more ripe for living in, and the drugs wear off, but sitting here is still just as wonderful. Maybe I've gotten a text from Kate. Or he's gotten calls from friends I don't know about but want to meet one day. Maybe I've got a day off work because of the snow....

We should go outside soon, maybe I should try and get at least an hour or so of sleep before work, lest I turn up and pass out. We should go out and see who's around for dinner, cooking, going out, takeaway, whatever. Maybe we can watch a film or see a band. Perhaps we could make a band. I know a drummer now, I think. Perhaps we should just find other people and throw lumps of snow at one another. That might be the thing to do, to use the snow while it's still there, fresh, virgin, few cars daring to tread down these side streets yet. But I know that when we step outside, we'll be outside. From there, the world is possible. There's no point in sitting around in this room all the time, wondering what life would be like on the outside. If there is one thing that I have learned, it's that experiences are infinitely valuable, and their subsequent discussions are infinitely meaningful. And if there's

another thing I have learned, it is that you are definitely not - and cannot be! - other people.

But you can get very, very close.