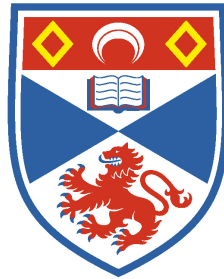


The Textbook

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University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of
MFA
at the
University of St Andrews

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Synopsis

For my thesis, entitled *The Textbook*, I have submitted the first 40,000 words of my prospective novel of the same name. *The Textbook* is semi-dystopian, allegory in which the protagonist is disturbed by his belief in the existence of a secret underground governmental textbook, which categorizes human beings according to their medical records. He is similarly disturbed by the politics, religion and the media, and often hears voices of celebrities and historical figures. The novel is specifically allegorical of to our societal prejudice of alcoholism and mental health, though it extends to disability in general.

For someone to be included in *The Textbook*, individuals must have a recognisable diagnosis with a cure, prognosis or recognised type of treatment. As my protagonist has never had an exact diagnosis for his mental condition, he feels excluded and his paranoia grows. Whether it is beneficial to included in *The Textbook* is left deliberately unclear until we reach the denouement, when the universal meaning of the novel unravels. The meaning of the text becomes clearer as it progresses and, as such, it is purposefully fragmented to mirror the protagonist's confused state of mind and his 'poetry' worsens as the plot unfolds for the same reasons.

Interwoven within the main plot is a series of chapters called 'The Brain Factory', which are written in plain English and form a sub-narrative, with parallel plots unfolding. I have included two of these chapters here. With reference to the dialect, the main body of the text is written in 'watered-down Edinburgh Gadgie' and, in keeping with the Scots' vernacular of modern times, my representation of many words is variable. Furthermore, I have omitted three chapters from my submission for the purpose of thesis regulation and have adapted the chapters accordingly. As such, I have compensated for the gaps in the narrative by amending chapters accordingly.

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I, Robert Chalmers hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2015 and as a candidate for the degree of MFA in September 2015; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2015 and 2016.

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Acknowledgements

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Contents

Prologue: The Darkest Place in the World

The Brain Factory (part one)

Dr Black (part one)

Catastrophe

Blood and Guts on the 95

The Slayer Ay Tøftir

Doctor Murray (part one)

Abducted By Aliens (part one)

The Brain Factory (part two)

Abducted By Aliens (part two)

Dom's Ma

Beer Legs (part one)

Brand New Star (part one)

Brand New Star (part two)

Beer Legs (part two)

Hitler Was A Vegetarian (part one)

Hitler Was A Vegetarian (part two)

Prologue: The Darkest Place in the World

**(01/02/93: Dominic Mathers DOB 02.03.77. Not Seen on this date. Mx, n/s, 15.
Hx/Dx: NAD. Rx:nil)**

The electricity wulnae stoap burnin, like a bare, cackling live wire in ma brain, stripped ay its protective plastic, once red, now ready tae fizx and explode...nae protective green and yellae...nae earth...ma skull is gonnae crack at any moment...butterflies in ma belly, flutterin winged maniacs, risin up intae ma chest...gnawin at ma heart...

...when Ab was young, Ab met me, now Ab dinnae ken me. When Ab'm wi you, Ab am you, when Ab'm wi someb'dy else, Ab'm them, him or her, the teacher who touched iz up in the showers, the junky up the street...

...how can you tell me who Ab am when Ab dinnae ken masel?

...a truth naebody wants tae ken...

...is this ma forever? Need tae see a doctor...

...who am Ab? Ab'm naebody...Ab'm no a human being, no like you...nivr huv been...Ab'm no like anybody Ab've ivir met...Ab dinnae recognise ma ain face...Ab've never met anybody who has the misfortune tae look like me...life is for the protected, the world's earth wires, the live and protected, the middle-class, the fortunate...

...life is for cunts...

...bein Mr. Nice gits yi fuckin naewhere...

...why can Ab no just be a cunt? Ab am a bastard, efter aw...

...Ma, Ab wannae help yi but Ab cannae help me...help iz help yi...

...need tae see a doctor...

...Ma, where are you?

...Da, who are you?

...need tae see a doctor...
...Ah'm Ah depressed? What's depression?
...is this what it feels like tae go mad?
...fuck ivirbody...
...fuck the middle-class...fuck them aw...
...fuck folk wi parents who care...
(...but Ma cares...she's always drunk though...naebody wants tae help an alcoholic...)
...Ah wannae live...naw...
...Ah wannae die...
...need tae see a doctor...
...ma future is fucked, Ah'm a freak, Ah cannae talk, cannae communicate...ma future is
fucked...
...need help...
...Ah've seen the future an Ah dinnae like it. Ma life isnae worth helpin. It's decided. By who?
What's happenin tae me? Ma, what's happenin tae you? Is this what it feels like tae go mad...Ah've seen
the future...
...fuck you...yil nivir understand...they'll nivir understand...naebody will...
...a distant voice, whispers... 'The Textbook, you're not in The Textbook'...
...a crazy man at the bus stop told iz aboot it...Jesus, they call him...
... 'They define us all,' he screamed, 'they're everywhere...nowhere to hide...some of us are
experiments, the 'untreatables' they drive insane. They get into your brain, eat your thoughts'...
...The Textbook? Shit. What's happenin tae me? A few weeks ago, Ah kent me...Ah
hink...Naw, Ah did... did Ah no?
...Ah've seen the future...Ah'm fifteen, but awready Ah've been eighteen, Ah've been twenty-one,
twenty-five, thirty...Ah dinnae wannae see any mair...naebody's gonnae help...
...EVER...

fated tae...

...the darkest place in the world...

...nae help fur the weak...

...nae rest...

...who am Ah?

...can Ah be you?

The Brain Factory (part one)

The news was buzzing round the factory, they were publishing a new edition of The Textbook. The bleary eyes of the self-consciously blonde admin girl narrowed in the darkness of the plant that they called Head Office, as she struggled to read the memo in front of her. It was so dimly lit in the windowless basement that you would never have known it was summertime in Scotland.

This was massive. Sandwiched between the Jeffrey Archer saga, the Bradford race riots and the horrors of 9/11 was the most exciting news to circulate the halls of Head Office since the official removal of homosexuality from The Textbook in the late nineties. The admin girl glanced over at the Head Doctor, the man whose great grandfather had written the first edition of The Textbook in the 1930s, a status that meant nothing to her.

The man was basically a psychological clone of every other medical professional in the factory, more obsessed with diagnosis than cure, more interested in genealogy than morality, more concerned with morbidity than mortality. Here, a human being was nothing more than a National Insurance Number, an electronic molecule in the human reservoir that opened up into the computerized river of disease that they called The Flowcharts.

Her eyes saw the wispy, white scalp of his balding egghead, which reflected back the dying glare of the light-bulb that dangled from a chain attached to the ceiling above him as he busied himself over a notepad, a copy of the latest WHO Urban Dictionary and a new publication of one of Dr Black's journals. He adjusted his specs every now and then, furrowing his brow as he flicked through the pages of the texts in front of him and then frantically scribbled something down, rarely raising his head to look at her. On his desk he had a PC, a microscope and a CCTV monitor though, as far as she knew, his PC was on the blink and she'd never seen him use the microscope. She had no idea what the CCTV monitor was for; no one ever intruded on the grounds of Head Office. The factory was

apparently an old POW camp, which sat in the corner of a desolate field near the Scottish borders, on soil in which nothing useful had been sown in years.

‘Plans fur the night, doc?’ the girl smiled, hoping that maybe he had a life outside of The Textbook, that maybe he did something other than work at the weekend.

‘What?’ She could smell his coffee-breath from a full four feet away.

‘Nae plans fur the night?’ She shimmied gently on her swivel chair but still he ignored her, dismissing her question with a wave of the hand. The admin girl hated pretending to be happy, but she wanted to find at least some hint of a personality in one of these doctors, and she thought she’d seen this one smile, even laugh, once.

‘I don’t do plans. Not the kind you mean, anyway. Don’t you realise how hectic my schedule is, Daphne? Amending The Flowcharts for The Textbook, keeping my records, *our* records, up-to-date and assessing the cases that you Fishers are incapable of doing for yourselves?’

For a moment, the admin girl thought he was going to shout at her, but he simply guffawed coldly and said, ‘of course you don’t, you Fishers don’t *know* anything, you just *do*. No more questions now... *please*...unless they’re work-related.’

He finally looked up to reveal his rough, grey face and his hard, brown eyes. A few strands of long, grey hair still sprouted from each side of his head. Magnified by his specs, his gaze appeared omnipotent though she’d noticed earlier, when he’d taken his glasses off to wipe the lenses, that his eyes were actually tiny, like a wee mole’s, almost impotent without their aids, and purple around the rims.

‘Oh...and Daphne, have you finished today’s Fishing? Your lot, I mean. Have you finished your day’s workload?’

This particular Administrator, this ‘Fisher’, hated her job, deciding who should and who shouldn’t go into The Textbook, it was all so demeaning, so inhumane, this ‘profession’. It wasn’t even a profession, not for her, not for any of the ‘Fishers’. Officially,

of course, they were ‘Administrators’, that’s what their pay-slips said, that’s what the IRS said, and that’s what their job titles said, but here they were called ‘Fishers’, the Administrators of The Textbook.

Is the Inland Revenue no a governmental department anyway? Why dae they pretend?

The current government knew all about The Textbook of course, she had no doubts about that. It was quite possible that other governments did as well, and health organizations, all over the world. It was impossible to tell how far this thing went. She looked at the piles of files around her, one for ‘Textbook Cases’, for those who were in, another entitled ‘REJECTS’, a smaller pile of the ones she’d yet to look through, and yet another with a post-it note on top that said ‘REF TO DR.’

It was a governmental project in the first place, The Textbook, they’d been defining people’s lives according to their medical records since before the war. In order to get in, you needed a diagnosis, a World Health Organisation-recognised one, one that was deemed curable, or possibly curable, or at least treatable in some palliative way. It was hard to explain. The admin girl had one, reactive depression (depression had to be ‘reactive’; endogenous depression was an instant ‘REJECT’), and asthma too, so she was ok, but what about the pure bastards who didn’t have a recognizable condition, an exact diagnosis? What about them? She knew one or two personally and the job burnt her guts with guilt. She felt dirty, but not in a way that she liked; this job made her feel *filthy* inside. The Fishers had all been given minimal training, of course, so that the real professionals could concentrate on researching and updating The Textbook. They’d all received eight weeks’ ‘intensive’ training on medical theory and they’d learned all about the different conditions that affected the different bodily systems. All training after that was on-the-job and, though they’d learned terms like ‘systemic lupus erythematosus’ and ‘sarcoidosis’, which she could impress her friends with, and she’d been freaked-out by illnesses that she’d never heard of before, like Wernicke-Korsokoff’s Psychosis and General Paralysis of the Insane which,

along with syphilis, had now been removed from The Textbook entirely, this particular Fisher couldn't stand what she did for a living. The money, though, was excellent. The Administrators were only permitted to make decisions on straightforward cases, the ones that weren't clear-cut inclusions or rejections were referred to the doctors.

'Have you finished your day's Fishing?' the doctor repeated, looking up at her again.

'Eh...no really, Ah was kindae hoping that...' she stopped when she remembered '*no more questions now....*' She had been hoping to leave a bit early since it was Friday, but she guessed that that was completely out of the question and she let her sentence trail-off. Still, she was sure that this was the doctor she'd heard laughing before, about two weeks ago, and she'd presumed that he must have had a sense of humour. She knew he was the Top Man and all, but she'd been certain that it was him who was the laughing doctor. Maybe it was Dr Black then? But this guy was short and thin, bony even, as if he himself had spent some time in hospital, whereas Dr Black was much taller and trimmer in comparison. Then she remembered that one of the doctors had tried to touch her up in the elevator, laughing it off when another doctor stepped in. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was him who'd touched her, she hadn't looked at him properly at the time, she'd just rushed off when the lift opened at the basement.

'Well then, if you'd kindly...' The doctor nodded at the pile of files by her feet and made a mock fishing gesture, this time actually laughing, genuinely laughing, but with no friendliness, no heart. It was him she'd heard laughing before; his hoot was unmistakable. He'd lost a bit of weight and hair since then was all.

'Ok doctor... sorry, Ah'll, eh, finish ma...*Fishin.*'

'That's a good lass, Daphne. Find me those misfits.'

Daphne? Who the fuck is Daphne?

The girl turned her attention back to her dreary formalities; sifting through piles and piles of doctor's reports, the GPRs of the fortunate, the less fortunate, and the damned, though they were all as good as dead as far as she was concerned.

'Doctor...' *what the fuck was his name again?* 'Eh...doactor, Ah mean doctor, Ah've goat this guy, he's eh-'

'What?'

'A paedophile.'

'Anything else?'

'Dyslexia.'

'Put him in.'

'Put him in? But he's a child molester.'

'He's got a diagnosis, hasn't he? Dyslexia. Paedophilia too. Put him in.'

'Ok.' The admin girl felt like crying. She picked up another report and read through it slowly, thoroughly.

'This guy-'

'Yes,' the doctor said, again without looking up.

'He's an alcoholic.'

'Throw him in the bin.'

'But he's goat an alcohol problem and-'

'Throw him in the bin.'

'But-'

'Has he a proper diagnosis, exogenous depression, ADHD, anything?'

'Naw, but he's goat an alcohol problem. His GP says that he's basically a guid guy, looks after his kids as best he can-'

'Has he been diagnosed with exogenous depression, or schizophrenia, anything like that?'

‘Naw, just-’

‘Any physical diagnoses?’

‘He’s only twenty-six.’

‘Any physical diagnoses?’

‘Well...’ the girl flicked through the report as hastily as she could. ‘Nuttin that Ah can see.’

‘Throw him in the bin.’

‘But...but...but he’s an alcoholic.’

‘Daphne, the word ‘alcoholic’ is not a medically recognized term. THROW HIM IN THE BIN.’

The girl looked at the doctor, incredulous. *Bastard*, she said with her eyes, but still he didn’t look up, and she dropped the man’s report on the ‘REJECTS’ pile. She tried to think of something else, something cheerful, something...*anything* to curb the anger that was battering her brain, but it was no use. She continued to fish through the reports, quickly now, very quickly, glancing every now and then at her watch, her belly rumbling for food. The end of the day was approaching; he had to let her go at the end of her shift, and she decided there and then that she wanted a drink.

Then, she came across a case that made her heart sink. It told the story of a young man, twenty-three, who’d been complaining of mental difficulties for nearly a decade, but had never been given a concrete diagnosis. It was one of the saddest things she’d ever read; she knew the guy very well, but she’d never seen his doctor’s report. He’d seen various doctor’s over the years and even a couple of shrinks, but they’d all continually denied him referral to a counsellor. Despite various disturbing episodes, they all felt he was ‘psychologically sound’, though there was a bizarre comment on his report which read, ‘Inability to handle will power: curb accordingly’, something she’d never seen on a doctor’s report before. No one, it seemed, wanted to help him; he had no diagnosis, he didn’t fit

into *any* textbook, anywhere. Through the years, he'd been diagnosed with possible this and possible that, but nothing concrete, nothing definite. She wanted this guy in The Textbook.

'Hiy Doc-'

'What?'

'Eh...doctor, Ah've goat this case-'

'*I've* got this case. Speak properly, Daphne.'

'Sorry, *I've* got this case,' she realised that she was grinding her teeth and she tried to relax. '*I've* got this case...eh...he's goat mental problems...'

'And?'

'He doesnae have a diagnosis, they say he's goat possible OCD, but it may be S.A.D, or bipolar, or it might just be a case ay endogenous depression, or extreme stress, like panic attacks...eh, they're no sure. He has severe social difficulties, anxiety, auditory hallucinations but nae schizophrenia, they think...eh...they think he may be faking the hallucinations for attention...tae try an get help, like... they're no sure, ken...eh. Aw, and he has an un-biopsied tumour growin oan his back as well...eh-

'No diagnosis?'

'Naw...but Ah hink that wi should mibbe-'

'No diagnosis? Everyone needs a diagnosis, Daphne, that's what human beings are, a collection of diagnoses. No diagnosis: no Textbook, you know that. Throw him in the bin.'

'There's a few weird comments about will power and powerlessness, but-' The doctor looked up at the mention of 'powerlessness'. 'It doesnae really make sense tae...to be honest, Ah'm-'

'Will power?'

'Some'ing...eh something about being unable to handle it. Ah dunno what-'

'Bin.'

‘But he *is* a human being-’

‘Throw him in the bin.’

That’s what they did to people with no diagnosis, they threw their lives in the bin.

The admin girl decided she was going to get fucking drunk that night.

Dr Black (part one)

(11/08/2001: Dx: fuck knows. Rx: loads. Prognosis: shite)

A dreich summer's morning in Nitten. Dominic's legs powered up the straight road that wound left at the top intae Mayfield, and veered off tae the right intae the grounds ay the doctor's surgery. He hoped that the drizzle would become a full-on downpour. It had been fucking heavy earlier on, and walking in the rain always had some kindae cleansing effect on his heid; his brain was in need ay a wash, for sure, but the rain had settled somewhat so that it dripped only lightly on his hair now. He'd spent the night rolling around in bed, thinking ay the past and the future, and realising that they were simultaneously deid and alive, and that each minute that passed was consigned forever tae death, but still living in his heid as another wasted minute ay his life. The present was aboot tae die and the next minute was in the future but its death was imminent. After several hours ay trying tae work this phenomenon oot and somehow relate it tae his ain struggle, he found hissel drifting in and oot ay hypnagogic nightmares. At around five, he'd decided that enough was enough and spent the rest ay the early hours drinking coffee until around half-eight.

Dominic's recurrent dreams, ay which there were a number, often involved his Ma, watching her morph intae an angel or a demon, right there in front ay him like, or hearing her cries for help while Banshees howled fae somewhere in the distance but, even in his dreams, he could never help her. Last night, she'd been stranded on an island in the middle ay an ocean ay fire, which boiled and spat its acid intae a deep green sky, while he stood helpless on a distant shore, which was really a desolate cliff, trying desperately tae think ay a way tae get tae her. It was a lost cause, *she* was a lost cause, and when his eyes awoke some time before his limbs, her voice continued tae echo in his heid for what felt like several minutes, until his shattered muscles finally began tae spasm and twitch. Then his body fully awoke.

‘Awright Dom?’ a voice fae the other side ay the road called. Recognising it as that ay Gaz Irvine’s, he pretended no tae hear.

‘Hiy Dominic, ya cunt! It’s-’

Just then, a silver Mini Cooper screeched around the corner and, though Dominic presumed that Gaz’s next word would have been ‘me’, it was actually ‘CUNT!’, as the car left him drenched fae heid tae toe.

As Dominic was about tae relent and have an unwanted conversation wi one ay the nicest, but fruitiest (and now wettest), guys he’d ever met, a lorry stopped tae unload ootside one ay the few factories that were still in business up there, freeing him fae Gaz’s field ay vision.

Thank fuck fur small mercies and big lorries...

The *small mercy* was short-lived, though, as Dominic’s ain field ay vision became fragmented and fuzzy, like a movie going intae multiple split-screen mode on a TV wi a dodgy aerial, and the road ahead suddenly forked intae different at the top. He saw a maze ay possible paths and roads in front ay him, no just going left or right or straight ahead intae the housing scheme up there, but north and northwest, west, east-west, east, northeast, north-north-east...a real fucking mind-fuck. On the threshold tae that mazy mind-fuck stood a man wi a white Jesus hairdo, looking distraught even fae as far as twenty-odd yards away. He appeared tae be dressed in jammies and trainers, wi his arms flailing and his fingers pointing randomly like he was directing the traffic. A blink ay the eye, and the maze was gone, but the Jesus guy was still there. As Dominic neared, his gait slowed and he caught snippets ay what the man was saying.

‘I see him! He’s here. The Messiah has arrived!’

Shouts ay ‘HIY JESUS!’ and ‘FUCKIN LOON!’ greeted his declaration ay the Coming ay The Messiah, and cars tooted mockingly. A speeding Ford Escort, gloss-painted

black, deliberately soaked him, but still he bore witness tae the Second Coming. Dominic then realised that the man was pointing at him.

‘Here he comes! Our Higher Power is here!’

Just as he looked like he was about tae bow at Dominic’s feet, one ay those green and yellae mini-ambulances and a police car pulled over. Two police officers, one male and one female, and a male nurse who looked like the singer fae Right Said Fred, emerged fae the vehicles and, while the red-haired female officer stayed silent, the two men took Jesus by the arm, one elbow each, and stood him up straight. Right Said Fred and the male officer – a bit ay a Kevin Keegan lookalike - grinned at each the over the man’s heid and Right Said Fred spoke:

‘Moan William, let’s get yi hame ay?’ He laughed a friendly laugh. Dominic stopped and stared, waiting for a chance sneak by. ‘How did yi get aw the way up here, ay? Yir no supposed tae leave the grounds ay the hospital, pal.’

‘Yeah, c’mon, Billy. The nurses’ll see yer alright. Yer can talk about the Coming of the Lord there, yeah?’ Kevin Keegan said, in a Bristol-sounding accent.

The two men gently, but firmly, coaxed the man away, leading him intae the back ay the wee ambulance. The female officer, who looked like someone Dominic couldnae quite put his finger on, couldnae help laughing herself and when she spoke, it was wi a strong Weegie accent:

‘Billy, yiv goat tae stoap daein this, yi ken. We’ve goat real criminals tae catch. Yir a guid man, an yi can tell the nurses aw about The Messiah when wi get yi hame, awright?’

A song burst intae Dominic’s heid when he realised who she reminded him ay, though her name still evaded him,

It’s got to be-ee-ee-ee-ee-e...

Finally, Dominic was able tae skip past, but he couldnae help looking over his shoulder when he heard the slamming ay the ambulance doors and his eyes briefly met

those of Billy's through the back windae. They rolled in his heid, red-rimmed and serious, and Dominic wondered whether they might have reflected his ain. He never could picture hissel in his mind at any given moment and, when he walked intae the surgery and saw the size ay the queue and the amount ay people in the reception area, the different appearances, shapes and sizes ay aw the folk in there, he wondered whether anyone else ever felt that way. He hadnae actually looked in the mirror for quite some time, no properly like, but no matter how often he did, he could never get a concrete image in his mind ay what he might have looked like tae other people...dark(ish) hair, round(ish) face (or was it square?), eyes the colour ay...what? Average height, mibbe...

The clock on the wall told him that he'd arrived five minutes early, but 11am was always the worst time tae be asked up for an appointment and Dominic was expecting a long wait. He took his place at the back ay the queue. A fat lass wi a twin buggy was giving the frail wee receptionist some serious stick, something aboot ordering a taxi, a couplae auld men talked aboot the fitba and 9/11 and, standing in-between the fat girl and the OAPs, was a short lass dressed in trackies and a Lacoste raincoat. He looked behind him at the folk sitting in the waiting area, folk he didnae recognise and folk he did. An auld fellae trying tae hide his colostomy bag under his cardie, a guy called Kingy, big Paddy Gilmore looking more than a bit worse for wear and sporting a black eye, and faceless others reading magazines and newspapers. Fae fuck-knows-where, a series ay words jumped intae his heid,

*The first 'you' is you,
The second 'you' is us,
The other 'you' is me,
But who is me?*

He made a mental note tae turn the words intae a proper poem when he got hame. Dr Murray was forever telling Dominic that there was a writer in him. His appointment today, though, was wi Dr Black and tae be honest, he didnae trust the cunt ataw. He

needed tae see somebody though, fucking urgently like, and wi Dr Murray oot on hoose visits aw day and the rest ay the docs unbeknown tae him, Black was the only one he could think ay asking for.

Dr Black was the first doctor he'd spoken tae aboot feeling low, and the first person tae decline him referral for counselling. His brain wasnae quite as frazzled back then, it was more ay a unipolar darkness, and a growing anxiety. He'd only visited him a few times in the ensuing years, only on days when Murray wasnae available, like. In fact, it was Dr Black who'd referred him tae the nuthoose when he was a teenager, a couplae times like, and later, tae some loony bin in Central Scotland, near Alloa. Strange how he never got any real counselling in the bin either, or even a proper psychiatric evaluation. During his visits, he'd basically wasted most ay his time walking around the gardens, attending therapeutic painting classes (he couldnae paint) and stop-smoking sessions. During his second visit, Dominic unexpectedly bumped intae his current flatmate and one-time mentor, Saffron.

Dr Murray, though, had made a specific offer a few years ago, mainly because the practice had so frequently refused him counselling and he wasnae sure that the psych services would help, so he offered his personal assistance, mibbe they could work together tae figure oot what was wrong, he'd said. He wished he was seeing Dr Murray, but needs must...

Dominic jumped when he felt someone prod him in the side and turned back tae face the queue. The lass standing in front ay the two auld men was Nadine, one ay Saffi's mates.

'Awright Dom, hun?' Nadine said.

'Eh...aye...aye, eh Ah'm awright.'

Are you not even going to ask her if she's alright, you selfish bastard? a voice inside his heid said.

‘How yi daein, pal? Ah’ve no seen yi fur ages,’ said Nadine.

‘Aye...eh...you? Eh, what about you, awright?’

Fuckin pathetic.

Nadine smiled and emitted a prolonged, ‘Awww...Ah’m always awright, hun, Ah’m just up fur ma script, ken?’

‘Aye, Ah ken.’

‘How’s Saffi? Ah’ve no seen her fur a wee while now.’

‘Saffi...eh...aye, she...eh...guid, aye.’

‘Well, when yi see her, kin yi tell her-’

Nadine’s lips continued tae move but Dominic felt another ‘poem’ kick him hard in the balls as she spoke,

*In the same garden stands another me, another you,
The other you hates me and the other me loves me,
Me in a paradise and me in hell,
Another me bored and another in ecstasy,
Forking time, multiple mes, multiple yous,
In that time which is this time, which is you and which is me?*

The words dissipated and he worried that he might forget them before he could make sense ay them and turn them intae another poem for the collection. Or mibbe a paragraph, maxim-like, for a book that he’d been thinking ay writing. After a brief, numbing silence, Nadine’s soft voice was audible again.

‘...Ah’m askin fur her.’

‘Ay?’ Dominic heard himself utter, wondering what she’d been saying while his mind had floated off intae...wherever it had gone just been. A toneless voice crackled over the intercom.

‘Dominic Mathers, room ten.’

At the same time, the obnoxious woman at the counter was storming oot, screaming at the top ay her voice, ‘AH’VE GOAT FUCKIN BAIRNS TAE FEED, YA

SPECCY BITCH!’ at the poor wee receptionist. Nadine made tae approach the counter, then turned back tae Dominic and looked at him, aw serious like.

‘Mind an tell Saffi Ah’m askin fur her, ay? Tell her tae pop round. Fur a drink, like.’

‘Aye...eh, aye Nads. Eh...Ah’ll see yi later, ay?’ Dominic said, no noticing how quickly he was walking until he got ootae the reception area and intae the maze ay GP’s offices.

The door tae room ten was open and Dr Black was scribbling something doon on a piece ay paper.

‘Hello Dominic,’ he said withoot looking up. ‘It’s been quite some time, has it not?’

‘Eh...a while, aye, it’s been a wee while, aye, eh-’

‘I’ve written you up for some of these.’ Dr Black looked up, his eyes dark but his face smiling like a rat that had just been injected wi morphine. His entire face appeared rat-like then, wi his sticky-oot lugs and pointy chin, his venomous glare, and then quickly moulded back intae the almost handsome, square-jawed, middle-aged man he remembered, wi thinning dark hair and bad-guy movie-star looks. He adjusted his specs and glanced back tae the desk, picking up a report. ‘It is your...er...mental issues that you’ve come to see me about, yes?’

‘Eh...well, eh...ma depression, aye. Ah’ve no been sleeping too well, ay. It’s gettin...eh.... worse.’ He decided no tae mention the voices; Dominic wanted a diagnosis, but no *that* one.

‘Well,’ the doctor laughed, low and fake, ‘you’ve never formally been diagnosed with depression as such, not by me anyway, and we’ve seen each other, er...’ His eyes drifted back tae the report in his hand. ‘We’ve seen each other quite a number of times now. I note that you have anxiety. These will help, on top of your other medications, of course.’

‘What are they?’

‘Pills. Not sleeping pills, but they’ll help you sleep – and they’ll help with your paranoia. They’re experi...new, but very effective. A very well-respected doctor has endorsed this medication and every patient who has been treated with these drugs has testified to their effectiveness. We’re very excited about these, actually, very excited indeed. A new development, an experiment, of sorts, but very effective.’

‘Ma depression?’

‘Your powerlessness. Is this something you’ve ever thought about, Dominic? You see, I fear that, rather than being depressed or even ill, the nature of your problems may lie in what we are loosely referring to as an ‘inability to handle will power’. We don’t think you’re ill as such, we - or rather, I - feel that you are merely impotent. Not sexually of course,’ he laughed again, forced and low in pitch, ‘not sexually, no, but powerless, yes...it’s difficult to explain.’

‘Eh...Ah...’

‘It’s a phenomenon that we’re presently looking into, my colleagues and I, but for now, please trust me.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Powerless over power! You’re harmless, but impotent. Will power is an alien emotion to you. Do you know what I mean?’

This guy was speaking in fucking riddles. Dominic wondered whether he wasnae purposefully trying tae confuse him, mibbe tae dissuade him fae asking for counselling again, like.

‘Can I ask, am I right in saying that your mother has a drinking problem?’

‘Ma mum? Eh...aye, she likes a drink, aye. How?’

‘Why.’

‘Ay?’

‘You said *how* when you meant *why*. Why do you say *how* when you mean *why*?’

Dr Black smiled and Dominic felt himself return the gesture, but he didnae mean tae and he couldnae tell whether the doctor was deliberately fucking wi him or no.

‘Eh...well, it’s just the way folk talk, is it no?’

‘Really? Fascinating.’ The doctor stroked his chin. ‘So, you’re mother’s an alcoholic?’

‘Eh, well Ah suppose-’

‘No, no, it’s okay.’ He held his palm in the air. ‘Apologies. I shouldn’t have asked. I was just wondering whether she was alright.’

‘Ah’ve no seen her fur a while, actually, so-’

‘Well anyway, don’t overthink what we’ve discussed. We have come to believe that will power and overthinking for people like you can be dangerous, likewise self-confidence. Some people just don’t know what to do with such characteristics. Please, trust me.’

Dominic glanced at the pink piece ay paper that the doctor had given him. He couldnae read what it said.

‘Eh....eh...Dr Murray had said that Ah’ve goat depression. He gies iz...eh...well, anti-depressants. He says that-’

The doctor’s cheeks widened laboriously, like they were competing wi some kindae invisible magnetic force, making his smile seem even more fake. Again, he adjusted his glasses.

‘Well, you have had a couple of episodes of unexplained, endogenous depression, yes. ‘Depression’, however, has never been concretely diagnosed. It’s possible, yes, probable perhaps, that you have some kind of depression, but let’s try these before we jump to any wild conclusions. These will help. Keep taking your other medications and we’ll see what happens.’

Dr Black’s smile grew tae a fucking scary grin and he even showed some very-white teeth. His frowning eyes suddenly burnt wi devilish glee. ‘I’ve given you two month’s supply. Take two in the morning and two at night, together with the other medications I’ve written you up for. If you make an appointment for mid-September, we can review your

dosage then. In the meantime, just take them as prescribed and take care of yourself, okay?’

He extended a hand, though the smile had gone.

‘Eh...Ah’d been wonderin whether we could talk about me getting some kindae...eh... counselling, ken...like, someb’dy take talk tae.’ Dominic shook the doctor’s hand and quickly withdrew it his own as he spoke.

‘Some kind of...eh...counselling,’ the doctor mimicked. ‘Oh, well, we have been over this, have we not, Dominic? I’m afraid the counselling services are still full...waiting lists, you know, huge waiting lists, NHS cutbacks, you’re an intelligent lad, you know the...er...score. There’s not much we can do for you there, I’m afraid. I’ve prescribed you more anti-depressants, with a view to maybe stopping these in the future, and some Valium. It was good to see you again, Dominic.’

‘Aw aye,’ Dominic tried tae keep the conversation going, ‘aw aye...eh, Ah’ve been advised that Ah might huv tae attend a return tae work assessment and Ah was wonderin...’ but Dr Black was awready asking for a Ms Zubizarreta tae come tae room ten.

Dominic’s hand was on the door handle when Dr Black spoke again.

‘I don’t do reports for the Department of Work and Pensions, I’m afraid.’

Catastrophe

(07/09/2002: Dx? Rx: Seroxat 40mg/day, Zopiclone 7.5mg/day x 2 bedtime, Amitrip 150mg/day??? 50mg/day x 2)

Dominic saw his legs take huge strides in front ay him and realised that he was walking unnaturally fast. His eyes darted around him as he walked, whizzing fae side tae side and rolling up and doon as if they had a mind ay their own. Paranoia was kicking in big time and he wanted tae get hame post-haste. The fitba was on this afternoon, wi *Der Terrier*, Scotland's new German superman, at the helm for the first time in a competitive match. Dominic hoped that would calm him while he waited on Saffi; he was anticipating a big win against the Faroes. She'd been on a training course doon the Borders, something tae dae wi her work, and was due hame sometime later. He hadnae taken his meds, never did when Scotland were playing, and Saffi would be angry aboot that, but only if she found oot. *Ab'll be fine*, he told hissel, *just keep walking. She's no ma girlfriend anyway...*

It was a cool, misty afternoon and a light drizzle fell on his heid. He looked left, then right, then left again, and then over his shoulder. A dog barked and he jumped. He looked around frantically. Across the road and through the steel rails ay the park fence, an elderly lady was walking a border terrier...*Calm doon, Dominic, it's just a wee dug...*

...*BANG!*

Fuck wis that?

He turned tae see an auld battered Capri struggling that was tae mount a speed bump. *C'moan Dom, take it easy man*. When he turned back, he started violently at the sudden sight ay an angry face staring at him fae the inside ay a parked Mini Cooper. The face had dark colourless eyes, angry eyes, and a creased mono-brow, and it looked like it wanted tae thump him. It took Dominic a few seconds tae realise that he was gazing at his ain reflection. Mirrors always scared him.

And suddenly he was ten again. That was the first time Dominic caught sight ay hissel in a long mirror. It was horrible. Sadistic eyes frowned back at him wi demonic intent, threatening orbs ay indeterminate colour, dark and troubled, blazed ootae the windae ay De Luca's sweet shop. He stood there, trying tae convince hissel that it wasnae him, the devilish gobshite that stared back. There were four ay them standing there, and one by one he was able tae decipher the others, meaning that the evil reflection that stood at the end ay the pack could only be his ain. One guy wore specs and had a lazy left eye, so he was oot. Gaz was a couplae years younger than Dominic, plump wi blond hair. But Kingy, he had dark hair, just like Dominic. For a moment, he prayed that the tall, handsome figure ay Kingy was him, but Kingy wore jeans and a hoody, while Dominic was dressed in trackies and a t-shirt. Later that day, he'd spent hours looking in the mirror, stretching the skin on his face, trying tae look like someone else, pulling his cheeks right back until it looked like his face was coated in cling-film, and then letting go. But every time he let go, it sprung back intae that same ugly pus that had scrutinized him just a minute ago, only thirteen years younger, wi those same dark orbital abysses in its heid, staring right intae him. He closed his eyes and tried tae bring hissel back tae the present.

Two more streets tae negotiate an Ah'm hame. Keep walkin, just keep walkin, Dom. Suddenly, his legs wurnae stomping doon Park Road the way they were a few minutes earlier. Now, it seemed a real slog for Dominic, like he was trudging through marshland. *Why does iviry'bing seem so unreal? Is Park Road really this long?* He looked doon and saw that he was clutching a bottle ay whisky, which was odd because he was pretty sure that he didnae normally drink. Thinking he'd mibbe bought it tae self-medicate, he took a swig. A strange, warm feeling grew in his belly and rose up intae his chest, though the whisky itself tasted rank. He took another look at the bottle and saw that he'd drunk about a quarter ay it. Realising that he was holding his breath, Dominic exhaled and his legs eased their pace a bit.

He looked up and saw starlings swooping and swirling in the grey September sky. The whisky had reduced his paranoia, but only minimally, and he couldnae seem tae get this fucking annoying song ootae his mind...*Street's like a jungle, so call the police...* It had been playing in his brain aw morning in stops and starts, just the same wee part in a continuous loop, over and over. Every time he passed someone in the street, the volume seemed tae increase. *Who sings that fuckin song?* And right on cue, as he contemplated the authors ay that mind-numbing pop song, he saw wee Chaz Smith walking towards him wi his wee dug, Dougal. Chaz was a grey auld man who looked, walked and talked just like Droopy the cartoon dug. The sadistic DJ in Dominic's brain cranked the volume up a notch as Droopy neared...*Street's like a jungle, SO CALL THE POLICE...STOAP...FUCKING STOAP!* Saffi had told him no tae worry about these things, that it was normal for people tae get tunes stuck in their heids, it happens tae everyone, she said. Thinking ay Saffi's soft voice calmed him a wee bit and the music faded. He even managed a grumbling '*Awright*' as he and Droopy passed. Droopy gave him the nod and then Dominic brainlessly uttered '*Awright Dougal*' tae the dug.

What the fuck did yi say that fur, ya stupid cunt? Now even auld Droopy Smith binks yir mad. Talkin tae the dug? Ya crazy bastard.

Suddenly, another noise exploded in Dominic's brain.

'Awright Dominic? DOM!'

Is someb'dy shouting oan me? Did Ah really just hear that?

'DOM, MAN!'

There it is again. He'd definitely heard it. He looked across the street and, sure enough, standing in one ay the gardens on the corner ay Beechwood Park was Gaz Irvine. His trackie bottoms were covered in white gloss, and on the grass by his feet sat several tins ay paint. Gaz was a short, fat bastard wi a round moon-face and a light suedehead. Dominic had been a couplae years above him in school and had spent a short period ay

time in hospital wi him; Gaz was a loon tae. He wasnae afraid ay Gaz, feeling ootae sorts in his presence wasnae a problem because Gaz was so far gone hissel, but he really couldnae be bothered wi his moronic chat.

‘How yi daein, Dom?’

(...Street's like a JUNGLE...)

‘Behaving yirsel?’ Gaz said, continuing withoot giving him a chance tae reply. ‘Ah’m just paintin Kingy’s shed fur him. So you livin in Nitten again?’ Dominic nodded. ‘Aye, Ah’ve stoaped aw the drugs now, like. Well, mair or less (...*CALL THE POLICE*...). Ah git Carer’s Allowance fur lookin efter ma bird,’ he went on, bouncing up and doon on his toes as he spoke. ‘She’s ill, see. You still workin...what wis that joab yi were daein again? The yard! You still workin in Steph’s yard, wi Boab an that?’ He gobbled on the path.

It was like was carrying on a conversation that had been interrupted three years ago. Dominic had worked in a yard for a few months a few years back, which was basically the sum total ay any employment he’d had since leaving school.

‘Ah dinnae huv tae work like, Ah git Carer’s Allowance ay,’ Gaz continued. ‘Kingy’s gicin iz twenty quid fur daein this, though’.

One ay the advantages ay bumping intae Gaz was that you didnae really have tae converse wi him, he just spraffed on and Dominic pretended tae listen. What’s more, Gaz could never stay still, he seemed tae be in a permanent state ay agitation, although his disposition seemed tae be an inordinately happy one, rather than one ay distress.

‘Ah’ve started growin ma ain grass, though. Yi just need tae buy a sunbed, some seeds and Boab’s yir uncle. He giggled intae his hand, leaving a mess ay white paint around his mooth. ‘Ah dinnae huv tae work, see...’

Dominic just let him blether on, occasionally nodding and feigning a laugh. Eventually, Gaz asked him again how he was, actually giving Dominic a chance tae answer.

‘Aye, no bad Gaz, no bad mate, no bad.’

(...Street's like a JUNGLE...).

‘What yi been up tae then, son? Ah’ve just been discharged fae the hospital again. Ah wis gittin the DTs really bad like, and Ah’d started smokin too much weed again. Ah’ve stoaped smokin dope now though, like, cept a couplae joints...well three...naw, wait, four...four joints a day. Nae mair, though, four at the maist.’

Suddenly, he did a karate kick, assaulting nothingness as he lashed oot at mid-air, one ay several strange habits for which he was infamous. Random kung-fu kicks, talking tae hissels and spitting like a trooper were defining characteristics ay Gaz Irvine.

‘So how long yi been back in fuckin Nitten fur then?’ Gaz said.

‘Three years, mate. Ah saw yi last year, no mind?’

‘That long? Fuck, Ah’m fucked! Where wis it yi wur before again? Wur you no up North or some’ing? Aberdeen, naw?’

‘Alloa.’

‘Alloa?’ For a second, Gaz looked distant and even thoughtful.

‘Alloa stinks, ay?’

‘Alloa? Eh...aye...eh, Alloa stinks.’ Dominic was starting tae calm doon a bit.

‘Where yi watchin the game aboot then?’

‘The flat.’

‘Come up tae the Top Club, mate. Me, Kingy and Boab’s what’s-iz-pus are aw gaun up later oan, watch the game, huv a wee carry on, ken what Ah mean, mate?’

‘Cannae mate, Saffi’s due hame later.’

‘Saffi Smith? Ya lucky cunt!’

‘Naw, Gaz, it’s no like that, ken? Wur just sharin, like.’

‘Aye right, ya dirty bastard.’ Gaz laughed a throaty laugh and lit a cigarette. ‘Hiy, you managed tae expose the secret ay The Textbook yet?’ he grinned. Dominic looked tae the ground, hurt at the sudden mention ay The Textbook. His (un)certainty ay its existence

had been swaying fae complete conviction tae absolute denial and back again over for the last nine or so years, and now he languished somewhere in-between.

‘Aw, Ah ken there’s nae Textbook, Gaz. Ah was ill, ken?’

‘Ah ken, Dom, Ah’m just kiddin wi yi. Hiy, gies a wee sip ay yir whisky mate?’

‘Ah cannae Gaz, yi ken yi cannae drink, mate.’

‘Aw, come oan Dom, man.’

‘Naw Gaz.’

‘Suit yirsel. Ah’m gaggin oan a wee blast though.’ He looked around and then picked up a tin ay paint that sat by his feet. ‘Hmmm...’ he put it back doon and pulled his sleeve over his hand, dipping it in the paint. Putting his forearm tae his mooth, he took in several huge blasts ay paint fumes, sucking it in wi real vigour.

‘Gaz, what yi daein man?’

‘AAAGH!’ Gaz gasped, pulling his sleeve fae his mooth. White paint ringed his lips and slobbered doon his chin, dripping ontae his trainers. He bent over double and panted furiously, huffing and puffing like he’d just run a marathon. ‘Fuckin hell, man!’ More paint slavered fae Gaz’s mooth ontae the path and he stood back up, his eyes rolling insanely in his heid. He picked up a tin ay Ronseal and started drinking fae that.

‘Gaz! Gaz, c’moan man!’

Am Ah dreamin here? Gaz is crazy, but for fuck’s sake...

‘AAAGH! Gaz groaned again, gasping. ‘The paint’s lovely but yi huv tae be careful wi the Ronseal...it does exactly what it says on the tin.’

‘Ay?’

‘It says harmful tae drink ay, an it gies yi a fuckin sair stomach dae!’ Still hyperventilating, he winked at Dominic.

‘Gaz...eh...Ah need tae go...eh...tell yi what...here, take the whisky. Dominic tossed the bottle over the fence. ‘Ah’m away...eh...see yi later, ay?’

Dominic turned and walked fast away, his eyes darting frantically fae side tae side and rolling up and doon. He turned his collar tae the rain, which was falling heavier now. By the time he arrived hame, he remembered that he'd bought the whisky for the fitba, he always had a couple for that.

He prayed that Saffi would be hame sooner rather than later.

The two red and black pills trembled in Dominic's hand. This was a catastrophe. Scotland were two doon tae the Faroe Islands and Dominic couldnae work oot what he'd done wrong. He stared at his shaking palm and contemplated his options: take the tablets and keep The Textbook at bay, or be responsible for the worst defeat in the history ay Scottish international fitba.

What tae dae, what tae dae?

Aw he could think was that The Textbook were ontae him awready, and that's why everything was so fucked-up. They must have kent that he hadnae taken his meds. But how did they ken so soon? And how could he have taken them anyway, when the fitba was on like? Surely they could him let off just this once, for the occasion, had they nae heart ataw? He couldnae let his country doon. He contemplated whether or no he could his take meds now that Scotland were losing anyway. That would keep The Textbook ootae his mind, but it wasnae even half-time yet, Scotland could still win. If he took the pills, he was sure they'd lose. This was more than superstition, he kent what would happen if he took his meds. He had tae take responsibility. They wurnae inside his mind yet, The Textbook, but they were ontae him. He had time.

He threw the pills across the room.

The game itself was dismal. It looked greyer in the Faroe Islands than it was ootside Dominic's windae. A biting wind blew through the screen and Dominic shivered in his armchair. A heavy downpour fell on the players, but should Scotland no be used tae that?

They were playing like schoolboys, and the Faroes deserved tae be ahead. It was painful tae watch and Dominic had done everything in his power tae influence the match, but he just couldnae control the ball wi his mind. Scotland were inept; the fishermen were in control.

Just as the ref blew for half-time, his eyes were suddenly drawn tae a poster on the wall. It hung behind the telly and he thought it odd that he hadnae noticed it before. It depicted a moustached man, one ay they handlebar numbers, wearing a Jimmy-hat. He looked serious, even angry. He was pointing his finger directly at Dominic. Above his heid, it read 'SCOTLAND', and below his neck, 'wants YOU!'

Where did that come fae?

He turned his attention back tae the telly, curious tae hear what the pundits had tae say about the first half. Dougie Donnelly had his bugger-lugged heid doon as the camera whip-panned and zoomed intae a close-up. Donnelly's face was bright red when he looked up. Dominic's eyes followed the camera movement precisely and he listened intently. Donnelly looked first sad, then angry, as he spoke fae his two-handled jug shaped face...

...We have just witnessed, he began, the worst forty-five minutes in the history of Scottish football. He turned tae another camera and gazed straight through the lens intae Dominic. And it's all because you Dominic, you stupid CUNT!

Dominic leapt off his armchair and cowered behind it.

Are you listening to me, Dominic Mathers?

'NUT! IT'S NO MA FAULT!' he screamed, thrusting his hands over his ears.

Look at me, I'm talking to you, Dominic.

'IT'S NO MA FAULT,' Dominic yelled again, 'AH DIDNAE TAKE MA TABLETS, HONESTLY!'

He shut his eyes tight, but it was too late, Dougie Donnelly's voice was now firmly in his heid. Dominic crept back intae his armchair and grabbed the remote. His hands shook as he searched for the 'mute' button. He pulled his feet ontae the chair and cradled

his knees in his arms, plunging his head between his legs. But still, Donnelly's voice remained in his head...

...Lynch him, he said, over and over. Lynch him, lynch him...You're going to be lynched for this, Dominic...

'SAFFI!' he screamed.

Dominic rocked back and forth, spittle rolling down his chin, saying the times tables over and over in his head, trying to get that voice out of there...

...Seventeen, thirty-four, fifty-one, sixty-eight, eighty-five...

He went right up to the thirty-second, then decided to play the word game.

Dougie Donnelly's evil monotonous drone had lowered to a terrifying whisper...

... Lynch him, lynch him, lynch him...as Dominic began,

'Tree...table...phone...label...stethoscope...terror...horror...house...NUT...STOAP! FUCK! NAE ALLITERATION!' He thrust his head in his hands and rocked harder, back and forth. He started again. 'Tree...table...phone...label...stethoscope...terror... horror...house...NUT...STOAP! FUCK! NAE ALLITERATION! START AGAIN...tree...table...leg...able...NUT! NAE RHYTHMING! NAE RHYTHMING, NAE ALLITERATION, NAE PROPER NOUNS! START AGAIN, DOMINIC!'

You're breaking the rules, Dominic, Dougie Donnelly said, start again.

Dominic was fucking terrified now. Donnelly's voice was stuck in his head FOREVER and he kept getting the word game wrong. Something was wrong, more wrong than ever. What did The Textbook want?

'LEAVE IS ALONE, PLEASE...'

Submit all your will to me...

'...LET IT IN OR LEAVE IT ALONE!' Dominic cried.

...Trust me.

'SAFFRON!'

Blood and Guts on the 95

The x95 was busy. Saffi sat by herself near the apparently deaf, fat bastard bus driver, behind a couplae spraffing pensioners who stank ay piss and spoke in a strong Border's accent that was aw Greek tae her. A few seats further back, a greeting-faced brat was gurning and wailing like a bairn. He was aboot eight and she guessed that he was some kindae mental case because his sister, who was a guid couplae years younger, was singing tae try and calm him. She had a beautiful voice that would have soothed Saffi's heid if it wasnae for the Brat.

*Ally, bally, ally bally bee...*she sang. It was really sweet, but the song sounded weird sung in an English accent, and the Brat cried regardless.

‘WAAAHH!’

‘Stop cwying!’ his dad said, in a posh accent which she couldnae quite place.

‘No daddy, I won’t stop cwying...WAAAHH!’ The Brat’s voice was identical tae his Da’s, but higher in pitch.

‘Why won’t you stop cwying? You said you were going to stop cwying.’

The Brat’s wail lowered tae a mumbling ‘Hmmm...’ and he spoke through his crocodile tears. ‘I said I would stop cwying when you started tawking to me.’

‘I said I would only start tawking to you when you’d stopped cwying.’

‘Then I won’t stop cwying...WAAAHH!’

Ally bally, ally bally bee....

Across fae her sat a skinny, speccy cunt, probably her age, who’d been gawking at her at the station through his thick broon NHS goggles, which had one leg taped on wi Elastoplast. Wi his hair greased over in a yukky side-score, he looked like the young Marty

McFly-snr fae *Back tae the Future*. He glanced up fae behind a huge hardback every now and then tae perv at her, then quickly looked away whenever their eyes met.

Aw these things, though, were secondary distractions. A bunch ay pissheids sitting at the back ay the bus, probably in their early-twenties anaw, had been pissing her off since they boarded at the depot in Carlisle, where Saffi had been on a training course for work. Most ay them were just a bunch ay dickheids, but one guy in particular was giving her pure dug's abuse.

'HIY BLONDIE, C'MOAN UP HERE AN TALK TAE ME! YOU KEN WHO AH'M TALKIN TAE DOLL, YOU UP THE FRONT!'

She kept pretending tae ignore him, gazing at the fields and lochs that flew by outside as they shot doon the A7, gritting her teeth at every jibe, her right fist clenched firmly by her side. Bar his mates who occasionally shushed him, naebody on the bus seemed tae take any notice. The driver whistled away as he drove, the Brat howled on, and the auld buggers behind her were busy whining aboot the price ay fags, the cancellation ay *One Man and His Dog* in favour ay the tennis at the weekend, and the pros and cons ay First bus' removal ay their auld x81 service.

'WAAAH!' went the Brat.

'Stop cwyin!' said Daddy.

*Ally, bally, ally bally bee...*sang his sister.

'HIY BLONDIE!' shouted Drunk Cunt.

It was aw so fucking nauseating. Saffi was worried aboot her flatmate and wanted tae get hame ASAP. Dominic had sounded agitated on the phone when they'd spoken earlier. He seemed tae have worked hissel intae a frenzy aboot the fitba, probably worried that he might affect the outcome ay the match if he watched the telly fae the wrong angle or something. Dominic was nuts, he was her best mate, but he was fucking nuts. He'd promised her that he'd taken his meds, but she had her doubts. During the conversation,

he'd mentioned The Textbook, and then immediately apologised, saying he was a bit confused and that his medication hadnae kicked in yet, but any mention ay The Textbook was usually an indication that he was ill. She was glad that he didnae ken what she really did for a living. She told him that she worked in an office, but no much more than that.

'HIY BLONDIE, LOOK AT MI WHEN AH'M TALKIN TAE YI!' Despite herself, Saffi turned around. The guy made like he was gonnae charge towards her, but one ay his mates pulled him back.

'Moan Stevie mate, sit doon pal, yir pissed,' he laughed. Drunk Cunt sat back doon. He was well-built wi a dark crew-cut and a heavy-set jaw. He had dark, angry eyes that stared her oot for a second, then he burst oot laughing.

'Och, Ah'm just kiddin wi yi, doll, Ah'm no gonnae hurt yi!' he laughed. On turning back, Saffi's eyes briefly met McFly's. He actually looked concerned, but again his eyes reverted tae his book.

Deciding she had a heidache, Saffi pulled oot a bottle ay vallies fae her handbag and copped two. Gradually, her irritation diminished and Drunk Cunt's jeers became just another noise over the hum ay the engine, the hoarse voices ay the gossiping pensioners and the wail ay the bawling Brat. She closed her eyes tae the rain that kissed the windae wi a gentle hypnotic pitter-patter and landed softly on the beautiful landscape ootside, which seemed tae filter through her eyelids as she drifted intae a soft hypnopompic awareness and, for a while, she wasnae on the A7, or in Carlisle, or Hawick, or Nitten, but some foreign land, mibbe Ireland, or Kendal, lying naked in the rain on the wet grass. By the time the bus reached Langholm, she was totally tranquil.

As a precession ay pensioners shuffled off the bus, Saffi opened her eyes and caught a glimpse ay her ain image in windae. She recognised herself instantly. Her wide blue eyes were grey in the reflection. She had fine a feline face and cute wee nose that buttoned at the end. It was the picture ay a beauty that she'd abhorred for years, a

monstrosity ay birth that was the aetiology ay her worst nightmare. Her golden hair looked light grey in the windae tae, like a black and white movie star's, and it was that beautiful blonde hair that her high school janitor, a wee fat balding fuck who lived on her street, used tae call her 'Mellow Yellow Hair' while he ran his minging hands through it when she was a teenager. Everybody liked the guy tae, they called him Jani DeVito, and he always smiled and had a laugh wi the pupils at break times, always giving Saffi the wink when he passed her in the corridor. She was glad that her hair looked grey in the windae, sometimes she wished it would stay that way, sometimes she wished she was ugly. Suddenly that song jumped intae her heid,

*I'm just mad about fourteen, fourteen's mad about me,
I'm just mad about fourteen, she's just mad about me...*

He used tae sing it while he did his business on her. She closed her eyes again tae get the monstrous beauty ay her ain face ootae her mind and quickly changed the tape in her brain, replacing it wi her favourite Roses' song,

*Did your bed and bookshelf, go
Run, run, run away,
These four walls saw the rise and fall and your midnight getaway...*

Ian Brown's soothing voice was one ay the few solaces that she found during those terrible days. For two years, she avoided school whenever she could, kipping it or feigning sickness, before eventually making herself really ill by experimenting wi anorexia nervosa. She hated herself for knowing the secret ay Jani DeVito's dark pleasures. At fifteen, she shaved off those blonde curls and started slicing herself wi razor blades, first her forearms and eventually her face, which she slashed open at the cheek tae make herself as ugly as possible. The scar had almost faded now, and Dominic affectionately called it her 'beauty scar' during those rare occasions when he was chill and half-sane. Shortly before her sixteenth birthday, her weight hit six stone and she fell ill wi pancreatitis. After a short period in the Infirmary, she was whisked off tae the Royal Ed, where she went voluntarily.

The tranquillity ay the Vallies was soon replaced by vivid memories ay those days, which came back in slow-moving pictures like a montage ay a silent horror movie in Technicolor, and she felt her eyelids grow heavy...

...Her first day in the nuthoose. She's frightened. Da tells her no tae worry, that he'll help her through. He looks worried, runs a hands through his long broon hair. Ma is shouting, *See the shame yir bringing oan the family? Folk'll talk, yi ken...* Da looks like he's gonnae greet. She wants tae tell him everythin, but he's pals wi Jani Devito. He doesnae ken, naeb'dy does. Ma drags her ootae the car, screamin, *see what yir putting us through? Draggin ma ain daughter intae the nuthoose...* Da stays inside. Saffi turns, has one last look at him. He's greetin, she's never seen Da's tears before. Saffi's arm, the one her Ma has a grip ay, is a mess ay self-inflicted archives ay terror, her 'war wounds', some are auld, some new...

...Winding corridors, beige walls lined wi paintins, autographs ay the insane beneath each picture, a title at the top: *The Sun Falling Behind A Hill, The Hanging Gardens, Dead Flowers...*

...The ward has a kitchen, just for the patients, where she sits waiting for the nurses. The inmates stare, some try tae comfort her. *Fuck yiz aw!* she screams... *fuck yiz aw!* That's aw she has tae say tae anybody. *Yir in the right place, hen,* an auld man in the corner says....

...Nurse Jackie greets her, shows her round. *This isnae a madhouse, it's a place for rest and respite.* She has a soft voice, tells Saffi she'll be okay, smiles. Nurse Jackie is nice, she likes Jackie. The tablets help her sleep...sometimes.

...She awakes tae the sound ay howlin wind, two nurses stand by her bed, it's still dark. *Where's Jackie? Ah want Jackie,* she cries. *Jackie's gone home. I'm Louise, this is...* Too many names, too many faces, they keep changin, the faces keep changin...the tablets are strong...she cannae stop greetin...

...The auld man, Henry, says *Take it easy sweetheart, yil be awright, it takes time tae get used tae it here, Ah'll help yi*. He has dark, sad eyes. She likes Henry anaw...

...Lookin ootae the windae, watching the autumn wind blow deid leaves across the grounds ay the nuthoose, she is utterly alone. She is seventeen years old. It's her birthday soon and her parents are comin tae visit, but she feels tired, so very tired. She cries...*they call it Mellow Yellow...*

Saffi awoke fae the nightmare tae a loud wail.

'WAAAH!'

Her eyes tore open and she heard someone shout something about '...TITS OOT!' She sprung upright and looked around, no sure whether it was her who'd shrieked or someone else.

'RIGHT PAL, ANYMAIR AY THAT AND AH'LL KICK YI OFF!'

Then she remembered Drunk Cunt and the Brat, and realised that the bus had broken doon somewhere near Suicide Farm on the A7. The driver was revving the engine, shouting at Drunk Cunt at the same time.

'...LAST WARNIN NOW!'

'Moan Stevie mate, that's enough pal, yir gonnae git us aw kicked off.' His mate wasnae laughing this time.

Saffi took another couplae Valium, hoping she might stay tranquil this time. Aw went quiet up back as she contemplated the nightmare. She was in much better shape after three months in the Bin. She'd started an exercise regime which included a hundred sit-ups and fifty press-ups a day. She let those golden curls grow back and kept them as a sortae silent protest (*Come and have a go if yi hink yir hard enough...*), though inwardly she still hated them. The scars on her body were a constant reminder ay the nightmare ay being in the

Bin, but she kindae liked them, never making any special effort tae cover them up. The person who helped her through it aw, unbelievably, was Dominic.

She took up boxing. No kickboxing like those lesbos fae work, *real* boxing. She learned that, because ay anatomical differences, women have tae punch differently fae men, draw their strength fae different parts ay the body. *'Men draw strength fae here'*, her trainer said, slapping his bicep, *'whereas women draw theirs fae here'*, and hit his waist. She remembered feeling somewhat uncomfortable when he put his hands on her hips and manoeuvred her intae position. *'Rotate yir hips, tense up the muscles ay yir waist, keep them biceps loose, and smash him right oan the nose, keeping yir wrist straight. If yi hit him hard enough on the nose, the bone behind it rattles and hits the brain, causin a knockoot. The brain is stunned, resultin in brain damage. That's the primary objective ay the Pugilist, tae cause brain damage in the opponent. Remember: hip, waist, bicep, CRACK!'* It gave her confidence, the boxing, and she even sparred wi men in training. She sometimes thought ay contacting Danny again, her auld trainer, taking it up again like...mibbe one day she will.

Whether Saffi ever truly 'got better' (as the nurses put it) emotionally, or no, re-discovering her sanity conjured a different Saffron Smith. She only wished that Dominic could get better tae, he needed tae toughen up. Being wee Miss Nice got her naewhere in life, worse than naewhere. A wee inner voice still told her that something was wrong though, it was the way he'd spoken on the phone, something in his voice; something definitely was up.

As the bus hummed and then roared back tae life, she realised how much she loved her best mate. Pictures ay the young Dominic passed through her diazepam-dazed brain and she found herself drifting blissfully in and ootae consciousness. She remembered the first time they met, when he was four and she was five. He was clutching his Ma's hand so tightly, hiding behind her legs. He was so cute and cuddly and shy. They lived on the same street and she used tae watch him fae her windae, playing fitba alone, walking hame

alone, and wondering why he was always alone. At some point in primary school, Saffi took him under her wing, like a big sister. She liked being his big sister, and when he finally came ootae his shell, back then before he was mad, she found him tae be the sweetest guy she'd ever met, intelligent tae, Dominic was highly intelligent. He thought hissel a poet, or even mibbe a novelist...she wasnae so sure aboot that, but still, he was bright. He could still be sweet and intelligent tae, she just wished he could see these things for hissel.

The stink ay vodka brought her back tae the present and she turned tae see Drunk Cunt's face a few inches face her ain.

'Awright Doll,' he said, 'you ignorin me?' His dark green eyes were glazed and he had a moronic grin on his face.

'Hey!' someone yelled. McFly was on his feet, aw six foot ay him, skinny as Twiggy, but tall as a fucking tree. He leaned over and put his hand on Drunk Cunt's shoulder. 'Leave her alone,' he said, 'she doesn't want to talk you.' Drunk Cunt looked at him, incredulous.

'Who the fuck ur you, like?' he said, his eyes now wide and rolling.

'Just leave the girl alone, okay?' Two ay Drunk Cunt's mates came rushing up fae the back.

'Moan Stevie man, leave it,' one ay them said.

'Where yi fae, pal? Drunk Cunt demanded.

'Alloa, originally.'

'Naw, smart cunt, where dae yi live now? What yi daein oan ma bus, ay? Why you oan the 95?'

'Well, my parents are English and I grew up in Alloa. Now I live in Danderhall.'

'Right smart arse you, ay? Posh cunt anaw.'

‘Stevie, come oan man,’ his mate kept on. Drunk Cunt stared at McFly for a few seconds, his pupils threatening tae burst, but McFly held his gaze and he won the battle ay wits. Drunk Cunt turned tae walk away, then looked back tae McFly.

‘Alloa yi say?’

‘Alloa, yes.’

‘Alloa stinks, ay?’

‘What?’

‘Alloa, fuckin stinks there, ay?’

‘Oh...yes,’ McFly said, ‘Alloa stinks.’

Drunk Cunt laughed as he swayed his way back tae his seat. Saffi smiled across at McFly, who blushed and smiled back, then returned tae his book. Saffi noticed that he was reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Glad she was gonnæ be hame soon, Saffi rested her heid against the windæ, feeling its moisture cool and pleasant on her cheek, and her thoughts drifted back tae Dominic.

One day, when Saffi was sitting in the gardens ay the nuthoose smoking a fag, she heard a familiar voice. ‘Saffron?’ it said. Dominic sat doon and put his arm around her. He didnae ken that much aboot the Bin really, it was only his second time, but the care he showed her was something she’d never forget. ‘Yil be awright here,’ he said, ‘Ah’ll take care ay yi.’

Saffi nudged McFly on the way by, mouthing the word ‘thanks’ as she pressed the bell.

‘No problem,’ McFly said.

The last thing she heard as she stepped off the bus and intae the rain that battered doon on the streets ay Nitten was the wee girl’s sweet voice... *Ally bally, ally bally bee*....and a final ‘WAAAHH!’ fae the Brat.

Saffi's heart raced as she fumbled in her handbag for her keys. The vallies were wearing off and that yukky feeling that Dominic was ill was rising. She slammed the door and dropped her handbag.

'NUT! DOMINIC!' she screamed.

Dominic was cowering on the armchair, cradling his knees in his arms and rocking hissel back and forth, sweat pouring fae his temples.

The telly was on mute and he was wearing a hat made ootae tinfoil, wi tinfoil antennae, something he done before tae stop The Textbook fae reading his thoughts.

'DOM!'

'Help, Saffi, 'The Text-' he cried. 'What is it they want, Saff? LET IZ IN OR LEAVE IZ ALANE!'

The Slayer Ay Tøftir

‘Ah hate this fuckin programme,’ Saffi said. ‘Look at them, smiley-faced pricks, fuckin suntans, fuckin umbrellas, dancin like fuckin pricks. Change the channel.’

Dominic sat unresponsive on the armchair, his face as pale as a gravedigger’s.

Sitting on the corner ay the couch wi her feet up, wrapped tightly in her duvet like a cooling fajita, Saffron felt warm and lazy, a coziness no unaided by the two vallies she’d copped no too long ago. She picked a sleeper fae her eye and flicked it at Dominic. It hit him on the face, but his stone-cauld gaze didnae flinch. A repeat ay *Friends* threatened tae interrupt her relative calm, but she was too comfy tae reach for the remote.

‘Goan change the channel, Dom. Ah hate this pish.’

He’d been distant aw day, which was worrying because he still hadnae really explained what had happened yesterday. She loved lazing around in her jammies on Sundays, she just wished Dom would say something, *anything*, about yesterday. She hadnae seen him so distressed for quite some time now, no since Scotland lost two nil tae England at Hampden the day after Gary Glitter was convicted, and she wondered whether the meds he was getting fae that Dr Black cunt were daein him more damage than guid. She kept telling him tae stick tae Dr Murray, but when he was desperate, Dominic would talk tae anyone. He did exactly as asked though and, withoot a word, started channel surfing, settling on one ay they documentary channels, which was airing an ad about some forthcoming docu-drama on Judas’ suicide.

‘It makes me feel so sad,’ a nun was saying, ‘that Judas didn’t know Jesus was planning to forgive him and that, ultimately, he consigned himself to hell.’

‘Bunch ay fuckin fruits, ay? Religious nuts.’ Saffi grinned, but still Dominic refused tae answer, though his eyes did eventually flicker at the array ay ads that followed, daft ads, repeats ay this, repeats ay that, charities, chat lines, *The Rise and Fall of David Hasselhoff*...

‘Dom, did you kill someb’dy or some’ing yisturday?’ she joked. Again, he ignored her.

If he’d just talk tae her, properly like, mibbe she could help, and then totally chill oot herself; she certainly wasnae looking forward tae work in the morning and she wanted a guid night’s kip beforehand. Finding him curled in a ball in the corner like that, though, was...well, fucking scary. Mibbe it had been some kindae adverse reaction, like withdrawals or something. Dom had said Dr Black’s meds were a new type ay anti-something-or-other that increased the production ay some kindae hormone in the brain and decreased the production ay another. Drug withdrawal would have explained a lot though...well, *a wee bit*, anyway.

‘Dom?’ Saffron shushed her voice tae a near-whisper. ‘Yi no gonnae explain a bit mair about...about...*yisiturday*.’

At least he had taken Dr Murray’s more conventional anti-depressants that morning, they seemed tae have helped a wee bit. Earlier, he’d sat there aw fidgety and nervous, getting up every now and again tae look ootae the windae, and then sitting back doon, avoiding the subject and leaving Saffi tae blether aboot auld times and future dreams, memories and fantasies ay a happiness that they both kent would never become them. Now, he seemed tae have melted intae his chair.

‘Dom?’

‘Aw, it was nuttin, it was just me bein...well...*me*...ken what Ah mean?’

‘Ah ken.’ She hated putting on that voice, her fake pseudo-psychologist’s fucking drawl, just like the patronizing voice that a woman called Chris used put on when she was in the nuthoose, weighing in at 5st 9lbs. *Back then...those days...*

‘Ah mean, Ah’d bumped intae Gaz-’

‘Did Gaz gie some’in, like? If he did, Ah’ll kick iz fuckin heid in.’

‘Naw, naw. Gaz was iz usual self, ken what Ah mean? Stoned ootae his heid ay, drinkin paint, Ronseal-’

‘Ronseal?’ She couldnae help laughing. Neither, it seemed, could Dom. She’d hit a nerve: guid.

‘Aye...fuckin Ronseal.’ He laughed again, *but was it genuine?* Dominic looked cute when he smiled, no quite as cute as when he was a laddie like, but there was still an element ay boyishness below his dark, red-rimmed eyes. ‘He offered me some. Ah didnae take it.’

‘He’s a mad fucker, Gaz. Harmless though, ay?’ She looked Dominic in the eyes for affirmation ay Gaz’s innocuousness.

‘Gaz, aw aye. He’s crazier than me.’

‘Well, at least someb’dy is!’

‘Aye,’ Dominic grunted tae a giggle, then giggled tae a sigh. ‘Aye, at least someb’dy is.’

‘Next up’, the telly voice-over man announced, ‘a documentary exploring the dark side of Hitler’.

Saffron felt her pupils widen at the ridiculousness ay a documentary on the dark side ay Hitler and, sure enough, the programme was actually entitled *The Dark Side of Hitler*. Usually, programmes aboot the Holocaust disturbed Dominic but, wi this, she spied an opportunity tae lighten up the atmosphere. When she looked back at him, though, Dom seemed unaffected. Mibbe he twitched in his armchair a bit, but there was nae facial response.

Saffi narrowed her eyes and wondered for the millionth time whether her tortured best mate was really a troubled genius. Awright, so his poetry was bullshit, but how was it that she’d kent him for almost as long as she could remember and still she couldnae work him oot? The aetiology – a word she’d learnt fae Dominic – ay her ain troubles was crystal, dark crystal mibbe, but crystal nonetheless, but what had Dom seen that made him the way

he was? What *really* went on in his mind? Was it genetic? His Ma was a total alci like, but she wasnae mad like Dom, she was a nice person really, like Dom but no like him, nice but disturbed, in a very different way. Mibbe it came fae his Da? Dominic was a *whodunit?* and, as far as she was aware, his Ma hadnae told him; he still lived under the illusion that his Da was some kindae brute who just up and left one day.

‘The dark side ay Hitler, ay? Wonder what the light side ay Hitler was?’

Dominic’s top lip twitched and he smiled, revealing the yellowing caps ay his perfectly straight teeth, but still she couldnae tell whether he was faking it or no. She decided tae keep pressing him, lightly like; she wanted tae get some genuine heartiness ootae him, the Dominic ay the auld days, when he was a cool, cute wee guy.

‘Mibbe he was a guid laugh in the pub or some’ing? Mibbe he was shit hot at pool or some’ing?’ she joked.

Saffron’s valled-heart softly pounded when she detected a hint ay that gentle, catchy throatiness ay his boyhood giggle and the hairs on the back ay her neck fluttered. She went on,

‘Ja, ja, it was all just a big misunderstanding. Actually, I find zose Jewish folks rather charming.’

‘Yir German accent’s fuckin appallin,’ he said bluntly, but wi the ghost ay a twinkle hiding somewhere behind the darkness ay his pupils.

Sitting there, aw comfy and warm, no overly-interested in learning aboot the dark side ay Hitler, a soft brain-wave caressed Saffi’s right frontal lobe like gentle fingers in her heid.

‘Hiy,’ she said, ‘fancy a game ay fitba?’

‘Ay?’

‘Aye!’ Saffi flung her duvet tae the floor and shuffled over tae Dom, crouching doon tae his eye-level. ‘Like when we wur wee, mind?’

‘What yi oan aboot, Saffron?’

‘When we wur wee, mind? You an me, playin fitba aw day long.’ She eyed him seriously. ‘C’moan Dominic, you need a kick up the arse, big-time, like. Git up, ya lazy bastard!’

‘You serious? Ah’m zonked oan fuckin ADs an vallies.’

‘So what?’

‘It’s fuckin freezin ootside.’

‘Och, we used tae play oot in the cauld fur hours. Mind that time we wur playin in the snow aw day, till it goat too dark tae see the fuckin baw, an your Ma had tae come lookin for yi cos we’d been oot fur so long?’

‘We wur in oor shorts anaw!’ Dominic’s eyes widened and Saffi’s subtle brain-wave became momentarily tidal. Feeling excited on vallies was an alien but welcome emotion.

‘Git yirsel ready!’ she said. ‘Ah’ll git ma gear oan.’

‘Saffi,’ Dominic said, ‘you’re crazier than me.’

‘Naeb’dy’s madder than you, Dom, ‘C’moan, ya borin cunt, git ready!’

‘Yi goat a baw like? What’ll Ah wear?’

‘Wear yir fuckin trackies, ya daft cunt, wear yir jeans, wear whatever the fuck yi want. It’s just a kickaboot, a bit ay fun. Ah hink oor chances ay gaun pro huv bypassed us, dae yi no? Just git ready!’

It wasnae easy, shifting aw the crap in the closet at the end ay the hall like, but she found her auld Mitre Delta behind her barely-used mountain bike and their broken tumble dryer. She hadnae kicked it for a guid couplae years now, but once she felt it under her feet again, she realised what a great idea this was. *Mibbe Ah’m the fuckin genius. Ha!* Though she was daein it for Dom, Saffi wondered whether it might bring back some happy memories for her tae. She felt great in her 1990 Scotland shorts and her 1989 Stone Roses t-shirt,

rolling the ball under her foot through the hallway. Dominic appeared in his trackies and an auld, yellae, retro '85 Liverpool away top.

‘Saffi, Ah’m tellin yi, we’ll look like a couplae dicks in front ay the whole street. It’s only wee laddies that play oot there now. Ivirybody’ll be able tae see us anaw, it’s like a fuckin Panoptican oot there.’

‘Aw, stoap bein such a big poof, ya big poof! It’ll be dark soon anyway, naeb’dy’ll be watchin us.’

Dominic was right, though, it was fucking freezing ootside, the autumn air an odd crystalline-grey, darkening wi the imminent onset ay the night, darkening like her mind did when her teenage memories crept intae the pits ay her mind, memories ay *those days*...She blotted it oot quickly, letting the cauld, menthol-smelling air tickle her bare legs and clear her nostrils.

Most ay the lights ay the four-a-block flats that made up The Drive had awready been switched on. As she Tiggered up the garden path wi the ball at her feet, Saffi became mildly conscious ay her self-inflicted tattoos, particularly the one on her inner left thigh, which read...

...READ MA FUCKIN LIPS – MINE...

...in small, light, red lettering, wi an arrow pointing tae her fud. She’d scratched in on wi a blunt Stanley knife when she was fifteen, perfecting it wi the pin fae a war memorial poppy. Ten years on and it was still visible, fading, but visible. Well, at least the approaching darkness would conceal the epidermal archives ay *those days*...

She crab-passed the ball tae Dom, who strolled along awkwardly beside her. Rolling the ball backwards, Dominic attempted a few keepy-uppies, managing five before almost falling backwards ontae the wee triangle ay grass ootside the front gate. He toe-poked it back tae Saffi, who managed tae keep the ball in the air wi six touches, two wi the right foot, three wi the knee and one wi her left foot, before losing it herself.

‘No as guid as we used tae be, ay?’ Saffi said.

‘Eh...naw...naw, wur no.’

‘Aw, at least try an sound enthusiastic, Dom. C’moan!’ Saffi nudged Dominic and jogged the last ten yards tae the park in the middle ay the Drive. Dominic made a half-arsed attempt tae imitate her, kindae half-jogging, half-walking. ‘C’moan, ya lazy bastard!’ Saffron commanded.

‘What wi gonnae play?’

‘Long shots.’

‘Long shots?’

‘Long shots.’

There were awready makeshift goalposts rendered fae stolen traffic cones for that very purpose. Saffi jogged up the slope tae the top ay the park, leaving Dominic tae be the one shooting uphill, though the goals wurnae quite far enough apart tae really justify the phrase ‘long shots’. The street was strangely quiet for dusk in the Drive, so Saffi only had tae raise her voice a wee bit tae be heard,

‘Right, Ah’m Scotland,’ she said.

‘What, efter yisturday? Go Scotland if yi want, Ah’m fuckin Holland.’

Saffron thought ay yesterday’s humiliation against the Faroes, thanked fuck she’d missed it, and quickly changed her mind.

‘Awright...Ah’ll be Italy. It’s Holland v Italy. First tae three, right? Best ootae three.’

Dominic didnae respond.

‘Right?’

‘If yi want. Hardly long shots this though, ay? There’s barely thirty yards between us. Like when we wur wee yi said, this is hardly like when we wur wee, is it?’

‘Aw! Will yi shut up ya miserable cunt, just lighten up an play the game, ay?’

Awright?’

‘Awright.’

‘Aye?’

‘Aye? Awright.’ She passed the ball tae Dominic. ‘You start.’

‘Look, aw the lights are gaun oan, folk’ll be watchin us, Ah swear!’

‘Hiy, Ah’m the blonde babe in the shorts, if they’re watchin anybody they’ll be watchin me! Just kick the fuckin baw!’

Dominic was right about the Panoptican thing though; Saffron noticed a wee gathering ay laddies and lassies watching them fae behind his goal and she saw auld Droopy Smith glance over as he opened the gate tae wee widowed Miss McCarthur’s garden. She was conscious tae ay the fat, baldy guy who lived upstairs at number 31 tae her left, gazing oot fae behind his curtains, then creeping back behind them whenever she glanced over. She kept quiet as Dominic took a half-arsed shot. The ball was going well-wide, so Saffi exaggerated her dive tae make the ‘save’ look harder than it was. They played the first game in silence, wi Saffi trying her best tae lose. Frustration got the better ay her, though, and she won 3-0.

‘Aw, c’moan Dom, put some effort intae it, ay? Ah’m tryin tae make yi feel better. C’moan, like when we wur wee, mind?’

Saffron hammered a shot at Dominic who, tae her delight, parried it off the goal line like Andy fucking Goram, then sprinted tae catch the rolling ball before it went intae Saffi’s half and battered it past her diving body.

‘One fuckin nil!’ he said, licking his forefinger and holding it in the air. ‘Patrick fuckin Kluivert. Holland one Italy nil.’

‘Yi up fur it now then, aye? Let’s fuckin go. Ah’ll be that cute fuckin defender, what’s-iz-name, Maldini.’

‘He’s an auld man,’ Dominic said. ‘When was the last time he scored a goal that wasnae a penalty anyway?’

‘Fuck you! He’s a shit hot defender an he’s fuckin cute. He’s no auld anyway, he’s been an international defender since he was eight-fuckin-teen. A true genius, cute as fuck and the best defender ivir.’

‘This game isnae aboot defense, Saff. Ah’m bringin Marco Van Basten back fae the deid. Now yir fucked.’

‘Aye?’

‘Aye.’

‘Bring it oan.’

Saffi drilled a low shot wide ay Dom’s right hand traffic cone. When he went tae retrieve the ball, she noticed that the wee group ay school bairns had increased tae six or seven enthralled eyes, probably seven or eight years auld, aw watching fae that wee triangle ay grass ootside their front gate.

‘Gies a kick, Dom,’ a wee broon-heided laddie said.

‘This is a serious game, Marky mate, too serious,’ Dom said, before looking up at Saffron. ‘Ah thought yi said that naeb’dy would be watchin? Ay?’ Saffi was relieved, though, when he didnae seem tae mind.

Dominic’s second shot went in as well and, by the time darkness had swept away the last remnants ay daylight, they were level at 2-2 on games, wi the streetlights illuminating the park like floodlights. Saffi was thrilled tae see Dominic simultaneously lighten-up and toughen-up as the game progressed. He seemed tae read her mind.

‘This isnae a game anymair, Saffi, Ah’m fuckin up fur it now, yi better be fuckin ready!’

‘Hiy, Ah taught you this game when you wur a naïve wee nipper, mind?’ she laughed. ‘You always used tae insist oan bein Kenny Dalglish or Gordon Strachan.’

‘That’s cos you used tae insist oan bein Maradona!’

‘That’s cos Ah was the best!’

‘Like fuck yi wur!’

‘HIY,’ Saffron shouted, ‘READ MA FUCKIN LIPS: FUCK OFF!’

‘C’moan then,’ Dominic giggled his boyhood giggle, ‘come oan!’

Wi the ball at her feet, Saffi eyeballed Dom’s right-hand cone, planning tae go tae the left. A girl sitting on a bike wi the gathering crowd shouted, ‘GAUN YIRSEL, SAFFI!’, and Saffron let her eyes float dreamily over Dominic’s heid, over the row ay four-a-blocks behind him and the black void between Nitten and the city, and settle for a second on the ski-slope at Hillend. It was brightly illuminated and Saffron laughed oot loud at a sudden memory: Dominic tumbling doon the ski-slope during a school trip. He’d been trying tae slalom his way doon the slope on the left, the bumpy slope, showing-off like, and ended up arse-over-tits, rolling half-way doon the hill until the instructor managed tae catch up and help him tae his feet.

‘What you laughing at?’ Dominic shouted.

‘You,’ Saffi said.

‘How?’

‘What?’

‘Why?’

‘Aw...nuttin...you.’

‘Me?’

‘Aye, you. Yi ready?’

‘Ah was born ready,’ Dominic said. ‘C’moan, take yir fuckin shot, Paolo.’

‘You wur born what? Dominic, look at...’ Saffi was about tae elaborate, but stopped herself when she remembered that she was trying tae help him.

Just as Saffron was about tae shoot, a wee laddie sitting on a bike next tae Marky shouted, 'HIY SAFFI, SHOW US YIR FANNY!'

'Shut up, David,' she heard one ay the lassies say, 'that's no nice.' Saffi decided tae reinforce the sentiment.

'Shut yir pus, ya dirty wee-' Remembering the age ay the filthy wee runt, she shut herself up.

Distracted by David's foul-moothed rant, Saffron's next shot missed by a long way, and she noticed a wee, auld man wi a Russian-style hat and a walking stick strolling by, near where the group ay kids had congregated. It wasnae just David who spat his venom at him, as a chorus ay them sang,

'Dirty Frank had a wank...'

Suddenly Debs, the junky fae number 46, came running ootae her gate and single-handedly hauled two ay them away.

'You two stay away fae that man!' she heard Debs say as she dragged her screaming brats inside.

'Some fuckin street this ay,' Saffi said after Dirty Frank had disappeared intae his ain hoose at number 37.

'What was it that Dirty Frank actually did anyway?' Dominic asked.

'Fuck knows, but his windaes urnae caged over fur nuttin. Ah just remember your Ma always tellin us tae stay away fae the guy wi the Russian hat. A perv, ay some kind.'

'Aye, an Ah remember that we used tae shout the same hings at him tae. Those wur the days, ay?'

Most ay the kids had been called in by their parents by the time they finished the match, wi Dominic winning 3-2. They walked over the wee triangle ay grass together, arm-in-arm, taunting each other wi embarrassing memories and unfunny jokes until Saffi felt a tear drop fae her eye; Dom had chilled a bit.

‘What’s wrong?’ Dominic said.

‘Nuttin. That was guid though, ay?’

‘Aye, it was awright.’

‘So yi feeling a bit better now?’ Saffron asked.

‘Hiy Saffi,’ Dominic said, ‘do you hink there’s a god? Really, Ah mean.’

‘Aw, c’moan Dom, Ah thought you’d huv chilled oot by now. It’s just wee laddies an lassies who ask questions like that yi ken.’

‘Naw, seriously, dae yi hink there’s a god?’

‘If there is, he’s a cunt. You’re still a wee bit fucked up efter yisturday, ay?’

Again, Dominic ignored the question. ‘Aye, if there is, he’s a cunt awright, and if he’s a cunt, he probably works fur the Scottish Executive.’

‘Aye,’ Saffron laughed.

‘And if he works fur the Scottish Executive, then mibbe he’s the cunt who sets the protocol fur The Textbook. Nah, it goes further than that. Mibbe he’s in the Royal Family, or the Whitehouse.’

Saffron felt her heart sink at the mention ay The Textbook. ‘Aw Dom, Ah thought you’d stoaped aw that shite,’ she said.

‘What shite?’

‘The Textbook...you ken.’

‘No Ah dinnae, Saffi, that’s the hing. Ah cannae work it oot.’

‘Work what oot?’

‘Just forget Ah mentioned it, ay.’

‘Naw, tell iz, Dom, Ah wannae ken. Tell iz what’s wrong.’

‘Me. Ah cannae work masel oot. Ah dinnae ken who Ah am.’

‘Well...Ah cannae work yi oot either Dom, or me. Ah dinnae ken me. Does anybody really ken who they are? Who gies a fuck?’

‘Naw, yir no listenin, Saffi. Ah dinnae ken who Ah am, Ah dinnae ken what makes iz the way Ah am. What’s wrong wi iz? How come they’ll no get iz counselling? The Textbook...Ah dunno. Who am Ah?’

Saffron released her grip on Dom’s left arm tae open the door and, as they walked intae the warmth, Dominic stepped in front ay Saffi and looked in her eyes.

‘Ken, see yistirday?’

‘Aye?’

‘Yistirday, Ah goat a...a vision. Ah saw it aw Saffron. Iviry’ing, why we’re here, the meanin ay life, iviry’hing. Ah even saw what happens when yi die...just for a few seconds like...like déjà vu. Ken what Ah mean? Ah saw it aw.’

An inner warmth became Saffron when she saw the glint in Dominic’s eyes and decided tae play along wi the joke.

‘Yi saw iviry’hing?’

‘Iviry’hing.’

‘So what is it then?’

‘What?’

‘The meanin ay life?’

‘Ah’m no tellin yi,’ he laughed.

‘Cunt.’

Saffi didnae bother showering or even changing ootae her dirty shorts and t-shirt when they got in, she just washed the mud fae her hands, face and legs, copped another couplae vallies and crawled back under the warmth ay her duvet. Dominic did shower and change, then plonked hisselt back doon on the armchair and turned the TV back on. A repeat ay *Time Team* was showing on the documentary channel. Dominic looked serious again, though no quite as much as before. He gazed over at Saffron.

‘Saffron,’ Dom said.

‘Aye?’ Saffi yawned, struggling tae keep her eyes open now. ‘What’s up?’

‘Ah’m a murderer.’

‘Dom, what yi talkin aboot?’ Saffi couldnae help yawning again, louder this time.

‘Who did yi kill?’ She tried tae laugh, but her efforts faded tae a half-arsed sigh.

‘Ah’m serious, Ah’m a killer, Saffi, Ah mass murderer. Ah murdered Scottish fitba...yisturday, in Tøftir, in the Faroe Islands, like. Yisturday, Ah slaughtered Scottish fitba.’

‘Dom, shut up, will yi? Ah’m knackered.’

‘Ah’m tellin yi, Dougie Donnelly himself telt iz.’

‘Dougie Donnelly?’

‘Aye, Dougie Donnelly...called iz The Murderer Ay Scottish Fitba, *The Slayer Ay Tøftir*. He called iz the Scottish Hitler.’

‘Dom!’ Saffi laughed. ‘Dom, you didnae murder Scottish fitba matel! Berti Vogts did. Naw, actually, it was Craig Broon. Craig Broon an Andy Roxburgh.’

‘It was me, Saffi, it was me.’

‘Shut up ya daft cunt,’ Saffron sat up and smiled and, wi the blanket still wrapped around her, crawled across the carpet over tae Dom. She ran her fingers through his hair.

‘Keep takin the tablets Dominic, Dr Murray’s Ah mean. Keep takin the tablets.’

‘Ah’m seein Dr Murray the morn,’ Dominic confessed.

‘Defo? Dr Murray, no Black?’

‘Aye, Murray. Ah’m seein Dr Murray.’

‘Guid.’

Doctor Murray (part one)

(09/09/2002: Dx murder; Rx: Seroxat 40mg/day, Zopiclone 7.mg/day x 2 at night, Amitrip 150mg/day, to be discontinued??; prognosis: ???)

Dominic looked around the waiting area and then tae the grey ceiling above. He glanced ootae the windae at the bright sky ootside, then around the waiting area again. The surgery was half-full and smelt ay eucalyptus and disinfectant, wi a hint ay mint tinged wi vodka coming fae the breath ay the woman sitting opposite him, her straggly, dark hair hanging over her walking stick, upon which she rested her heid. A beam ay sunlight illuminated a tunnel ay dust which penetrated its way through the usual dullness ay the broon-carpeted doctor's surgery. He wanted tae take another look around the room, just tae gauge how long it might be before he was called in, but the paranoia ay sneaking a peek was too much and he could feel the angry red and black burning ay the skin ay around the rims ay his eyes; he didnae want anybody tae notice that he hadnae slept. Droopy Smith sat by hissels in the far corner, reading fae a big book, his frail arms daein well tae hold it aloft given that he had progressive MS. Poor fellae. An intellectual teetotaler, one ay the nicest folk you could ever meet, and he gets diagnosed wi MS, while Nitten's local psychopath, Paddy Gilmore, sat upright, looking surprisingly clean and healthy. He'd even uttered a cheerie 'Hiya' on the way in. Dominic had recognised one ay the receptionists tae, Margaret ...something, when he checked in, Kingy's Ma.

Margaret King, you thick fuck, Dougie Donnelly said. Donnelly had been creeping in and ootae Dom's brain since Saturday afternoon.

A wee lassie was crying bravely and nursing a wounded ankle, her Ma wi one arm slung around her daughter's shoulder, a hand caressing the girl's leg. There were others there too, coughing and spluttering, but he hadnae the guts tae look up again, even though

his eyes wanted tae. He hated waiting there, hated bumping intae people who kent he was a loon, the constant talk ay sickness and death, pain and suffering. He hated the constant ringing ay the reception telephones and the buzzing ay the loudspeaker calling oot names that wurnae his. He let his pupils fall back tae the carpet. Fuck, he wished he could pick up a magazine, though experience told him that most ay them were women's zines, the men's ones were usually about cars or golf. He didnae care much for cars and he gave up golf long ago, shortly after he was abducted by aliens.

The buzzer rattle-snaked tae life, signaling someone else's appointment. He looked up involuntarily, an unwelcome hope invading his brain, his burning pupils hitting the ceiling again, even though the noise was actually coming fae the reception area behind him.

'John Rowley room four, please, John Rowley room four.'

His gaze reverted tae the floor and his shaking hands grabbed a magazine fae the table in front ay him. He pretended tae read it, his knees trembling against his elbows, his hair growing longer by the second (*Really? Hair growin longer by the second?*). He flicked through the pages, quickly at first, then slowly, in case someone noticed that he wasnae actually reading it.

In his delirium, he caught the tail end ay a conversation between two girls sitting near the door. They spoke in light-hearted, excitable voices.

'That's ma sister gonnae be a granny in a couplae weeks' time. She's only twenty-nine anaw.'

'Aye? How did that happen?'

'Well, she had her Chloe when she was fourteen, an Chloe got pregnant at fourteen anaw. Ah'm waitin till Ah get a bit aulder till Ah have kids me, Ah'm just a bairn masel ay, thirty-five.'

'Aye, wur just bairns us, thirty-five's the new twenty-five, they say.'

‘Totally, think about it. They say that, in nineteen eighty-five, the average kid left hame at sixteen, or eighteen, depending oan when they left school, ken what Ah mean?’

‘Aye.’

‘Aye?’

‘Aye.’

‘Also, when we wur born, the average life expectancy for a wuman was...well...younger, ten years at least.’

‘Aye, Ah ken.’

‘So, Ah reckon that, wi life expectancy increasing, we should subtract ten years fae oor age just based oan that. Ah smoke though, so really Ah should add a few years fur that, tae be fair, an we need tae take intae account hings like school dinners in the eighties and the drug culture ay the nineties, but wi healthcare improvin, an the inevitable advances in medical science that’ll come in the next ten years, Ah reckon that makes up fur the smokin, ken what Ah mean?’

‘Ah hink yi might be oan tae some’ing there, Nicky. Aye, totally.’

‘Naw...wait...aye, the improvements in healthcare makes up fur ma smoking, so really, Ah’m only twenty-five.’

‘Me tae,’ the other girl laughed.

Dominic felt like joining in, laughing tae like, but his brain was still pulsating in his heid and his legs still twitched. His heid sprung up again and he caught the eye ay one the girl’s, the one who’d been in constant agreement wi the other on her the theory on age. He felt his eyes growing redder along wi his face, mibbe even yellower. He looked away again.

He had tae tell the doctor aboot Saturday, aboot the fitba like, and mibbe see if he couldnae get a copy ay his doctor’s report for his upcoming DWP review. A year had passed since his last dealings wi them, and they’d deemed him unfit tae work without the need for interview, but he’d been on disability for three years now and he was fucking

anxious. He felt like he had a murder trial coming up or something. Saffi had told him no tae worry about it so much, that it was just routine like, but Dominic kent he would worry hissel shitless anyway. Saffi said that they couldnae tell someone in his predicament tae go back tae work, then she reminded him no tae tell them that he was a wannabe poet and writer. They might take that as unpaid work, she'd said.

He needed tae tell Dr Murray aboot the medication Dr Black had put him on as well, that they were making him feel aw fucked-up, like. Better at first, but fucking spaced. He tried tae remember whether he got the voices before Black had started prescribing him those meds a year ago. He wondered tae whether he should tell Murray aboot the voices, though he certainly he didnae want tae go back intae the nuthoose. He decided tae trust Dr Murray.

Through the coughing and spluttering and the strangely logical, Jakey philosophies ay the twenty-five year auld thirty-fives, Dominic heard a strangely rhythmic, soft shoe-shuffle, like someone daein the Moonwalk through the reception area, dancing its way intae the waiting room. then that unmistakable voice,

‘Awright, Dom?’

He didnae have tae look up tae ken who it was. Gaz Irvine’s gruff voice leapt up a pitch as it grew nearer, jumping intae a throaty squeal as his faint shadow hung on the dirty carpet next tae his battered white trainers, which were still speckled wi white paint.

‘How yi daein, man? See the fitba oan Saturday?’

‘Awright Gaz?’

‘Fuckin catastrophe, ay? Worst fuckin performance Ah’ve ivir seen, by Scotland Ah mean. Fuckin retards, the lot ay them.’

‘Gaz man,’ Dominic whispered, ‘wur in the doctor’s mate, there’s sick folk in here.’

‘Aw shit, sorry mate.’ Gaz put a finger tae his lips and sat doon on the chair beside Dominic.

‘Anyway, Ah’ve nearly finished Kingy’s...ken what Ah mean?’

‘Shed?’

‘Eh...aye. Ah’ve just aboot done wi Kingy’s shed.’

‘Aye?’

‘Aye.’

‘Right...eh...well done, mate.’ Dominic noticed that his legs were twitching worse than before. He racked his brain, trying tae think ay something tae say, tae distract fae his palpable state ay paranoia.

Aw Doc, please...call iz now...please...

‘Hiy Dom?’

Fuckin hell, what now? Aw man...

‘Hiy Dom, why yi readin that wuman’s mag upside-doon?’ Gaz actually looked concerned when he said it. Dominic looked at his trembling hands; he *was* holding the magazine upside-doon. He tried frantically tae think ay a joke.

‘Ay, what mag? Aw this...eh...cos, well...women, ken what Ah mean? Upside-doon, ken?’

‘Ay?’ Gaz squinted at Dominic, then laughed. ‘Aye well, yir no wrong there, mate.’ Dominic let himself make brief eye contact wi Gaz and noticed that he was sober.

Shit, now even Gaz Irvine’s saner than me. Change the subject, quick.

‘Eh, you still paintin Kingy’s shed?’ Gaz’s squint tightened and he laid a warm hand on Dominic’s shoulder.

‘Ah’m...eh...finished, nearly like, like Ah-’

Another rattle-snake cackle, short and sharp, sounded across the loudspeaker.

‘Dominic Mathers, room twelve please, Dom-’

Before the voice had a chance tae finish its announcement, Dominic was on his feet and charging through the reception area.

Shit, Gaz...

‘Eh...sorry, Gaz man, that’s me, see yi...eh...soon. Eh...Get well soon.’

‘Hallo,’ a familiar voice said before the door had time tae fully open, ‘have a seat.’

As usual, Dr Murray was sitting wi his back tae the door when Dominic entered, seemingly checking oot the grazing sheep in the yard behind the surgery. It wasnae till Dominic sat doon that Dr Murray swivelled on his chair, adjusted his glasses and raised his heid. Dominic had tae twist his neck tae face him, though still he averted the doc’s eyes. There was a distinct humanity in the enforced cauldness ay the doctor’s tone that calmed Dominic somewhat...very *somewhat*. Though he was mibbe in his fifties, Murray looked pretty cool, like Sam Waterston in his prime, wi glasses.

‘Hallo Dominic. What can we do for you today?’ The officiousness ay Murray’s voice belied his appearance. Below his neat, grey troosers, he wore blue Plimsolls wi a kindae tropical palm tree-design on them, and beneath his white shirt Dominic could see a dark t-shirt covered wi more palm trees. Unlike most ay the other male doctor’s, he never wore a tie.

‘Eh...well, it’s...well-’

‘Have you been in the wars again, son?’

‘The wars?’ Dominic couldnae help smiling through his nervousness; Dr Murray’s voice was icy, aye, but there was a certain...warmth behind it, like he *bad* tae speak that way; he spoke like an igloo, that was the only way Dominic could describe it.

‘How have things been since I last saw you? It’s been...’ He tried tae scroll doon the page on his PC, then changed his mind and picked up a folder fae his desk, glancing through it briefly.

‘Eh...Ah’ve been havin...eh...experiences again.’

‘Experiences, ay? What type of experiences?’

‘Voices.’

‘Voices?’ The doctor’s thin, greying brows furrowed in genuine concern. ‘What kind of voices? You mean hallucinations? Are these voices real, Dominic?’ His voice was getting warmer wi each question, like he was drawing Dominic intae his vocal igloo.

‘Aye...Ah mean, naw,’ Dominic put his heid in his hands. ‘Ah dinnae ken.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘Ah dinnae ken.’

‘Have you been takin your medication?’

‘Aye...Ah mean naw, Ah mean, some.’

‘Some?’

‘Some. Ah stopped takin your tablets, then Ah started again, aw ay them like...except for Dr Black’s.

‘What has Dr Black been giving you?’

‘Dunno. Red an black ones.’

‘What were they called? Do you know?’

‘Dunno...eh...an experiment, he said it was an experiment. Some’ing new, ken? He said some’ing about powerlessness, that Ah cannae handle will power. That was ages ago. He’s said a lot ay hings Ah dinnae quite get.’

‘Things you don’t get? What kind of things? Ah...I mean, I’m not saying anything about...well, go on, tell me.’

‘Eh...well, durin another appointment, he said some’ing writin doon iviry’hing that Ah’ve done wrong in ma life an anyone Ah’ve hurt, just tae get an insight intae what...eh...distressed iz, like. He wanted me tae list aw this stuff...Ah cannae remember exactly what he said now, it was a while ago like. Ah dinnae always ken when Ah’m wrong, or what’s right an what’s wrong. Though, ay Ken what Ah mean?’

‘No...Ah mean, yes. You’re not the moral majority. Neither am I – and neither is he.’ Again, that insulated tone. ‘Ah...I didnae say that.’

‘Nae bother,’ Dominic said.

‘Don’t take Dr Black’s treatment. Give them back to the chemist. I’ll pick them up from there. How’s your depression?’

‘Good...eh...Ah mean bad...eh...Ah mean...Ah dunno.’

‘You need any more tablets?’

‘NO! Eh...Ah mean, no thanks.’

‘You say that the voices are...er...internal, but that you know they’re not real?’

‘Aye, Ah mean naw, Ah mean...Ah ken they’re no real. They’re just in ma heid.’

‘When do you get them? In social situations?’ Dr Murray asked.

‘Aye...eh...sometimes. Ah goat them really bad durin fitba though. Dougie Donnelly started talkin tae iz oan Saturday, efter the Faroes draw.’

‘Aw aye, that. Did yi...you watch it. Fu...bloody disaster, ay? Scottish football’s dyin a death, mate. Dougie Donnelly, you say?’

‘Aye, Dougie Donnelly.’

‘Gentle guy as well. Was he threatening?’

‘Aye, fuckin...eh...really threatening.’

‘Well, Ah dinnae...don’t think you’re schizophrenic, Dominic, which is good news. I do think you’re depressed, though, and that you’ve panicked a bit, and also that perhaps Dr Black’s tablets may have had an adverse effect on your anxiety disorder. Like I say, give them back to me and I’ll get rid of them. How’s your sleep? Have you been sleeping, Dominic?’

‘Naw, barely, eh...Ah huv nightmares when Ah do.’

‘Right, I’ll give you something for that, but don’t worry, it’s nothing heavy. Just a mild sedative. A short course.’

‘Awright.’

‘How about your appetite?’

‘Eh...Ah suppose it’s okay. Ah had a Pot Noodle this morning.’

‘Right. And fibre? Are you eating any fibre?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Cereals, fruit and veg, tatties, that typae...type of thing?’

‘Eh...nah, no really. Ah sometimes eat baked tatties, eh...really sometimes though, ay.’

‘But you are eating, that’s good.’

‘And how’s your sex drive, Dominic?’

‘Sex drive?’

‘How’s your sex drive?’

Through his embarrassment, Dominic felt strangely assertive, even comical. ‘Non-existent,’ he grinned; Dr Murray smiled back.

‘Really?’

‘Really,’ Dominic replied, still a bit taken aback that he’d actually grinned.

‘So you would say that...er...you practice safe sex?’

‘Eh...nae sex is safe sex, is it no?’ Dominic heard himself laugh oot loud, and he was sure he heard a snigger coming fae the doctor.

‘You surprise me, Dominic, I’d always thought of you as a...sexual tyrannosaurus rex.’ Dr Murray suddenly flung oot his arms, wing-like and, mibbe Dominic was imagining things, but he seemed tae dae a small and very bad imitation ay a pelvic thrust.

‘Eh...nut, Ah’m no.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s good, the safe sex I mean. Now, I’ve known you since you were a kid Dominic and there’s some’ing...eh...something I’d like tae ask yi. Do you know what a ‘cocoon’ is?’

‘A ‘cocoon’, it’s kindae like a nest, ay? Like, somewhere warm where people can rest, an hide. Feel safe’

‘Spot on, mate. Huv yi...er...have you ever considered whether your depression may be some kind of cocoon, your pain I mean. Pain can be a cocoon too, like phobias. People get afraid of spiders, small spaces, needles, things like that. There is a school of thought that such phobias can be a sort of...cocoon, a hiding place, somewhere they feel safe. Ken what Ah...I mean?’

‘No really,’ Dominic laughed again. He hadnae felt this cheerful in a long time.

‘Sorry, Ah’m no...I’m not trying to undermine your distress, pal, and I have no doubt that you suffer from depression, Dominic, and that it hurts, but mibbe...maybe it’s a safety zone, if you like. If you free your mind from your fears, maybe you can integrate yourself into...er...life. It’s scary, you know, living life, but I think it’s even more frightening to live alone, in your mind I mean. What you don’t want to do, Dominic, is pigeonhole yirsel...eh...yourself, label yourself I mean, place yourself in a group in which you don’t belong. Sometimes it’s better to be an individual, Dominic. Believe it or not, the you have it in you. You have a good brain, mate, dinnae...er...don’t lose it. You still writing your masterpiece?’

‘Ma poetry?’

‘Yir...you’re masterpiece. That project you were telling me about?’

‘Eh...no fur a while, but probably Ah’ll go back tae it. The poetry, Ah mean.’

‘Do, mate, do. I think yir...you’re oan...on to something. Do you ever try alternative therapy?’

‘Like hypnosis? That kindae thing?’

‘Aye, that’s exactly what Ah...I mean. Here, I’ll give you the number of a hypnotherapist I know, called Sylvia. She’s very nice. She also doubles as an acupuncturist.’ Dr Murray scribbled something on a piece ay paper, which he gave tae Dominic along wi a prescription. Dominic glanced at the script:

Zopiclone, 2mg per night for three nights.

He folded it and put it in his coat pocket. He tucked the piece ay paper intae his back pocket withoot reading it

‘Another thing I wanted tae...eh...suggest, Dom...Dom...Dominic is that research in Germany has shown that getting a good spanking can help with depression.’

‘A what?’

‘A spanking. Releases endorphins, they say. What you want to do, Dominic, is find yourself a nice girl and get a good spanking!’ Another friendly smile.

‘Can you prescribe that?’ Dominic couldnae believe he was joking wi the doctor, but Murray laughed, a genuine laugh, almost a childlike chortle, that Dominic had never heard fae him before.

‘Eh...no.’

‘Aw...right. Well Ah’ll-’

‘Listen mate,’ the doctor suddenly lowered his voice, ‘you ignore Dr Black. Like I say, just stick wi me pal and we’ll see if we can work oot what’s going on together.’ Dr Murray’s accent was changing, it was unmistakable, and Dominic shifted in his chair. ‘Dinnae worry, pal, you can trust me. Ah better call ma next patient now.’

Just as Dominic stood tae leave, he remembered the DWP appointment.

‘Hiy doc...eh...Murray, eh doctor Murray, Ah’ve goat one ay they disability assessments comin up, it would be handy if-’

‘You could obtain a copy of your medical records?’

‘Aye, that would be helpful.’

‘No problem, mate. Pick it up at reception tomorrow, in the afternoon. I’ll sort it.’

His voice had reverted tae its icy work-tone.

‘Thanks.’

Dominic was aboot tae get up and leave when Dr Murray spoke again.

‘And Ah’ll see aboot getting yi in wi Hannah, mate.’

‘Hannah?’

‘Oor Nurse Counsellor. Ah’ll pull a few strings...well, Ah’ll see what Ah can dae.’

Abducted By Aliens (part one)

‘Would you like to know about Jesus?’ There were two ay them standing on the doorstep, both aboot Dominic’s age, and the guy who spoke had a Southern American accent.

‘Eh...Saffi’s no here,’ Dominic said.

‘Sorry?’ The two fellaes looked at each other, and the dark-haired guy who’d spoken went on, ‘would *you* like to know about Jesus?’

‘Would Ah like tae ken aboot Jesus?’

‘Would you like to know about Jesus? Do you believe in God, The Bible? Do you read The Bible?’

Dae Ah read The Bible? Dae Ah want tae ken aboot Jesus? Dominic was aboot tae respond when the other guy, a light-haired fella, cut him off.

‘Or do you believe that we descended from monkeys?’ He folded his arms under his pits like an orangutan. ‘I mean, do I look like a monkey to you? Ooh-ooh, ee-eeh.’

‘A wee bit,’ Dominic feigned a laugh, no sure whether these guys were jokers or no.

‘Well, let me ask you this, my friend. If we evolved from apes, how come apes aren’t evolving anymore? How come they’ve suddenly stopped turning into humans now?’

‘Because-’

‘Maybe we’ll be evolving into aliens next!’ They both laughed. ‘Did you see that guy on the US news who says that he was abducted by aliens? The guy from Michi-’

Dominic slammed the door on them, angry that it had took him so long tae realise that he was talking tae Jehovahs. He decided tae chuck on some tunes, opting for a weird collection ay remixes that he’d asked Gaz tae make for him a couplae years ago, returned tae the comfort ay the couch and chomped on his cauld chow mien pot noodle.

Abducted by aliens though, ay? It was possible, was it no? Over the years, he'd been given every possible diagnosis under the sun, every *possible* diagnosis...never a concrete one, just possible this and possible that and possible...*what?* Nothing. Nae diagnosis: nae cure. Nae prognosis: nae place in The Textbook. Aye, he'd spent a bit ay time in the nuthoose, but still he'd come oot totally none-the-wiser as tae the cause ay his mental turmoil, but the in-patient shrinks, the ones who'd *un-diagnosed* him wi nothing, well...he came ootae there thinking that they probably worked for The Textbook tae...*The Textbook?* Where did that idea come fae in the first place? Now that he was fairly heavily medicated, the concept ay a secret underground governmental textbook seemed as absurd as getting Gary Glitter tae advertise a well-known breakfast cereal, and having Donovan's 'Happiness Runs' playing in the background...for now, anyway.

Dominic glanced at the big broon envelope that lay unopened on the coffee table, resting between a packet ay fags and his left foot. Part ay him wanted tae open it now, but fear ay what it contained dragged his eyes fae the coffee table tae the windae. He slurped away at what was his second Pot Noodle ay the day, watching the rain fall lightly over the rooftops ay The Drive and the park ootside. Rain; one ay God's great elements that seemed tae slow the flow ay electricity in Dominic's brain, at least a wee bit anyway...it never quite stopped burning in there, no entirely. Sometimes though, when it rained, he could almost think straight...*almost*. Saffron was at work, daein whatever it was she did, wherever it was she worked, in some office somewhere up the A7...

... *'Up' the A7? Or was it no 'doon' the A7? The road ran uphill fae where Dominic and Saffi lived, but it took you doon south, so was it 'up' or was it 'doon'?*

Medication didnae make that particular riddle any easier tae solve. He thought ay Dougie Donnelly and the other voices that sometimes roared, sometimes whispered, in his heid, and wondered why God had never spoken tae him. Mibbe that's why he'd never been

diagnosed wi schizophrenia, because God had never spoken tae him. But then again, neither had the Devil.

As usual, the TV had been on aw morning and Dominic was grateful that he couldnae lip-read; someone who looked like Phil Collins was being interviewed on *This Morning* aboot premature ejaculation. Thankfully, he couldnae hear what was being said for the sound ay Pink Floyd's 'Interstellar Overdrive' playing over The Clash's 'White Man In Hammersmith Palais', a combo he'd accidentally discovered one afternoon when he and Saffi had had a row aboot whose turn it was tae dae the dishes, retreating intae their respective bedrooms, only tae wage musical warfare on each other as they each ay them chose a CD and turned the volume up until the flat was jumping wi a new kindae psychedelic punk-mash type-thing that tickled Dominic's phonological loop enough tae calm him intae a state ay dishwashing-mania. While Saffi took a nap, Dominic discovered the beauty ay daein the washing-up, and the purifying qualities ay making his hands as soft as Saffi's face. What's more, its effectiveness on removing nicotine stains fae his fingers was second tae nothing else on this planet. Now, as Dominic lazed on the sofa stoned ootae his heid on prescription drugs, The Clash thrashed in his left ear and Syd's Floyd distorted the auditory canal ay his right, while Phil Collins, Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan spraffed and laughed away, unheard.

It was a miserable morning and, wi the memories ay the Faroe Islands saga still fresh in Dominic's mind, he'd had tae dae something tae chill oot, so he'd taken his meds, most ay them anyway, and blasted his musical mash over the brainless, mute fuckheids ay daytime TV. Daytime TV, ay? The government's ploy tae get the unemployed back tae work. He'd tried aw the other channels, after they'd announced the *This Morning* line-up and its topic ay the day. The weather must have fucked wi their Freeview or something though, so he was stuck wi five channels tae choose fae, and one ay them was fuzzy, but the other sides were just as bad. Earlier, the BBC news had told the story ay how some guy in Iowa

or somewhere like that had gone apeshit wi a gun in a school and shot a bunch ay kids. As soon as he felt the tears welling in his eyes, Dominic switched channels, but the local news on STV was nae better. A guy who looked like David Icke reported on how a couplae teenagers had set fire tae a homeless fellae in Dalkeith, apparently as a joke. The newscaster's sad monotone still played in his heid like a slow, broken record, somewhere beneath the wail ay Dominic's chosen soundtrack tae that dreary morning.

'The man was in his early seventies,' the newscaster had said, 'and was affectionately known by locals as 'Penny Jack' for his love of leaving behind a penny on the corner of every street that he slept in. He died of third degree burns in the early hours of the morning.' The man's eyes saddened briefly and he lowered his gaze, shuffled some papers, looked back up and smiled, introducing 'Kiara, with the weather'.

Kiara appeared on the telly in a crushed light-green blouse that was buttoned-up aw wrong, her dark broon hair looking like it had been finger-brushed in a rush, and Dominic wondered whether she'd been shagging the producer backstage before suddenly realising she was due tae dae her weather report. She said that the sun was gonnae shine in the east later in the day after a string ay light showers, and that it was gonnae be sunny aw day in the west, unless you lived in Dundee where the presence ay two 'Ds' and two 'Es' was gonnae render the city centre dangerous tae travel through unless you had a pair ay binoculars...' Well, that's what Dominic heard anyway, his brain had kindae switched itself off at that point.

Fuck, these meds are strong....

Dominic despaired when he realised that The Clash song had finished and the closing riff tae 'Interstellar Overdrive' was reaching its disorientating, ear-splitting climax, drum-rolling its distorted proto-grunge variation ay the *Steptoe And Son* theme and slowing tae a prolonged, feedback-garbled E-flat. The sound ay the telly was gonnae brain-rape him again, no that he minded Phil Collins quite so much, it was that Richard and Judy that

scared the living shit ootae him. Richard reminded him ay an auld PE teacher he had, called Mr Cunningham, who had a nasty habit ay wandering intae the showers after a game ay fitba while the boys were drying themselves off tae give a post-match team talk while they aw stood there in the scud. Judy just made him think ay witches. He sat up and looked around for the remote, his hand touching the broon envelope and then retracting itself as if he could somehow tarnish its contents through touch alone. *Where is the fucking hing? Ah only just used it...* He looked underneath his notepad and a copy ay *The Sun*, but the clicker was naewhere tae be seen. His hands felt frantically around the couch, underneath it and beneath the cushions. Panic was kicking in; Richard was aboot tae speak.

Where the fuck did Ah put it?

‘The news.’ Madeley said, ‘will follow a quick ad break. Then, how to check yourself for signs of prostate cancer.’

Did he really just say that?

Suddenly, a fucking angry sausage burst ontae the TV screen and started eating itself, screaming manically and jumping up and doon like a lunatic, the picture going temporarily fuzzy and bouncing up and doon wi the sausage, like the telly was gonnae explode. Then he erupted intae flames while shrieking something aboot being ‘too hot for ya!’. The caption said something aboot the sausage being a ‘bit ay an animal’ and, after the initial shock ay seeing a living, screaming piece ay pork ten feet fae where he sat, Dominic laughed and wondered whether the caption didnae offend vegetarians.

Where is that fucking remote? Fuck it.

He shuffled across the room and changed the channel manually, settling on a fairly benign-looking black-and-white movie aboot Abraham Lincoln on Channel Four. Dominic hated adverts, they scared the living shit ootae him. He remembered being aboot twelve and seeing this ridiculous advert for a certain breakfast cereal, no the one that Gary Glitter used tae advertise, a cereal even more tasteless than that, a flaky one made ay bran. A fairly

normal looking couple were sitting in a field munching their breakfast, singing their dialogue. *Singing their fucking dialogue, for fuck's sake...* it was horrible. He remembered that the woman looked like Geena Davis, and that the fellae was pretty non-descript. It was one ay the earliest memories he had ay depression battering his brain like a basebaw bat tae the heid. How could you watch yirsel day after day, every fucking day, behaving like that, making a total tit ootae yirsel on national TV, in front ay the whole country, like? A white-hot sweat ran doon his neck and his spine spasmed at the memory. He recalled mentioning it tae Gaz Irvine and Boab what's-iz-name at the time.

'How could yi dae that?' he'd said, but Gaz and Boab were in total agreement aboot the entire concept ay television advertising.

'Hink ay the money,' they'd both said. *'Fuck what other people say, hink ay the money, mate...'*

But there was nae amount ay money on this earth could make Dominic dae that.

He wanted tae open that envelope. He needed tae. So what was stopping him then? It sat there, like a wrapped present waiting for Christmas day, on a table that was itself as alive as a Christmas tree; mibbe it was once a Christmas tree? He decided tae go for a walk first. Mibbe he should pay Gaz a visit, efter aw, he promised he would. Leaving Abe Lincoln tae his get on wi his wood-chopping on the telly, Dominic slipped on his trainers and put coat on. It wasnae until he stepped oot intae the breeze ay late morning, that the voices came ...

...What do you think really goes on in The Textbook then, Einstein? Dougie Donnelly said.

...Come on now Dougie, Dominic doesn't want to think about The Textbook, do you, Dominic?

The reply came fae Tiger Woods, whom he'd seen being interviewed by Dougie Donnelly a few weeks back.

...Shut up! Fur fuck's sake, shut up! Dominic said tae his heid.

Why hadnae he just opened that fucking envelope? The further he walked, the more it bugged him, its unseen contents. His entire life was sealed inside that envelope. He turned tae walk back, then changed his mind and quickened his pace, wondering exactly where he was going, whether he could really be daein wi talking tae Gaz and, for the billionth time, how they decided who went intae The Textbook and who didnae...

...But just half an hour ago, The Textbook was an absurd notion, naw?

...You stupid cunt, Donnelly said.

...Shut up, please, shut fuckin up!

The Brain Factory (part two)

‘So...have we covered every item on the agenda? Are we all on agreement on the final updates for the Seventh Edition of The Textbook?’ said the small, bespectacled doctor at the top of the table. The admin girl stifled a yawn and turned the page on her notebook. Her belly rumbled and the Head Doctor shot her a brief, very cold, glance. Lunch time had come and gone and the meeting had long surpassed its intended two hours.

‘I think there’s still a few areas that we need to review,’ another doctor said.

‘Such as?’

‘Well...what about Asperger’s? Is it definitely out of the Seventh Edition? It is becoming an increasingly recognized medical condition and I-’

‘Increasingly diagnosed or increasingly *over*-diagnosed?’ another doctor coughed.

‘Don’t we all fit on to the autism/Asperger’s spectrum somewhere?’ someone else said.

‘Yes, yes we do. That’s why we’re leaving it out...for now. Maybe it’ll go into our next edition, this is our plan actually, but for the time being-’

‘Asperger’s is the ultimate diagnosis of the human condition. We are all Asperger’s suffers, as human beings, but we are not all Buddhists. Isn’t that what we are striving for? We can’t have a diagnosis for *everyone*, it just isn’t possible to fit everyone into The Textbook. As such, Asperger’s simply *must* stay out of The Textbook, just as Buddhists should. Don’t we agree?’ said a female doctor, who looked like a young(ish) Camilla Parker-Bowles and spoke like Margaret Thatcher. She looked at the admin girl; the admin girl looked at her. They both quickly looked away. She’d caught Dr Parker-Bowles, or whatever her name was, with Dr Black, in the basement after hours, when she’d gone back for her phone. Dr Parker-Bowles was a real bitch, but Black seemed to have a soft spot for her, and she knew it, she *used* it.

‘No/Yes,’ two of the others said simultaneously.

‘There is no such thing as Asperger’s,’ someone else said.

‘To be human is to suffer,’ Dr Murray interjected. He sat at the far end of the long table, to the left of the admin girl, and had to raise his voice so that the Head Doctor could hear him. The admin girl shifted her gaze from Dr Murray, along the long line of white coats that contrasted with the dark suede jacket that he wore over his un-ironed shirt and notably-absent tie, and looked to the Head Doctor, curious to hear his response. She scribbled down the minutes frantically, desperately trying to keep them as legible as possible; she was the one who’d have to understand her own handwriting later on. ‘To be human is to live,’ he went on. ‘We all suffer pain and we all suffer joy, we’re all human beings, Dr Black, and I am no Asperger’s sufferer. Oh, and yes, there is something else that I’d like to discuss. The issue of my resignation.’ The Head Doctor’s face went temporarily white and the admin girl saw him clench his fist, but he composed himself quickly and remained silent while Dr Black spoke.

‘Dr Murray, why do you insist on breaking the rules? For God’s sake man, we all know the basic rules of these meetings. No Buddhism, please. We accept no religious bigotry at all within these walls, besides the teachings of...well, most of are...Christians, let’s keep it that way...’ The Head Doctor paused. ‘We...we will discuss your request for resignation in private, this is hardly the place nor the time. You are far too important for our studies, as you know, but we will discuss that later. For now, let’s return to the agenda.’

Though the room was air-conditioned and cool, the admin girl felt a chill in her bones at the direction in which this debate was heading. She glanced outside at the deep grey sky; several shades of misery hung over the dead vegetation outside and another downpour, like the one she’d been caught in on the way to work, appeared imminent. She couldn’t help wondering whether it was more to do with how much Dr Murray knew about The Textbook which prevented them from accepting his resignation; she doubted that

anyone besides Dr Black and the Head Doctor was too important to lose from this consortium. She decided to leave Dr Murray's resignation out of her minutes, taking the opportunity instead to fire him a sympathetic glance. He gazed back, his glasses reflecting the frame of the windows behind her and the outline of the field of long crabgrass behind those. One of the doctors sitting to her right coughed.

'What about alcoholics?'

'No.'

'The word 'alcoholic' is becoming increasingly acceptable in the US as an illness, the American Research Association are becoming increasingly open to recognizing it as a dual mental and physical disorder, even an allergy, and it *was* recognized as an illness for a long-'

'I know, I know.' It was Dr Black who spoke. 'But we don't want 'dual diagnoses' in The Textbook. Look, we all know what alcoholism is, we all know that there are different categories of the condition, we know the facts and we know that there are remedies, but we can't afford to put it in The Textbook just now, and this will be the case for a long time, twenty, maybe even thirty years, perhaps longer. I am sorry, I really am, if there are people here with family members who are...well,' he waved his hand in the air and seemed to be searching for the correct term, '...what we call 'alcoholics', but we have an agenda to stick to, a long term plan. Eradicating cigarette smoking is going to lose aristocracies...er...governments all over the world millions in tax, and we'll be looking to reveal cures for conditions such as dementia in the next twenty years or so, so for now we'll have to let those who want to keep drinking keep drinking, and suffer the consequences, and those who want to believe in that Alcoholics Anonymous nonsense...well, at least they have,' he searched again for the right word, '*somewhere* to go. We...well, the United States, gave the world that, didn't they? Now, if we were to reveal

what we know about alcoholism, how do you, Dr Murray, propose we deal with the cost, not to mention the she number of sufferers who-'

The Head Doctor stood and spoke over Dr Black, a very rare occurrence.

'May I remind everyone at this point that everything that is said inside this room, or anywhere in this building, remains within these walls, and that all members of staff,' he looked directly at the admin girl, 'have signed a contract of confidentiality.'

Dr Murray frowned at the admin girl, looked wearily to the table, and glanced disdainfully at Dr Black. His agitation was becoming increasingly apparent and the admin girl watched on as he shifted his gaze to the Head Doctor and then back to Black. Again, she looked along the line of doctors at either side of the table, from one to the other. From where she sat at the far end, she often found it difficult to tell which was which, except for Dr Black, the Head Doctor and, of course, Dr Parker-Bowles.

'You know, and I know, Dr Black, that the word 'alcoholic' has become a hindrance to our development of the cure for alcoholism, which we all know exists. The 'alcoholic' is a cultural myth based on cultish values that people believe in or don't depending on whether it suits them or not. We know that these individuals *do* have power and control over their condition, they just need help with it until we have solidified our studies and decided on the cure. But instead, we send them to AA, which tells them that they are powerless. How can someone be born addicted to alcohol, for fuck's sake?' Dr Murray was shouting now, his hands trembling. He briefly removed his glasses and looked across the line of doctors to his left, and then shifted his eyes to those on his right, finally resting them on the table in a moment of rare resignation. The admin girl jumped when he thumped the table.

'Dr Murray, you are treading on very thin ice-' Dr Murray took a drink from his water bottle and continued, slightly calmer now.

‘We all know that there is no such thing as an ‘alcoholic’, taking ‘alcoholic’ to mean what AA literature defines it to mean, and that an ‘alcoholic’ is someone who has either (a) a liver incapable of coping with the vast quantities of sugar in alcohol, or indeed the compound itself, exhibiting more symptoms akin to type-one diabetes mellitus sufferers than addicts of, for example, nicotine or heroin, b) an individual with psychological problems, usually caused by some kind of trauma, such as war or child abuse, or c) someone who has simply developed a liking for drink and taken it to the extent that it has become a physical addiction. Yes, very possibly, there is a genetic predisposition, it is often used as a coping mechanism, this is an obvious fact to which you seem to be oblivious, and it is particularly prevalent in those who have suffered from shyness. However, alcoholism in the majority of what people call ‘alcoholics’ is a physical condition of unknown aetiology, a defect of the negative feedback mechanism in the liver resulting in a neurological overdrive which leads to addiction to a substance which ninety percent of us do not become hooked. We also know that, with the right amount of medical research and correct categorization of the condition, a variety of treatments exist-’

Dr Black took a drink from his cup and slammed it down, shouting now himself.

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘how much money the government, *our* government *and* governments all over the developed world, will lose in taxes, in profits from pharmaceutical companies, in compensation payments, if we put alcoholism in The Textbook now? This will cost the UK millions of pounds; can you imagine how much it will cost the first world in total? Alcoholism is NOT going into The Textbook. This is a global decision; we will not be curing alcohol dependency at any time in the foreseeable future. It’s not just money in taxes we’ll be losing, people are going to be living longer. Who’s going to pay for that? Do you think about these things at all, Dr Murray? We need alcoholics, we need the myth of the alcoholic to stay alive, for at least thirty years, maybe longer. We’re not inhumane here, Dr Murray, but we *are* realists. We simply cannot afford it.’

‘But what about the people who are suffering, and their families, what about them?’

‘Let them suffer. You just said, ‘to be human is to suffer’, let them *suffer joy and let them suffer pain*. We have set our timescale: thirty years, minimum. In thirty years’ time, we will re-assess whether we will release our recent findings on alcoholism and on the workings of the liver and the brain. For the time being these ‘sufferers’, as you call them, can continue to suffer, or they can attend AA-’

‘AA is fucking pigshit...it’s all pigshit and you people are all pig-’ Dr Murray raged.

‘Yes, Dr Balls?’ It was the consortium’s Camilla Parker-Bowles lookalike who had raised her hand. The admin girl held her cup over her mouth to cover her immense pleasure in learning Camilla Parker-Bowles real name.

‘On the subject of alcoholism, it has been brought to our attention that a doctor in Brazil has come-up with a new theory on alcoholism, and his findings are frighteningly close to our own, very plausible in fact. Our sources say that he has been alternately referring to it as *diabetes type-three*, *diabetes neuritis*, and *sugar stabilizing deficiency disease*.’ Dr Balls said.

‘What is this doctor’s name?’

Dr Balls picked up her personal organizer and pressed a few buttons.

‘He calls himself Dr Zico. Our sources say that he was once a very well respected man, but not in the field of medicine, apparently. We don’t know his real name.’ Dr Black was standing now, with his chin rested between his thumb and his forefinger.

‘Okay,’ he nodded slowly, ‘okay, find this man and...*bin him*.’ He looked to the admin girl. ‘Don’t put that in today’s minutes.’

‘You know what’s happening here, don’t you?’ Dr Murray whispered to the admin girl as they made their way out of the meeting room. ‘You know what this is? White-coat apocalypse, that’s what this is. The fucking white coat apocalypse’

Abducted By Aliens (part two)

Dominic's legs carried him as fast as they could through the breeze, which was getting stronger, the drizzle becoming rain. He passed auld Droopy, wi wee Dougal, on Mansfield Road and stomped by Kingy's place, just in case Gaz was daein something else in his garden, but aw he saw was an empty, uncut lawn, the grass blowing in the wind. Beechwood Park was desolate ay life, the only signs ay inhabitation being a row ay faceless windaes and empty cars. Empty crisp packets and sweetie wrappers blew across the pavement.

He cut ontae Park Road, where the Lollipop Lady was waiting by the pedestrian crossing and realised that it must be near lunchtime. He'd been up longer than he'd thought and he wondered whether Gaz might be in the pub. A silver Mercedes beeped on the way by and Dominic waved, unsure ay who he was waving at, but positive he saw someone gesturing at him through the windae. He stomped on, his legs taking those familiar huge strides in front ay him, the way they always did when he got anxious.

'DOMINIC!'

Who was that? He stomped on further.

'DOM, MATE!'

He looked back tae see that the silver Merc had pulled over between the bus stop and the pedestrian crossing, a long-haired heid hanging ootae the windae. It was Saffi's Da.

Bet he thinks you're right dickhead now, Donnelly said.

Oh, will you just stop it! Jim Whyte said.

Hmmm...I'm beginning to agree with Dougie, Tiger said.

Nice one, Tiger, said Donnelly.

Wi the wind behind his back, Dominic made his way tae Al's Merc. He'd always liked Saffi's Da and hoped he might calm him a bit.

'Awright Dom?' Al said.

'Aye, no bad,' said Dominic.

You lying fucker, Donnelly said.

You big bully! Holly Hunter, Dominic's teenage fantasy, stood in his defense.

'Hiya Dom, is Saffi at hame? You're still sharin a flat wi her, ay? Oan The Drive?'

'Aye...but naw, she's at work.'

'Workin? Where's she workin?'

'Ah dunno, somewhere doon the Borders.'

'Aw, right...she back later? Ah wanted tae talk tae her.'

Dominic leaned closer and noticed that someone was sitting in the passenger seat. It was big Danny McCleod, Saffi's auld boxing trainer. Danny's square jaw widened tae a grin, exposing his gold left incisor.

'Awright, Dom?' Danny said.

'Danny,' Dominic nodded. 'Aye, eh... Saffron tends tae be back aboot...eh...well, it varies, ay. Ah'd say gie till eight. Sometimes she works overtime. Ah hink her bosses are a bit strict, ay.'

'That right?' Al said, looking at Danny. 'Well, Ah hope they're no too strict. Yous still at the same number, then?'

'Aye. Eh...Ah'd gie yi her mobile, but Ah cannae remember the number an Ah've no goat yin masel.'

'Nae bother son. Hiy, you take care, an Ah'll see yi...' Al looked at his watch, and then back tae Danny. 'Actually, it'll huv tae be later in the week, or mibbe next. Tell her Ah'll be round soon though, ay?'

'Aye, Al...eh...see yi soon, ay? Ah'll tell her.'

You stuttering prick, Donnelly said.

Fuck off, Dominic said. He recommenced his mission tae find Gaz.

‘Thanks son,’ Al called after him, ‘you take care now.’

Dominic walked a bit more calmly through the wind after speaking wi Al and Danny. Al was a known crook, kindae like a wheeler-dealer kindae fellae or something, but a guid guy, nae drugs or anything like that. And Danny, he had helped Saffi get stronger when she was sick. He trusted them. Why did they want tae see Saffi though? Mibbe Al just wanted tae pay his daughter a wee visit. He was far nicer tae her than her Ma was. Why Danny though? He never kent that Al and Danny kent each other. He made a mental note tae let Saffi ken they were looking for her.

You’ll forget, you insane cunt, Donnelly said.

Yeah, I fear you will, Tiger agreed.

No you won’t, Jim Whyte said, *I’ll remind yi, mate.*

Deciding tae cut through the park tae try the Top Club, Dominic finally found Gaz. He was taking a piss in the bushes by the five-a-side fitba pitches, clearly ootae fucking heid.

Your friend’s a dirty bastard, said Donnelly.

A real dirty bastard, Tiger agreed.

Dominic turned and ran before Gaz had a chance tae see him; he couldnae be bothered wi a drunk Gaz now. Danny had chilled him a bit...a wee bit, mibbe, but enough. Now he just wanted tae get tae the comfort ay his settee, mibbe take some more meds, mibbe, and open that fucking envelope. He ran through the wind and rain, back up Park Road and along Beechwood, back along Mansfield, oblivious tae the worsening weather and no caring who he might pass on the way. When he got hame, Abraham Lincoln was still on the telly, addressing a crowd ay people. Dominic picked up the envelope and sat doon. He turned it round and round in his hands...

...it's goat tae be done...

Suddenly, his ain inner voice seemed tae temporarily adopt that ay the STV reporter who'd reported the tragedy ay Penny Jack and, for a second, he imagined his ain life story being broadcast on the news...

...Dominic Mathers was abducted by aliens on Monday the 1st of February 1993. He was fifteen years old...

...it was a horrifying thought and the voice quickly faded, but he was left wi the memories ay that fateful day back in '93, when he first realised that something had gone wrong inside ay him forever. He closed his eyes tight, breathed in deep and blotted it ootae his mind, looking back tae the envelope in his hands. Inside it, courtesy ay Dr Murray, was a printoot ay Dominic's medical history, his life immortalized on paper, computerized forever.

On the telly, the young, bare-chested Abraham Lincoln was chopping wood again, wi real vigour, his biceps pounding and his eyes full ay wisdom and determination. Dominic pulled a bottle fae his coat pocket and copped another Valium; this report was gonnæ be tough reading. Why were the DWP assessing his sanity anyway? He'd been in the loony bin and they'd come up wi nothing. Did that no emphasise the extent ay his madness? Even the mental health pros couldnae explain his insanity, so how could the Department ay Work and Pensions dae it? Did they ken something that the mental health profession didnae? They were happy tae certify him sane, sane but depressed, depressed wi nae identifiable cause. Biting his bottom lip till it almost bled, he tore open the envelope:

Dominic Mathers, 30/11/1978, 736/78309

All Consultations:

01/08/2002 Administration (Miss Lauren Bailey)—No Data Recorded

29/07/2002 Telephone consultation (Dr Marshall Black) – "Patient had bad reaction to tablets prescribed" Drowsy on Amtriptyline – missed a dose then took 3. Advised to go back to 50mg. Not for more Zopiclone, concern re addiction. Try to increase Amitrip to 75mg after 1/52. Continue with Seroxat, 20mg and 40 mg. Dr Marshall Black

25/07/2002 Patient presented in a state of extreme distress. Dx: possible bipolar affective disorder, previous Dx: possible seasonal affective disorder and depressive illness. To continue with Amitriptyline and Seroxat. Zopiclone increased to 14mg/day. Claims ongoing Tx with another drug? No record.
 24/06/2002 Telephone encounter – No Date Recorded.

It was hard tae take it aw in, no just because it was recorded in backwards chronology, but also because some ay the entries just didnae make sense, something wasnae adding up. He had tae fathom this oot, had tae figure oot the riddle ay his madness, and the discrepancies in his medical history wurnae helping. He lit a fag and saw the remote control lying where the envelope had been. He took a slow, hard puff and glanced at the telly. Abe had taken a break fae his wood-chopping. He looked casual but proud, wi one foot resting on timber and one elbow hanging over his knee, wiping sweat fae his brow wi his free hand, his eyes on the autumn leaves at his feet. Then he looked up, his eyes contemplative and kindae friendly, strangely distant, thoughtful like. *Man, that's guid acting*, Dominic thought, and decided tae leave it on that channel. For a second, Abe seemed tae look through the screen at Dominic, then he returned tae his wood-chopping, oblivious tae Dominic's confusion. He forced himself tae take another look at his report:

12/02/2002 Administration (Mrs Margaret Jones)– No Data Recorded
 11/01/2002 Telephone encounter – patient thinks he may be having a nervous breakdown. Loss of feeling in limbs. Wants counselling – informed him that Miss Altobelli is fully booked, will have to wait. Not under any agency at present. Seems lucid. No sob, agreed 48 hr apt mane, call again sos. Also had general talk with flatmate, thinks he may be panicking. Dx? SAD.
 21/12/2001 Suicide and SII – hang/strang/suff/OD. Dr Staff unknown.?SAD, BAD. Nurse counsellor fully booked. Call back in 24hrs. Rx Half Inderal (Pt exhibited mild tachycardia) & Seroxat, 20mg/day

He had nae recollection ataw ay the consultation fae December 2001. There were pages more on the table, the report was as thick as a Tolstoy epic, and as full ay shit as something by Jeffrey Archer. Dominic kent he'd have tae trudge through the lot at some point though, and that he'd have tae try and doctor it in some way, for his assessment.

Very busy people, these counsellors, Dr Black's voice jumped back intae his heid, as vivid as the day he said it, *very, very busy people. It's all the drugs in this area you see, it's out of control, the counselling services are full, as is psychology. Huge waiting lists, Mr Mathers, huge, huge waiting lists...*

...huge waiting lists...

...the voice hissed through Dominic's brain like a venomous yellae-bellied sea-snake wi a public school accent and the tiniest hint ay a lisp, making the skin on his forearms crawl. Mibbe he *had* spoken wi the Devil efter aw. He took another long puff on his fag.

He tossed the pages back ontae the coffee table and let his pupils zoom intae the oddly compelling propaganda movie on the telly. Abe was now on his soapbox, no yet the President, but speaking in defense ay some wrongly-accused thief, advocating liberty and justice for aw. Liberty? *And Justice for aw, ay?* His eyes rolled upwards tae the once-white ceiling, now blonde wi nicotine and age, like stretched-skin yellowed by jaundice and hardened wi years, and then back tae the rain ootside, which was falling even more heavily over Nitten. He closed his eyes tae the sound ay the raindrops as they gently assaulted the windaes, battering softly in his brain and calming that incessant electrical flow ay insanity somewhat...as *somenwhat* as it possibly could, as *somenwhat* as anything possibly could. He stubbed his unfinished fag oot hard in the ashtray, but it kept burning, it smoking its ain filter and stinking the living room oot.

What distressed Dominic most was what wasnae on the report. What about the S.A.D, or more accurately, the possible S.A.D he was diagnosed wi in January 1994? Or the possible OCD that they'd suggested a few months later? It was as if the 90s never happened for Dominic. There were so many absent admissions, it was shocking, and it seemed tae be the irrelevant ones that stood oot:

09/10/1984 Attended with mother, who smelt of drink. Chesty cough gone. No asthma

02/10/1984 Dominic attended with his mother. Chest cough ++ ?asthma. PEFR good. Rx: short term antibiotics (penicillin)
 05/07/1985 Mild summer flu, Rx? (Mother smelt of alcohol)
 02/12/1978 Mild baby jaundice, ectopic birth, jaundice cleared up in hospital, no further problems

It occurred tae Dominic then that the people who got counselling or social work were the folk who nicked cars, kids who terrorized classrooms, and people who robbed pensioners, or sexually abused lassies at school. Sometimes he wished he could be diagnosed wi autism, or Asperger's, or ADHD. Even diabetes...just a diagnosis. Hypoglycaemic attacks can cause madness can they no?

In June 1994, Dominic sank a half bottle ay whisky and slashed his wrists. He remembered waking up soaked in blood, wi a splitting heidache and a three inch gash up his left wrist, a slightly smaller one in his right. His Ma, in a state ay alcoholic distress, called an ambulance and, soon after, Dominic was referred for in-patient observation, where he met his auld pal, Saffron. She was in a sad state ay depression and in need ay some help. Their childhood friendship was reborn.

Dominic decided he didnae want tae read any more fae the report, no just now anyway. He slipped it back intae the envelope and picked up his notepad. He wished he'd had the presence ay mind tae visit Dr Murray way back when, when he was first abducted by aliens, or whatever the fuck it was that had happened tae him. He should have told his Ma, got her tae take him. Mibbe then he'd have received some *real* advice, some *proper* help, like. He thought ay the doc's advice tae keep writing. He scribbled doon another wee verse,

RSVP God

Help me,

RIP ASAP to OCD and BAD,

SAD all year long,

Query Dx for what went wrong,

Mx 24, Dx???

It was nae guid, nothing was coming, he was nae poet. He tore the page fae the notepad and stuffed it in the envelope beside his doctor's report, making a mental note tae go back tae it later, once his meds had worn off a bit. Then he remembered the note that Dr Murray had given him wi his script. He'd forgotten aw about that.

Read it later...

He was getting drowsy now and considered whether he should take a nap. He could go over the report later wi Saffi, she said she'd mibbe be able tae come along wi him tae his assessment anyway. Suddenly, he remembered where the concept ay 'The Textbook' came fae. It was suggested tae him when he was fourteen, by a guy who everybody called Jesus because he had a long hair and a long, broon beard, a bit like that guy he'd seen ootside the surgery about a year ago, but younger. Jesus just walked around aw day, talking tae hissel, like. They were standing at the bus stop, when the guy started whining about the unreliability ay the x95 and the sad state ay the Labour party since John Smith had passed away. He was a very intelligent man, that Jesus. At the time, Dominic passed it off as insane banter and pretended tae take note when the fellae said something about being wary ay 'The Textbook'. But the notion remained and time passed, as it does and, in time, Dominic found himself investigating the existence ay 'The Textbook'.

As he felt hissel becoming increasingly sleepy, he realised that he'd spent the whole morning swearing tae hissel. There was a time when he never used tae dae that, swear tae hissel in his ain heid like, because the guid Reverend MacSweeney had said something at Sunday School about God being able tae hear your thoughts. So, ootae courtesy like, Dominic never swore tae hissel in his heid. When did that stop? *Aye*, he decided, *Ab'll go over ma report wi Saffron when she gets hame. Or mibbe Ab'll visit ma Ma. Aye*, he decided, *that's what Ab'll dae, Ab'll pay ma Ma a wee visit.*

Remember tae tell Saffi about her dad, Dom mate, Jim Whyte said.

Yeab son, said Abe Lincoln. *You owe it to her. And to yourself.*

Dom's Ma

It was getting harder and harder tae tell whether his Ma was drunk or sober these days, or withdrawing fae the sauce, but when he saw her fall on the wee mound ay grass that led tae the block ay flats that the DSS had put her in, he kent the answer. Dominic only ever went tae Moredun during the day; these flats were dangerous places tae be at night, though he'd arrived a wee bit later in the day than he'd intended. As he ran tae her aid, a voice fae behind called through the wind and rain,

‘Why yi runnin fur that minkin wee mutt, ya daft cunt?’

‘Make sure yi git her handbag!’ somebody wi a Weegie accent shouted.

She was on her arse by the time he got tae her, trying tae heave herself tae her feet wi her hands, like a Buddha in the lotus position, but wi her legs wide open. It wasnae as hard as he'd imagined it would be tae help her up.

‘Yi awright Ma? Yi hurt?’ He dried her face wi a hanky as he spoke, looking her her up and doon. She was wet, but surprisingly clean.

‘Ah’m awright son, dinnae worry aboot me,’ she laughed. She always laughed when she was hurting.

Her voice sounded remarkably sober, wi only a hint ay a slur, making it difficult tae determine how much she'd had tae drink that day, and for how long she'd been binging this time. Her years ay alcoholism had taken her tae the *Ah-need-a-drink-tae-sober-up* stage, so that sometimes she appeared tae be sober when she was drunk and sometimes she was ‘drunk’ when she was sober. He picked up his Ma's handbag and the clink ay metal against glass made it clear that there was more than just keys and a purse in there. He'd given up asking how much she'd had tae drink years ago; she could never remember anyway. The thing nowadays was tae ensure that she was alive and well, as well someone in her condition could be, really.

He held her cheeks in his hands, which felt as soft as scar tissue and caulder than an angry October in Scotland, and looked her in the eyes, which were marginally less zonked than his ain had appeared tae him when he looked in the mirror that morning shortly after taking a compromised dose ay his meds.

How did she retain her guid looks after so many years ay alcohol abuse? She still looked thirty-some'ing; she was fifty-one.

It was one ay life's mysteries. He helped her tae the doors ay the horrible high-rise, where she lived up on the ninth floor. The lifts wurnae working so, keeping one hand on her hip and the other close tae her shoulder, Dominic helped his Ma climb the filthy staircase. She'd fallen backwards once, once that he knew ay, and had badly injured her heid. She'd fallen forwards countless times in his presence and, when she had withdrawal seizures, she always fell tae the left.

The staircase was dark and stank ay urine and fish, except for the second floor, which smelt ay Frankincense and Myrrh, or tae the more educated nose, heroin. The graff on the wall was vaguely decipherable in the darkness as they made their slow progress upwards:

YG RULES!

~~MOREDUN PISH!~~

MOREDUN PISH!

JOHN SQUIRE IS GOD!

DAMN HOMOSEXUALS!

FUCK YG!

FOR SALE CONDOM, NEVER USED

The condom ad had been sprayed across the wall on the third floor in huge lettering, wi an arrow point tae some poor fucker's front door.

'Awright Beth?' someone groaned through the darkness ay the fourth floor landing.

It was the big weirdo who slept in the corner there, the guy who made Dominic think ay Jeff Goldblum wi a lug-job. Dom's Ma used tae let him sleep on her couch, until Dominic found oot and got Boab what's-iz-name, Saffron and Gaz tae sort him oot.

'Yi no talking, Beth? You awright, pal?' he said tae Dominic.

You leave ma Ma alane, ya big bastard, Dominic thought.

'Awright mate?' Dom said.

Mibbe it is Jeff Goldblum? Dom's heid suddenly suggested, *mibbe he'd spent so much money gettin iz lugs fixed that it had left him bankrupt so he came tae Scotland, the alcoholic capital ay Europe, tae hide fae the world media.*

Shut up, Dominic said tae his heid, *this is nae laughin matter.*

'Ah'm always awright son,' the fellae said, extending a hand while trying tae manoeuvre hisseltae his feet, but giving up halfway when he realised that standing was mission impossible. 'Ah'm always awright,' he said again, letting hisseltae flop back intae the corner and the pool ay piss that he'd been sleeping in.

When they finally reached the ninth floor, Dom's Ma opened the door tae the familiar and slightly less rank smell ay cleaning products, air freshener and gin. She lived in a cell-shaped rat-cage you could hardly call hame. A sad wee lot, but at least she had a roof over her heid, and the rats left her alone...*mostly*. The rats who slept on the staircase and lived in the surrounding doss-hooses sometimes chapped her up, looking for a bed tae sleep in and probably a handbag tae nick, mibbe some free booze or a counsellor for the night. There were nae rats *inside* her flat; for someone whose life had been thrown intae the bin long ago, she always kept the place as clean as a chronic 'alcoholic' could.

Before the booze took over completely, she had always been a tidy person, almost obsessively so. Mibbe being clean on the ootside helped purge some ay the dirt that she felt on the inside. Dominic kent that his Ma felt diseased tae the bone, a bit like hisseltae in a way, but completely different in another. Beth was simultaneously strong and weak, or more

accurately mibbe, a strong woman *weakened* by alcohol. He couldnae imagine the horrors ay just being Beth, and he wondered how much she felt his ain pain. It was intensely sad, though, knowing that his ain Ma was a Textbook reject...

...The Textbook...come oan Dom man, there's nae Textbook, mate...

...Who the fuck said that?

He could hear music humming fae upstairs, a gentle song he recognised called *This Is How It feels To Be Lonely*.

...this is how it feels tae be small, this is how it feels when... his Ma sang along.

...your word means... Dominic was surprised tae hear himself join in.

'Sit doon son, it's guid tae see yi. Ah'll put the kettle oan, ay?' The stable slur ay her voice belied the shaky state ay her legs as she jittered her way intae the living room, Dominic staying close behind, just in case. She pulled a silver comb fae her coat, which she slung on a hook on the tiny hallway wall.

The juxtaposition ay her voice and her legs imitated the state ay her flat: the living room was well-hoovered, her futon neatly folded intae a couch, its flowery yellae and white pillae nicely fluffed, her five or six books piled neatly intae alphabetical order in the cabinet beneath the telly, which was switched off. Everything was nicely dusted, a place for everything and everything in its place, but beneath and around the table next tae her armchair, Dominic saw a mess ay cans and bottles, some open and probably empty, a couplae unopened ones waiting impatiently for her affection, and yet more empties lying on their arse.

Like the state ay the cans, her heid was a fucking mess and that filthy-clean combo ay odours still assaulted Dominic's nostrils. Beth disappeared intae the kitchen and he gazed ootae the windae intae the rain, the running water fae the kitchen tap adding a soundtrack tae the Heavens' silent blitz over Moredun, along wi the music fae upstairs.

'Here yi go son, get that doon yi.'

‘Thanks Ma. Hiy Ma, why dae yi need a futon when yiv got a bed in the room?’

‘Aw...Ah goat that fur free fae the nurse upstairs cos Ah sold ma couch tae the Spanish guy oan the second floor fur a tenner. He said he needed yin.’

‘Aw...right.’

A fuckin tenner? That couch cost £200.00 brand new. Saffi's Da gave yi that couch ootae pity.

Aw Ma...

Then, for nae apparent reason, she walked up tae the mirror and started combing her hair.

‘You gaun somewhere?’ Dominic laughed.

‘Nah, Ah just like tae-’ she dropped the comb mid-sentence. ‘Aw fuck!’

Dominic leaned forward tae pick it up, and his Ma’s face went suddenly serious.

‘Naw son, Ah’ll get it, dinnae you bother yirsel. Sit back doon.’ She picked up the comb placed it neatly on the mantelpiece, then changed her mind and resumed combing her hair.

He raised his *Best Mum In The World* mug in salute and took a long drink.

‘AH YA FUCKER!’

A stream ay phlegm, tea and whatever else was in there spewed fae Dominic’s mooth like projectile vomit. ‘What the fuck -’ He couldnae finish his sentence for coughing and spluttering.

‘Aw Dom...Dominic, Ah’m sorry. Ah’ve gave yi the wrong cup! Ah’m sorry Dominic. Dinnae worry, Ah’ll clean it up.’

‘It burns Ma, it fuckin burns!’ he coughed.

‘Aw son!’

Beth dropped the silver comb and ran intae the kitchen. ‘Dinnae touch that comb,’ she shouted, ‘leave it, Ah’ll get it.’ She returned fae the kitchen wi a cup ay water, a bottle Shake n Vac, Dettol, and a sponge. She handed the cup tae Dom and picked up the comb again, putting it back on the mantelpiece.

‘Here, drink this son, it’s just water, Ah swear. Aw Dominic, Ah’m really sorry, Ah really am. Drink that up, it’ll help yir throat.’

Dominic nodded, massaging his throat and trying tae catch his breath, still coughing and spluttering away. He smelt the cup while his Ma dropped tae her knees and started spraying and scrubbing like a maniac. It was hard tae tell for sure that it was actually water; the chlorine stink ay the Dettol made Dominic almost as dizzy as the vile concoction he’d just spewed oot.

‘What was in that?’ Dominic coughed. ‘Is that what you drink? There was mair than just gin in that tea, Ma.’ She was still on her knees when she answered.

‘Well, eh...Ah...eh...garnished mine a wee bit wi...well, you ken son...a cocktail ay ma ain devise. Ah’m sorry, Ah just cannae be daein wi the DTs, they’re horrible son, they’re really horrible. Gin and tea oan it’s ain just isnae enough anymore, Ah have tae...eh...improvise a bit more these days.’

Dominic’s eyes drifted again tae the grey sky. The rain had slowed somewhat.

‘Ah ken Ma, Ah ken.’ He spluttered another couplae times and took three or four long, slow breaths, feeling his heart rate gradually slow tae a near-normal pace.

He wished so much that he could get Dr Murray tae help her, or get her tae go tae Dr Murray, but the doc had awready told him that because she lived in Moredun, he wouldnae be allowed tae see her, unless it was on a ‘personal’ basis. But that was a line, he said, he couldnae cross, though he had tried tae advise Dominic on how tae help her, and he’d prescribed him vitamins and stomach capsules that were really for her.

When she seemed satisfied that the carpet was suitably clean, Dom’s Ma passed him the *World’s Greatest Son* mug that she’d laid on the table next tae her armchair.

‘This is yours son, coo an two, just as yi like it. Imagine what would have happened if Ah drank yours an you drank mine!’ she laughed, ‘Naw, seriously son, Ah am sorry.

Honestly, there’s nuttin else in that yin, coo an two, that’s aw.’

He trusted her and took a drink. It was lukewarm, but alcohol-free, wi coo and certainly more than two.

‘Dominic, aw Dom, there’s some’ing Ah need tae tell yi.’

‘Yiv no been diagnosed wi some’ing else have yi?’ He awready kent aboot the cirrhosis and the ulcer that often perforated her intae fits ay agony.

‘Naw...well...aye. Ah’ve got cirrhosis an aw that, yi ken that, naw it’s no that.’ She looked at him wi bleary but serious eyes.

‘What is it Ma?’ He could see that she was awready a bit more wasted than she’d been when he picked her up fae the wet grass. She must have had a bottle or two hidden in the kitchen as well.

‘Ah was gonnae murder you when yi wur a baby.’

Did she really say that?

No, it’s just the booze talking Dom mate, that’s all, Jim Whyte said, and Dominic realised that it was him who’d spoken earlier, but in a slightly more Jakey-Weegie type accent than usual.

Fuck...ma beid’s fucked...

Dom’s Ma snorted a laugh through her nose and wiped tears fae her eyes wi the sleeve ay her once-pretty red and yellae cardie.

‘Ma, how much huv yi had tae drink, really?’

‘Ah’m serious son, Ah actually thought aboot killin yi. You were a baby...Ah...it crossed ma mind...in a dream, Ah hink...Ah’m no sure. Sometimes, hun, Ah still feel like Ah’m a murderer. Is it ma fault, what yir gaun through?’

Dominic looked intae the blank TV screen and saw the vague silhouette ay a face that he only truly recognized when he was wi his Ma: his ain. He let his eyes roll around the room again, then rested them intently on Beth’s face. He wondered again how she’d managed tae stay so pretty, tear-stained mibbe and, aye, badly made-up, but beneath her

strawberry cheeks and blue, alcohol-reddened, yellowing eyes, her beauty remained. She looked a bit like a punk rock star, wi her lovely mess ay long broon hair, which looked better when it was unkempt and straggly. Ma's heart was in the right place, for sure, it always had been; it was her heid that was pickled. It was aw fucked-up, almost as bad as his ain. He tried tae take in what she was saying, and whether she meant it or no, part ay him wishing he could leap across the room and hug her, another part ay him wishing he had the balls and the strength tae shake the booze ootae her.

If you're beautiful at heart, it stays in the eyes no matter what, age cannae take that away. It was the gentle Weegie tone ay Jim Whyte that spoke again.

Dominic's eyes kept rolling, resting briefly on his Ma's again. Behind her sleepy, red-veined sclera and the rotating, sparkling darkness ay her pupils, Dominic still saw love. His eyes rolled on. Ootae the windae, across the road, behind a beautiful row ay cottages, was the new Royal Infirmary, which was near completion. If it was open, mibbe he'd have taken her over there and then.

'Ah loved yi son, but Ah wanted tae kill yi.'

'Why?' he heard himself say.

Beth lit a cigarette and threw one in Dom's direction, which he put behind his ear for later. She started greeting again and rested her fag in the ashtray.

'Yi huv tae understand, son...aw Dom...' she dried her eyes wi her sleeve. 'It was aw over the telly, there was gonnae be a nuclear war. The Russians wur gonnae blow us up, ken what Ah mean? There was a...a rapist oan the loose tae, a fuckin child molester. That wee lassie...that pair wee girl, they never found her, an Ah thought, *How can Ah bring a baby intae this world?* Ah felt so bad.'

Tell her she's beautiful, Dominic, tell yir mum tae stay beautiful. Beauty in the eyes never dies, Dominic, tell her. It's in her heart as well. Tell her to stay beautiful. Tell her that if she keeps being herself,

she'll always be beautiful, even if she cannae stop drinking. It's in her heart Dominic, and it's in her eyes.

Tell her, mate, Jim said.

‘But yi didnae kill iz, Ma. Look, Ah’m still here!’ He flung his arms wide open and forged a smile.

‘Ah went tae the doctor, that Dr Murray. Does he still work oot there? Well, anyway, Ah went tae see him an he told iz that Ah had some’ing called ‘postnatal depression’, really bad like. Ah ken it’s a well-known hing now, but back then...well, some folk didnae believe in it, men especially. He gave iz some Vallies and advised iz tae stop drinkin. Yir Da had just left, so Saffron Smith’s mother looked after yi fur a while, while Ah dried masel oot in the Lee. Dae yi no remember?’

‘Ah remember playin fitba wi Saffi, she-’

‘Aye, she was always a bit ay a Tomboy, that Saffron. Nice girl like, but a real Tomboy, ken what Ah mean?’ She finished the dregs ay her cup, which must have been well-cauld by now, and continued. ‘How is she anyway? Yous still livin thigither?’ Before Dominic had a chance tae answer, she went on. ‘Yi want another cup ay tea? Ah’ve finished mine.’ Withoot giving Dominic a chance tae answer, she sprung up, wobbling on her feet for a second, then steadying herself wi her arms flung oot like a tightrope walker and swayed intae the kitchen.

He heard the sound ay the tap running beneath the louder sound ay the music fae upstairs, which was aw interrupted by a banging at the door.

‘Dinnae answer son, Ah’ll get it.’

Beth left the tap running and staggered through the tiny hallway. Dominic decided tae follow her, but the door-knocker spoke before his Ma had a chance tae answer.

‘Beth...Bethany....’ The voice was loud, slurred and croaky.

‘Dinnae let him in,’ Dominic whispered, ‘it’s that Jeff Goldblum guy.’

‘What Jeff Goldblum guy?’

‘The piss-stained fellae fae the staircase.’

‘AH’M NO IN!’ Dom’s Ma shouted.

‘Aw, let iz in pet, Ah just want a wee chat, that’s aw.’

‘AH’M NO IN!’ she shouted louder.

‘Aw, c’moan, let iz in Beth, Ah just want a wee drink!’

‘FUCK OFF!’

‘LISTEN MATE,’ Dominic was shocked by the ferocity ay iz ain voice, ‘IF YI
DINNAE GO AWAY, AH’LL GIT MA MATES BACK, SO GIT TAE FUCK!’

‘AH NEED A DRINK!’

‘FUCK OFF!’ Beth roared.

‘FUCK YI THEN, YA MINKIN WEE MUTT! AND YOU, YA FUCKIN
WEIRDO!’

They sat silently for a few minutes as his footsteps echoed doon the stairs. Dominic waited until his steps were little more than a distant tap before he spoke.

‘Eh Ma, there’s some’ing Ah wanted tae ask...eh...tell...eh...ask yi.’

‘What is it son?’

‘Well, it’s-’

‘Wait there,’ Dom’s Ma held her palm up, ‘Ah just need tae grab a wee drink. You ken how it is son.’

‘Awright Ma, you git yir drink.’

Seemingly oblivious tae the booze that lay on the floor, she staggered back intae the kitchen. He heard her turn off the tap and open a can. The light *Tssch* ay the ring-pool was followed by a soft ‘Aaagh!’, and then came the clicking ay a bottle being opened. He heard the pouring ay liquid and, after a few minutes, Beth returned wi a pint glass containing a concoction ay god knows what. He could hear that she’d left the tap running again.

‘So, what is it son?’

‘The tap.’

‘What?’

‘The tap, yiv-’

‘Och, forget aboot the tap. What’s wrong wi you, Dominic? Yi said yi had some’ing tae tell mi.’

‘The DWP-’

‘The DWP?’

‘The DWP are askin iz tae attend fur an assessment. Tae see if Ah’m fit tae work, like.’

‘An assessment?’

‘An interview like, they want tae see if Ah’m fit tae work.’

‘Bastards!’

‘Ah’m a bit worried cos Ah’ve no goat an exact diagnosis yet.’

‘They doctors are bastards tae. Can that Dr Murray no help yi?’ She’d opened a fresh can, which she drank at lightning speed. She tossed the empty on tae the floor and fumbled underneath the table beside her armchair until she found a full half-bottle. She opened it and took a big drink. Her fag had burnt tae the tip in the ashtray.

‘Murray’s written iz a letter ay support, an he’s wangled iz a copy ay Ma GP report as well. It’s full ay mistakes.’

‘Mistakes?’

‘Omissions. Half ay ma visits urnae even oan record. There’s nae exact diagnosis either, just possible this and possible that.’

‘Dinnae worry son, they cannae send *you* back tae work. Yir like that guy fae the telly.’

‘Who?’

‘That guy fae the telly, fae Gallae, wi the dark hair.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘The guy fae the telly!’

‘Aw...him.’

‘Dae yi want me tae come wi yi? Ah’ll sort it oot fur yi son. Dinnae worry, let mum handle it.’

He looked her up and doon, fae heid tae toe. Her face was lolled tae the right and her short legs were stretched as far as they could go across the carpet. Her hands rested on her belly, locked together at the fingers. He could see that she was struggling tae stay awake and, as much as he’d have loved tae believe that his Ma was in a fit enough condition tae help him wi his assessment, he decided tae take Saffron’s offer ay support.

‘Nah, yir awright Ma, Saffron’s offered tae come wi iz. She does some kindae admin work fur some pharmaceutical company or some’ing doon in the Borders, something like, she’s tough though, ay, Ah mean guid wi folk like that. She doesnae take nae shite, ken what Ah mean?’

‘Ah ken what yi mean. Who’s Saffron?’

‘Ma flatmate, Saffi Smiff, remember, the lass whose Ma looked after iz when you were...eh...ill.’

‘Aw aye, Saffron Smith, the Tomboy.’

‘Aye, that’s her.’

She’d crossed the border between alcoholic sanity and drunken delirium now, and lay on her armchair wi her eyes half-open and her chin wagging fae side tae side so that he wondered whether she was aboot tae have a fit. Then, her eyes just tore open and she was suddenly wide awake, her pupils darting around the room.

‘Dominic! Dom is that you?’

‘It awright Ma, Ah’m here.’

The tune playing upstairs had changed tae 'The Charlatans' *One to Another*. Fae her cardigan pocket, she suddenly produced a packet ay Revels and tossed them over tae Dominic.

'Find iz the orange yin, will ye?'

'Ay?'

'The orange yin, Ah can never find the orange yin, Ah always choose the wrong yin. Ah only like the orange yins, see. Find iz the orange one, you can keep the rest. It feels like Ah've been lookin fur the orange yin aw ma life, but Ah cannae find it anywhere.'

Dominic opened the packet and fingered the chocolates, searching for a round one, but then how would he ken that it was the orange one? Aw he kent was that the orange one was round, but so were most ay the others.

The orange one's a bit bigger than the others, Dom mate, Jim Whyte said, like a Malteser. Choose one ay the bigger round ones. It'll either be a Malteser or the orange one. You'll have tae guess, mate. If you get it wrong, I'm sure she'll give you another chance.

Dominic chose one ay the bigger round Revels, just as Jim had said, and tossed it over. It landed on his Ma's belly and she quickly threw it intae her mooth.

'Aw, thanks son, yi found iz the orange yin. You keep the rest.'

Dominic looked tae the floor, tae the black, wet stain that ran fae his feet tae the bottom ay the telly cabinet. He could see that his Ma was checking the cans on the table beside her, trying tae find an open one. He decided tae help.

'Here yi go, Ma.' He handed his Ma the bottle she'd opened a few minutes earlier, and poured a drop ay beer fae a near-finished can intae the asthray tae put oot the smoke that was emanating fae her burning filter. 'Wait, I'll mix it fur yi. Get some useful fluids intae yi, ay?' As he walked intae the kitchen tae fix his Ma a drink wi some water in it, he heard her muttering something tae herself, something aboot angels and devils, and women wi combs.

‘Yi see that patch ay grass oot there son,’ Dom’s Ma said, her eyes half-shut again and her ring-finger pointing oot the windae. ‘Yi see that patch ay grass where Ah fell earlier oan? Mind, when yi helped iz up? That’s where the angels play son, that’s where the angels play wi the demons when Ah’ve run ootae drink in the middle ay the night an Ah’ve no had any for a couplae days. Dinnae drink away yir problems son, you keep be you an yil always be beautiful. It’s in yir eyes. If beauty’s in yir eyes an yi keep bein you, it’ll stay in yir eyes and yil always be beautiful.’

Ah...she beat yi tae it Dom, mate, Jim said. *Nice woman, yir Ma, really nice woman.*

‘Hiy Ma,’ Dominic said, seeing that she was aboot tae pass oot completely now, ‘stay beautiful tae, ay? Stay beautiful.’

‘Ay?’ She burped.

‘You stay beautiful, ay?’

Dominic wasnae sure whether she’d heard him as she drifted softly asleep withoot having touched the drink he’d fixed for her. He took the fag fae behind his ear and lit it, deciding tae stay wi her through the night, tae make sure she was okay in the morning and mibbe try and get her tae a doctor somewhere up toon. He turned off the tap in the kitchen and fetched a blanket fae his Ma’s bedroom, flinging it over her and neatening the edges around her body, then lay doon on the couch. It was starting tae get dark ootside.

Well done, mate, Jim Whyte said, *well done.*

Beer Legs (part one)

(01/10/2002. Dx? Rx: too much. Px: pish))

The booze had been carrying Dominic's legs in dangerous directions aw night. He kent it would be a bad idea, bevvyng like, especially on his meds, but he'd made an horrific start tae his new job, the one the DSS had found him after his disastrous DWP assessment. He was now a 'Supporter' in a finance office, insurance or something, working as part ay a small team situated in a massive open plan on the first floor ay a huge building that overlooked St Andrew Square. Apparently, it was customary tae go oot on a Friday night and since they'd reached their weekly targets – *the team's* weekly targets, no the targets that Heid Office had set – this Friday was special. What's more, it was somebody's birthday, and they *always* celebrated birthdays, especially *special* ones; some daft wee lassie was gonnae be eighteen at the weekend and they were gonnae show her how tae party *like a woman*. A couplae the women sitting around Dominic had awready given the lass a theatrical lesson on how tae give a blowjob on a banana while aw the other guys in their wee team were in a meeting, and he was left sitting there pretending he couldnae see, or hear, them and wondering whether the performance was more for the sake ay embarrassing him than giving the lass an oral sex education class; he doubted she lacked experience in that particular field, given the lassie's *advanced* vocabulary.

Brand New Star (part one)

His first morning, a Tuesday, had been fucking awful. They'd found him the job on the Monday and he hadnae even had tae attend a formal interview, just a hurried wee chat wi a busy agency woman aboot a different job entirely, one which had actually interested him...*almost*, and he'd basically just sat there trying tae find somewhere tae rest his eyes without looking like he was gazing intae space like a weirdo or perving at the guid looking curly-blond soon-tae-be birthday girl. He choked under the collar ay the new white shirt that Saffi had bought him and felt like a dickheid in his red-and-white striped M&S tie. He was definitely under the gaze ay the entire office as the new guy, the weird-looking new guy, the new guy wi a pus like well-skelped arse. He wondered tae whether he was under the radar ay The Textbook, that that's why they'd put him there in the first place, tae keep an eye on him like. Mibbe there were people in the office who worked for The Textbook? He hadnae had much cause for suspicion yet, but it was a fucking big office and he always felt lonely in crowds, under scrutiny like, and this was mibbe one ay the most exposed situations he'd ever been in. There were fucking eyes everywhere.

The shrill ringing ay telephones was constant, the short *brring-brring...brring-brrings* signalling external customers, the longer *burr-ing...burr-ings* indicating internal calls. Most ay the *brring-brrings* rang oot, unanswered. The buzzing and bleeping ay photocopiers and fax machines, the spacey *zbrooom* ay electronic scanners and the general cacophony ay different accents were aw alien tae Dominic, and the banal, lug-buggering banter around him mingled wi the sound ay city traffic and the occasional shouts fae pedestrians and tourists outside. He was sure he could hear trumpets in the distance tae, and someone playing slide-guitar over an African gospel choir, which wouldnae have been entirely insane during the Edinburgh Festival, but this was October. Petrified it was gonnae ring at any moment, his

gaze occasionally shifted tae the phone on his ain desk, which sat still and silent like an unexploded bomb.

‘I think people on benefits should get vouchers for everything,’ a chubby girl wi alcohol-smelling coffee breath was saying, ‘but we just hand them wads ay cash. What do you think they spend it on? Food and warmth?’ she sneered. ‘We sit here aw day long, workin our asses off, while they sit in front ay *The Big Breakfast* guzzling cider and smoking fags.’ She said ‘assess’ in an American accent, like a character fae *Friends* or something; her ain brawl was a weird hybrid ay suburban Edinburgh Jakey and middle-class Morningside. It was now half-eleven and she’d been putting the world tae rights aw morning. Dom hadnae noticed her dae any work since they’d plonked him at his desk at 9am. She seemed tae be one ay the big-wigs in their wee team.

‘I know...ken, Ah ken,’ Claire, the *Girl-You’ll Be-A-Woman* lass, said. She seemed non-too-bright, but fucking hot, and an array ay random words passed softly through Dominic’s brain, while the hairs on the back ay his neck stood on end in a moment ay rare tranquillity,

...*Colourful...butterfly...yellae...cabbage...brains...eyes...*

He made a mental note tae write a poem when he got hame. Though his confidence in his ain writing skills had waned somewhat since Saffi went apeshit at him for revealing his poetry skills during the DWP Assessment that ultimately brought him here, what harm could it dae tae try? Dr Murray thought he could write. Still, the note he’d given Dominic when they last spoke worried him.

See me before 8th October – will be going away for a while.

Claire seemed tae be the opposite ay everyone else in the Dom’s wee team. Most ay them seemed tae be wannabe middle-class proletarians, but Claire was a posh girl who wanted tae be working-class. She kept mixing up her dialect and getting her Gadgie slang

wrong. Plus, she couldnae seem tae decide whether she was Edinburgh-Gadgie or working-class Weegie. They were aw screwing up their accents really, like naebody could decide who they were, but it was Claire who confused him most.

‘Aye, ma Jamie’s braw like, ken? Stoater ay a guy, a real fuckin belter aye...ay...oh...’ She put her hand tae her mooth. ‘Did Ah just swear again,’ she giggled. ‘But aye, we hit it aff...oaf...aff straightaway. Brainy too...anaw...brainy tae...anaw...know what...ken?’ Those were the words that Dominic’s ears heard anyway.

She’d been blethering away aboot her Jamie aw morning and Dominic’s hands momentarily wanted tae grab his monitor and chuck it ootae the window. Her and the fat girl seemed tae ken everything aboot everything, the moral majority like, but between them they had the IQ ay a piece ay lettuce. He tried tae switch his brain off tae the banter and his eyes drifted back tae his PC screen, which stared back at him, bored in its idleness, the green cursor flashing its impatience. But naebody had shown him what tae dae. He kent the work was simple, if Claire could dae it, his auld granny’s goldfish could, but naebody had even told him what it was they wanted him tae dae, they’d just thrust a cup ay sugarless coffee in his hands and said, *‘Bruce’ll be with you in a minute...’*

That was two hours ago. The noise, the moronic chat, the rumbling in his belly for food and the stink ay coffee and dust that hung in the air wi the smell ay vodka that wafted over fae the fat lass...he wanted call Saffi, but that was ootae the question., she was working tae, daein whatever it was she did, and she’d never given him her work number.

‘Hey, Dominic, is it?’ Claire suddenly asked and, withoot giving him a chance tae answer, went on, ‘where you from...fae...fae...where do yi come fae?’ She smiled and their eyes met.

She was undeniably beautiful and Dominic felt naked in her blue-eyed gaze. Behind her dim-witted brightness he suddenly noticed an inner darkness and a hint ay...*intelligence*, replete wi a tiny, haloed twinkle that made him think ay a solitary streetlight in the distance

on a black, secluded landscape. Claire was intelligent! She kent more than met the eye and Dominic flinched. *Could she be? Naw...* He looked briefly away, but his eyes pulled themselves back tae hers, despite hissels. She smiled again and then glanced over his heid at the shining sun ay the mid-morning October sky, her eyes widening tae reflect the fluffy clouds ay late autumn. Then, when she looked back, he saw her pupils draw inwards like citric acid being sucked intae a hypodermic needle fae a junky's spoon, and those shadows, that darkness, was gone, like someone had flicked a switch, and her forehead tightened, then loosened as if the inner light ay her brain was being turned on and off, finally settling on her previous persona.

Who was this girl? Mibbe...nah...

He forced his gaze over her heid and intae the open plan area behind them. Could any ay these people be working for 'The Textbook'? Though Dom was on Dr Murray's medication, he hadnae taken quite as much as prescribed; he didnae wannae appear too spaced on his first day. He'd given Dr Black's red and black pills a miss for now, deciding tae wait until his first day was over, mibbe his first week. Though the office was fucking brain-buggering, at least he wasnae getting any voices; nae Dougie Donnelly, nae Jim Whyte, nae Tiger Woods, nae Abe...none ay them...and he was pretty sure that naebody in his immediate team worked for 'The Textbook'. The girls were far too dim and the folk at the next bank ay desks, who were actually working, seemed completely unconcerned wi what was happening around them; they certainly wurnae preoccupied wi Dominic. There was one guy who'd glanced up at him a couplae times, a guy wi long blond hair and specs, but Dom wondered whether he was frowning at the girls' chat rather than him. The woman who'd fetched him the coffee when he first sat doon was far too bright and cheerie; he liked her. Nice people dinnae work for 'The Textbook'. He glanced further intae the distance, further intae the dusty, stinking void ay the open plan that they'd walked him through on the way tae his new desk.

The entire building was like a small world contained within four walls, the floor on which he worked like a miniature indoor village, though its walls were pretty far apart. It even had its very ain Postman Pat, a guy called George who delivered mail tae the different departmental trays every now and then wi a joke and a smile, and aisles in-between the different teams like streets, and people who pushed trolleys round the office like prams. Dominic's eyes gazed further afield, telescoping further intae his new world like a man trying tae decipher a brand new star in a distant constellation, but it was impossible tae tell fae where he sat whether there were any members ay 'The Textbook' in there or no, they were aw so far away. Some folk seemed tae be working hard, typing like demons and checking and double-checking reports like automatons, photocopying like psychos and faxing like madmen, while the girls across fae him spraffed on aboot 'spongers' and 'alcis', how some women got pregnant just tae get a hoose, how great Jimmy Saville was and how Tony Blair was the best British Prime Minister since Winston Churchill...

...Winston Churchill was a mass fucking murderer...

Dominic jumped.

Who the fuck said that?

He looked around. Claire and the fat lass, whom he'd learned was called Denise, were still nattering aboot 'spongers' and 'freaks ay nature' (i.e. 'alcoholics' and 'manic depressives'). Liam, the blond-headed guy who'd been working away quietly aw morning at the next bank ay desks, was still working away quietly at the next bank ay desks and Gwen, the nice lass who'd given him the sugarless coffee, was struggling wi the fax machine.

...No better than Charlie Manson or Wayne Gacy. Even Jack the Ripper wasn't as bad as Churchill. They're all murderers you know, politicians...

The voice was unmistakable; it was Donnelly.

Shut up! Dominic screamed in his heid. He pressed his hands tae his ears.

I know all about mass murderers, Dominic, I've studied them all.

Ab'm no listenin...Shut up!

He felt his eyes roll in his heid and then dart around the room, his feet shuffling under the desk like an Irish batter-dancer.

Aw fuck...did Ab just shout oot loud?

He looked again at the people in his wee team, one at a time; Liam was still furiously typing away, Gwen was still trying tae fix the fax machine and the girls were still spraffing away.

Ab'm no listenin tae yi, Ab'm no-

And yet you're still talking to me, in front of all your new colleagues. They all know you're a freak, Dominic, everyone does.

Dominic screwed his eyes up tight and Donnelly's voice went suddenly soft, soothing in tone, but Dominic remained disturbed by its very presence....

...Oh well, if you don't want me to help you through your first day...

Shut up!

I'm only trying to help, Dominic, I'm just telling you. There are killers everywhere. You know that quiet man with the long blond hair and the specs? Liam...

...Shut up!

He's a killer Dominic. So's Postman Pat. And the girl at the fax machine...

Dominic reached inside his coat pocket, which he'd slung over his swivel chair, for those red and black capsules. He opened the bottle under the desk and quickly swallowed one, massaging it doon his throat, then looking around tae see if anyone had noticed. He looked up at Gwen who smiled back triumphantly; she'd sorted the fax machine. Soon, though, Dominic felt sweat pouring fae his temples and his heart started beating faster than it ever had done before. A strong smell ay coffee, stronger than the general stink ay the office, filled his nostrils and a gentle hand touched his shoulder.

'You okay Dominic? You look a bit flush.' He turned tae see the smiling face ay his new manager, Bruce, the guy who'd greeted him at reception when he'd arrived that morning.

'Awright...me...aye...eh...aye, Ah'm awright. Cool.'

Cool? Why the fuck did you just say that to your new boss? Cool? Are you some kind of weirdo Bohemian-type? You a fucking Buddha? Don't you want your new boss to like you?

'First day nerves, ay?' Bruce said softly. 'Don't worry mate, you'll soon settle.'

Bruce's voice then seemed tae fade until he was speaking like a TV on mute, his lips moving in soundless shapes like an interpreter for the deaf, but wi less animation in his body language. Dominic took a couplae slow, deep breaths and looked away. His eyes caught the cursor on his PC screen as it suddenly ballooned intae a round, yellae face. First it frowned, then smiled, winked, and grinned, sprouting hands, but nae arms, and feet, but nae legs, and started dancing in the middle ay the screen. Soon, there were two ay them, then three...they kept multiplying until the entire screen was full ay dancing cursors that looked like M&Ms wi hands and feet and great big smiling faces, their lips ruby-red like a gummy bear's. They were aw singing, a merry air, then a disco song, one by ABBA, something about a dancing queen, in strange, high-pitched computerized monotones. He blinked and looked back at Bruce's smiling face, as the sadistic cursors changed their tune tae The Beatles' *Let It Be*, in a kindae *Sesame Street* way...

...Letter B, Letter B...spelling words like 'Brisbane', Letter B...

'Dominic,' he said, 'I wanted to show you the filing centre, where you'll be doing a lot of your work, to begin with anyway.'

Bruce was a nice guy wi a friendly face and a gentle voice. He was guid-looking in a manly way, but soft-spoken in a feminine way, definitely no a member ay The Textbook. When Dominic looked back tae his screen, the cursor had returned tae its former self; a solitary, lifeless dash, flashing unused below the first letter ay a client's name, the letter B.

‘Come with me pal, I’ll show you round. Do you want a cup ay tea?’

Dae Ah want Ah cup ay tea?

‘Dae yi want me tae get it?’ Gwen asked.

Dae Ah want Gwen girl tae get iz a cup ay tea?

‘What do you take again?’

What dae Ah take again?

‘Eh...just milk an-’

‘Milk, nae sugar. Cool.’ Gwen spun on her heel wi the majesty ay a movie star and bounced towards the kettle. She had lovely broon hair, soft and flowing, like Holly Hunter’s, her face just as pretty, her body equally as petite. ‘Milk an nae sugar.’

‘Naw,’ Dominic whispered, ‘milk an two sugar.’ But it was too late, Gwen was awready filling his cup.

‘What’s that?’ Bruce said tae Dominic, leaning over.’ Dominic looked at his new shoes, the ones that Saffi had bought him, a nice pair ay broon Vannucci’s for his new job. Bruce was wearing a similar pair.

‘Milk an sugar,’ Dominic whimpered, ‘Ah take milk and two sugar.’

‘Hey Gwen,’ Bruce whistled, ‘it’s coo and two!’

Dominic could tell that Bruce came fae a posh area; he was another one ay they folk who seemed tae be ashamed ay their middle-class upbringing and he just couldnae blend his Barnton brogue wi Edinburgh Gadgie.

‘Aw...right,’ Gwen smiled, ‘milk an two sugars. Yi should have said, lovey, dinnae be shy.’ She winked at Dominic.

Brand New Star (part two)

Dominic let himself exhale when the elevator bleeped and opened up intae the sub-basement. He'd felt intimidated standing in such a short space wi Bruce, no because Bruce was an intimidating guy, he was the exact opposite really, and it was probably that very characteristic that fuelled Dom's psychic self-deprecating venom; he *should* have felt comfortable in Bruce's presence. His only real reservations aboot Bruce were wi regards tae his sexuality; he wiggled his arse like a woman when he walked and, though he had nothing against gay folk, Dominic had been touched inappropriately by homosexuals in the past, as a laddie like.

You fucking faggot!

It was Donnelly again; those pills hadnae done much then, except tae bring on some disturbing hallucinations. He felt his spine shudder, the tea running over the tip ay his cup and scalding his hand. He looked doon tae see that his thumb and the space between it and his forefinger were bright red. He did his best tae steady the cup in his hand. Bruce put a hand on Dom's shoulder.

'You alright pal? Still nervous on yir first day, ay?'

'Aye, first day butterflies, ay.' Dominic tried tae laugh it off, the cup still trembling in his hand, but Bruce's face simultaneously magnified and brightened until Dominic found himself gazing at a giant, smiling orange. He placed his other hand on Dom's left shoulder, but another voice entered his mind...

...Why are we in Aye-raq?

It was Andy Gray; he hadnae spoke tae Dominic for ages.

'Sorry?' Dominic said.

That wee Claire lassie's a bit ay a ride, ay?

‘Eh...aye, Ah suppose she is.’

‘Sorry?’ Bruce said.

Aw naw, yiv just spoken oot loud, ya daft cunt!

‘Aw, eh...Ah mean, Ah was sayin...eh-’

Bruce patted Dominic on the back. ‘You’ll be fine pal, absolutely fine.’

Fucking faggot, Donnelly interjected.

Leave him alane, ya fuckin bully, Jim Whyte suddenly jumped intae Dom’s heid, *you just leave him alane. Yil be alright Dom, yil be fine, pal, just take it easy, that’s aw*. White’s voice seemed tae have adopted a Gadgie twang, but remained gentle as ever.

Dominic took a few more slow, deep breaths as Bruce led him through the filing centre. *Those fucking meds...* Bruce took him intae a stinking wee claustrophobic cell at the back ay the sub-basement called the Cedar Room.

‘Right Dominic, this is where we keep the Irish files. You’ll be working down here about two mornings a week. We have a lot of Irish clients, as you can see.’ He gestured round the room tae illustrate just how many Irish clients they had. ‘Stinks in here, I know, but you’ll get used to it. Well,’ he patted Dominic on the back, ‘you’ll have to!’ Dominic’s cup still shook in his hand as Bruce spoke.

Ah wonder what would happen if Ah chucked this tea over Bruce’s face?

‘So, where to next...’ Bruce’s voice went ontae mute again.

Throw the tea in the cunt’s face! Donnelly said.

Nut!

Do it, ya fuckin poofster!

No! Jim Whyte said, *dinnae dae it Dom, mate...*

‘I’ll show you where we keep the pensions.’

...Fucking do it! Shiter...

‘Follow me,’ Bruce said.

Dominic downed the rest ay his tea in a oner, thanking fuck that it was cauld, and relieved that it was finished.

Though the entire filing centre reeked ay damp, Dominic preferred it tae the smell upstairs and he finally started tae chill a bit as Bruce showed him where they kept the Final Salary files, the Impaired Life Annuities, the Term Assurance policies, the p501 prints that came in fae Glasgow every morning, and then took him through tae introduce him tae the filing staff. They were aw working-class, steely-faced, angry but fucking friendly, sitting there sifting through piles and piles ay files and listening tae radio, which played quietly in the background.

‘Awright, Ah’m Linda,’ a stout brunette wi a face like she was sucking a soor ploom said. She never offered her hand the way the people up in the department had, which somehow impressed Dominic. ‘Welcome tae the Dungeons.’

Dominic liked her straightaway. Nae pretension, nae bullshit and an anger that he instantly respected because he kent she was angry at something real, something *meaningful*. A picture ay the two ay them standing at the Chapel suddenly jumped intae Dom’s brain and he blinked, feeling his knees go weak and trembly as the image slowly dissipated. In a way, it had been an image that he’d wanted tae keep, but now wasnae the time nor the place. Like the fax machine lass (*what was her name again? Gail? Gwen?*) ...like the fax machine lass though, he liked Linda, she reminded him ay Saffron...she had fire in her belly, which was a pretty big belly if truth be told.

Margaret and Mary were similarly doon-tae-earth, but strangely jovial and accepting ay their place in the company. They were both close tae retirement and refreshingly nice, despite the palpable pain behind their smiles, the *experience* in their eyes, and no a bit like the lassies up in the department. Mary flicked doon her glasses and flashed him a warm smile and Margaret turned the volume up on the radio.

‘This is ma favourite song,’ she said. ‘You like *Sex on the Beach*, Dominic?’ She smiled, revealing a mouthful ay gleaming falsers.

Dae Ah Like Sex on the Beach?

‘Eh...aye...it’s awright,’ he said.

Why could Ah no huv been put doon in the Dungeons wi this lot instead ay upstairs?

After lunch, Dominic was finally given the low-down on what his job would actually entail. For the time being, he’d be daein ‘the easy stuff’, paper-chase and filing mostly, and dealing wi changes ay address and stuff like that. As he sat there stamping certificates for fuck-knows-what, he wondered why the job description had specified three highers, tae include English and Maths; *a fucking monkey could dae this work*.

He finally relaxed a bit when Claire told him that the phone on his desk wasnae actually plugged in and he realised that his first day was coming tae an end. The general mayhem ay that first day though, whether real or no, continued tae drive him nuts when he got hame, and he had tae turn tae Saffron for comfort.

‘At least it forces yi tae concentrate on the real world Dom,’ she’d said, kissing him lightly on the cheek. ‘Yir a wee bit...*better* the night than sometimes yi are. Any hot single guys that Ah might like?’

‘Ay?’

‘Ah’m just kiddin wi yi,’ Saffi laughed. ‘Yi look a wee bit better than normal, though, a bit less...well...better, yi look better.’

‘Cheers Saffi. Actually, Ah do feel a bit better,’ he lied.

The rest ay the week, though, continued in a similar vein. Until Friday.

Beer Legs (part two)

‘Coo and two,’ a guy called Craig smiled as he placed Dominic’s tea in front ay him, his big hand threatening tae crush the cup in its grip. Craig was a likeable fellae who’d been on a training course aw week. He was well-built and prematurely balding, probably a couplae years aulder than Dominic, and much bigger, muscular like, but wi gentle blue eyes, a bit like Saffi’s, and Dominic felt close tae comfortable in his presence.

‘Miss Molinari,’ he said tae Claire as he set her tea doon. Claire smiled back, blue-eyed and wide, white-toothed and beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

‘This coffee’s a bit creamy,’ Claire giggled, ‘you been doing something yi shouldnae have been in it?’

‘What you tryin tae say?’ Craig laughed, shaking his heid. ‘Cannae believe you just said that.’ He looked tae Dominic, who looked away, embarrassed.

Dom was glad his first week was nearly over. In a few hours’ time, he’d be cuddling in front ay the telly wi Saffi. Mibbe he’d even fall asleep at an almost reasonable hour for the first time in years. He hadnae, as yet, seen any concrete evidence that anyone there might actually work for The Textbook, just one or two suspicions aboot Claire, and today she was tae officially become a woman.

The bevvying started at around 2pm, in the office. The official pre-party orthodox was that everybody basically got rat-arsed and had a great time, but the reality was pretty far removed fae that. While Dominic sat at his desk surrounded by a sober Claire, a completely wasted Denise and a woman called Pauline, who’d been on the same training course as Craig, Bruce sipped tea wi a guy called Marc. The only other people who really got drunk were Gwen, which made him a bit sad, and the folk fae the Filing Department, who seemed tae have been invited up for the sole purpose ay being scrutinised by their seniors. Mibbe, Linda had suggested tae Dominic while they were ootside having a fag, they were

looking for someone tae sack, it was the same every time, she'd said. Dominic, as usual, stayed sober. At the end ay the 'working day', during which it was compulsory tae stay in the office whether they were working or no, they went tae Marcardos nightclub behind the train station, where Happy Hour started at 4pm.

The pumping dance music, the flashing blue and red lights and the general chaos in there made Dominic feel sick, increasing the strength ay the inner tidal wave awready started by his medication. He was looking around the dance floor for Linda or Craig, someone tae talk tae who might make him feel almost halfway sane, when he saw Bruce edging his way through the crowd.

'You not drinking?' Bruce shouted in Dominic's ear.

'Nah, mate. Ah dinnae-'

'You don't like drinking? Me neither. You should sit with Marc and me.' Bruce nodded tae a table along the wall.

On the dance floor, Gwen was making a fucking arse ay herself, dancing like Kate Bush and bumping intae people, knocking back shot after shot and shouting in the ears ay random strangers. Bruce led Dominic through the happy crowd and squeezed intae a seat between Marc and Pauline, who was basically a slightly prettier, kindae watered doon version ay Denise; similar daft opinions but wi a hint ay kindness behind her banality. Dominic sat opposite them. Linda, he noticed, was busy arguing wi the bouncers, her right fist clenched.

'Look at Gwen,' Marc shouted, 'so sad tae see her like this, such a nice lass.' He shook his heid.

'She's an idiot,' Pauline said. 'Look at her. Ah hink she's goat a-'

Wi two manicured fingers, Bruce summoned Dom tae come closer. His ear met Bruce's mooth mid-table.

‘She always gets like this when she drinks,’ Bruce shouted in Dominic’s ear. ‘Oh no, here comes Craig.’

Craig plonked a pint on the table. ‘Here yi go Dom, mate, oan me.’

‘Ah dinnae-’ But Craig was awready dancing his way back intae the crowd before Dominic could finish.

Dominic let the pint sit there while Bruce and Marc were becoming increasingly friendly, though they seemed tae be talking in code.

‘I’m bibi, Brucey,’ Marc said.

‘Ha! Cod, cod omi! Bona omi-palone, through and through. Alamo!’ He nudged Marc and nodded at a couplae young fellaes standing at the bar.

Dominic felt like a wonky spare part. He took a sip fae his pint.

‘Dom, ma man!’ He felt someone’s hands massaging his shoulders and turned tae see Craig’s grinning face.

‘Awright Craig, Ah’m awright. Yirsel?’

‘Shite. This place is fuckin shite. Hiy,’ he nodded at Dominic’s pint, ‘that the same pint Ah bought yi? Yi a poof or some’ing? Drink up, mate.’ He said the word ‘poof’ loud enough for Bruce and Marc tae hear.

Dominic looked at his glass, braced hissels, and took a couplae long slugs, sinking aboot a quarter ay it.

‘Ah’m just jokin, mate! Drink at yir ain pace. Yi dinnae huv tae dae what Ah say. You always dae what people tell yi tae?’

He sat doon on Pauline’s seat, making Dominic wonder where she’d disappeared tae. Though he was friendly wi Dominic, there was still something aboot Craig that made Dom wonder. What had made Pauline piss-off like that? After aboot four pints, Dominic was pretty half-cut. He wiped some sweat fae his forehead and looked up. His eyes saw

Bruce and Marc standing there wi were their coats on, Bruce wi his hand extended in Dom's direction.

'Well, Dominic, I hope you're feeling more settled now your first week's over.'

Dominic shook his hand wi a wee bit more caution than he meant tae.

'Ma first week?'

'In the office.'

'Aw aye... ma first week. Aye, mate...eh...Bruce...settled...in...settlin.'

'Good, good,' Bruce said. 'We're off now. See you Monday.'

'Aye...Monday...see yiz.'

'Fuckin fag,' Craig shouted in Dom's ear as they left. Dominic wasnae sure whether he was referring tae Bruce or him. He changed the subject and they spent about half an hour spraffing about the fitba, where they came fae, aw the usual surface crap, until Craig leaned over the table.

'Wannae go somewhere else.'

'Where?'

'Ah'll tell yi ootside. Git yir coat oan.'

It wasnae until his face hit the cauld October air that he realised just how wasted he was. As he steadied hissel on the railings ootside the train station, Craig did a kindae Nazi salute, hauling a passing taxi.

'Fuckin lucky that, ay? Walk ootae the club an a taxi comes straight away. Guid karma mate, guid karma.'

'Where wi gaun?' Dominic asked.

'Ah'll tell yi in a minute, just get in the taxi afore someb'dy else grabs it.'

'Where tae, mate?' the back ay the taxi driver's heid asked them.

'Salamander Street,' Craig said.

'Where?' said Dominic.

Craig put an arm around his shoulder. 'We're gonnae git some action, mate.'

'How dae yi mean?'

'You ken what a mean, Dom.'

'Ah dunno, like. Ah've nivir-'

'Yi a poof?' Craig laughed.

'Nah, it's just-'

'So?'

'Awright.' Dominic said, still confused by the situation he found hissel in, but praying that he'd think ay some way ootae it.

'Awright?' The driver said. He was a scruffy looking, yellae-toothed baldy wi a sadistic glint in his eye.

The driver did a three-point turn and took them round the corner ontae the relative quiet ay the Royal Mile. It didnae take long tae get the bright lights ay Salamander Street fae there.

'Just here mate,' Craig said, 'by the chippie.'

Dominic pulled oot his wallet.

'Ah'll get this, man.' Craig gave the driver a twenty and told him tae keep the change, then turned tae Dom.

'Let's go.'

Together, they made their way up Salamander Street, wi Dominic wondering why he was going along wi this. He wanted tae go hame, but Craig was on a mission.

'You done this before, mate?'

'Eh...naw...no really...naw.'

'Dinnae worry Dom, yil be fine. It's just a ride mate, there's nowt wrong wi that. Mair folk dae it than yi hink. Be honest, Ah've only did it a couplae times masel, but Ah'm in the mood.'

‘Craig!’ It was a woman’s voice. Dominic turned around.

The lassie that stomped towards them was petite wi short, dark hair. She wore a black leather jacket and mini-skirt, her high-heels clicking and echoing through the bright night ay Red Light Leith. Dominic guessed she was mibbe forty-five.

‘How yi daein Craig?’ she said, looking ootae puff. ‘Ah’ve no seen you in ages. Where yi been?’

‘Aw...just...’ Craig looked momentarily embarrassed. ‘Well...hings tae dae, ken?’

‘You lookin for me? Who’s yir pal?’ She smiled at Dominic, and beneath her hardened, made-up face, he got the impression that she was once pretty.

‘Looking for you? Eh...aye...you...aye.’ He looked tae Dominic, ‘this is Dominic by the way. Dom, this is Connie.’

‘Awright?’ Dominic heard himself say.

‘Hiya pal. Yi want iz tae call Vicky fur him? Naw wait, Ah cannae, she’s-’

‘That’s awright,’ Dominic said.

‘Dinnae worry Dom, pal, there’s plenty totty doon here. Yil be fine.’ Craig said, taking Connie by the arm and walking back the way they’d come. ‘Ah’ll se yi oan Monday mate,’ he said.

Dominic felt relieved, but still pretty fucking wasted. At least he’d escaped a sticky situation. Just then, aboot twenty feet ahead, he saw a woman, a girl really, making her way towards him on the other side ay the road. As she neared, he saw that she was dressed just like Connie but wi tights on. She held her handbag close tae her waist. He crossed the street and staggered towards her, wondering why his feet were carrying him in the lassie’s direction, but suddenly conscious ay how long he’d been waiting for counselling.

This girl was a wee bit taller than Connie, around Dom’s age, wi long red hair. She narrowed her eyes and Dominic felt his brain pulsate, a flash ay medicated sobriety passing through his consciousness like a jump-cut in a Tarrantino movie.

‘You lookin fur business, pal?’ She spoke in a Northern accent, Aberdeen mibbe.

‘Eh-’

The girl sighed and said, ‘right, it’s twenty fur hand-relief, twenty-five fur oral, thirty fur the full service and-’

‘Naw...Ah just wannae...The Textbook...Eh...Ah just wannae...an Ah’ll-’

‘Anal? That would be extra, mate.’ She sighed again and he noticed that she was smoking a joint. ‘Twenty fur hand-relief, twenty-five fur oral, thirty fur full sex, fifty fur anal-’

‘Please...honestly...Ah just wannae talk tae someb’dy, that’s aw. Ah’ll give yi twenty quid.’

He pulled oot a twenty and showed her the money.

The girl tossed her joint away and looked Dominic up and doon.

‘Ah dinnae dae weird stuff!’ she said, and marched on past him. ‘Fuckin weirdo!’ she shouted, withoot looking back.

Hitler Was A Vegetarian (part one)

Going tae work on the Monday after the hooker incident wasnae exactly easy, and the hangover that Dominic had woken up wi on the Saturday morning was almost as skull-cracking as Dr Black's meds. He hadnae taken any more since then and, though the office banter was becoming increasingly brain-fizzing and it had taken a guid couplae days for Dominic tae pluck up the courage tae talk tae Craig again, once they were able tae look each other in the eye, he found himself re-warming tae the guy. Craig could be almost as easy tae talk tae as Gaz...*sometimes*

Tae his extreme horror, Dominic had been invited tae another night oot. Apparently, Thursday night was quiz night at Ivanhoe's and, finding it impossible tae say nut, he'd invited Saffron along, just tae watch over him like, mibbe help him socialise a bit better.

The inane chat was daein his nut in again. Actually, Dominic felt half-asleep and half-frazzled. He was on some ay Dr Murray's more conventional anti-depressants, one Prozac and one Mirtazapine, and mibbe it was a combo being on those and coming off the Black stuff that made one half ay his brain deid. He could feel the top left side ay his heid, the frontal lobe like, shrinking, physically fucking shrinking, right intae his left eye, which he struggled tae keep open, while the right side ay his brain, front and back, burnt against his skull, keeping his other eye wide awake. The middle part ay his brain was...somewhere in a void between Jupiter and Saturn.

As usual, a faint smell ay vodka wafted over the table whenever Denise opened her mooth, a stink no made any better by the bacon and broon sauce sandwich she was munching away at wi real fucking vigour. Pauline had just finished her ain sausage roll when Claire arrived, red-faced and ootae puff.

'Sorry girls, really Ah am, the train-'

‘Och, dinnae worry about it, hun,’ Denise said. ‘Fancy a bacon roll?’ She held a broon paper bag in Claire’s direction.

‘Claire’s a vegetarian,’ Pauline giggled.

‘Ah’m a vegetarian,’ Claire confirmed.

‘You a vegetarian?’ Denise said, ‘honestly, like? Ah...I mean, seriously? You a vegetarian?’

‘Aye,’ Claire said.

Hitler was a vegetarian, Donnelly said.

Please, Dominic begged, *please leave iz alane.*

Well, said Donnelly, *he was.*

Ah wis, Hitler said. Hitler had only spoken tae Dom on the odd occasion in the past, usually tae vent his hatred on issues ay race and sexuality, and fitba.

‘There is a certain type ay meat that she does like though, ay Claire?’ said Pauline.

‘What’s that?’ Denise said.

‘The type that comes wi...with two veg,’ Pauline laughed.

‘Aw,’ Claire sighed, ‘I...Ah can’t...cannae wait tae get a nice stiff one in iz the night.’

‘You two been at it again?’ Pauline said.

‘Like bunnies,’ Denise laughed. ‘Ah hink...I think we’ve taught her well.’

I think she already knew... Donnelly said.

She’s a fucking whore, said Hitler.

Claire flickered a flowery smile below her wee nose, and Dominic saw those beautiful blue eyes sparkle again.

Who is this lass? Dominic thought.

She’s a paradox, Donnelly said, *Dumb by mouth, but her eyes...there’s something behind those eyes. Think about it Dominic, you know why she’s here.*

She's a spy, Hitler said, A Textbook spy. Dumb by mooth, but certainly no nil by mooth, if yi ken what Ah mean.

'Naughty girl you, ay?' Pauline was saying now, making Claire laugh oot loud.

'Did yi...you see *Big Brother* last night?' Denise changed the subject.

'Nah, her and Jamie wur-'

'Come on now girls, less of the...' Bruce let his sentence trail off. He'd appeared ootae nowhere and stood behind Dominic. 'Dominic doesn't want to hear your smut, do you Dom?' he said softly. Dominic tensed-up when Bruce suddenly rested his hands on his shoulders and started gently massaging them. His left eye tore itself open, even wider than his right, and his semi-logical left lobe throbbed a couplae times against his skull, as Bruce began massaging even harder, in full view ay everybody.

This Bruce guy really is a fag, isn't he? Donnelly said.

Fuck off, Dominic said tae Donnelly, wishing Bruce would tae.

Bruce eased his hands off and, for a moment, Dominic wondered whether he hadnae heard Donnelly.

Of course he can't hear me, you stupid fucker...

'Sorry Dominic, buddy, you looked a bit tense there. You coming along tonight?'

'Aye.'

'Nice one mate, maybe we'll play on the same team, ay?'

Playing on the same team as Brucey-boy, ay? Ha!

Aw...will you just leave the lad alone. Dominic was relieved tae hear Jim Whyte's soothing interjection.

'Aye...eh...awright. Ah'll introduce yi tae ma flat mate, Saffron, Ah've asked her along tae.'

'Your girlfriend?' Bruce was still smiling, but the sadness that loomed behind his eyes was palpable.

‘Nah, nah...she’s just ma flat mate.’

‘Be glad to meet her,’ Bruce said. He looked at his watch. ‘Why don’t you go get your nicotine-fix, ay?’

The time on Dominic’s PC said 11.08am; he’d become accustomed tae having his fag break at eleven. He decided tae ask Craig if he wanted tae go for a cigarette anaw. As he navigated his way round the maze ay desks between his ain and Craig’s, he remembered something fae a the handoot that Dr Murray had once given him on how tae cope wi social anxiety,

Go up to someone you like and touch them lightly on the shoulder.

Craig sat wi his back tae Dominic, working away, his broad shoulders moving up and doon tae the rhythm ay his typing. Mibbe it was just Dom’s insanity – usually it was – but he seemed tae have lost even more hair overnight.

Would alopecia get you intae The Textbook? Nah...no Craig...

Go on Dom, touch him lightly mate, no in a gay way like, just for the sake of yir own confidence,
Jim Whyte said.

He felt nervous, but decided tae go for it. His right hand trembled as he placed it very lightly on Craig’s shoulder.

‘Eh...Craig, mate, fancy-’

Craig pulled his hands fae his keyboard and turned violently, like someone had just smacked him on the back ay the heid. Dominic quickly withdrew and backed away, feeling his pupils widen.

‘TOUCH ME AGAIN AN AH’LL SMASH YIR FUCKIN-’

His raging eyes softened when they met Dominic’s and he looked suddenly sorry, ashamed even.

‘Aw... Dom...it’s you. Sorry pal. What can Ah dae fur yi, mate?’

‘Eh...yi wannae go fur a fag?’

Craig looked at his watch, and then at the pile ay work on his desk. ‘Aye, awright mate. Ah’m bored tae fuck anyway.’

They stood ootside the garage, on the cobble-stoned alleyway between Princes Street and St Andrew square, and puffed away. Dominic drew on the fag that Craig had given him, softly, like a schoolkid hiding behind the PE blocks at break time, while Craig sucked the life ootae his wi aw the might ay a huge, asthmatic polar bear. As usual, the garage was derelict ay security.

‘Ken,’ Craig said, ‘yi wouldnae believe the amount ay stuff that’s been nicked fae this garage since Ah’ve been here. Fuckin security are nivir around. Folk’ve managed tae steal PCs, fuckin fax machines, monitors. Once, someb’dy even managed tae nick an auld grandfather clock.’

‘A grandfather clock?’

‘A grandfather clock, one ay they big auld-fashioned fuckers. Belonged tae one ay the executives, Ah hink. Either that or they wur usin it for décor somewhere in the buildin.’ He took another long puff on his fag. ‘The staff doon here are so fuckin daft though ay, they probably helped the cunts load it ontae their fuckin van!’

They both laughed, though Dominic wasnae entirely sure what he was laughing at. He’d only met one ay the security guys doon there and he seemed like a nice fellae.

‘So, yi gaun the night?’

‘Aye,’ Dominic said, ‘but Ah was gonnae stick tae the poof-juice, ay.’

‘What fur?’

Dominic’s brain beat against his skull as he searched the right side ay his heid for a creative excuse. Mibbe his meds were working for once, or mibbe it was just that he didnae feel so stressed in Craig’s company, but the answer came tae him surprisingly quickly.

‘Antibiotics,’ he said.

‘Antibiotics? What’s up?’

‘Eh...just a wee bit chesty, ay.’ Dominic said, feigning a cough.

‘Yir better oaf no drinkin wi that lot up there anyway,’ Craig said, ‘they keep an eye oan yi, ken what Ah mean?’

They’re all watching you, Dominic, Donnelly said.

Kill them aw, said Hitler.

Aw, leave him alone, Jim Whyte jumped in.

‘Aye,’ Dominic laughed, ‘Ah noticed that oan Friday. Ma flat mate’s comin along as well.’

‘Aye? Who’s he?’

‘Eh...it’s a she. She’s a lassie...eh...Saffron...Saffi, Ah mean.’

‘Aw aye,’ a young female voice said fae behind, ‘what’s this? A couplae skivers, ay?’

‘Awright Gwen?’ Craig said.

Gwen stepped lightly past Dominic and twirled on her toes so that she was facing both ay them. She pulled oot a Silk Cut and lit it. Dominic hadnae seen her aw morning and he’d assumed she was off sick.

She’s a sweet gal, Holly Hunter said, her Georgian drawl stronger than ever. *Talk to her, Dom. Looks a bit like me, don’t she? When I was younger, I mean.*

She doesn’t look like you, Donnelly said.

Does too! said Holly.

‘Aye, no bad. Hi ya Dom,’ she said. Gwen had such a cute way ay saying ‘hiya’, kindae like a softly-spoken, Gadgie girl-ninja...*Hi Ya!* She was way too guid for Dom though, he kent that, but she was certainly an admirable lass.

‘Hi ya.’ Dominic tried tae mimic her but his joke seemed lost on Craig and Gwen.

‘Yiz gaun the night?’ Gwen asked.

‘Does a bear shit in the woods?’ Craig said.

‘No where Ah live. You gaun, Dominic?’

‘Eh...me...aye...eh...Ah’m gaun.’

She’s such a nice lass, Jim Whyte whispered.

Not a chance, Donnelly said, *not a fucking chance. Do you really think someone like that would go with a dickhead like him?*

Everybody’s got a chance in this life, said Jim. *You seize the day, Dom pal, go for it. Ask me, though, Linda’s the one for you, the lass from the filing area. But if you like Gwen, you go for it, mate.*

‘You awright Dom, pal?’ Gwen was waving her palm in Dominic’s field ay vision.

‘Ay?’

‘Yi wur a million miles away fur a minute there, mate,’ Craig laughed. Gwen still looked concerned.

Tell them you’re feeling sleepy, Holly said.

‘Aw...aye, Ah’m fine, just a bit sleepy like, ay.’

Dominic looked tae the ground. Seeing that his fag had burnt tae the filter, he flicked it away. Craig had long since finished his.

‘Aye, this place’ll dae that tae yi,’ Gwen said.

‘Aye but...eh...Ah was gonnae say...weird hing,’ Dominic’s gaze shifted fae Craig tae Gwen and back again, ‘Ah was sittin at ma desk up there an...eh...well, eh... Bruce just came up an started massagin ma shoulders.’

‘Och dinnae worry about that, Dom. Brucey’s awright. He’s a bit ay a, well...Ah hink you ken what Ah mean...but he’s a nice guy. See yiz the night, ay?’ Gwen said.

‘See yi the night Gwen,’ Craig said.

‘Cheerio,’ Gwen said, in a sweet wee mimic ay one ay they Gaelic TV presenters...*Chee-reeo!*

Brucey’s a bit ay a what? Dominic wondered as he and Craig strolled back intae the garage

What do you think, you dumb bastard? Donnelly said.

‘Aye,’ Craig said when they got in the lift, ‘Bruce did that massagin hing oan me once. He’ll no be daein that again, that’s fur sure.’ He looked Dominic in the eyes, aw friendly like, and they both laughed. ‘Naw, but Brucey’s awright, he’s a guid man, really.’

Hitler Was A Vegetarian (part two)

Ivanhoe's was a dark, claustrophobic pub, which occupied a small corner ay the building that they worked in. The place survived on revenue accrued fae Dominic's colleagues and the nine hundred and ninety-three other employees at the company. Outside, it was a friendly enough, ordinary-looking bar, advertising 'great food and an exotic collection of multinational beers'. Inside, Ivanhoe's stank ay body odour, sick and fag reek...and beer. The air was always heavy wi smoke.

Quiz Night at Ivanhoe's was less for the quiz than it was for the Thursday night Happy Hour, though the use ay the word 'hour' confused Dominic since it was a pound a drink between 4pm and 8pm. By 6 o'clock, at least three people had puked up in the bogs, though the bar staff, who were half-cut themselves, didnae seem tae give a fuck. Sadly, Gwen one ay the puking-three. She sat at a table nearby, knocking back shots like there was nae yesterday, burping and blurting oot random comments, like:

'IT'S NO TOO LIGHT AN IT'S NO TOO DARK, SO IVIRY'HING'S
AWRIGHT!'

Definitely no in The Textbook then, Dominic thought; Gadgie-angel by day, total alci by night. She sat at the table in the middle ay the pub, a few feet away, wi Pauline and wee Claire.

His thoughts drifted tae his Ma. Was that what she was like before she became a 24/7 boozier? Nice woman by day, strange, scary creature by night? Did she once twirl on her toes the way Gwen had earlier on, and speak like a cute, soft-spoken Gadgie girl-ninja? Did she once smile brightly and wave sweetly at everyone, the way Gwen did at work?

Dominic watched on as Denise joined the other three, wi a tray ay what looked like sandwiches, or mibbe it was something on cocktail sticks, it was difficult tae see or smell exactly what it was they were eating fae where he sat. He thought he heard Denise say

something like ‘Get stuck in, girls,’ before he suddenly found himself locked in a momentary starlit exchange ay eye-contact wi Claire. He saw the windaes behind him reflecting in her eyes and, for the briefest ay seconds, he was sure he saw her in there too, that image in her ain eyes, like. It *was* her, Claire as a kid, the young Claire, the younger Claire, a child, wi those same beautiful blonde curls, her elbows resting on the windaesill, one cheek resting on her hand. She was gazing ootae the window wi tears in her eyes, looking at the sky. She looked so sad. It lasted barely a second before the picture was gone and Claire was looking elsewhere, first tae the floor, and then tae Denise. She smiled, a fake smile.

Who is this girl?

‘FUCKIN BITCH!’ Gwen suddenly roared at fuck knows who, and there it was again, that sadness in Claire’s eyes... and it struck him, he realised how stupid he’d been; Claire didnae work for The Textbook, something was troubling her.

Then an announcement: Quiz Night had been cancelled, the quiz master was ‘ill’, basically the manageress’ way ay saying that he was one ay the pukers anaw. Someone turned the lights up a bit and a *Girls Aloud* tune suddenly blasted over the banter. The whole place became even more claustrophobic then, like the walls were somehow closing in, as Dominic found himself squashed between Linda and Bruce, who each seemed equally as interested in getting tae know him a bit better. Craig and Saffron had awready become acquainted, laughing and joking away at the other side ay the table, their moving lips wordless tae Dominic’s lugs below the catchy, but fucking loud, *Sound Ay The Underground*. Gwen, though, seemed tae have developed a unique ability tae compete wi the music.

‘SOMEBODY BUY IZ A FUCKIN SHOT!’

And there it was again! Claire...her eyes... Dominic sat spellbound in her enchanting glare, so mysterious he wished he’d never seen it. He didnae fancy her in *that* way, she was

way too young, but there was something about her...something no quite...no quite right. Again, the exchange lasted for barely a second, but...*what was it about her? Was it aw an act, at work, like? Could she be putting it aw oan? Could Claire really be a Textbook spy? Naw...she was tortured, something was torturing that girl.* He watched her gaze drift tae Gwen, then saw her brows furrow. She looked back tae Dominic, her eyes so sad, then she glanced at Pauline and he saw them both laugh. Was she genuinely concerned, about Gwen like? Or was she concerned about something else? Could she possibly be keeping shotty? Concern: The Textbook. Doesnae add up. *Nab, she cannae be...canna be...could she? The Textbook dinnae harbour nae concern fur naebody.*

She is a spy, Hitler said.

No she ain't, said Holly, *she's a nice gal.*

She fucking is, Donnelly said, *she's fucking spy, a grass, a fucking chivato.*

She's a Scots' senorita, Holly said, *she's a good gal Dom, pay them no mind.*

As Dominic puzzled over Claire's true nature, he felt warm breath caress his left lug and turned tae see that Bruce's lips were inches fae his face. He leaned closer and put a hand on Dominic's wrist.

'It's so sad, ay? Gwendolyn's such a nice lass, but once she gets a drink in her, well, you can see for yourself.'

'She cannae fuckin handle it,' Linda laughed, her stinking beer breath competing wi Bruce's much more pleasant OJ-aroma. 'Nah...she's awright, Gwen, but see when she gits pissed...fuck me! What about you, Dom? No drinkin? Ah'll buy yi a beer if yi want.'

'Naw...eh...Ah'm cool...eh...Ah'm oan antibiotics.'

'Aye? Ah've drank oan them before. Mind, Bruce?'

'Aye, I remember,' Bruce smiled, 'she-'

'Ah spewed up aw over Bruce's troosers.'

'And ma shirt.'

‘And his shirt.’

‘How could I forget, ay?’ Bruce laughed, his voice becoming more camp by the minute.

‘Scuse iz,’ Dominic said, ‘Ah need tae go tae the bogs.’

Dominic made the extra effort ay squeezing past Linda’s weighty body, rather than risking the easier route past Bruce’s considerably smaller one. He liked Bruce, and trusted him, but he just didnae fancy passing him wi his crotch at Bruce’s eye-level.

‘DOM! DOMINIC! C’MERE PAL, GIES A CUDDLE!’

Gwen leapt up and smothered him in a tight bear-hug as he tried tae pass, surprising him wi the strength ay her grip; she was a guid four inches shorter than Dom, pretty slim anaw. She pulled away, but kept an arm around his waist, ruffling his hair wi the other like a proud, patronizing mother.

‘Yir such a friendly guy, ay? A bit shy, but there’s nuttin wrong wi that.’ She turned tae Claire and the she-witches beside her. ‘He’s a nice guy ay? There’s no enough nice guys around, nice guys like you Ah mean. Ay Pauline? Denise? Ay? Is he no a nice guy?’

‘Aye Gwen,’ Pauline laughed, ‘Nah, really yi are Dom, Gwen’s just had a few too many, that’s aw. Come an sit wi...with us if yi want.’

Gwen let Dominic go and made for the bar, freeing him tae go for the piss that he never really needed.

‘Eh...a need tae...’ he pointed tae the gents.

‘Well, feel free tae come over when yir done, pal.’

Dominic had hoped for an empty gents so that he could just wash his hands and leave, but a few pissheids fae the Claims department were taking a leak, so he felt obliged tae join in. He strolled over tae the far end ay the urinal, as far fae the others as he could, and pushed...and pushed...and pushed. Eventually, a few golden droplets hit porcelain, but the Claims’ guys didnae seem tae notice his pseudo-piss and he felt momentarily proud

ay hisselt for getting away wi it. Ootside, he nicked a vacant chair that belonged tae someone standing at the bar and moved it over tae where Craig and Saffron sat, pricking his ears up tae their conversation, hoping they'd notice his presence and talk tae him.

'Ken, Ah once goat arrested fur abductin a donkey,' Craig was saying.

'Fuck off!' Saffi said, 'yi fuckin niver! How?'

'Honestly! Ah was walkin hame fae Bonnyrigg tae Gorebridge, like, at aboot one in the morning. Obviously, Ah'd missed the last bus, so Ah had tae walk it, so Ah decided tae take a short cut through the farm, Dalhoosie Farm like, ken? An then Ah spies this donkey, ay. Ah was pissed as a fuck an Ah thought *fuck it*, and jumped the fence, no even realisin that the fuckin gate was open, like. Ah dunno how, but Ah managed tae mount the donkey.'

'Mount the donkey?' Saffron laughed.

'Ha-ha, no like that, ya wee mink. Ah somehow managed tae get on top ay the donkey. Took iz ages tae git the fucker tae start...what d'yi call it...gallopin. *Giddy-up*, Ah kept sayin, *giddy-up*. Finally, she moved an we were oaf, gallopin up the A7, when this cop car suddenly appears beside iz, drivin oan the wrong side ay the road, like. *Pull over*, they kept sayin, *pull that pony over, sir*. That's what they wur sayin.'

'Fuck-off!' Saffron laughed, slappin him on the knee.

'Gen-up! An then Ah says,' Craig was laughing at his ain story as he spoke, 'Ah says, *It's no a pony, it's a donkey*.'

'Seriously?' Dominic said, his question falling on deaf-ears.

'They wur drivin along at aboot ten miles an hour, oan the wrong side ay the road, an Ah'm tryin tae stoap this donkey, but Ah'd niver ridden yin before, ay. Ah kept slappin it oan the side an shouting hings like, *Nice lass, stoap now, nice lass*, hings like that, ken?'

'So what happened?'

'The donkey eventually stoaped, near Gorebridge Glenn.'

‘Yi made it that far?’

‘The fuckin donkey wouldnae stoap!’

Dominic noticed Craig’s hand creeping up Saffi’s thigh. Saffron finally noticed Dominic and they exchanged eye-contact, but she didnae seem concerned about Craig’s advances. Actually, she looked pleased, and pretty half-cut.

‘Hiy Dom,’ Saffi said, ‘tell Craig about the nostril-hair trimmer.’

‘Nostril-hair trimmer?’ Craig laughed.

‘Goan,’ Saffron nudged Dom’s arm, aw friendly like. ‘Tell him.’

‘Well, Ah was in the bath ay, trimming ma nostrils like, wi one ay they electric hings, an Ah goat the heid ay the trimmer-’

‘Stuck up iz nose!’ Saffron’s heid fell backwards so that she was looking at the ceiling, giggling her heid off. She covered her mooth, contained herself, and continued. ‘So he comes runnin ootae the toilet, a towel round his waist an the heid ay a nostril-hair trimmer stuck up his nose. *Call the Fire Brigade*, he was shouting, *call the Fire Brigade*. Aw, Ah couldnae stoap laughin.’

‘And did yi?’ Craig asked.

‘What?’ Dominic said.

‘Call the Fire Brigade.’

‘Naw,’ Saffron said, ‘Ah pulled it oot fur him!’

‘Fuck me...yir one mad fucker Dom,’ Craig said, before downing several huge moothfuls ay lager.

Dominic was embarrassed, but pleased, tae be part ay the group. He noticed tae that Bruce and Linda had leant forward tae listen in, though he wondered how they’d been able tae hear fae the other side ay the table when he hadnae been able tae hear a thing Saffi and Craig were saying just ten minutes ago.

Cos the music’s stopped, you stupid fucker, Donnelly said.

Yeab, Dom, the music's over mate, Jim Whyte said.

When the music's over, Holly sang.

Turn on the lights, Jim joined in.

Soon, the night descended intae an evening ay musical chairs as, whenever anyone went tae the bogs, somebody nicked their seat so that Dominic found himself sitting alternately wi Saffron, Craig, Linda or Bruce. He was pleased tae see that Linda and Saffron were getting on, but slightly disconcerted when Bruce invited him back tae his for a drink afterwards. He reiterated his 'antibiotics' excuse and said that he was getting tired. Apart fae that, things seemed tae be going pretty well and, after Claire and the witches left, Gwen fell intae the chair that Bruce had just vacated and started chatting away, mostly tae herself.

'Fuckin whores, them three, ass-lickin fuckin whores. Stayin sober aw night an keepin shotty for any dirt oan anybody so that they can report back tae the boss.'

Wi her eyes half-closed and her shoulders slumped forward, Dominic worried that Gwen was gonnae fall asleep. When he leaned over tae check she was awright, she sprung back tae life and took a sip fae Craig's pint.

'What was that yi wir sayin?' Craig asked, coaxing his pint back fae the other side ay the table.

'Pauline and Denise, the gruesome fuckin twosome. That Claire tae, Ah dinnae trust her either. Ah dinnae trust vegetarians full-stop. Yi no noticed that they always stay sober oan nights oot, watchin ivirybody else git pissed so that they can report back tae the boss.'

A heid appeared in the space between Dominic and Gwen, and Dominic smelt that OJ-scent again.

'Eh...I'm the boss, Gwen, and I don't listen to what Pauline or Denise say, and I really don't appreciate the things you're saying about young Claire. I think we should call you a cab, ay? Maybe you've had just a wee bit too much to drink? Let's get you home, ay?'

‘Ah’m no fuckin drunk!’ Gwen belched.

‘Alright,’ Bruce backed off and held his hands in the air, palm-oot. ‘Okay, I was just sayin-’

‘Well...Ah’m fine. Craig, can Ah huv Ah sip ay yir pint?’

Craig laughed and handed her his glass. ‘Here, huv a ball.’

It took aw the efforts ay Bruce, Craig and Linda tae calm Gwen when the manageress called Last Orders and, subsequently, Ivanhoe’s closed half an hour later than usual. Ootside, in the chill early-winter wind, Dominic wasnae sure how tae feel when he saw Saffron get intae a cab wi Craig. He liked Craig, but he kent at least one dodgy secret ay his. Then he remembered that explosive ootbust fae earlier when he’d touched Craig on the shoulder. Mibbe he was just tense. Even more alarming, though, was that he found himself walking through the dark alley by the garage where he, Craig and Gwen had had their fag break that day. Linda seemed perfectly sober, despite having sunk aboot eight pints and, as Gwen doubled over tae vomit intae a doorway, a Smiths’ song that Dominic couldnae recall the title ay played in his brain,

*Oh Gwen, don’t come to the house tonight,
Oh Gwen, don’t come to the house tonight
Oh Gwen, Ooooh Gwen...*

As Gwen emptied the contents ay her stomach intae the doorway, Linda threw her tree-trunk arms around Dominic, pulled him towards her and stuck a thick, thirsty tongue doon his throat. She pulled away when Gwen suddenly stood upright and announced that she wanted a MacDonald’s.

‘Ah hink MacDonald’s is closed, hen,’ Linda said, ‘it’s one in the morning. Ah hink yi need a taxi.’

‘Naw Linda, let’s go clubbing.’

‘Ah dinnae hink yil get in anywhere, Gwen,’ Linda said.

The three ay them stepped oot intae the brightness ay St Andrew Square, wi Dom and Linda each taking Gwen by the arm, one on each side. By the time they got tae the taxi rank at Waverley, Gwen was sleeping, her heid resting on Linda's left breast. Linda managed tae persuade the taxi driver at the front ay the rank tae take her tae Danderhall, and even woke Gwen up enough so that she could tell the driver where she lived. Whether it was for the best or no, Dominic found himself in the back seat ay a taxi wi Linda, going in the opposite direction tae where he lived.