

Alan Driscoll  
LET'S DANCE

## FOOTBALL SEASON IS OVER

"No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun — for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax — This won't hurt."

- the suicide note of Hunter S. Thompson, February 2005.

## 21<sup>st</sup> June 2015 - Second Wave Theory

### Rez

The secret is knowing when to stop.  
The timing of that moment, however, is not always easily agreed upon.  
“Up you get,” says Davina, barging into the infinite record store of my dreams, like a bull in a dreamworld record store. Racks of vinyl melt like surrealist timepieces.  
My consciousness flickers, becoming momentarily aware of the armchair beneath me, but remains dormant.  
“Quick,” says Davina. “While I’m naked.”  
Despite myself, my left eye cranks open a segment.  
Davina stands there fully clothed, sucking milkshake through a straw.  
I mumble threatening obscenities, exerting as little energy as possible.  
Davina wafts coffee under my nose.  
My right hand spasms open.  
She places the cup in my hand and spits out gum, which she uses to affix an earpod to my forehead.  
A manicured fingernail grazes the play button. The Flotation Toy Warning song *Popstar Researching Oblivion* beams itself directly into my brain.  
My theme tune.  
Davina lights a joint and inserts it into the cigarette holder that still dangles from my mouth.  
I inhale.  
“Up,” she says. “It’s party time.”  
My sunglasses have slid down my nose, allowing me to peer menacingly over the rim at her.  
“Don’t give me that look,” she says. “This was your idea. You wanted to test your theory.”  
Smoke escapes my motionless lips.  
Davina rolls her eyes, sighs and inserts one straw into another. She places one end of the double-straw into the coffee cup and the other into the side of my mouth not holding the joint.  
I suckle caffeine.  
Cognitive cogs whirr and rattle.  
I open my right eye.  
Now, it’s party time.

I stand and survey the scene in front of me.  
The intimidatingly ornate grandfather clock that dominates the end wall reads six minutes past eleven.  
Sunday morning.  
Stylishly dressed corpses litter the floor. Fashion victims and ketamine casualties. Unconscious indie celebrities mingle with braindead bohemians and a scattering of neighbourhood gatecrasher kids. All of them pushed their bodies to the limit last night before succumbing to the inevitable time out from reality.  
A few of the faded faces might be recognisable to my more discerning readers. Laura Miller, the singer-songwriter generally credited for kickstarting the folktronica revival that

trendspotters and scenesters have been lapping up like dehydrated cats, lies sprawled on the floorboards, grinning and twitching like a blissful kitten. Perhaps amused by something in her dream.

Austin Dunn, the psychological illusionist who shot to fame following his legendary televised performance of the Indian Rope Trick, lies in the recovery position, his hips spooning those of a sleeping goddess.

Davina crouches on her heels and amuses herself by drawing a chalk outline around the comatose form of a bearded giant in a Night Warriors t-shirt.

"Don't do that," I tell her. "You'll fuck the continuity. The house needs to look exactly as it did eight hours ago. Start sealing the windows."

Davina pouts and scampers outside. Minutes later, the black sheeting I stashed in the garage begins to appear through the gaps in the curtains, creating the illusion of night.

I stride across to the grandfather clock and wind the hour hand backwards eight times, my grin widening with each anti-clockwise rotation.

"Start tidying," I instruct Davina upon her return. "Just the excess. Don't overdo it."

Davina begins transporting two out of three empty bottles to a kitchen cupboard set aside for the purpose. We can't risk filling black bags with clinking glass.

I empty half of the ashtrays and unlock those cabinets behind the bar yet to be touched. I collect empty baggies and fag packets from the floor, placing a few pills into each bag and a few cigarettes into every packet, before returning them to the ground.

Davina perfects the lighting. Laughing gas cylinders are primed with fresh balloons.

These tasks are all performed silently. We've been practising.

The opening riff of that *Time Travelling Man* song shatters our silence.

Fucking ringtones.

Davina plucks the phone from a sleeper's pocket and hurls it at me like it's a live grenade. I punch the keypad, silencing it. Musical synchronicity be damned.

"I thought you confiscated them all."

"You know how it is," says Davina. "Some people need them surgically removed."

A sleeper stirs. Davina gently drapes a jacket over their face. I turn away from the resulting morbid imagery and assess the state of the house.

It feels like night. The clock reads thirty-four minutes past three. But we can't leave anything to chance.

"Come upstairs," I tell Davina. "Quietly. It's time to release the reinforcements."

I once took too much acid in a newspaper-lined room containing nothing but an irritable Guatemalan parrot on a perch. I was locked in and told to expect a revelation. Whether the parrot was integral to this or merely a fellow psychedelic passenger was unclear.

And so it came to pass that I was provided with the knowledge of the purpose of my life.

Helping people.

Helping people to be happier.

At least, that's the conclusion I came to when I awoke days later covered in newspaper print, parrot shit and post-it notes bearing scrawled pleas for HELP.

Clues are only clues if you want them to be.

One a scale of one to messy, that week got pretty messy.

Yet I was the apex of elegance when compared to the state of my bedroom that confronts me upon unlocking the door and daring to peek inside.

The Vodka Girls.

If they didn't exist, would it be necessary to invent them?

The Vodka Girls are a dozen Smirnoff-sponsored promotional nymphettes, currently draped over my furniture clad in thongs under three-inch mini-skirts and numbered bikini tops.

At least two of them are engaged in sexually gratuitous acts that would test my gonzo credibility to recount in any degree of accuracy, while those girls not sexually preoccupied or unconscious scabble around like headless hyenas emptying my drawers and rummaging through cupboards.

"Good morning, ladies." I tip my hat to them.

"More coke," demands Vodka Girl 2.

"I thought you drank it straight?"

A shot glasses shatters above my head.

"More coke," demands Vodka Girl 9.

Davina enters the room, effortlessly outclassing them all, her eyes nevertheless flickering with primal jealousy.

Vodka Girl 7 squares up to me, her forehead butting the brim of my fishing hat.

"More coke," she says.

Davina coughs, her cough suspiciously resembling the word "Whores".

"Fuck you," says Vodka Girl 5 as Davina shrinks into the doorway, outnumbered. "I don't know where you got that stuff, but we need more of it. Or we're not going anywhere."

I knew this was coming. I sigh and toss a baggie onto the bed. The Vodka Girls pounce and tear open the bag, immediately snuffling up its contents like vulture pigs. I watch their bare asses wiggling symmetrically in the air.

Davina gives me a look.

"And people say I make this shit up," I say.

*(Editor's note – And for legal reasons, your features will continue to be classified as fiction.)*

"Shall we get a move on?" asks Davina.

"Good idea. We don't want to push our luck."

I clap my hands together dramatically, triggering zero attention. I'm instead forced to lure the Vodka Girls downstairs with the promises of more cocaine in half an hour, on the condition that everything goes according to plan.

This ensures a little extra effort when it comes to keeping quiet, some of them even removing their heels to descend the stairs.

"Space yourselves out," I instruct them. "Try to hide the sleepers from each other. And don't forget to synchronise your watches with the clock."

Vodka Girls 1 through 10 position themselves equidistantly amongst the dormant revellers, while Vodka Girl 11 unlocks the chillout room and Vodka Girl 12 guards the front door.

I sip from a bottle of water, a token rehydration in preparation for the impending second wave of alcohol abuse.

Davina takes her position at the decks.

"Ready when you are," she says. "Are you sure about your choice of song?"

"Absolutely," I reply.

There was only ever one contender. I need the perfect combination of nostalgic novelty and credible classic. Whatever your position on Bowie, this song is irresistible.

Davina raises her eyebrows in assent.

"Say the word," she says.

I carry out one last visual check of the room.

Everything is in its right place.

“Let’s do it.”

Davina drops the needle on the record.

Vinyl crackles.

Action.

It helps that *Let’s Dance* begins with that quadruple ascending vocal assault familiar to those acquainted with *Twist and Shout* or *White Lines*. It gives our sleepy audience ten seconds of shock in which to brace themselves for the melodic impact of the chorus.

“Rise, my little seedlings.”

One or two zombified guests jerk upright as if waking from a nightmare. Others either screw their eyes shut in denial of consciousness or clamber uncertainly to their feet, resembling primary school children emulating tree growth.

Say what you like about the Vodka Girls, but they know how to dance. The sight of their hypnotically gyrating buttocks is what greets most guests brave enough to open their eyes, which triggers a mixed response according to sexuality. Ultimately, however, the visual is distracting enough to combine with the volume of the music and the literal instruction of the title lyric to ensure that no guest takes more than a fleeting, bewildered glance at the clock.

Except for Austin Dunn.

Having climbed to his feet, he rubs his eyes and stares at the grandfather clock for a long time.

We make eye contact.

Austin winks at me, turning my water into wine.

Following an unsteady transition, the room is full of dancers. Those incapable of remaining vertical have been dragged to the chillout room. Those insistent on vomiting were gently led to the kitchen sink by a Vodka Girl. For most guests, however, access to the previously locked drinks cabinets and a replenished drug supply was encouragement enough to keep the party going.

Now they dance, lost in time.

Davina spins *You Can Never Go Back* by The Night Warriors. It takes me a moment to recognise the song, and this dawning realisation coincides with a moment of eye contact between myself and Laura Miller.

“Nice selection,” she says, as we drift towards each other. “You’ve got her well trained.”

“I take no credit for Davina’s impeccable taste,” I reply, meeting her rhythm. She’s admirably coherent for someone who doesn’t know day from night.

“I like your place,” says Laura, determined to flatter me. Maybe she suspects I’m an easy target for a free plug. Evidently, she’s correct.

“Strange choice of location, though,” she continues. “I would have expected something more, I don’t know, urban?”

“I inherited it,” I state coldly.

“It must be nice to have somewhere like this to retreat to after getting your fix of London craziness,” says Laura. “Are you still following the Primal Scream diet? Three months of hedonism followed by three months of detox?”

“Something like that,” I reply. “But I wouldn’t believe everything you read. Besides, the craziness has a way of following me home.”

“I can see that,” she says, casting her eyes across the diverse mix of mashed-up misfits that surround us, their movements dictated by particle motion or chaos theory or whatever chain reaction is triggered when one soul decides to dance and a universe reacts.

"I need ten minutes in the chillout room," says Laura. "If I smoke a joint here, I'll fall over. But I will return."

"I'll look forward to it," I reply, bowing to her, this forward movement of my head dislodging my shades and allowing her an unintentional moment of genuine eye contact.

I shiver. Laura smiles. I'm not entirely sure in which order.

The song fades.

We release our grip on each other's fingertips and send each other spiralling into the orbit of random strangers.

"You read my mind," says Austin Dunn. "I was just about to ask you to dance."

"You again," I reply. "Listen, I realise this trick is amateur by your standards, but I'm trusting you not to give the game away. It's a miracle no-one's ventured outside yet."

"Your secret's safe with me," says Austin. "But don't be so modest. It's an impressive trick. First attempt?"

"On this scale, yeah."

"Good work. You've mastered the basics of misdirection."

"Let's wait and see. I don't know how long I can maintain the illusion."

"You don't need to worry about that," says Austin.

"How do you know?"

"You saw my first special, right?" says Austin. "The Indian Rope Trick?"

"Of course."

The legend: Colonial era India. Snake charmers and sitars. A magician throws a rope into the air, which freezes, suspended and vertical. His boy assistant climbs the rope and either disappears into the clouds or falls to the ground, one mutilated limb at a time. The magician would then miraculously restore the assistant from a basket or bundle of rags.

Austin's televised rendition inevitably involved an attractive female assistant and a somewhat more contemporary soundtrack, but the principle remained the same.

"Did you know that my performance was the first verifiable occurrence of the trick?" asks Austin.

"It's centuries old, surely?"

"1890," says Austin. "A Chicago Tribune reporter faked a news story, citing eyewitnesses. They described a fakir and his assistant performing the trick, pretty much as you saw me do it."

"I'm sure the resemblance was uncanny," I reply. "Did they have leather mini-skirts in those days?"

"I see you're not averse to the hiring of glamorous assistants yourself," says Austin, raising an eyebrow in Davina's direction.

"Please continue."

"So we have the performance as described by the eyewitnesses, yet the accompanying photographs simply showed the fakir and his assistant, sitting cross-legged on the ground."

"What are you saying? Hypnosis?"

"Think about what you just said," says Austin. "I already told you that the news story was faked. And now you're drawing your own conclusions about how the trick was performed."

"Genius."

"Indeed. And so the legend grew. Whether you believed the performance was real, or merely suggested, no-one doubted the veracity of the story itself. The newspaper confessed the fabrication four months later, but it was too late. Others came forward, for decades after, claiming to have also witnessed the trick."

“Decades?”

“It became legendary. Marco Polo was rumoured to have seen the trick performed in the thirteenth century. There’s hundreds of other examples, presumably not all from the mouths of the dishonest or insane.”

“So what’s your explanation for this phenomenon?”

“You tell me,” says Austin. “But what I will tell you is this. In all witness accounts, there’s a proportional relationship between the time elapsed since the performance and the impressiveness of the account.”

“So they exaggerated it in their minds, over time?”

“For a magician,” says Austin, “it’s often the case that all you need to do is plant the seed. Memories are fed by legends. As a gonzo journalist, you should be familiar with this concept.”

“I always tell the truth,” I reply.

“As you see it?”

I can’t help grinning.

“Exactly.”

“Which is why you don’t need to worry about tonight,” says Austin. “Curiosity often drives people to seek out a magical secret, but they’re always disappointed when they find out how a trick was performed. People who experience magic don’t want to let go of that sensation. So they exaggerate, and each re-telling of the story adds some even more impossible element that validates their deception.”

“Spoken like a true gonzo journalist.”

“Exactly,” says Austin. “We both blend reality with unreality. Fact with fiction. All experiences are subjective, anyway. We’re just having fun with it.”

I find myself warming to Austin, which triggers an orchestra of alarm bells. This man’s powers of psychological manipulation are unrivalled.

“You’re suspicious of me,” says Austin. “Don’t worry, I’m not fucking with you. I just want you to relax and enjoy your own party. You’ve pulled it off. Even if I threw open the windows and let the sunlight stream in, people won’t willingly surrender their memories of this party.”

“I think there might be more of a chemical basis for people not being able to remember today.”

“Nonsense.” Austin pats me on the shoulder. “In three decades time they’ll still be telling their grandchildren about the night they travelled back in time.”

“Thanks for the reassurance.”

“Any time,” says Austin. “I’m sure you’ll return the favour at some point.”

My symphony of alarm bells reach their peak, coinciding with the opening beats of Primal Scream’s *Miss Lucifer*.

This is what is known as foreshadowing.

“Why is your assistant waving at me?” asks Austin.

I turn and spy Davina gesturing wildly in our direction from behind the decks.

“I think she wants you to swap places with her while she has a dance.”

“On your own head be it,” says Austin, as Davina approaches. “I take no responsibility for any musical atrocities inflicted upon you.”

“You just need to man the decks,” says Davina. “I left an extended mix on.”

I can’t help become aroused by the flippant manner with which Davina handles one of the most impressive men in the country.

"I'd best do as I'm told," says Austin. "I assume our discussion will form part of your next feature?"

"Unless you've any objections?"

"Not at all. I trust you to tell the truth."

"As I see it?"

Austin looks into my eyes like my sunglasses are the lens of camera.

"As you see it," he says, grinning. "Write what you like. We're on the same page."

Austin disappears.

"Right," says Davina, settling into a loose rhythm and motioning for me to join her. "Let's dance."

*(Editor's note – Austin called, requesting a meeting. I explained your policy on meetings, but somehow he convinced me to give him your details. Expect a call. Just don't sign anything – your legal bills are high enough as it is.)*

Davina and I both know how to dance. But more importantly, we know how to dance with each other.

While she enjoys playing up to the role of the long-suffering assistant, and while I'm more than capable of genuinely annoying her with seemingly arbitrary assignments and randomly anti-social hours, the fact remains that I am as capable of teasing her to bursting point as she is of doing the same to me.

Which is why it's written into her contract that she's fired the second she lays a sexual finger on me.

If I make the first move, I have to double her pay.

It's not so much a Will-They-Won't-They relationship as a They'd-Better-Fucking-Not one.

Friction is important. To fuck would be nothing short of a supernova, ending our partnership instantly. And we still have much work to do.

And so we dance.

She moves her body close to mine. I caress the air around her hips.

We never touch.

Her green eye matches her dress. Her brown eye matches her hair.

The track peaks.

She smiles.

"We should leave," says Davina.

She's right.

The secret is knowing when to stop.

We've started the ball rolling. The party will continue without us. I don't wish to stay long enough to witness its decline.

"Let's go to my place," says Davina. "I'll make us Sunday roast."

Irresistible.

We let ourselves into the porch. I smoke a little of Vodka Girl 12's joint while Davina swaps her heels for sneakers.

I unlock the front door and stand on the threshold. Women push prams across my field of vision. Men mow lawns and walk dogs.

Our work here is done.

Davina puts her shades on as we step outside. Vodka Girl 12 closes the door behind us.

We take a final look at my house, still pulsating with music, and walk on into the Sunday afternoon sun.

11<sup>th</sup> April 2008 - Rave

## Maria

"Maybe it's something to do with the nature of *consciousness*", says Katie, infusing this word with sarcastic grandiloquence.

To Katie, possessing a vocabulary including words of more than two syllables is a sign of pretentiousness. However, some of us aren't willing to sacrifice our love of language to the Myspace-addled textspeak she spouts in place of sentences. These days, she's more likely to state the phrase "LOL" than to actually laugh out loud, but I'm the one in the minority, not her.

I make a feeble grab for Austin's letter, but Katie, whilst not fat, is bigger than me and easily able to hold me at arm's length while continuing to read from the letter in her other hand.

*"...but I can't help wanting to get into your head. Ha! Get into your pants, more like. I want to know what it's like to be you..."*

Thankfully Katie has the attention span of a goldfish watching Youtube and is distracted by Gary walking past the off-license before any more of Austin's innermost feelings are made the subject of public mockery. She bounces over to him and stops him in his tracks, allowing me to reclaim my letter from the bench.

"What?" asks Gary, with a suspicious grin. He's a bit of a chav, but the cheeky rather than sociopathic variety.

"Get us some fags," says Katie.

Gary scratches the back of his neck.

"What's in it for me?"

"A fag."

"Two."

"Fine."

Katie gives Gary three quid and he disappears inside.

Jessica arrives.

"What's up, bitches?"

I roll my eyes. Every day I wake up and wonder what poetic beauty the day has in store for me, and every day my two best friends conspire to reduce my life to a god-awful high school sitcom, without the mercy of it being edited down to an endurable twenty-two minutes.

Yet due to the constant references to celebrity gossip, brand name products and tales of sexual dysfunction that comprise what passes for conversation at our school, it still feels like every half hour contains eight minutes of commercials.

"Maria got a love letter," sings Katie.

"Fuck off," I reply.

"Let's read it," says Jessica.

"No way."

"Go on. I won't take the piss."

"Nope. I'm putting it away now." I fold the letter and pointedly place it in my back pocket. "And I'm not reading it until later."

Their twin pouts are cut short by the jangle of the off-license door as Gary emerges. He puts one cigarette in his mouth and another behind his ear before handing Katie the rest of the pack.

"Change?" asks Katie.

Gary rummages in his pocket and removes his middle finger, which he shows to Katie, and a lighter.

"You guys hear about the rave?" he asks, lighting his fag and handing the lighter to Katie.

"What rave?" asks Jessica.

"The beach, tonight," says Gary. "Spread the word."

"There's going to be a rave on Frinton seafront?"

"If all goes to plan."

Usually my vocal cynic would kick in about now, but it would be dishonest to deny that there is something in the air today. A sense of potential that transcends the usual Friday feeling and makes room for magic. Whilst it's implausible that a seafront rave in Frinton-on-sea could last for more than half an hour before the high decibel Psytrance disturbed even the deafest elderly resident, prompting a police visit, it's not inconceivable that someone might be dumb enough to try. Which could be entertaining in itself.

"What kind of music?" asks Katie.

"A bit of everything, unless the drum and bass twats take over, which they probably will," says Gary. "Still, it's got to be done."

We stand in silence for a while. Teenagers standing in front of an off-license, smoking cigarettes and talking about rave music.

Gary stubs out his fag, gives Jessica a cheeky leer and moves on.

"I'm going home," I tell the girls. "Let me know if anything happens."

"Give my love to Austin", giggles Katie. Jessica high-fives her.

I grin, give them a middle finger each and head home. I can't wait to read the letter, but I want to take a bath, put some Nina Simone on and really savour it.

I dump my bag on the sofa and head for the fridge.

My dad is drinking alone at the kitchen table.

"Your mother's gone," he says.

Fury clogs my throat, like I'm choking on syrup.

"What happened?" I splutter. "Did you fucking hit her again?"

My dad rises from his chair.

A fist-shaped train collides with my skull and everything disappears.

Consciousness returns to me, bringing with it a dull agony between my legs. The echo of a vicious kick.

Shattered glass surrounds me but there is no blood. My dad is nowhere to be seen.

I haven't moved by the time he returns. He sheepishly retrieves his bottle of vodka from the table and makes a kind of sitcom face, as if to say "I'd forget my own head if it wasn't screwed on".

He leaves again.

I crawl upstairs to bed.

A pebble taps my window. I ignore it.

My phone rings. I answer it, to stop the ringing.

"Hey," says Austin, inanely.

I say nothing.

"Hey? You there?"

I sigh.

"What?"

"Are you coming to the rave?"

"There isn't going to be any fucking rave, Austin."

"Yeah, there is," he says. "I just heard. It's going ahead."

"On Frinton seafront?"

"Yeah."

"So there's going to be, what? Lots of speakers and people and loud music?"

"Yes," says Austin. "That's what a rave is, last time I checked."

"You're a fucking idiot."

"Nice," says Austin. "Did you just get your period or something?"

"Do you want me to kill you?" I reply. "I mean literally, to actually end your life?"

"Fine. I'll talk to you later."

"No, don't talk to me later. Don't write me any more letters either, you creepy fucking perv. Just stay the fuck out of my life."

"Fine. I'll wait until you're done menstruating."

I hang up.

It's tempting to lean out of my window to shout and throw things at him, but it's possible I've got a black eye.

Another pebble taps my window. I ignore it.

Years later, I do a kind of John Wayne stagger to the dresser and check my reflection.

My body looks good in the moonlight. I'm in my underwear now.

I do have a black eye.

I cover it with sunglasses, put a cigarette in my mouth and set the playlist on my laptop to random.

I watch myself light the cigarette as that song by The Gossip kicks in and all of a sudden I'm in an episode of fucking *Skins*.

I skip through the mp3s, rejecting Goldfrapp, Nada Surf and Leonard Cohen until I reach *Bells Ring* by Mazzy Star, my favourite band.

Deep beneath the surface of the Earth, tectonic plates grind against each other.

I know what you're thinking, if you know your music history. Either my musical taste is precociously eclectic for a fifteen year-old, or it's simply unrealistic that in 2008, a girl my age would be so into Mazzy Star, a band who last performed live in 2000 and whose final album, *Among My Swan*, was released in 1996.

I know I'm an anachronism. Blame the internet.

Speaking of which, don't think I don't realise that nonchalant references to Myspace and Youtube are no replacement for convincing characterisation or dialogue. This is honestly how my friends talk.

It'd be nice to punctuate this stream-of-consciousness soliloquy with the sound of police sirens and distant rave music, but I'd be lying. There isn't going to be a rave. We both know that.

Nor am I trying to distract you from the real and serious issue of parental abuse unfolding. I realise that a certain emotional impact follows an offhand implication that my Dad kicked me in my vagina, and I don't mean to treat the subject flippantly. No doubt I have an epic psychological journey ahead of me, full of sympathetic counsellors, friends making me laugh when I'm trying to cry, and upsetting montages of self-abuse fading to long shots of me standing on the promenade looking meaningfully out to sea, before I do a little dance to The Pigeon Detectives and the credits roll and everyone gets closure except me who has to continue to inhabit this unbearably clichéd teenage tragedy.

Or, if something more heartfelt is what floats your goat, we've already established that I'm in my underwear, so why not simply zoom out slowly from my bed while another Mazzy Star

song plays, *Fade Into You* this time, because that's the only one any of you cunts are familiar with, though admittedly it does coincide nicely with the visual effect, and you can project your romantic ideals onto my sad smile while you imagine fucking the love back into me (once I've turned sixteen, of course, otherwise the whole thing could be considered rather unsavoury) and my bruised pussy being soothed by your tender touch before we live happily ever after in a big house with an uppity butler and a monkey sidekick and a wacky next-door neighbour who's a registered sex offender who is *always* committing hilarious social faux pas (that is the correct use of the plural, I had to check on Wikipedia (I know, another topical internet reference. Don't worry, I'll get Facebook in there somewhere too), during which I also discovered that my use of the word social was actually redundant, but removing it seemed to disrupt the flow of the sentence, which I'm still oddly reluctant to do despite the fact that that (this repetition is also grammatically correct, though surely there has to be a more pleasing way to phrase it?) particular ship has clearly sailed.

Close brackets.

My Dad beat me up today.

I'd like it if you believed me, but I must ask that you don't delude yourself that you care. You don't care. I don't mean that in a snarky teenage way where you're supposed to put your hands firmly, almost (but not quite) aggressively on my cheeks, look deeply into my pretty sad eyes and tell me that you *do* care. It's a simple statement of fact. You think you care about me because I'm physically beautiful (I know the only reference I made to this was "My body looks good in the moonlight", and although this stretched my credibility a little (Is any fifteen year-old girl so hot that she can even see it herself? Clearly not, yet how else could I have established that I do happen to be pretty good looking, even though I can't see it myself?), it was enough for you to capitalise on and build me up into a pretty pretty princess (Christ, now I even sound like that stupid fucking anorexic from *Skins*) waiting for a knight in shining armour with a big throbbing cock for a sword, ready to rescue me from my abusive father and carry me on the back of your horse to the conclusion of my narrative arc, at which point I cease to exist.

Except I wouldn't.

There are ugly girls starving. Go save them if you're such a fucking humanitarian. Until then, pardon me if I take your concern not with a pinch of salt, but the amount you'd get in one of those big containers at the side of the road they use to melt the ice in winter. Is that salt or is it grit? I don't care, it's an amusing analogy and it's staying in.

Don't ask about my mother. She's "gone". Presumably that's all we need to know.

My Dad beat me up today.

Know that to be true, but please remind yourself that you don't care.

I'm going to end this thing now. Sincerely, please don't give me another thought.

Fuck you. I know you're still watching me, you evil fucking voyeuristic cunts.

The only reason I'm writing like this is because there aren't the words to emphasise the pain I'm feeling, and other than "evil" and "cunt", I can't think of any words that have any impact at all. Apart from "scum", but I've used that one up now too.

Please help me.

Please understand why I have already rejected your empathy in advance and don't let it stop you from loving me in the way that all humans are supposed to love each other, even if we frequently fuck it up.

I love my Dad and I love my Mum and I probably love Austin and his stupid fucking magic tricks too. I want to rewrite this situation into something different, something less unbearably painful, but all I can do is play with the form. I can't change the content.

I wake up. Surely even by my standards of cliché, my brain isn't retarded enough to inflict a dream sequence upon me?

I take that back. If I was dreaming, then maybe...

A vaginal throb kills that idea. *Fade Into You* is still playing, though the vocals have yet to appear, meaning I can't have lost consciousness for more than twenty seconds.

Please don't take any of this to heart. Believe me, I like that you think I am pretty and it's sweet that you would like me to be in less pain. I'm just lashing out, to protect you from the fact that there really isn't anything you can do.

Go listen to *Fade Into You* and think of my sad pretty face if that's what helps you cultivate empathy, but please try not to get too hung up on me as an individual. There are many girls out there more beautiful and tragic than I, probably in American small towns with the advantage of a fetish for English accents. Don't love me just because I'm local. That devalues both of us.

You're still here? Right, I give in.

Moonlight caresses my toned stomach as I reach out for the letter protruding from my trouser pocket.

*From the desk of Austin Dunn.*

*My dear Maria,*

*Do pray tell you'll forgive me the cliché of writing you this love letter, and also the attempts of a fifteen year-old Essex boy to correspond in the style of some kind of Victoria squire. I'll stop now.*

*I would like to tell you that I have been thinking about you constantly, but it would be an untruth. Wednesday last, I found myself briefly distracted by a particularly amusing episode of South Park, but rest assured upon its end I immediately resumed my yearning for you.*

*Maybe it's something to do with the nature of consciousness, but I can't help wanting to get into your head. I want to know what it's like to be you. I want to inhabit your brain and caress your body from inside your mind.*

*I can't believe how creepy that sounded, but I'm using a posh fountain pen and I'm nearly at the end of the page, so I'm going to resist the obsessive need to edit and rewrite and hope that you'll let that one slide.*

*I guess I'm trying to say that I do have strong feelings for you but I'm not one of those guys who just wants to possess you or show you off on my arm. I care about you. And it's not just because you're physically divine – I know you don't see yourself this way, but trust me on that one – I really feel like I want to get as close as possible to you and do whatever I can to make you experience joy.*

*On the one hand it feels like I've known you forever, but on the other it seems like I don't really know what's going on with you apart from the usual school bullshit, and I know there's so much more to you than that. I want to be part of your life. I'm not*

*quite sure what I have to offer a goddess such as yourself, but I promise not to let my lack of confidence prohibit me from finding whatever beauty is within me and sharing it with you. It's bound to be entertaining, if nothing else.*

*Anyway, no pressure or anything. But if you feel inclined to spend some time with me outside school, I would be infinitely receptive to that.*

*Righty-ho, Miss Davis. I think I've embarrassed myself enough. I hope you're good, and that you'll finally get round to listening to my mix CD soon – I know you'll love Mazzy Star.*

*Stay beautiful,*

*Austin xxx*

*PS. Did you download that documentary about Frinton I told you about? Where were the people under 65?! We should make our own one, show people what it's really like living here!*

My playlist has conveniently ended and as the echo of Hope Sandoval's angelic vocals fade, I convince myself that I heard a brief snatch of distant drum and bass.

Now, there is only silence. And also, I admit, confusion.

I'll make a deal with you. You try not to get too attached to me, and I'll keep an open mind about whether or not you do actually care. That's the best I can offer for now.

Besides, you must be bored of me by now and need a break. I know I do.

I think I might actually be able to sleep now. Small mercies etc.

I'll speak to you soon.

## 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2008 - Retraction

Message from Maria Davis to users of the *Let's Dance* Facebook group:

Hi. I'm very sorry to bother you and clog up your inbox. Feel free to ignore this message if you have not read Chapter 2 of Alan's "novel" *Let's Dance*.

If you did read it, then I need to make it clear that the things that were written about me were not true.

First of all, I never knew my Dad.

On 11th April 2007, I had a traumatic experience, the nature of which I do not wish to publicly discuss.

In February 2008, my boyfriend Austin introduced me to Alan Driscoll at a party. Austin is a magician who Alan had got in touch with while researching a storyline about a teenage magician. This resulted in Alan writing Austin into his novel as a character.

Alan and I got talking about our respective writing projects, and the problems we were having with them. I needed to express the emotions resulting from my bad experience, but couldn't bring myself to write about them explicitly. Meanwhile, Alan was trying to figure out how to write autobiographically while respecting the privacy of the people he knew.

As you may know, the first chapter of Alan's book was an exaggerated version of a real event, written in collaboration with an anonymous gonzo journalist, and featuring a cameo by a future version of Austin. This led to the genius idea that Alan would write me into his novel as a character as well, and we would come up with an "equivalent" traumatic event that she would experience, and ultimately recover from.

I collaborated with Alan on the chapter, and we settled on the abusive father storyline as it would enable us to use my real name while being an obviously fictional tale to people that knew me in real life. A couple of my friends also wanted to be in it, and Austin let us include an edited version of one of his letters.

So when Alan sent the chapter out, my friends all printed it and liked it, although I don't think they got some of the stream-of-consciousness stuff. And eventually, news of our creativity reached my English teacher.

This wasn't good. Concerned for my psychological well-being, she contacted my Mum, who completely freaked out. She couldn't understand why I'd written such horrible things, and I couldn't see what the big deal was.

Then she showed me the letter.

Just days previously, my Dad had got in touch for the first time in sixteen years, asking to see me. My Mum had been agonising over whether or not to tell me.

To cut a long story short, last week I met my Dad for my first time since I was a baby, and we got on really well. So you'll understand why it's worrying to have an apparently true story out there that describes him as an abusive alcoholic. So please understand that it was complete fiction. Something bad did happen to me last year, but it was nothing to do with my Dad, and I don't want anything to risk my chance of a relationship with him.

I was worried Alan would hate me for fucking up his story, but he seems to think he's figured out a way to keep me involved without any danger of reality and fiction crossing over. So this message will form Chapter 3 of Let's Dance, and my character will return.

Some of what she tells you will be true, and some of it won't be. You won't know which is which, so please make no assumptions about my real life based on what you read.

Anyway, the stuff about my Dad wasn't true – that's all you really need to know. I'll be in touch soon, but only within the pages of the book – I shouldn't have to bother you personally again.

Cheers,

Maria xx

## 30<sup>th</sup> May 2008 - Garden Party

### Benny

Being in love is amazing.

I blot out the sound of drinks being poured and playlists being prepared, and focus solely on the image of Vanessa, sitting across the picnic table from me.

She is beautiful and happy, and it's hard to believe that we made it this far.

Austin and Maria sit down beside me, placing the digital camcorder on the table. I ignore them, choosing instead to stare into the infinite beauty of Vanessa's eyes.

Austin hits the record button. Vanessa disappears.

"Sorry to jolt you from your reverie," says Austin. "But the chapter starts here. For the purposes of getting it on record, perhaps you should tell me why the camera is here."

I sigh.

"In another hugely pretentious attempt to create fiction that is as real as possible, and to figure out how to salvage our storyline from the complications of the last couple of chapters, we will be recording everything that happens tonight and using it as the basis for chapter four."

"And am I right in thinking that you will be transcribing dialogue directly from the recording, without alteration?"

"That's right, Austin. I might have to edit out the odd personal detail, as usual, but I won't add anything that we didn't actually say."

Rez joins us, Jessica and Katie hanging off each arm. They sit opposite us as Rez cracks open a bottle of vodka.

"Is Davina not joining us tonight?" I ask him.

"No," says Rez. "She thought there'd be too many characters to keep track of."

"So," asks Maria. "Have you figured out what you're going to do with me yet?"

"I don't know," I reply. "Maybe this is too self-indulgent. Writing us all in as characters."

"Self-indulgence is your moral responsibility," says Rez.

"How so?"

"It leads to honesty, which leads to truth. People are too self-conscious of their own truth. Self-consciousness is the greatest enemy of self-awareness."

"I'm all in favour of self-awareness," I reply. "But my truth involves the private lives of other people. How can I communicate it without compromising?"

"All communication is compromise. But until we evolve telepathic unity, it's a necessary one."

"So what should I do? The storyline is already fucked." I raise a hand to dismiss Maria's impending apology. "We're one step further away from the truth."

"Just keep telling the story as it unfolds," says Rez. "The emotional truth can withstand necessary misdirection."

Katie strokes her chin and makes a sarcastic professor face.

"I concur," she says.

Rez places a baseball cap on her head and pulls the peak down, covering her eyes. Katie mimes blind confusion.

"Beware of self-consciousness," says Rez, rolling up a copy of the NME. "And if anyone accuses you of pretentiousness, take this and strike them firmly across the nose."

He bops Katie on the head.

"Besides," says Rez, indicating the camera. "You've taken steps to ensure your dialogue is accurate, at least. Therein lies the heart of the story. The rest is just decoration."

"So what is your book actually about?" asks Jessica.

Rez cocks his head and grins at me.

"You're asking the wrong person," I reply.

"I thought it was about parties," says Katie.

"My first book was. Every chapter was set at a different party, and the characters were based on people I knew. This was supposed to be a sequel, but now half the people I wrote about aren't talking to me any more, and I broke up with Vanessa, so there's no way to keep the storylines consistent."

"Forgive me," says Rez. "But wasn't your novel a mix of teenage autobiography and futuristic fantasy? What were you hoping, for your life to play out as you'd written it?"

"I was hoping to keep things in synch for another decade or so, yeah."

"That's the beauty of serial fiction. You can't go back and change what you've written, especially if you've tried to predict a future that we know didn't happen."

"How does that help me communicate the truth?"

"All fiction is a lie," says Rez. "From the moment we turn the first page of a novel, we're asked to suspend our disbelief. The form itself is a contradiction, especially with a first-person narrative. How are we expected to believe that this person's innermost thoughts were miraculously captured on paper, without an apparent awareness of that fact?"

"I'm with you, but still. If the form is flawed, how do we express truth through fiction? Even fiction based on fact. Am I supposed to publish our private lives in explicit detail?"

"Even if you did, there's still no guarantee that it'd be accurate," says Rez. "It's all open to subjective interpretation. You can never tell the whole truth."

"So what should I do?"

"Exactly what you are doing. You're acknowledging that this is a book, and you're admitting that it's impossible to describe things exactly as they happened. But you're also explaining that you're attempting to tell as much of the truth as possible. Which is a hell of a lot more convincing than pretending that these words magically floated out of your head and landed on the page without passing through that filter."

"Sorry to bore you with all this shit," I tell Maria. "I feel like I've already involved you enough."

"Hush," says Maria. "I'm glad to be part of it. Besides." She nods at the camera. "I'm in character."

Austin kisses her on the cheek and wanders inside.

"The readers know that Maria is a real person now," says Rez, "but they also know that privacy considerations prevent you from telling her full story. So whatever it is that you two need to express, just tell as much of it as you can. If the emotional heart of the story is true, no one will hold it against you if you lie about the details."

"See," says Maria. "Relax. Just be as honest as possible, and either use your imagination to fill in the gaps, or leave that to the readers."

"Spoken like a true gonzo," says Rez, topping up Maria's shot glass.

"I was checking out some of your stuff online," says Maria. "I really liked your article about 1980s cocaine culture."

"I didn't write that," says Rez.

"It was credited to Rez Dillon."

"Rez Dillon is a multiple use name. Like Monty Cantsin, or Captain Swing."

Austin returns with a tray containing several glasses of absinthe.

"Have you got him started on Captain Swing again?" asks Austin.

"Who's Captain Swing?" asks Maria.

"In 1830," says Rez, helping himself to a glass of absinthe and lighting a cigarette, "a group of English agricultural workers rioted to protest the usage of farming machinery that threatened their livelihoods. Threatening letters were sent to farmers and magistrates, all signed by Captain Swing."

"Who was he?"

"He's never been identified. Most likely he was a fictional figurehead. Anyone could write a Captain Swing letter. It caught on as a meme."

"There's a character in one of the Discworld novels called Captain Swing," says Jessica.

"Yeah, William Gibson used the name too. So have lots of bands."

"So there are lots of different people writing under the name Rez Dillon?" asks Maria.

"Fewer than there were. But I'm doing what I can to keep it alive."

"So what's your real name?" I ask Rez.

"I could ask you the same question, Benny."

"My name's on the front of the book. It's not a difficult code to crack."

"Could be a double bluff," says Austin. "Are you disguising fiction as reality, or reality as fiction?"

I sip absinthe.

"Perhaps more importantly," says Rez. "Is this a comedy or a tragedy?"

"There's no such thing as tragedy", I reply. "That's my theory, anyway."

"An intriguing one. Go on."

"I'm doing some research into the science of comedy. What makes something funny. I have a very strong hunch that there's a link between the reason we laugh, and the meaning of life."

"I wouldn't be surprised if you were right," says Rez. "But it's going to be a difficult one to prove."

"I know. My research so far supports my theory, but I've yet to explain away the concept of the sadistic laugh. I need to understand the structure of a joke first."

Rez bops Katie on the head again with the rolled-up NME. Jessica laughs.

"You should be able to figure that out, Austin," says Rez.

"Why me?"

"You're a magician. You understand about misdirection, tension and release. A perceived threat followed by the ironic diffusion of that threat. Comedy and magic are similar in terms of mechanics, but they aim for different emotions. The magician cultivates joy, that childlike belief in the impossible."

"And the comedian?"

"Relief," says Rez, glancing at Maria. "That sense of, 'I thought things were fucked up, but now I realise they're not'."

"What if things really are fucked up?" asks Maria. "What do you laugh at, then?"

"Nothing stays fucked up," says Rez. "Give it time. The bigger the tension, the greater the release."

Maria opens her mouth, but seems to remember the camera and falls silent again.

"Speak your mind," says Rez.

"It's just, I want us to tell my story properly," says Maria, turning to me. "What actually happened. I know we have privacy to respect, but I'm entitled to talk about my experiences."

"Just the past, or do you want me to keep writing about your life now?"

"Keep writing about me if it's interesting. But I do want to process what happened with fiction. Set it two hundred years in the future for all I care. I'm sure we can figure out a way."

“You're under no obligation to answer me,” says Rez. “But what did actually happen to you?”

Maria's face hardens, and a Mexican wave of tension flickers through Jessica, Austin and Katie.

[dialogue removed]

After a long period of silence, Rez leans back in his chair and removes a joint from behind his ear. He lights it, hands it to Maria, and places his hand on her shoulder.

“I'm not going to say anything to that,” he says. “I know I cultivate a persona of having an answer to everything, but I simply don't have an adequate response.”

“It's fine,” says Maria.

“No,” says Rez. “It is not.”

Jessica bursts into tears.

Maria hugs her.

Austin looks at me helplessly, like he's out of magic tricks.

“Yo yo yo yo yo.”

The six of us glance in the direction of this buoyant greeting. Gary leaps over the garden wall and punches the air, thrusting blue and green glowsticks towards the sky.

Katie runs over and hugs Gary. Jessica sucks in her sniffles.

“I thought this was supposed to be a party,” says Gary. “You all look like right miserable fuckers.”

“We were missing you,” says Maria. “We're fine now.”

“Sweet,” says Gary, accepting the joint from Maria. “Who's the old dude?”

“This is Rez,” says Maria. “Rez, Gary.”

“Like the Underworld track?” asks Gary.

“That's the one.”

“Hang on,” I say to Rez. “You told me that the name Rez Dillon was taken from an Underworld song and a phonetic tribute to Bob Dylan. Something about the worlds of dance and folk music colliding? Yet how can it be, if it's a multiple use name in operation since the '80s?”

“Maybe Underworld named the song after me,” says Rez.

“Right, and Elvis used to cover Pet Shop Boys songs.”

“Exactly.”

“What the fuck are you guys talking about?” asks Gary.

“We're talking about you being gay,” says Katie.

“Really?” says Gary. “You want me to kick your ass this early in the night?”

“You couldn't,” says Katie. “Because you're gay.”

Gary sighs, rolls up his tracksuit sleeves, and pounces on Katie, digging his fingers into her ribs.

“Get off!” splutters Katie.

“I'm sorry? I can't hear you when you're laughing so much.”

“I said get off me, bender.”

“Did you hear what she said?” Gary asks me, drumming on Katie's cap with the glowsticks. “It sounded very much like 'Please keep tickling me'.”

“It did sound like that.”

“No! Benny! Tell him!”

Gary and Jessica wrestle on the ground, a flailing mess of limbs and luminescence.

“Get a room,” says Maria, pouring another glass of absinthe.

"Ow, careful," says Gary. "You broke my glowstick."

They clamber to their feet, revealing a luminous blue stain on the patio.

"You broke it," says Katie.

"You broke it with your fat arse," says Gary.

"Benny, tell them I'm not fat!" says Katie. "You made it sound like I was fat in Maria's chapter."

"I'm trying to avoid physical descriptions and let the dialogue establish our characters," I reply. "Besides, people keep accusing me of objectifying women."

"I don't care if you objectify me, just write that I'm gorgeous."

"But write that I'm more gorgeous," says Jessica.

As this conversation unfolds, I find myself distracted by the twin divinity of Jessica and Katie's teenage perfection. I don't think I could sleep with anyone under the age of eighteen, but if anyone was capable of tempting me, it would be these two goddesses. Katie's baseball cap is holding her fringe in place over one eye, her mysterious pout daring me to admire her curves-

"And don't use the word 'curvy' when describing me," says Katie.

-her mysterious pout daring me to admire her figure, averting my eyes only succeeding in confronting myself with Jessica's subtler yet more delicate beauty.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," says Jessica.

I nod at the camera.

"Taken care of."

Gary sits down at the table and begins fiddling with the green glowstick.

"I wonder what's inside this," he says.

He snaps the glowstick in half. Green goo drips onto the table.

"You let the magic out," says Austin.

"Check it out," says Gary, dipping his fingers in the goo and smearing it across his cheeks. "War paint."

Gary grins at me, his face glowing. Rez rummages for cigarettes.

"Awesome," says Maria. "I'm going to dye my eyebrows."

She dips her fingers in the goo and begins applying it to her eyebrows, gurning with concentration.

"Who are you trying to be?" asks Jessica. "Piggy Stardust?"

A lightning bolt of sound pierces my brain and I pass out.

"IT'S IN MY EYES. IT'S IN MY FUCKING EYES. POUR WATER. POUR WATER."

Panic erupts. Gary and Katie scream and swear. Rez checks the assorted bottles for water and finds only alcohol. Austin sprints to the kitchen.

"GET IT OUT. IT'S FUCKING BURNING."

Rez grabs Maria and lays her sideways on the table.

"Look at me, honey," he says. "Gary, turn the camera off, mate."

"LEAVE IT ON."

Gary freezes. Austin returns with a pint glass of water then runs back for another.

"Look at me," says Rez. "It'll be over in no time."

He pours the water across her face. Maria splutters and thrashes.

"I'M FUCKING BLIND."

Austin returns and watches dumbly as Rez pours the second glass.

"Fuck, mate. I'm not getting it all, I think you should call an ambulance."

Austin rushes inside.

Katie and Jessica return with more water. Rez pours another two glasses, Maria now crying but no longer resisting.

"Crying is good," says Rez, cradling her head. "Cry as much as you can, it'll help get it out. Jessica, can you get me a wet towel or a flannel or something?"

Jessica departs.

Austin bursts through the back door and trips over the step, landing on his elbows.

"FUCK." He leaps to his feet. "The ambulance is on its way. They said just keep applying as much water as possible. Maria, it's going to be OK, I promise."

Maria whimpers in Rez's arms. Jessica returns with a flannel which Rez applies to Maria's face.

"It'll soon be over, honey," he says. "Soon be over. Is Benny alright?"

"He faints sometimes," says Austin. "We'd better get him inside."

Austin and Gary carry me off-screen.

Minutes pass. Jessica and Katie stand frozen in shock. Rez does what he can to soothe Maria, who keeps murmuring the word "blind".

"Could you guys clear some space?" asks Rez. "And take the camera inside."

Katie opens the gate and kicks patio furniture out of the way. Jessica carries the camera inside as distant sirens become audible. She puts it on a table, pointing at me.

I am lying unconscious on the sofa, oblivious to the loudening sirens and muffled activity taking place outside the patio doors. At some point the sirens restart and fade, and I open my eyes.

Rez is sitting in my field of vision.

"She's going to be OK," she says. "Hopefully, there'll be no damage to her sight."

I lean up on my elbow then collapse again.

"Where is everyone?"

"Austin and Jessica went with Maria to the hospital. Katie's a bit freaked out. Gary's looking after her. How about you? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"What? No, I just passed out. Fuck, I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing to apologise for. We had the situation under control."

"But this whole thing. It's my fault. I created it."

"Don't get me started on causal responsibility," says Rez. "Technically yes, you invited her, and had you not have done, it wouldn't have happened. But maybe if she hadn't been here, she would have been hit by a car somewhere. It was an accident."

"I'm just trying to help her move on from things, and somehow it keeps attracting more drama."

"You're not responsible," says Rez. "You can reflect reality by writing about it, but you can't control it."

"Writing affects people. It can change things."

"Yes, but it's not the only force that can change things, and it's not always the most dominant. The laws of physics can be brutal."

"Fuck, what if she's been blinded?"

"I don't know," says Rez. "Let's just hope that she hasn't."

"This is not how the chapter was supposed to end."

"Well," says Rez, glancing at the camera. "Shit happens. Looks like your battery's about to die."

The last thing I see is my own weary face staring into the lens as the red light clicks off.

## 11<sup>th</sup> April 2207 - The Flood

### Maria

Sann stands naked on the roof of the flyer, tiptoes extending her vital centimetres towards the lightning sparkling beyond the Shield. Flashing lights have yet to impress me, but I can understand the natural, primal appeal of an electrical storm. Sann grins at me, and I can tell from her wavering eye contact that she is horny.

"I've always wanted to fuck in a thunderstorm," she says.

"I'm sure someone is fucking you as we speak," I retort, a bitchy callback to our earlier row.

"We do the same job, Maria," says Sann, this statement weary with its hundredth repetition.

We do not do the same job.

Yes, I fuck myself on cam with generic dildos, allowing sexually unappealing men to headset my image while fucking their equally generic sex dolls.

Equally, if a guy saw me publicly eating a banana, he'd be able to visualise me sucking him off. You can't control this misappropriation of your image, but you can charge for it.

Sann is different.

Sann has a cult following. Guys send her casts of their cocks that record her internal contours and each interaction of her vaginal muscles with their phantom phalluses.

She's giving too much of herself away, the betrayal softened by her obliviousness to her unfaithfulness.

I want her to myself.

I want her off the meds. Her feelings for me fade when she doesn't feel much of anything.

But I know the love is in there somewhere.

Later, we glide through the mall, window shopping. Sann offers to buy me anything I want for my birthday.

"You know what I want," I tell her.

"I'm working on it," she replies, her eyes instantly welling with desperate tears. "Bear with me."

I feel guilty every time I notice that Sann is never more beautiful than when she is sad. This thought loops back to my own self-consciousness and irritation that I'll have turned thirteen by the time I get rid of this fucking eye patch. Surrounded as we are by intricate ice sculptures of mediaeval weaponry and racks of clothing composed entirely of light, this metallic scrap of satin strapped across my face seems stupidly anachronistic, and only serves to amplify my lower physical status to Sann.

By the time we reach the outskirts of the mall I'm beginning to tire of the constant parade of dicks twitching in Sann's direction and contemplate heading home to put some clothes on, hoping that she'll take the hint and join me.

"Fuck this," says Sann, before I can suggest anything. "I need to dance."

"Really? It's been ages since you've wanted to dance with me."

"I know. I'm sorry I've been so distant. Let me make it up to you. Meet me at Zero Gs?"

Truth be told, the last thing I want is to hang out at that retro dive, but right now I'll take any opportunity to bond physically with my lover.

"Sure thing. How long will you be?"

“An hour, max. You go on ahead. I’m gonna head back inside, there’s something I want to pick up.”

I watch Sann glide back into the mall. Before turning a corner, she turns and blows an air kiss to me.

“I love you,” she calls. “Goodbye, Maria.”

I shudder at the finality of this greeting, shaking off the sensation as I grab a cape from a paypod and head outside. I don’t mind being nude in public when I’m with Sann, but even with my shield activated, I need something covering me when I’m alone. I feel too vulnerable without her.

I can’t suppress a nostalgic smile as the greying sphere of the Zero G dome appears on my horizon and happy memories of my youth return to me. I feel silly and childlike as I pass through the entrance, surprised at my conditioned excitement, eagerly removing the cape and my piercings as I pay the C40 fee and pass through the metal detector.

That same old orchestral track greets me as I enter the arena. It must be five hundred years old but always sounds new to me. I’m reminded to pause for a second on the diving board to savour the impending sensation of weightlessness.

That same faded sign on the wall:

NO METAL  
NO FLUIDS  
NO INTERCOURSE  
VIOLATION = INSTANT C500 FINE

The sphere is sparsely populated tonight. A few dozen kids float listlessly about, occasionally rotating on their axes but mostly motionless. Flying is apparently no longer a novelty.

Oblivious to their cynicism, I take a running leap into the sphere, attracting a few sneers with my instinctive giggling as the expected feeling of falling fails to happen. I roll over and over, as fluid and graceful as the classical soundtrack, feeling as close to joy as I can remember.

I must lose myself in this manner for almost an hour because the next thing I register is the sight of Sann approaching the diving board, her body swathed in an unfamiliar black trenchcoat. This seems an odd choice of purchase, and I don’t remember passing anything similar on our mall visit. There’s a strange look in her eyes, and while it is unmistakably Sann, she doesn’t appear to recognise me.

“Down here, babe,” I call, hoping to catch her in my arms, as on our previous visit here.

Sann doesn’t respond. She pauses on the edge of the board, then simply walks out into the sphere, the flatness of her trajectory making the miracle of weightlessness seem more Biblical than technological.

“Sann?” I plead. “Can you hear me?”

Sann shrugs off the trenchcoat, which hovers, suspended, like the cape of an invisible superhero.

I watch dumbly as she reaches over her shoulder and withdraws the ice sword she has holstered to her collar, raising it above her head.

Maria watches in frozen terror as Sann plunges the sword into her abdomen, and the two young lovers share a moment of eye contact, pregnant with eternal intimacy, as Sann manoeuvres the sword from left to right with a surgical twist.

Ribbons of Sann's intestines spiral towards Maria with kaleidoscopic symmetry. The orchestral music peaks, colliding with a hundred teenage screams to form a soundtrack of cathartic dissonance.

The gravity filter, struggling to process so many litres of blood, chokes to a stuttering halt that sends Maria slamming into the sphere's floor, breaking her left arm, right hip and ankle, and shattering her pelvis.

Dozens of teenagers fall to the ground. Seven of them die instantly.

The gravity filter attempts to restart, its power sapped. Only the lightest human debris manages to float limply through the dead air of the sphere.

Maria, momentarily oblivious to her own pain, tries to make sense of the shapes that present themselves to her. Somewhere, in the gory, three-dimensional jigsaw that her brain struggles to process, is the form of her lover.

However, only one recognisable entity emerges from the chaos, that of a dead but miraculously intact human foetus. This floats passively across Maria's field of vision and severs the final tenuous link between her brain and the reality being experienced by it.

Everyone's shield having activated at the first moment of bone breakage, medics are now starting to arrive on the scene. Some part of Maria knows that they will save her life if she does not act quickly.

Summoning strength that is beyond superhuman, Maria raises her head from the floor of the sphere and slams it back down with the last of her lifeforce.

It is not enough. Her skull intact, she can only lie in impotent paralysis as she is swarmed by medics. They stretcher her outside into a waiting ambulance. She has no concept of her journey, but melodramatic buzzwords like "broken" and "suicide" filter through to her subconscious. They mean nothing to her.

Days later, Maria awakes to discover that she has travelled back in time two hundred years. As strangers try to explain to her, it is the year 2007 and she inhabits a coastal town in what was once known as England.

Maria tries to explain her experiences but finds her advanced vocabulary restricts her communication with people of this era.

The phrase "doesn't make sense" falls repeatedly from her mouth, simultaneously a statement and a desperate plea.

"I know," says someone, mopping her brow. As this alien hand wipes her forehead, an expected moment of contact with the strap of her eye patch fails to occur. Maria realizes that she can open both eyes. Of course – she has travelled in time. Her chemical burn has yet to happen.

This inspires hope. If it has yet to happen, then it can be avoided. There is time to change the future. Her unfaithful lover has yet to get pregnant and commit suicide. This abstract storyline may never occur.

This blissful idea has mere seconds to roam Maria's mind before the emergence of a crying, middle-aged couple into her field of vision threatens its survival, and therefore Maria's.

Maria knows that as soon as she recognises the couple, everything will be destroyed forever.

So I refuse to recognise them. I refuse to recognise anything. Reality is over. Just try telling me I'm in denial. Try telling me that this is all just my brain's way of processing something too horrible to contemplate for even a second. You can't reach me. I obey a whole different set of rules now. Keep my body alive – I don't give a fuck.

Nothing can reach me now.

For all intents and purposes, I am dead.

## 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008 - The Lost Legends Of Surf Guitar

### Benny

I reach into my top pocket and start my old Minidisc recorder, triggering the start of another chapter.

The train arrives at Frinton-On-Sea. I disembark and light a cigarette on the platform. From the point of view of anyone facing me, this motion is framed against the train pulling away to reveal the mural behind me.

I exit the gates and wander up to Tendring Technology College, my old high school. The lunch bell doesn't appear to have rung yet so I pop into the newsagents at the Triangle and buy myself a packet of Bobby's Buffalo Chips. It's impossible to tell whether I genuinely enjoy the taste of these crisps or whether I'm simply displaying a Tarantinoesque affinity for quirkily-named snackfoods.

Shoppers are sparse so I light a joint and sure enough, the area immediately becomes swarmed with schoolchildren. I stub the joint out and scan their ranks for Maria. She soon emerges, easily identified by the patch that still covers her left eye.

"Hey, stranger."

"Oh my God," says Maria. "My boyfriend is incredible. You wouldn't believe how much he's improving. I was waiting for him outside the school and he just appeared."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, he just appeared out of nowhere, in a puff of smoke."

"Sounds impressive."

"He's amazing."

"Is he still around?"

"Yeah, he's getting chips."

Maria sniffs the air.

"You have weed on you?"

I open my pack of ten Mayfair containing several pre-rolled joints and offer one to her.

"Not here. Follow me."

I walk with Maria back to the school and across the playing field, keeping an eye out for former teachers, who would be unlikely to take kindly to a former student supplying a current student with drugs on school property. Maria leads me behind the gym. I never used to smoke at school, but this is where the cool kids went to do so. Being here now triggers a mix of juvenile validation and creepy self-consciousness at doing this a decade too late.

I light a joint and pass it to Maria.

Maria takes a deep drag and exhales upwardly, dislodging a loose curl of fringe. She holds the joint next to her face between two fingers, her elbow supported by her other hand, her breasts supported by this arm. Three buttons are undone on a white shirt, through which a black bra is visible.

She is sixteen years old.

"I'm seventeen tomorrow", says Maria, as if correcting this thought. "Are you coming to my party?"

"Sure, what's the plan?"

"Everyone's meeting around eight at Austin's parents' beach hut. Then the plan is to get very drunk."

"Blimey, it's been a while since I got pissed on the beach. Sure, I'll be there."

Maria passes the joint to me. There is a moment of ritualistic silence as I take my first inhalations.

"I liked chapter five," says Maria, once this passes.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It really did it justice. Thanks for writing it."

"I'm glad you liked it. I hope it helps you process things."

"Yeah."

"Were you OK with the sexual stuff?"

"Sure. I mean, it's the future, right? Kids are bound to be fucking all the time."

"OK, cool. And you didn't think it was too violent?"

Maria hangs her head.

"It could never be too violent."

There is an awkward silence.

Maria notices the minidisc recorder in my top pocket.

"What kind of iPod is that?" she asks.

"Shit, I forgot to say. I'm recording all my conversations. The dialogue is going into chapter six, unedited. Are you OK with that?"

"Sure," she says. "As long as you don't get me into trouble for smoking weed."

"Well, even if the things I write are true, we can always claim that I just made them up. I'm not sure a novel really counts as evidence of anything."

Maria laughs.

"You should put one of those disclaimers at the beginning."

"What, you mean '*Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely co-incidental*'?"

"Yes! Exactly! I'm just a figment of your imagination."

"I didn't realise I had such a dirty mind."

"Fuck you," says Maria, reclaiming the joint with a grin.

"Anyway, I shouldn't really be flirting with you. You're only sixteen, and your boyfriend may magically appear out of thin air."

"Seventeen tomorrow."

"Right."

I'm enjoying the moment, but something primal is intruding on me. My heart is beating too fast and too loud. I feel dizzy, but some strange force of ego compels me to avoid collapsing in front of Maria.

"I need to be somewhere," I tell Maria, hoping my sudden decisiveness will deter further questioning. "I'll see you tomorrow, if not sooner."

"Sure," she says, sitting down on the grass. "You want the rest of this?"

She offers me back the joint.

"Keep it."

I leave the school via the back exit, not feeling prepared for the adrenaline surge an encounter with an old teacher might trigger. Once I reach the road, the panic settles to a bearable level. I sit on a garden wall and attempt to regulate my breathing.

Austin appears in front of me.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I exclaim.

"Take it easy, mate," says Austin. "You look pretty freaked out."

"How the fuck did you do that?"

"How did I do what?"

"Just appear out of nowhere like that."

"You were staring right at me."

"But Maria said you did the same thing to her."

"Well, yeah, I did appear in front of her."

"So how did you do *that*?"

"It wasn't hard," says Austin, sitting on the wall beside me and rummaging in his rucksack. He flips open a science magazine to an article on optical illusions.

"I was just fucking with her blindspot," he says, holding the page up in front of me. "Here, cover your left eye and focus your right eye on the X."



"OK."

"Now watch what happens when I bring the page closer to your face."

"The circle disappears."

"Right. And even closer?"

"It reappears."

"And that's magic," says Austin, with a comical waggle of his fingers.

"You're a genius," I tell him.

"Of course, it only works on people who are either wearing an eye patch, or are very stoned."

"That does somewhat limit your audience."

"Not with the friends I've got," says Austin.

"Touché."

"Listen," says Austin. "I need to talk to you about Maria."

"Sure."

"She's not holding up as well as she seems to be."

"In what way?"

"I'm not sure this novel business is actually doing her any good."

"Shit, that reminds me."

I indicate the minidisc recorder.

"I'm recording my conversations again, trying to make the dialogue accurate. Are you OK with that?"

[dialogue removed]

"Fair enough. I did talk to Maria about the last chapter, but she said it helped."

"Maybe it did, but it's been just over a year since Sam's suicide and I'm worried about her. She was doing OK, but going to the hospital last week seemed to trigger something in her. I think it might have been the same hospital."

"Well, that was bound to be stressful in any situation. What can I do to help?"

"Write her out of the story."

"You really think that's what she wants?"

"I think it's what she needs. You can always bring her back later on, but for now I think she needs a chance to move on."

"What am I supposed to do, kill her off? It's already been established that she's a real person."

“That’s part of the problem. People are messaging her on Facebook, asking her about personal stuff. She needs a break from all this.”

“Right, sure. Don’t worry, I’ll figure out a way to shift the focus.”

“I think you should. For your sake as much as hers.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it just seems a bit like you’re using Maria’s situation to avoid dealing with your own issues. Or maybe even to deal with them. Either way, you’ve written a lot more about what happened to Maria than what happened to you.”

[dialogue removed]

“OK, I understand that,” says Austin. “But still, think about it. And take it easy on the weed.”

“Just give me a minute.”

I’m feeling dizzy again. I close my eyes and slow my breathing, attempting to exhale for twice as long as I inhale.

When I open my eyes, Austin is gone.

This jolt of unreality sends the panic into overdrive. My heartbeat is uncomfortably loud, and the knowledge that my frantic breathing is being recorded, and will no doubt later make its way into the book, is overwhelming.

This has to stop.

I turn off the minidisc recorder and yank my iPod shuffle from my jacket pocket. Fumbling the headphones into my ears, I skip through four volumes of surf guitar rarities until I reach the maniacal laughter kickstarting the track *Point Panic* by Jerry Cole & His Spacemen.

I leap up from the wall and spring through the streets of Frinton, towards the sea.

As stereo surf riffs pan across my frontal lobes, picturesque suburban houses (white picket fences included) scroll past my field of vision as I adjust my iPod to drown out the increasing volume of my heartbeat. Skilful editing of this montage allows me to reach the seafront before the song’s two-minute duration expires. I hop and bounce over stones and walkways until I reach the sand, then stagger a respectably dramatic distance towards the surf, finally collapsing on my knees (an iconic silhouette from the point of view of the beach huts).

The ultimate synchronicity occurs when my sudden stillness coincides with the start of the next surf guitar track – P.J. & Artie’s instrumental lament *They Call The Wind Maria*.

However, as much as I pray for this calm to extend to my body, the biological effects of my spontaneous sprint catch up with me and my heart beats louder and faster than ever, drowning out all sound and vision in a tidal wave of red noise. My face crashes into the sand as I lose consciousness completely.

Hopefully I’m not dead. I’d hate for the discovery of my corpse to spoil Maria’s birthday beach party.

The music, meanwhile, continues to play.

**7<sup>th</sup> June 2008 - Formation of Closed Timelike Curves in a Composite Vacuum/Dust Asymptotically-Flat Spacetime**

**Maria**

*Dear Sam,*

*Well, I'm another year older, and another year further away from you. I guess I've been putting this off. Writing to you like this is supposed to be therapeutic, but I'm not convinced. We'll see, I guess. Why can't we just have a normal conversation? Oh that's right, because you killed yourself, you stupid fucking CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT CUNT.*

*So fucking STUPID. You fucking IDIOT WHORE. Do you have any fucking idea how much I loved you? Or do you remain oblivious throughout eternity? I loved you SO much, you prick. Beyond words. Beyond everything. There is nothing that can do it justice. You'll never learn, you fucking dead twat. You just lie there dumbly in your fucking self-inflicted grave while I keep loving you and betraying every other lover with your memory. I want to dig up your skull and use it like a fucking hand puppet and say HI MY NAME'S SAM AND I'M A FUCKING DEAD CUNT BECAUSE I HAD NO FAITH IN MY GIRLFRIEND'S LOVE SO I HAD TO FUCKING CUT MY WRISTS BECAUSE I'M A STUPID CUNT.*

*I've never been one for self-abuse, but this morning I actually sat for hours in the bath with a razor pressed against my wrists, just to try and channel whatever the fuck you could possibly have been thinking. Do you have any idea how tempting it was to exert a little extra pressure and end all of this shit? But no, I don't get to do that, because I'm in the unfortunate position of having to CONSIDER OTHER PEOPLE'S FEELINGS, and I could never do to Austin what you did to me.*

*HAPPY SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY MARIA. MAKE A WISH.*

*Why did you do it? Couldn't you have left one tiny clue? A note? Something? I helped a friend of mine write you into a novel. We turned you into an unfaithful pregnant lesbian in the twenty-third century and it still didn't make any fucking sense. None of us have any idea why you did what you did. But I'm not going to write some bullshit about how "not knowing is what hurts the most". WHAT HURTS THE MOST IS THAT YOU'RE FUCKING DEAD.*

*I could go on forever but honestly, what's the fucking point? You'll never know or care about anything I think or say or do. Your part of my story should be over, yet it never will be.*

*This will never reach you, but I need to state for the record: If there was anything I could do to bring you back, I would do it. I'd give up my own life. I'd spend eternity in agony if there was some way of forgiving you for your stupid dumb mistake and allowing you another chance. I'd erase myself from existence to let you live.*

*But there isn't anything I can do.*

*Enjoy rotting underground, you stupid twat.*

*I love you.*

*Maria*

I email the letter to Benny for his book, close my laptop, and head into the bathroom to get ready for my party.

"You look beautiful," says Austin, as I arrive on the beach.

"Thank you," I reply, still self-conscious about my eye patch.

"Happy birthday Maria," chant Katie and Jessica, either side of a grinning Gary.

"Thanks, guys."

Benny offers a meek wave from the steps of the beach hut and tosses a wrapped present limply onto the sand. Katie, Gary and Jessica do the same, forming a small pile.

"Wow. I'm noticing a certain square theme going on here. I suspect I might have some mix CD listening in store for me."

"Problem?" asks Jessica.

"Not at all. Although..."

I make a show of counting the presents.

"There appears to be one missing."

Austin winks at me.

"Later," he says.

I connect my portable speakers to my laptop and play Jessica's mix CD while perusing the tracklisting.

"Hang on. *Popstar Researching Oblivion. Let's Dance*. Aren't these just the songs that Benny mentions in his book?"

"Yes," says Jessica. "But I added some extra ones, so he'll have to mention them in chapter seven."

"Great," says Benny.

"What's the matter, you don't trust my taste?"

"It's not that. We're just dangerously close to an episode of *Skins* as it is. Teenage beach parties, hip soundtracks, ambiguous personal tragedies."

"Fuck that show," says Maria. "We're real and this is how it is. Not some old guy's wank fantasy of what he wishes his teenage years were like. No offence, Benny."

"I'm offended that you thought that would offend me," says Benny.

"I like *Skins*," says Gary.

"Me too," says Katie.

"I'm just self-conscious," says Benny. "The closer I get to the truth, the more clichéd everything seems. Especially with all the fainting I've been doing lately. It's like I've seen *Donnie Darko* too many times."

"What's *Donnie Darko*?" asks Katie.

"Look," says Benny. "Do you mind if we keep the pop-cultural references to a minimum? People might not know what we're on about."

"Benny," says Austin. "I know this might be an alien concept to you, but not everything we say has to go into your book. Is there any chance we could just enjoy the party?"

Something unspoken seems to pass between Austin and Benny, causing Benny to relent.

"Sorry," he says. "I'm being obsessive. We're here to celebrate Maria's birthday. Happy birthday Maria. I'm glad to have you as a friend, and I hope we stay close even when I'm done writing about you."

"Why would you stop writing about me?"

"I do have other characters to focus on, you know."

Austin seems oddly appeased by this statement.

“Anyway, enough about my book. Let’s start celebrating. I’ll skin you up a birthday joint.”

“About fucking time,” says Gary, swigging from a bottle of White Lightning and passing it to Katie.

*Let’s Dance* kicks in as Benny sparks up the joint and passes it to me. I do my best to fake enjoyment, but the music and drugs do nothing to lift my mood. I swig more cider, more as a way of hiding my expression than anything else.

“Are you OK?” asks Austin, who knows me too well.

“Yes,” I reply. “Well, no. But it’s nothing new. Just, you know. The usual.”

“Are you sad about Sam?” asks Katie, blunt and childlike in her semi-drunkenness.

“Yes,” I reply. “I’m sad about Sam. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to bring people down.”

Benny waves dismissively. Austin seems lost in thought. It’s Gary’s turn to hide behind the cider bottle.

“Listen,” says Austin. “I know it’s awkward, us going out and you still grieving your ex. But I don’t want you to hold anything back on my account. I understand.”

This emotional honesty pierces my smoky haze and I burst into tears, as David Bowie fades to Mazzy Star.

“I’d do anything to bring him back.”

Austin appears to give this serious thought.

“Anything? Would you sacrifice your life?”

“Yes.”

We sit in silence for a while.

“Would you sacrifice my life?”

I look imploringly into my boyfriend’s eyes, but something in his expression compels me to be honest.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I just need to know how much you’d be prepared to risk.”

Austin is starting to annoy me now

“I’d risk everything, OK? And I’d appreciate you not turning my grief into a fucking drinking game. Can we change the subject now, please?”

More awkward silence.

Mercifully, my phone beeps, providing me with the distraction of a text message.

*Hey trouble. Sorry we can’t make your shindig – stranded on an assignment. Celebrate in style – see you at Glasto. Rez/Davina*

“Your friend the gonzo journalist,” I tell Benny. “He’s not coming.”

“Oh well,” says Benny. “We’ll see him at Glastonbury.”

“And your ex. Davina.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s the matter? You seem dizzy.”

“It’s just this,” says Benny, gesturing in the direction of my laptop, which is now playing surf guitar music. “I passed out here yesterday while listening to these songs. I’m getting some kind of sense memory flashback hearing them again in the same place.”

“Take it easy,” I tell him. “I’ll skip it on a couple of tracks. Though you’ll be at the mercy of Jessica’s taste in music, I warn you.”

“Hey,” protests Jessica, as the pounding opening rhythm of *That’s Not My Name* by The Ting Tings bursts from the laptop speakers.

“I fucking love this song!” shouts Katie, immediately leaping up onto the sea wall and gyrating sexually along with the beat. She continues to mime some mutant version of the Macarena while singing loudly along with the lyrics, replacing “Stacey” with “Katie” in time with an athletic outward kick that only just fails to topple her from the wall.

Austin begins laughing hysterically.

“What’s got into you, magic boy?” I ask, my irritation with him melting at the site of his cute smile.

“I’m sorry,” he splutters, nudging Benny. “What were you saying about this being like an episode of *Skins*?”

“Fuck off,” says Benny. “Jessica, I blame you for this.”

“This is a fucking great song,” says Jessica, jumping up to join Katie on the wall. She mimics Katie’s apparently random dancing, lending their drunken performance an air of careful choreography.

Gary applauds as Katie and Jessica shout along with the climatic chorus and it occurs to me that I’m actually having a good time.

If only I could hold onto this moment...

The song ends. Jessica and Katie jump down from the wall. The music is replaced with something familiar, yet alien.

“Oh God, what the fuck is this?” asks Benny. “Why do I know this song?”

“It’s Aqua,” says Jessica. “*Turn Back Time*. This was my favourite song ever as a kid.”

“See,” says Austin. “You’re not the only one who can do foreshadowing, Benny.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about,” says Austin, apparently angry with Benny about something. “Is it time for me to give Maria her present, do you think?”

“Sure, if you like.”

“Then so be it.”

Austin reaches into his rucksack and tosses an unwrapped, stapled stack of paper at me.

Bewildered, I flip through them. They appear to be various academic papers printed out from the internet.

One is entitled *A Quantum Mechanical Look at Time Travel and Free Will*, by David Greenberger of the University of New York. Another is called *Quantum Theory Looks at Time Travel* by the same guy. A third is something to do with *Closed Timelike Curves* by somebody named Amos Ori from the Israel Institute of Technology.

“I don’t understand,” I tell Austin. “What is this?”

“If you’ll please suspend your disbelief for a moment,” says Austin. “I think I’ve figured out a way to bring Sam back.”

It’s at this moment that I realise my boyfriend is insane.

“Fuck you,” I spit. “It’s bad enough that you’re constantly trying to inspire me with your dumb tricks. But now you’ve spent so many hours getting stoned and watching *Donnie Darko* with your fucking mentor here,” I wave a contemptuous hand at Benny, “that you’ve actually convinced yourself you’ve mastered the secret of time travel.”

Austin gives me a serious look.

“Read the papers,” he says. “This is not hack internet bullshit. These are actual scientists proposing a way in which time travel might one day be possible.”

“And how does that help me, exactly?”

"It doesn't. Not yet. But it might, one day. That's the point. I'm sixteen. With any luck, I'll still be alive in the year 2068. Who knows what might be possible by then?"

"You think we'll all have time machines by then?"

"Maybe not the general public. But it's conceivable that people with enough power and influence might have access to time travel. And if I spend the rest of my life getting myself into that position, then I will too."

"And how will you do that?" I ask, humouring my idiot boyfriend, not wanting to kid myself with hope.

"With the magic," he says. "I'll be the best there is. We're always watching Derren Brown and wondering what he could get away with, with those kind of manipulative psychological skills, as well as the conjuring. If you're good enough, you can accumulate all kinds of money and power."

"So what you're proposing, is that you will dedicate the rest of your life to becoming the world's greatest magician, in order to accumulate enough wealth to have access to a time machine? Which you will then use to travel back in time and prevent my ex-boyfriend from committing suicide?"

"More or less," says Austin. "Yeah."

"Safe," says Gary.

"The important thing is," says Austin. "Do you want me to? You know about chaos theory. Any alteration to the past could have serious consequences for any one of us. We might be killed in a car accident that would never otherwise have happened."

"I told you I'd sacrifice anything," I tell him through gritted teeth, annoyed at myself for indulging his insanity even for a second.

I need a joint. I motion to Benny to pass me the skinning up gear.

"Happy birthday," says Austin.

"What's scary is that you actually seem to believe this is possible."

"Look into my eyes," says Austin. "Well, one of them. Do you really think I would fuck you around about something as serious as this, if I didn't truly believe that it was a real possibility?"

I try to ignore him and focus on the joint I'm rolling, but a stiff breeze keeps sending my rizla flying away.

"I'm going inside to skin up," I announce, taking the weed into the beach hut.

"If you guys have finished with your sci-fi shit," says Gary, rising to his feet and hauling Katie and Jessica to theirs. "We're going to nip to the offy. If I'm not back soon, it means we're off somewhere having a threesome."

Katie bats playfully at Gary's sleeve as he leads them away.

I slam the door shut. Enough light filters through the cracks for me to skin up in.

"That's quite a birthday present," I hear Benny say to Austin.

"Be honest," says Austin. "Do you think I'm talking out my of arse? Or do you believe there's some tiny chance it could work?"

"I'm not the best person to ask," says Benny. "My habit of confusing reality with fiction is well-established."

"But do you think there's a chance?"

"Assuming it is theoretically possible," says Benny. "Whether or not it's successful depends entirely on you."

"I know."

"You can't change your mind. Ever."

"I know."

"It's all very well saying you intend to dedicate your life to something when you're sixteen. But you might fall in love with someone else. Your priorities may change. Can you honestly say you'll spend your whole life working on this? Because the second your intentions falter, your plan fails. And this will all have been a cruel way of raising Maria's hopes."

"I know," says Austin. "But I love her truly, and I will do this for her."

The door of the beach hut opens.

Austin and Benny look up.

Sam emerges from the hut, an improbably large joint dangling from his mouth.

"Sorry to further complicate your storyline," says Sam. "But I think I've found a problem with your time-travel theory."

"What's that?" asks Austin.

"Well, let's say it was possible for you to go back in time and change things. Presumably, it doesn't work like in *Back To The Future* where the timelines take a while to catch up with themselves. Any change you make would already have happened. If you will travel back in time, then you already have."

"Why is that a problem?" asks Benny.

"Because of this whole thing with Maria sacrificing herself in order to bring me back to life. The only way she could not exist is if she never did."

"Right."

"So, what? You're just going to admit to your readers that you made Maria up?"

"I guess," says Benny.

"Even after the fake Facebook messages?"

"Speaking of which," says Austin. "I figured out where you got her photo from."

"Oh yeah?"

Austin retrieves his science magazine, the one containing the optical illusions. He flips the pages over meaningfully while looking at Benny, finally holding up a photograph of Maria. The one from her Facebook profile.

"It's not even a real photo," says Austin. "It's an average of fifteen different 'attractive' female faces. Nice touch. Maria could be anyone, right? As long as she's pretty."

"It still doesn't make sense," says Sam. "You're going to admit that Maria is not a real person, as a way of establishing that I'm not really dead?"

"You're alive, aren't you?"

"Right. But I was never dead."

"So Maria got what she wanted."

"But Maria doesn't exist!"

"That's the price she paid."

"I don't know," says Sam. "It's a clever little narrative trick, but what's your justification for tricking people into believing someone is real, and then making them feel that person's grief?"

"Don't tell me," says Austin. "That's what all fiction does, right?"

Benny raises his eyebrows indignantly and mimes zipping his mouth.

"So what is your reason for doing it?" asks Sam.

"I'm going somewhere with it," says Benny.

"We're all ears," says Austin.

"Look, it's not easy. I can't write about the people in my real life because I have to respect their right to privacy. But equally, who gives a shit about what happens to made-up characters?"

"That's your job as a writer, surely," says Sam. "To make people care."

"But I don't care about fictional characters. I care about the people in my real life, who I can't write about. That's why I needed Maria."

"Maria doesn't exist, and she never did," says Austin. "So what now?"

"Nothing," says Benny. "I guess this is the end."

"Of the book?"

"Of this part of it. I've been thinking about what we were talking about at the party last week, before Maria's accident. About how the emotional truth is what's important."

Austin looks at Benny like he's insane.

"You realise that conversation never actually took place, right?"

"That's not the point. Or maybe it is. What I'm trying to say is, maybe it's OK if the story doesn't match reality perfectly. If I need to protect privacy, I can change names or twist the events somehow. There's got to be a way of telling my story without publishing the personal lives of people I know. I don't need to bother with all these elaborate hoaxes."

"So why are you?"

"Because some things are fucking hard to write about no matter what the privacy issues are. I guess I've just been dancing around the subject. Trying to write about it while distancing myself from it at the same time. I don't know. I just want the blackouts to stop."

Sam offers his joint to Benny, who shakes his head. Austin intercepts it instead.

"How do you propose to achieve that?" asks Austin, his eyes following a smoke ring skywards.

"I need to write about what really happened," says Benny. "To me."

"Well," says Sam, distributing three cans of lager. "That sets things up nicely for the sequel. Can we get drunk now? I'm in the mood to celebrate."

"What are you celebrating?" asks Austin.

"Maria's birthday," says Sam, with a wink. "Do I need a reason? Maybe I'm just happy to be alive."