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***UNDOING 'YOU': BLINDNESS AND SECOND SIGHT
IN THE SECOND-PERSON NOVEL***

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Creative & Critical D. Phil.

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DECLARATION:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been, nor will be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signed.....*Kristian White*.....Date...10/11/2016.....

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Summary

Wayne C. Booth's famous claim in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1967) that "efforts to use the second person have never been very successful" is widely considered outdated in light of the many theoretical publications about second-person narrative that followed. What critics tend to overlook when dismissing Booth is that although shorter works of second-person narrative are relatively abundant and ever more frequently occurring, novels written entirely in second-person number only a few and, of these, only Michel Butor's *La Modification* and Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* might be described as having wider literary appeal or success.

My 'Creative and Critical' project is an innovative way of thinking about what it is that gives the second-person novel its peculiar appeal and makes it so difficult to write. In turn, my observations from this research contribute to the understanding of second-person narrative as a whole. My research consists of two mutually informative parts: a novel entirely in second-person and a critical thesis that seeks to provide a different history of second-person narrative. By reading a range of second-person texts in conjunction with Sigmund Freud's *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis: the 'Rat Man'*, Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, and other key works, I argue that what gives a novel like Butor's or McInerney's its appeal is a narrative strategy of 'undoing': set in motion by a moment of self-blinding, that instant where you realise that 'you' are not who you think you are, the second-person novel moves through a point of view of second sight, where you experience a world that derealises and denarrates all boundaries of conventional thinking.

Preface

My interest in second-person narrative began in the mid nineteen-eighties with the fashion for *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, written in the second person. It struck me that there was something very futuristic about a book, where, as the tagline of the *Fighting Fantasy* range stated, 'You are the Hero', and even as a child, I found myself wondering if this new form indicated a significant change in how we thought about the novel. However, this genre was soon forgotten about, subsumed by the widespread emergence of home computers equipped with video games and software that appeared to adopt this position of interaction in a more visually stimulating and addictive way.

Twenty years after this, during my time on a Creative Writing MA, I was planning the writing of a novel set in a busy city hair salon which sought to convey something of the ten years I had spent working in front of a mirror, faced with a seemingly endless row of customers. The subject of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* phenomenon arose in a discussion with fellow students and somebody asked me if I had read *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, which I admitted I had not.

McInerney's use of the 'you' voice to satirise 1980s Manhattan life fascinated me. The only way I could describe this narrative at the time was – oddly as it seemed – that the voice seemed to possess a sheen, like a first-person narrative coated with a layer of gloss that made it feel more real. After reading McInerney's novel, it occurred to me that this might be a suitable narrative voice to describe the similarly chaotic and claustrophobic cityscape I wanted to portray: a world where image was everything, appointment times were strictly adhered to and being quick was the difference between having and losing your job.

Invigorated and eager to finish my first draft, I sped into writing *The Cutting Block* but no matter how I tried, I just couldn't seem to get it to work. After consulting with writers and associates about this difficulty, a couple of problems came to light. Firstly, I was surprised to discover that I was far from alone in trying to write a novel in the second person. In fact, almost all writers I consulted with had thought about or attempted to write one at some point, with one particular lecturer of Creative Writing commenting that for some reason she had been unable to fathom, about four chapters into her novel it just stopped working. Secondly, that despite this enthusiasm for the 'you' voice amongst writers – with there being an abundance of short stories, alternating chapters, instances and flash fictions emerging – there were remarkably few published novels written entirely as 'you'. The few that existed were generally short novels consisting of

between 15 and 30 thousand words, with only a couple that exceeded 40 thousand words. It began to occur to me that writing a novel in this narrative voice was not simply a matter of replacing the 'I's or 's/he's with 'you' to gain an instantaneous effect of immediacy as I had first assumed, but that it required an entirely different approach that involved changing my own way of thinking about the world.

With this in mind, I tried to simulate the narrative of a second-person novel. One of the first experiments I performed was, literally, to hold a mirror to nature. I started to go about my daily business using a pocket mirror or mobile phone to narrate my thoughts and actions directly to my reflection. This approach, I thought, might account for the effect achieved by McInerney in *Bright Lights, Big City*, where the protagonist feels trapped by the seductive imperatives of a shallow consumer world. With the inspiration of the mirror image, I set about a second draft of my novel, but I soon realized that although speaking to myself in this way provided a clean narrative – one that avoided difficulties such as mixing the 'you' that designates in part a protagonist with the hypothetical 'you' – it did not seem to overcome the repetitive and slightly irritating tone the voice took on after a few chapters.

Taking a step back, I started to think about a different history of the second-person novel and what had prompted writers such as McInerney to adopt it. My first discovery of importance was that although the second-person short story had existed since early in the nineteenth century, the second-person novel had appeared much later in 1957, shortly after the emergence of the household television. It occurred to me that in the sense of how early movies were often based on novels, the second-person novel seemed to have emerged from a culture of the 'screen'. This inspired me to try to think about writing in a more filmic way, imagining chapters as scenes and characters as actors. It was while reading Stanislavski's theories on how to act that the difficulty I faced in writing a second-person novel began to emerge. In *An Actor Prepares* (1936), Stanislavski is critical of the traditional practice of an actor creating a character in the mirror: "That is dangerous [...] You must be very careful in the use of a mirror. It teaches an actor to watch the outside rather than the inside of his soul, both in himself and in his part." (19). All of a sudden, it transpired what I had been missing. I had been looking outwardly at the mirror as an 'I' looking across at this thing called 'you'. With this in mind, I took a second look at McInerney's novel and realized that his was not a story that said what you 'are', it began by undoing the identity of 'you', by stating quite simply what you are 'not'.

You realised that in order to write as 'you', you must firstly consider what you take for granted as being set in stone: you must remove the 'I's' and stop using your eyes in order to write a world where 'you' becomes a character in the novel that disrupts all boundaries of singular language.

Introduction: You are (not)

In *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Brian Richardson declares that “The genealogy of second person is surprisingly rich” (17). He lists works, instances, and occurrences from Hawthorne’s short story *The Haunted Mind* (1835) to Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and beyond. Richardson’s intention is to illustrate how despite the apparent frequency of second-person texts, they did not achieve extensive attention from critics until the 1990s. While I am in agreement with Richardson about the lack of attention the subject has received from critics before the 1990s, what his chronology of the second person reveals is a discrepancy. Since the publishing of the first novel written entirely in second-person, Michel Butor’s *La Modification* (1957), only a few other novels narrated entirely in second-person have been published. These consist of *Aura* by Carlos Fuentes (1962), *A Man Asleep* by George Perec (1967), *A Pagan Place* by Edna O’Brien (1970), *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) by Jay McInerney, *The Sound of My Voice* (1987) by Ron Butlin, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994) by Tom Robbins, and *Layla* (2014) by Nina De La Mer. Of these, perhaps only Butor’s and McInerney’s could claim renown by casual reader and literary critic alike. By contrast, the novels of Perec, O’Brien, Butlin and Robbins, have all been marginalised as the writers’ lesser-known novels or simply overlooked.

My history of the second-person novel begins by considering what the second-person novel actually is. That is to say, when is something described as a second-person novel and when is it a novel which employs the ‘you’ voice for effect? However, even before this question can be asked, it is necessary to consider whether the second-person novel is actually capable of communicating the figurative language needed for narrative fiction. Traditionally speaking, second-person voice has been employed for such uses as dictating rules, from the biblical commands, ‘Thou shalt’ and ‘Thou shalt not’, to the suggestive voice of the hypnotist, the instructional voice of the drill instructor, the repetitive voice of the ‘how to’ book and the flat voice of the instruction manual. Indeed, even the most cited example of second-person narrative fiction, *Bright Lights, Big City*, which made Jay McInerney an instant Manhattan celebrity at the age of twenty-four, does not escape from negative reader reviews on internet websites which remark of the ‘you’ voice as irritating or difficult to get used to. Nevertheless, the fact that Butor’s and McInerney’s novels had such an impact then and after they were published shows that second-person narrative is not a redundant form for the novel, and yet, if this is the case,

then why are there so few successful novels of second-person, and why are most of the existing overlooked?

For instance, Shahriyar Mansouri argues that *A Pagan Place* has been disregarded in Irish literature, not only by the patriarchal establishment it sought to challenge but also by feminist critics in the 1970s who felt it offered “a fragile portrayal of women and their plights and tribulations in the post-independence Ireland” (335). Similarly, in the foreword to *The Sound of My Voice*, Irvine Welsh demands a reconsideration of Butlin’s novel on the grounds that, “To my mind this book is one of the greatest pieces of fiction to come out of Britain in the ‘80’s and I’m still a little astonished at the way it has been neglected” (vii). On the one hand, while *A Man Asleep* has received some critical attention, Perec’s employment of second-person narrative has largely been sidelined in favour of discussing it alongside his other work with regards to the theme of the ‘void’, and although Fuentes’ *Aura* was well received at the time as a popular ghost story, it has been given little attention with regard to how the employment of second-person affects the narrative beyond passing suggestions that the second-person voice foreshadows the revelation that the protagonist is the resurrected husband of the mysterious old lady who has employed him.

Throughout my thesis, I contend that the reason the second-person novel is overlooked is due to a vicious circle where critics are so focused on finding an unequivocal definition of second-person narrative that they overlook the novel written entirely in second-person in favour of extending the application of models and theories across a broader range of second-person works. Consequently, they do not consider the difference between a work narrated entirely in second-person, and a work that shifts between narrative voices. That is, works such as Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979) and Iain Banks’ *Complicity* (1993), which alternate between chapters of second- and first-person narration, as well as Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia: a novel* (2013) and Rob Magnuson Smith’s *Scorper* (2015) – which both see a return to ‘I’ narration for effect in the latter parts of the novels – are more often than not cited alongside Butor’s and McInerney’s works as second-person novels. This generalisation is evident in how Richardson declares that “Butor is often mistakenly credited with having invented the technique”, whereas there are, “several earlier short stories which are written entirely in the second person”. It is this oversight of the difference between the novel form and the short story that leads him to describe the work written entirely in second-person, be it novel or shorter work, as “the closest to more traditional forms of narration” (19, 20).

While it is not my purpose to claim that certain novels should not be called second-person novels or affix them to a genre, for the purpose of thinking about the novel narrated

entirely in second-person, my thesis distinguishes between a second-person novel – as one that employs the second-person narrative for the entirety – and other novels that merely employ second-person, to give a more focused consideration of what happens when you remove the ‘I’s and ‘s/he’s in their totality from the novel¹. This is also my reason for conducting a Creative and Critical approach, in order to address the second-person novel and relevant critical material from the position of a writer preparing to write a second-person novel. Writing my own second-person novel has involved careful consideration and redrafting with each new development in my research. The culmination of this two-pronged approach has formed my argument that in order to write or theorise the second-person novel, the writer or critic must first remove the ‘I’ness’, or singular origin, of their own thinking.

The title of my thesis describes a narrative strategy for the second-person novel where the grammatical effects of the ‘you’ narrative combined with cleverly contrived figural device and thematic concern on behalf of the writer, creates a point of view of plurality and undecidability. A plurality, in that ‘you’ always constitutes a supplement to a central origin, and undecidability, in that the second-person narrative always defers singular interpretation to another way of thinking about the novel.

The O.E.D. defines the word “undoing” as “1. Exposition; Interpretation. 2. The action of opening, unfastening, taking apart, loosening, etc. 3. The action of bringing to nought, destroying, or ruining; the fact of being so dealt with; the state of being undone”. The O.E.D.’s definition of the psychoanalytic concept “undoing” is “The obsessive repetition of a ritualistic action as if to undo some previous event, action, or attitude, or to signify that it never happened, usu. a symptom of obsessional neurosis”. The way in which I have conceived of ‘undoing’ in its broader literary sense, is where the past in some context is altered by an act that prompts a retroactive rethinking of characters and events differently. This narrative dates back as far as *Oedipus Rex* and the biblical crucifixion, but perhaps one of the more memorable examples in modern literature is the self-sacrifice of Sydney Carton in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Writing of the difference between Dickens’ and Beckett’s work, where the former is thought to concern himself with the presence of voice and the latter is thought to concern

¹ My thesis does not give extended attention to the adventure roleplaying genre, such as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* and *Fighting Fantasy* novels where ‘YOU are the Hero’, outside of mentioning their historical context and the resulting publicity for second-person narratives this genre achieved. This is because I consider the *F.F.* novels a temporalised phenomenon that was superseded by video-game culture. Where I argue that second-person novels in one respect undo self-certainty, I suggest that the aim of the *F.F.* novels and others like them is to fill the reader with a complete sense of ‘being’ the ‘fantasy’ protagonist rather than to be self-critical of this relationship. Additionally, I do not give extended attention to novels such as David Eagleman’s *SUM*, which begins with the line, “In the afterlife you relive all your experiences” (Eagleman 3), as I equate this more with the ‘Fighting Fantasy’ genre in that it fails to achieve ambivalence in its beginning and focuses more on the novelty of ‘you’ as the hero.

himself with its disappearance, Peter Boxall writes: “it might be that the novel voice in Dickens is not as committed to the reproduction of presence and self-identity as it has sometimes appeared to be; and it might be that Beckett’s work, however much it empties or evacuates the narrative self, cannot quite free itself from the strains of the voice” (29).

It is in this sense that I suggest that a writing of ‘undoing’ evokes the disavowed other. This is evident in *A Tale of Two Cities*’ first chapter, *Recalled to Life*, which opens by denarrating the centrality of voice: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness” (3). It is interesting with regard to this string of oxymoron and subsequent foreshadowing with figures of resurrection and rebirth, that the pivotal moment Carton stares drunkenly at his reflection and realises he is removed from the person he imagined himself being, is imparted in ‘you’ monologue:

...why should you particularly like a man who resembles you? There is nothing in you to like; you know that. Ah, confound you! What a change you have made in yourself! A good reason for taking to a man, that he shows you what you have fallen away from, and what you might have been! Change places with him, and would you have been looked at by those blue eyes as he was, and commiserated by that agitated face as he was? (53)

As disillusioned and intoxicated as Carton², the beginning of *Bright Lights, Big City*, finds ‘you’ hunched over a bar, reflecting on the fact ‘you’ are unable to attract “the kind of girl who is not the kind of girl who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning” (McInerney 3). Like the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the “far, far better thing” (Dickens 237) that Carton does activates a kind of temporal loop that invokes a radical rereading of his character as ‘the kind of guy’ who might be looked upon by the ‘blue eyes’ of his love, McInerney’s ending, through the realisation that ‘your’ shallow lifestyle is merely a ploy to hide the guilt felt over ‘your’ mother’s death, invokes a summoning to life of another reading in the context of the absent other: “You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (174). A similar ‘recall to life’ of the absent other is apparent in the ending of *La Modification*, where a train journey between Paris and Rome ends with the revelation that ‘you’ are not experiencing the present as absolute truth, but reading a book that may or may not be a work of fiction:

² Contrary to the novel which includes no explicit reference to a mirror, the film adaptation sees actor Michael J. Fox gazing across the drinks bar into a mirror as a voiceover repeats the opening lines of the novel.

The best thing, surely, would be to preserve the actual geographical relationship between these two cities and to try to bring to life, in the form of literature, this crucial episode in your experience, the movement that went on in your mind while your body was being transferred from one station to another through all the intermediate landscapes, towards this book of which you're holding in your hand the outward form (Butor 561).

This 'undoing' that raises otherness from a state of being hidden, I demonstrate throughout my thesis as a major concern of the second-person novel. However, to be clear, I am not arguing that other narrative forms are less capable of destabilising the singular meaning of a text – several texts in my thesis show this not to be the case – but I am claiming that works written entirely in second-person narrative display a uniquely different way of achieving this with vast literary potential. For instance, one of the most striking examples of 'undoing' in second-person narrative, that describes how 'you' are always deferred to a further reading, can be found in the final passage of David Foster Wallace's short story, *Forever Overhead*.

Forever Overhead, narrated entirely as 'you' concerns a boy on the day of his thirteenth birthday, who hesitates to jump from a diving plank as he reflects on the strange changes to his body and life in the journey towards adulthood: "The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud-blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear./ Hello" (16).

To begin with, Foster Wallace's story illustrates the point of view of 'undoing you' by placing the protagonist in a position between two conflicting worlds. On the diving plank, he is neither able to access his childhood, his retreat blocked by the "solid bald man" who asks, "They want to know. Do your plans up here involve the whole day or what exactly is the story" (14), nor comfortably enter the world of adults that he can only reach if he "disappears in a dark blink", as, "part of a rhythm that excludes thinking", by jumping off the end of the diving board that is "going to send you someplace which its own length keeps you from seeing, which seems wrong to submit to without even thinking" (13). This idea of a 'they' that want 'you' to jump into adulthood creates a sinister scenario from the archetypal comical situation of a person stuck on a diving board. In this sense, far from Richardson's claim that the text written entirely in second-person is the closest to traditional narratives, *Forever Overhead* insists it is the most unnatural: the position of 'you' on the diving plank demonstrates the uncanny situation maintained by undoing 'you', where caught between 'your' unalterable history and a future of preordained identity, 'you' – because second-person narrative can never point in its entirety to a protagonist or addressee as persuasively as 'I' can – stop to reread that which has been set in stone. It is this state of extraordinary vision in *Forever Overhead*, a point of view that transcends the distance between

subject and object and destabilises binary oppositions, that resembles what Nietzsche calls “the eternal essence of art”, where, “in this state he is, in a marvellous manner, like the weird picture of the fairy-tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is now at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator” (17).

This self-critical point of view that always invokes a new beginning, where ‘you’ continually ‘step into the skin and disappear’ to evade singular definition, demonstrates my secondary argument, that the effect of undoing ‘you’ in the second-person novel creates a distinctive narrative structure. Contrary to Aristotle’s thinking of the narrative as a ‘whole’ where “A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity”, “A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it”, and an end, which “is that which itself naturally follows some other thing [...] but has nothing following it” (162), I posit that the second-person novel moves – by the repeated undoing and deferral of singular meaning – through a series of beginnings that expand out simultaneously, further and further into the past and future, avoiding assimilation by the metaphysical present.

It is with regard to the removal of central origin that the subtitle ‘Blindness and Second Sight’ refers to how the ‘you’ narrative removes the central point of view of self or ‘I’ness’, to see things differently through the unnatural point of view created by undoing ‘you’. I refer throughout to an opposition of ‘first sight’ (‘I’) and ‘second sight’ (you), as that which is seen through a lens of centrality and that which is seen from a point of view as ‘you’. It is also a play on words on the title of Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight* where de Man claims that “Critics’ moments of greatest blindness [...] are also the moments at which they achieve their greatest insight” (Blindness 109). As de Man explains, it is through the intervention of the reader that a critic’s blindness becomes apparent and it is in this sense that I reinforce my assertion that a common misreading in the approach to the second-person novel, is the inability to avoid concluding ‘unnatural’ observations from a position of self-certainty.

Accordingly, the narrative strategy of undoing ‘you’ in my thesis refers to the way the ‘you’ narrative denarrates the affirmation of central origin imposed by metaphysical ‘being’ in order to destabilise singular discourse in traditional and conventional thinking. This is illustrated by reading the second-person novel in dialogue with two key ideas of ‘undoing’: Paul de Man’s ‘self-deconstruction’ and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic concept, ‘undoing’, which form a dialogue with the other texts in and around the second person, mentioned in my thesis.

The first of the two key ideas, ‘Self-deconstruction’, is de Man’s revolutionary idea that because all language is open to both a rhetorical and grammatical reading at the level of the sentence, then all language is in part figurative and therefore literature. Because all language is

literature, but literature is the only discipline that knows this, de Man grants literature precedence over metaphysical language because it disavows its own invention. Disavows, in the sense that de Man suggests “All of us know this, although we know it in the misleading way of a wishful assertion of the opposite” (Fry 146). It is with regard to de Man’s claim that all language self-deconstructs, that I demonstrate that the second-person narrative provides a metaphor for self-deconstruction: ‘you are’, through the irreducible doubt in you, is always also ‘you are not’. However, that is not to say that this happens by merely replacing the ‘I’s or ‘s/he’s with ‘you’s in the story. As I have suggested, this denarration of singular identity always already occurring at the level of the sentence is revealed by the employment of rhetorical device to highlight the plurality of ‘you’. For example, the beginning of McNerney’s novel highlights this plurality from the very first line, by simply stating, not what you are but what you are ‘not’: “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of morning. But here you are” (1). It is this device that in conjunction with the imperative nature of the second person (you are), merges to form a point of view of ‘undoing you’, where each claim to ‘being’ is undone by a claim to non-being and vice versa. Furthermore, it is in this sense that I suggest the writing of the successful second-person novel is not simply a replacement of the ‘I’s of a story with ‘you’s – which creates a naturalistic world-view – but involves a ‘removal’ of the ‘I’s to destabilise the empirical dependence on ‘sight’ to verify the factual over the fabular.

Samuel Beckett’s short novel *Company* (1979) illustrates the plurality of ‘you’ by showing how the second-person narrative cannot point to a singular protagonist, narrator or addressee but is always open to another interpretation. Drawing similarities with the act of reading, *Company* begins, “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine”. The idea of ‘company’ in Beckett’s novel concerns a communication between the “Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself”. In the introduction, Dirk Van Hulle draws a comparison with Beckett’s *Malone Dies*, where “the solitary man who turns himself into men is not Malone, rather ‘Alone’” (Beckett) to suggest that ‘company’, as the word implies, is a creation for the sake of not being alone. In order to escape this loneliness, the mysterious ‘diviser’ who observes himself as ‘he’, summons the ‘you’ voice, proclaiming: “Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not” (Beckett 3). This state of being company, “to be company” (6), allows the ‘diviser’ to summon different scenes from his life out of the darkness. However, the ‘diviser’ becomes aware that the creation of ‘company’ with the ‘you’ voice is illogical because he can never be sure exactly who is being addressed: “May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking?”; “Why does it never say for

example, You saw the light on such and such a day and now you are alone on your back in the dark? Why?” Like the doubt in the singular incurred by the irreducible cohabiting of figure and form at the level of the sentence that de Man claims can neither point decisively to one reading or the other, the ‘deviser’ proposes that perhaps this incongruence of the voice in the dark is “for no other reason than to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty” (4). After all, the ‘deviser’ continues, “Were it not of him to whom it is speaking but of another it would not speak in the second but in the third. For example, He first saw the light”.

This comparison of second- with the third person leads the deviser to exclaim that “with what reason remains he reasons ill”, and declare that in order to be company “he must display a certain mental activity” (6). Ultimately, *Company* ends with the declaration that ‘company’ is “The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were./ Alone” (41). It would appear that on the one hand when addressed in the third-person instead of the second-, ‘company’ is merely the desire of a singular being for otherness, or, the “Devised deviser devising it all for company” (30). However, ‘you as you’ in the penultimate sentence invites a rereading in terms of the ‘mental activity’ the ‘deviser’ suggests is needed for ‘company’, that places the prioritisation of the factual (over the fabular) under erasure.

This ‘mental activity’ becomes apparent in the passage where the ‘deviser’ remembers asking his mother if the sky is actually as far away as it looks:

Looking up at the blue sky and then at your mother’s face you break the silence asking her if it is not in reality much more distant than it appears. The sky that is. The blue sky. Receiving no answer you mentally reframe your question and some hundred paces later look up at her face again and ask her if it does not appear much less distant than in reality it is. For some reason you could never fathom this question must have angered her exceedingly. For she shook off your little hand and made you a cutting retort you have never forgotten (5).

Like Foster Wallace’s ‘solid bald man’ who pushes the boy towards a future of preordained adulthood, this imaginative thinking on the part of the ‘deviser’ as a boy incurs his mother’s anger, as though the precise synchronisation of sight with the real world were the key to the solid foundation of a child.

This association of the ‘real’ with sight in *Company* resembles the moment in Orwell’s *1984*, where undergoing torture, Winston Smith professes that the stars are outside of human reach, to which the Party interrogator, O’Brien, replies: “The stars can be near or distant, according as we need them [...] Have you forgotten doublethink?” (Orwell 278). However, while

Beckett's world is one where societal norms seek to reduce otherness to the condition of fable, Orwell's novel satirises this by presenting a world where all meaning is simulacra and the 'thing in itself' can be erased at whim. Ironically, the situation of 'undoing' that I describe as liberating the text from a single reading, is also the position of 'doublethink' O'Brien speaks of, that allows the erasing of human history in *1984*.

Thomas Pynchon, who defines 'doublethink' in *1984* as "a form of mental discipline whose goal [...] is to be able to believe two contradictory truths at the same time" suggests that 'doublethink' presented Orwell with an ethical dilemma: "a kind of meta-doublethink – repelling him with its limitless potential for harm, while at the same time fascinating him with its promise of a way to transcend opposites" (Orwell 2). It is this dilemma that is reminiscent of Freud's ambivalent observations of the concept he named 'undoing', abbreviated from, "*undoing what has been done*" [translator's italics], which he refers to as "negative magic".

Freud's concept of 'undoing'³, drawn from his case studies of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, is a world-view where a singular idea is always challenged by an opposite counter idea that "endeavours, by means of motor symbolism, to 'blow away' not merely the consequences of some occurrence, experience or impression, but those very events themselves" (Freud, *Inhibitions* 275). This O.C.D. world-view, where the subject defers the singular to the other by means of imagining the dire future consequences of following a singular path, is evident in *A Man Asleep* and *Layla*, however, I suggest that the very modern point of view of the second-person novel shares a concern with this modern 'mental illness', a characteristic of which Freud observes – in a similar manner to the boy stuck on the diving plank in *Forever Overhead* – is for the patient to use this condition to avoid making 'real world' decisions.

A Man Asleep tells the story of a young student who decides to remove the constraints of his identity entirely, fears what he discovers, and in his attempts to reverse the situation, becomes irrevocably caught between the two. Perec's novel begins with the 'you' protagonist as a university student who on the day of his exams decides that he will see what happens to the world if he simply does not get out of bed. In a similar manner to *Company*, whose beginning sees a deprivation of conventional sight, *A Man Asleep* informs, "AS SOON AS YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES, the adventure of sleep begins". This beginning follows directly from the epigraph of the novel, taken from Kafka's *Reflections on Sin and Suffering, Hope and the True Way*: "There is no need for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't

³ Slavoj Žižek describes Freud's concept of 'undoing' as "retroactive cancellation", drawing comparisons with Hegel's own idea of 'undoing' as "the supreme power of Spirit", which he suggests is the Hegelian version of the 'death drive', where the textual past is erased by cancelling out the symbolic relationship with the thing in itself (Žižek).

even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will offer itself to you to be unmasked” (Perec 131). In the cases of Beckett and Kafka, each concerns the idea of a closed physical space where what is imagined – by the dark ink of the writer’s pen – can never point in its entirety to the ‘thing in itself’ and Perec’s novel is no exception. ‘You’ find yourself living in a small cramped room, which is subsequently revealed not to be a small room, but a compartmentalized half of a larger room, the other half of which contains a mysterious man. As the novel progresses there are hints that this older man may, in fact, be ‘you’: “like you he never has any visitors to his room”; “nor is old age necessarily the explanation for the obsessively regular hours that he keeps. The latter would rather tend to suggest that he is, again a little like you” (207). This figure of another ‘you’ is continued in how Perec describes the protagonist as he seeks to remove himself from all linguistic identity, by imagining “Someone else, your twin, a ghostly, conscientious doubt”, that describes ‘your’ absence by describing instead what ‘you’ do not do: “You don’t go and wait for the candidates to come out of the examination hall to find out what questions were devised to test their perspicacity. Neither do you go and join your friends in the café” (39).

However, what emerges from this voyage into the void to break free of linguistic identity is that: “Your powers have deserted you [...] You are no longer able to summon up a face, a triumphal cavalcade or a distant city out of the cracks and the shadows” (199). This realization scares the young student, propelling him back in the opposite direction, only to find that in the place of his old world is a world of the unnatural: “The monsters have come into your life, the rats”. Perec’s description of the rats, a possible allusion to ‘rat torture’ in both *1984* and Freud’s ‘Rat Man’, spans two pages, where at first ‘you’ feel akin to the rats, sharing a telepathic communication: “The rats don’t speak to each other or look at each other when they meet. But you can sense these eyeless faces, you can feel their constant proximity, you follow their shadows, you are their shadow”. This all changes with the realisation that these rats are not what they seem and are in fact humans, blind to their controlled state: “you spy on them, you hate them: monsters in their garrets, monsters in slippers who shuffle at the fringes of the putrid markets, monsters with dead fish-eyes, monsters moving like robots”. Moreover, not only are they blind to their own slavery, they are simultaneously the exactors of this control: “The monsters confident of their own rights, who address you without further ado, call you to witness, stare you out” (201).

Ultimately, this dread of being assimilated by the singular, whether the totality of the voice or absolute silence, manifests itself in ‘you’ like the symptoms of O.C.D:

You set your life like a watch, as if the best means of saving yourself, of avoiding going under altogether, were to set yourself derisory tasks, to decide everything in advance, to leave nothing to chance [...] The orderliness of your room. The regularity of your timetable. You impose childish constraints on yourself. You do not step on the cracks between the paving slabs near the curbside, you go the right way around traffic islands... (205)

This theme of conflicting world-views resident in the self is similarly apparent in De La Mer's recent second-person novel, *Layla* (2014). Like *A Man Asleep*, *Layla* also displays a direct connection with the point of view of 'you' and the modern world-view of O.C.D. In the custom of *Bright Lights, Big City* and *A Man Asleep*, De La Mer's novel begins by undoing the present with a doubt of conventional sight: "You blink. Once. Twice. Double blink" (3). The revelation for the 'you' protagonist – in this case, the seventeen-year-old London stripper, Layla, that her life is a series of social pitfalls and societal constraints that keep her in her place and deprive her of her young son, becomes apparent in a moment of clarity reminiscent of Perec's protagonist: "you leap [...] over the cracks in the pavement, an old childhood superstition coming back to you out of left field: if you step on a crack, you will die". Like Perec's protagonist, who avoids the cracks in paving slabs, Layla's avoidance of the cracks leads to her avoidance of a future set in stone: "as you listen to your footsteps bounce down the street and the bright star in your mind burns brighter still, the opposite idea takes hold, together with a spasm of pleasure. You will not die. You will live" (245).¹

It is this positioning of a character in the 'you' that denarrates singular language, moving freely through walls of convention from a point of view of neither one, nor the other, neither dead nor alive, but erasing and rethinking, that undoing 'you' conjures.

In the concluding chapter to *The Value of the Novel*, named *The Thing Which is Not*, Peter Boxall responds to Will Self's article *The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)*, where Self describes successful modern novels as "zombie novels, instances of an undead art form that yet wouldn't lie down" (Guardian), by declaring that the death of the novel is "not a mark of the failure of the novel, not a sign of its demise, but the very condition of its being" (Boxall 140). Boxall explains Self's reason for proclaiming the novel's death as in part due to a cultural antipathy caused by "a condition in which everything is available [the internet], so nothing either ages or strikes us as new" (139). It is this feeling that nothing ages or strikes us as new caused by the singular language of the 'now' that is disrupted by the point of view of 'undoing you'.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud notes that "all Obsessional Neurotics" believe they have "presentiments" which 'usually' come true", adding that "an accident or a death will rarely take place without having cast its shadow before on their minds" (12). Freud attributes this belief to

the act of ‘undoing’ that imagines counter-factual future scenarios happening, resulting in an uncanny belief in having seen things before. This, I would suggest, is comparable with the phenomenon Self speaks of where nothing strikes us as new, however, where Self sees this as a problem of modernity, the second-person novel observes the fallacy of a singular language that associates the ‘live’ with truth. As Boxall says, “To see the death of the novel that arises from the advent of communication technology as a singular event [...] is to fail to see that the novel has always risked its own death as part of its struggle to live” (140), and it is in this regard that far from the residual corpse Self infers, the second-person novel rises from the dead in the advent of a teletechnological culture that tells you who you are, to declare, ‘You are (not)’.

The three chapters of my critical thesis are arranged to display a progression of thinking that illustrates my argument. Chapter One, *Undoing definitions of second-person*, describes a vicious circle where in a bid to find a definition that can be agreed upon, and with limited material with which to do so, critics tend to generalise. By doing so, they overlook significant differences between the novel form and shorter works, as well as the difference between works written entirely in second-person and those implementing it for effect. This myopic approach by critics leads to the introduction of the first key idea, ‘self-deconstruction’, where through a number of texts, both second-person and other, I demonstrate how the idea of undoing ‘you’ provides a new way of thinking about the second-person novel.

Chapter Two, *How to get by with no T’s*, extends the thinking of self-deconstruction into the second key idea, Freud’s concept of ‘undoing’, firstly by thinking about the association of ‘sight with truth’ in metaphysical language, and secondly, by reading Freud’s *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis: the ‘Rat Man’* in dialogue with de Man’s thinking in *Blindness and Insight* to further promote my proposal for approaching the second-person text by being aware of the hindrance of central origin and concluding with a thinking of ‘T’ness’.

Chapter Three combines the theoretical thinking of ‘undoing’ in the first two chapters and shows how the narrative strategy of undoing ‘you’ can provide a unique way of writing about the teletechnological world.

Chapter One. Undoing definitions of ‘second-person’

This chapter is arranged into two parts. The first part positions my research in relation to existing theory and considers two differing approaches to second-person narrative: Brian Richardson’s chapter from *Unnatural Voices*, entitled, “*At First You Feel a Bit Lost*”: *The Varieties of Second-Person Narration*, and Nicholas Royle’s ‘creative and critical’ approach to narrative ‘you’ in a chapter from *Veering: A Theory of Literature*, entitled *The Literary Turn*. Through this comparison, I suggest a fundamental flaw in existing critical approaches which has led to the second-person novel being overlooked, as well as demonstrating the beneficial effects of the ‘creative and critical’ approach in asking the question, why would you write as you?

The second part of the chapter introduces the idea of ‘self-deconstruction’ to the second-person narrative and shows how by ‘undoing’, ‘you’ maintains a narrative point of view of plurality that always defers singular language to a reading of the other.

Only ‘You’

One of the most frequently discussed problems amongst theorists of second-person is that of definition. Monica Fludernik and Matthew DelConte both consider a lack of definition as central to the problem of awareness among critics as to what second-person narrative actually is. In the preface to *Who speaks, Who listens, Who acts: a New Model For Understanding Narrative*, DelConte remarks how when speaking to colleagues about second-person narrative, “Colleague A hadn’t read any second-person and wanted me to refer some to him, whereas Colleague B began discussing a text that wasn’t really second-person” (viii), and concludes, “This lack of consensus has not only hindered the analysis of second-person narration but it also has corrupted our understanding of how the narrative modes relate to one another” (6). In her introduction to an edition of *Style*, dedicated to second person narrative, Fludernik reports a similar experience when discussing second-person narrative with colleagues, “Such encounters frequently end, you will see, with a recommendation of a new second-person text [...] but the moment you lay eyes on the text, your hopes evaporate”⁴ (282), and draws a similar conclusion, “one of the major

⁴ Fludernik and DelConte’s opinion about the meagre amount of second-person literature in circulation differs from Richardson’s claim that the genealogy of second-person works since Hawthorne is surprisingly rich. While I can see Richardson’s point of view, during my research I have met with similar experiences to Fludernik and DelConte

handicaps to an adequate treatment of second-person narrative has been the lack of an unequivocal definition of what exactly is a second-person text” (284). This difference of agreement about definition is also mentioned by Brian Richardson in *Unnatural Voices*.

Richardson proposes, “We may define second person narrative as any narration other than an apostrophe that designates its protagonist by a second person pronoun” (19), but points out that while Fludernik agrees with him, DelConte and Gerald Prince disagree, preferring a definition where ‘you’ designates both the protagonist and a narratee.

This quest among critics to find a definition which can be agreed upon has a detrimental effect on the research of second-person. As DelConte and Fludernik state, there is no agreed upon definition and therefore people are generally unaware of what second-person narrative is. Because people are unaware of what second-person is, and because there is no agreed upon definition of second-person to go by, the researcher of second-person is left trying to find material with little help from colleagues or archives. Moreover, because second-person is a modern voice (1835 onwards), there is relatively little material available, which once exhausted, puts the researcher in the unenviable position of waiting for new works to be discovered or published. If this is problematic for the second-person work in general, it is more so for the second-person novel, which emerged after 1957 and whose growth has remained relatively static compared to the growth of published short stories, flash fictions and occurrences within novels.

The situation that arises from this vicious circle is one where critics either argue over strong claims of what second-person narrative actually is, or avoid the subject altogether. By contrast, I maintain that if there were a definition of second-person, it would be that second-person narrative avoids definition by always deferring ‘you’ to a writing of the other. However, despite the apparent plurality of the ‘you’ voice, where narrative ‘you’ cannot be defined as wholly representative of a singular speaker or directed towards a specific addressee, critics still attempt to read ‘you’ from a position of self-distance. This is evident in how Richardson, who criticises second-person theory for its “habit of thinking in terms of binary oppositions” (35), and who claims that “[the] very essence [of second person] is to eschew a fixed essence” (19), still insists that second-person narrative is “A continuous dialectic of identification and distancing [...] as the reader is alternately drawn closer to and further away from the protagonist” (21). What, for Richardson, is an ‘unnatural’ voice, is so only under the condition of self-distance from the text.

regarding a lack of awareness as to what second-person narrative is, as well as receiving several recommendations for second-person novels which were invariably first-person novels that implemented narrative ‘you’.

It is this interpretation of the unnatural as natural in second-person narrative, where the critic concludes with singular definition, that I propose is the most common misreading of second-person narrative. For instance, after claiming that Edna O'Brien's employment of second-person in *A Pagan Place* highlights "the struggle between Irish women and the State's gender politics" (Mansouri 338), where the "totalitarian ethos of "thou shalt (not)" transforms into an interrogating voice that "sifts through the protagonist's conscious and unconscious psyche, wild and repressed thoughts, scavenging for pieces of un-Irish, urban, 'pagan' trends" (Mansouri 339), Mansouri still rests on the idea that the voice is "oppressing her [the young female protagonist's] 'I'ness" (340). This comfortable distancing of 'I and you' leads Mansouri to claim that by "embracing the voice [...] the protagonist although a 'zero' in the voice's colonial macrocosm, seeks a much larger benefit, namely, to (re-) gain her lost 'I'ness'" (341). The moment when this 'I'ness' is restored, he insists, is at the end of the novel when she finally plucks up the courage to face her family and leave home: "I will go now, was what you said" (Mansouri 343).

However, by placing the 'you' at a distance from the 'I', Mansouri overlooks his earlier assertion that the totalitarian voice is seeking out 'pagan' trends to assimilate. It is these 'pagan' trends that I suggest destabilise singular thinking in O'Brien's text, such as the description of the school teacher, Miss Davitt, who is "too brainy" and whose cataract was like "a little cloud that came down over the eye like a veil", that leads 'you' to consider that "Everything means more than one thing" (O'Brien 28). Consequently, it is Mansouri's focus on 'I'ness' in *A Pagan Place* by performing a restoration of the 'I' to the 'you', that leads him to ignore the context within which the protagonist declares herself an 'I' at the end of the novel. "I will go now, was what you said", is immediately followed by, "the last thing you heard was a howl starting up, more ravenous than a dog's, more piercing than a person's, a howl that would go on for as long as her [her mother's] life did, and his [her lover's], and yours" (O'Brien 202).

What Mansouri demonstrates through his reading, is an ability to describe the ambivalence and diversity of the second person as a strategy to oppose totalitarian and singular discourse, but an inability to avoid concluding his argument in a singular way that contradicts this, leaving the reader, like the reader of *A Pagan Place*, with a resounding unnatural howl⁵.

⁵ a) In the paper *Clipping* Royle refers to a passage from Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, which contains the description of a falling paperclip: "The paperclip hits the floor with an end-to-end bounce, faint and weightless, a sound for which there is no imitative word, the sound of a paperclip falling, but when you bend to pick it up, it isn't there." (Royle, *Clipping* 1). Royle proposes for consideration "how should you describe 'a sound for which there is no imitative word'? You listen to the clipping, and it's *you* you are listening to" (Royle, *Clipping* 4). It is this sound that like the indescribable howl in *A Pagan Place*, that I suggest is the sound of repressed otherness in narrative 'you'.

This tendency to read the second-person novel from a standpoint of 'I-ness', or 'first sight', is further evident in Damiano Damiani's film adaptation of Carlos Fuentes *Aura*, entitled *La Strega in Amore* (1966), known in English as *The Witch in Love* or *Strange Obsession*. While the plots of both novel and film move along the same axis, their endings differ dramatically. Both stories concern a young historian hired by an old lady, Señora Consuelo, to write the memoirs of her late husband, and in both it becomes apparent that Consuelo has used magic and trickery to restore the appearance of her younger self in the form of Aura, who the historian initially believes to be Consuelo's niece. However, the two show a marked difference in how they portray the moment when the historian discovers that Aura is Consuelo. In the film, the moment the protagonist realises that Consuelo is Aura, he ties her to the gates of the house and burns her as a witch. In stark contrast, the moment in Fuentes novel is described as follows:

...a ray of moonlight shines in and surprises you, shines in through a chink in the wall that the rats have chewed open, an eye that lets in a beam of silvery moonlight. It falls on Aura's eroded face, as brittle and yellowed as the memoirs, as creased with wrinkles as the photographs. You stop kissing those fleshless lips, those toothless gums: the ray of moonlight shows you the naked body of the old lady, of Senora Consuelo, limp, spent, tiny, ancient, trembling because you touch her. You love her, you too have come back... (Fuentes 145)

Far from the traditional interpretation seen in Damiani's film where once the historian's love is revealed as black magic and expunged by flame, the curse is lifted, the silvery moonlight that shines through an eye in the wall fashioned by rats provides an alternative point of view. As the name 'Aura' suggests, it is this destabilising of sight by a feeling that 'you' have known it all along, that sees an undoing of the traditional ending. Or, to employ a turn of phrase, Fuentes novel is the experience of a love at 'second sight'.

It is in this position of 'second sight' by undoing 'I-ness' that the second-person narrative challenges all boundaries, beyond the cover of a book. For the simple reason that while 'I' or 's/he' can more easily be reduced by readerly intervention to a singular entity, 'you' always suggests another way of thinking about who 'you' are. Despite this, it is the tendency to position the 'you' at a distance from the 'I' and conclude with a thinking of self-distance that features continually in the reading of the second-person novel. This is evident in how Del Conte, who

b) Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Haunted Mind* refers to a non-existent third stroke of a church bell that resounds with a booming sound : "You count the strokes—one—two, and there they cease, with a booming sound, like the gathering of a third" (Hawthorne 1).

states his intention to challenge the primacy of voice and maintains that in *Bright Lights, Big City*, McInerney “uses the you address to its protagonist to emphasize an existence dictated from the outside” (3), still ignores the more crucial idea implied from the onset with “You are not the kind of guy”. That is to say, that unequivocal definition of ‘you’ is as illusory as the idea that ‘you’ can be yourself apart from a writing of the other, something that becomes apparent when the protagonist, Jamie Conway, recalls a conversation that has had a profound effect on him:

Last night Vicky was talking about the ineffability of inner experience. She told you to imagine what it was like to be a bat [...] You think she meant that the only shoes we can ever wear are our own. Meg can’t imagine what it’s like for you to be you, she can only imagine herself being you (McInerney 96).

Through Conway’s recollections, McInerney makes reference to Thomas Nagel’s paper, *What is it Like to be a Bat?* (1974), in which Nagel announces: “I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate” (3). Nagel adds, “any shift to greater objectivity — that is, less attachment to a specific viewpoint — does not take us nearer to the real nature of the phenomenon: it takes us farther away from it” (6), and concludes that any real attempt to know what it is like to be a bat must be avoided until “more thought has been given to the general problem of subjective and objective. Otherwise, we cannot even pose the mind-body problem without sidestepping it” (8).

Nagel’s dilemma resembles that of the critic who attempts to find a definition of second-person narrative by either make a strong claim on the ‘you’ within the binds of singular language, or sidestepping the matter like Conway’s work associate, Meg, who “can’t imagine what it’s like for you to be you”. However, it is in the phrase ‘for you to be you’ that McInerney problematises Nagel from the point of view of ‘you’. Where Nagel asks what it is like for a bat to be a bat, McInerney’s text suggests a consideration of the singular point of view that asks the question, by having the reader consider the difference in what it is like for ‘I to be you’, and what it is like for ‘you to be you’. It is in this manner that in order to have a definition of second-person narrative that can be agreed upon, it must first be accepted that second-person is always also something other than second-person.

In *The Literary Turn*, Royle subverts traditional academic standards of writing the essay in third-person by writing – in a book whose subtitle declares itself a “theory of literature” – from the point of view of ‘you’. The apparent objective of *The Literary Turn* is to demonstrate the author’s frustration with the frequent occurrence of the term, ‘turn’, especially the ‘linguistic

turn' which saw the creation of a new philosophical meta-language. Royle argues that "the phrase 'linguistic turn' cannot simply be outside or apart from the turn to which it refers" (Veering 92) and informs us that this is what Derrida is referring to when he announces the need for a metalinguistics that underlines the impossibility of metalanguage. It is from the self-critical point of view of second-person narrative that Royle emphasises the idea that language is always in the act of turning.

The Literary Turn begins with the same destabilising of self-presence as *Bright Lights, Big City*. "You are not there" defers the logic of singular presence to the unknown, and the subject-object binary that enables philosophical language to speak objectively about language is placed under scrutiny. Moreover, like McInerney's thinking, the second sentence of *The Literary Turn* concerns the problematic of Nagel's bat and 'inner experience': "You veer about for a fold in the painting that would at last apprise you of the partition you play in a piece of theatre that was acting itself out before you were born and sings imperceptibly in your body like a bat" (Veering 92). Unlike Nagel's bat that remains out of reach of the self, the voice of otherness that sings within 'you' in Royle's writing searches for the part it has played that meta-language has ignored in its claim to have turned language from outside of the subject.

It is in this conjuring of the absent other in McInerney's and Royle's texts that the echography of Nagel's writing becomes apparent. Conway's longing for 'inner experience' in *Bright Lights, Big City*, and Royle's hope for "that 'idiomatic writing' of which Derrida continues to dream", which he suggests is "the musical signature, of your most unreadable history" (Veering 102,103), both employ second-person narrative to demonstrate the fallacy of a language that seeks to singularly identify the other from the outside. A fallacy that is discernible in Nagel's rationale in choosing the bat because bats "present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours" (Nagel 2). While bats have, as Nagel says, differing sensory apparatus, he cannot distance himself from the mythology of the bat. To be 'blind as a bat' is a common term used to describe a person who cannot see, regardless of the fact that the bat's other sensory apparatus make its vision in the dark superior to human vision. Subsequently, this under-privileging of the bat's other sensory apparatus attests to the prioritising of sight in traditional thinking. In is in this sense, that Nagel's desire to know what it is like 'for a bat to be a bat' becomes a problem of limited vision, one where he can only imagine what it is like to be the other from a point of view of self-certainty.

It is this problem of observing the subject from a point of view of singular origin that is encountered when Richardson dispenses, too quickly, with the 'apostrophe', the 'you

monologue' and the 'familiar authorial colloquy' because these forms are "readily situated within standard categories of narrative and rhetorical analysis" (18).

The OED defines the traditional employment of the apostrophe as the moment when "a speaker or writer suddenly stops in his discourse, and turns to address pointedly some person or thing, either present or absent" and describes how this differs from modern usage that has "extended it to the *absent* or *dead* (who are for the nonce supposed to be present); but it is by no means confined to these" (O.E.D.). With regard to the absent as present, it is significant how Royle ends *The Literary Turn* with an ironic play on the apostrophe that undoes the boundaries of speaker and addressee, subject and object: "You say all this. You stop. You smile. But the tears begin to roll. I have no idea who or where on earth you are" (Veering 113-114). By stepping outside of the 'you' and perceiving it from a singular point of view as 'I', Royle parodies the idea of a meta-language that would step outside of the text and fail to recognise its own relationship with the other.

Richardson further expands on his reason for delimiting the apostrophe and 'you' monologue from the research of second-person by declaring they are "addressed to characters, albeit silent or absent ones, within the fictional world" (18). It is here that I reiterate that second-person does not deal in the binary of reality and fiction, but knows that all language is composed of both reality and fiction. This is demonstrated in the effect of the 'you' monologue in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, shortly after the titular protagonist changes from being a man to a woman:

...mincing out the words, she was horrified to perceive how low an opinion she was forming of the other sex, the manly, to which it had once been her pride to belong — 'To fall from a mast-head', she thought, 'because you see a woman's ankles; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, so that women may praise you; to deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you; to be the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of creation.— Heavens!' she thought, 'what fools they make of us — what fools we are!' And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman (108).

While Woolf's 'you' could quite plausibly be addressed to a fictional narratee or 'real world' addressee to hypothesize Orlando's sex-change, the resulting "she was man; she was woman", creates a state of narrative 'undoing' that destabilises the conventional 'you' monologue Richardson speaks of.

In *Semiology and Rhetoric*, de Man proposes a change of perspective towards how we think about language, suggesting that because French semiotics adopted Saussure and Jakobson as their model, rather than Proust and Valéry, thinkers such as Barthes, Genette, Todorov and Greimas let “grammar and rhetoric function in perfect continuity” (28), so that “Grammar and logic stand to each other in a dyadic relationship of unsubverted support” (29). That is, by concentrating on the structure of the sign and its relationship with the thing, they bypassed the irreconcilable tensions and interplay that lie along the surface of grammatical structures. Significantly, because this tension means there is the possibility of both a figurative and a literal reading of all language, de Man claims that all language is always also figurative and consequently, philosophical language must also be figurative. Therefore, if all language can in this sense be called literature but literature is the only language that knows this – because it is aware of its own fiction – then by this rationale, the metaphysical privileging of philosophy over literature is turned on its head. It is in view of this thinking that de Man claims “Poetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction”, (32) and, “I would not hesitate to equate the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself”⁶ (30).

To illustrate the idea that language has both a rhetorical and literal meaning, de Man draws on the example of the rhetorical question to demonstrate that “the literal meaning asks for the concept [...] whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (29). Through a reading of W.B. Yeats’ poem *Among School Children*, de Man relays how the rhetorical question in the final line “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” puts into doubt any authoritative readings prior to this line. It is with regard to this conflict of rhetoric and grammar that de Man adds that while “two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line”, (30) it is not a comfortable cohabitation. By way of another of Yeats’ poems, *Vacillation* – where the fiery blossom and earthly leaf are held together on the Tree of Life – de Man insists that it is not as simple as just saying there are two separate meanings that run in parallel: “The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be *undone* by it” [my italics] (30).

This is illustrated in Woolf’s language where the denarrating of Orlando’s identity, “she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman”, marks the impossibility of definition by singular language. While a figurative reading might promote a metaphor for a woman trapped inside a man’s body or a man trapped inside a woman’s body, the literal reading insists that

⁶ De Man explains the difference between his idea of deconstruction and Derrida’s by suggesting that he grants more authority to the literary text in its awareness of its own fictionality: “In a complicated way, I would hold to that statement that ‘the text deconstructs itself, is self-deconstructive’ rather than being deconstructed by a philosophical intervention from the outside of the text” (Rosso 791).

Orlando does in reality switch between being a man and a woman. This retroactively questions all preceding language such as the 'you' monologue in its ability to represent a singular interpretation, or be readily situated within standard categories as Richardson claims.

It is in this regard that I suggest the plurality always inherent in narrative 'you' is brought out by figural device to challenge the assertion of a singular or authoritative reading by metaphysical language. By highlighting the undecidable through a narrative of 'undoing', the second-person points to where language falls short of describing the other. Subsequently, Richardson's third dismissal, the 'familiar authorial colloquy', which concerns a hypothetical address to an imagined reader, highlights the inability of singular language to regard 'one' as different in itself.

The hypothetical 'you' address is generally dismissed as the more modern substitute for the hypothetical 'one'. What is significant is that this traditional barrier against thinking about how 'one' is different in itself, is reflected in the writing of second-person. Richardson, for instance, describes the hypothetical 'you' as having an "unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee" (29). This is evident in how first-person texts can change to the 'you' voice as a hypothetical device to tell you what it is like to walk in a character's shoes, but is generally avoided by second-person narratives that tend instead towards passive narration. However, in the same sense that Woolf's thinking in *Orlando* challenges the conventions and restrictions of the 'you' monologue by subverting the idea of fixed identity, writers such as Hamid and Palahniuk have deliberately subverted the subject-object barrier of the hypothetical 'you'.

Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia: a novel* (2013) is a book that leaves it up to the reader to decide if it is, in fact, a novel structured like a self-help book or a self-help book structured like a novel. The first page proclaims, "LOOK, UNLESS YOU'RE WRITING ONE, A SELF-HELP book is an oxymoron", pointing out that in a self-help book you are not actually helping yourself. This, combined with a subtle switch from hypothetical address to a 'you' protagonist on page two, destabilises the 'unambiguous distinction' between narrator and narratee that Richardson mentions: "This book is a self-help book. Its objective, as it says on the cover, is to show you how to get filthy rich in rising Asia. And to do that it has to find you, huddled, shivering, on the packed earth under your mother's cot one cold, dewy morning" (Hamid 3).

Richardson describes such instances in second-person narrative as the 'autotelic form', where "the direct address to a 'you' that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of the fiction", (Richardson 30) however,

Hamid's text allows for no such easy distinctions between actual reader and fiction. Where Richardson relates a 'you' voice that is at times the actual reader and at times a thing of fiction, Hamid's narrative destabilises the binary of actual reader and fictional character, as well as, actual book and fictional book, in their entirety.

A similarly subversive narrative that breaks down the distance of 'one' and 'you' is Chuck Palahniuk's novel, *Fight Club*. *Fight Club*, which is for the most part written in first-person, begins with a subtle but incremental writing of instances of what appears to be a hypothetical, or outwardly addressing, 'how-to' voice:

This how-to stuff isn't in any history book.

The three ways to make napalm: One, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate. Two, you can mix equal parts of gasoline and diet cola. Three, you can dissolve crumbled cat litter in gasoline until the mixture is thick.

Ask me how to make nerve gas (13).

This instance sees Palahniuk's protagonist describe – with explicit reference to the style of the 'how-to' book – how to make napalm. However, what appears on the surface like a natural first-person narrative that directs the hypothetical 'you' towards a narratee or addressee, is undone by the revelation that a second character in the book, the mysterious eco-terrorist, Tyler Durden, is the imaginary double of the protagonist, intent on making their shared body his own.

This undoing of the singular by the other, causes a shattering of all pre-conceptions and a re-reading of the book's 'how-to' narratives with the knowledge that they were not simply addressed outwardly from protagonist to another, but inwardly and outwardly concurrently, by Palahniuk's creation of a real and an imaginary character who turn out to be one and the same. This is demonstrated by how in the approach to the revelatory moment, the occurrence of 'you' narration increases dramatically, and the distinction between 'I' and 'you' begins to blur. When Tyler Durden vanishes in Chapter 21, the protagonist proclaims, "I've got to find Tyler./ I've got to get some sleep./ I've got to sleep./ I've got to go to sleep" (161). Following this, at the beginning of Chapter 22, a similar scene is repeated, but with a change of point of view that destabilises the affirmation of fact with conscious sight, where 'you' are unsure if 'you' are awake or asleep: "You've got to find Tyler./ You've got to get some sleep./ Then you're awake, and Tyler's standing in the dark next to the bed./ You wake up./ The moment you were falling asleep, Tyler was standing there" (163).

This change of point of view from 'I' to 'you' is explained when Tyler Durden reveals himself as the protagonist's double, declaring quite clearly that "There isn't a me and a you,

anymore,’ [...] ‘I think you’ve figured that out.’/ We both use the same body”. (Palahniuk 164) What was assumed thus far in the novel to be a switch to ‘you’ for the purpose of explaining something hypothetically to the reader, must now be revisited in the light of this change. This becomes evident when the narrator refers for a second time to the making of napalm after he has discovered Tyler Durden is his double: “I know my boss is dead./ The three ways to make napalm. I knew Tyler was going to kill my boss. [...] I know this because Tyler knows this” (185). Like the narrator of *Fight Club*, by undoing the centrality of ‘you’ as one, ‘you’ have somehow known this all along. ‘You’ have known that in Palahniuk’s text, the hypothetical ‘one’ was never simply one, it was ‘two’ in disguise, or rather, ‘you’ in disguise.

It is in this sense of the ‘you’ that is always also the other, that both Palahniuk’s and Hamid’s novels end with a position of undecidability about the location and identity of ‘you’. In *Fight Club*, in the ambiguous position where you no longer know who is speaking, or even, whether the protagonist is dead or alive, or occupying any kind of body at all, “Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died. Liar. And Tyler died. [...] Faker” (206), and similarly in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia: a novel*, where “the pretty girl holds your hand, and you contain her, and this book, and me writing it, and I too contain you, who may not yet even be born, you inside me inside you” (228).

Waking up as ‘you’: Self-hypnosis

Aside from the beginning of *Bright Lights, Big City* that utilises the negative “You are not” from the first sentence to trigger a doubt in the singular construction of the self, the unsettling of beginnings plays an important role in activating the point of view of ‘undoing’ in narrative ‘you’. For example, *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* begins with the explicit derealisation of the present tense through future knowledge⁷: “The day the stock market falls out of bed and breaks its back is the worst day of your life. Or so you think. It isn’t the worst day of your life, but you think it is” (Robbins 1). Similarly, *Aura* begins with the line, “You’re reading the advertisement: an offer like this isn’t made every day....You don’t even notice when the ash from your cigarette falls into the cup of tea” (Fuentes 3). Both examples lure the reader into the false belief that you are

⁷ In a similar manner to Robbins, Robert Magnuson Smith’s novel *Scorper* (2015) also begins by derealising the present through implying future knowledge in the narration: “You’re on your way to Ditchling. It’s a Thursday afternoon in late March during the year of 2012, the year the bookshops are closing and the libraries are downsizing and the internet attempts its final stranglehold on the written word” (Smith 1)

experiencing the actual through present tense, however, the narrative prolepsis in Robbins' novel betrayed by the fact you already know this is not the worst day of your life, and the idea that a mysterious other is observing what you have not noticed in Fuentes' novel, destabilise the singular present.

In this regard, perhaps the most striking destabilising of the beginning in second-person happens also to be the first published work of second-person, Hawthorne's short story *The Haunted Mind*, part of a collection aptly named, *Twice-Told Tales*.

Written entirely in second-person, *The Haunted Mind* begins by placing 'you' in the moment between sleep and consciousness:

What a singular moment is the first one, when you have hardly begun to recollect yourself after starting from midnight slumber! By unclosing your eyes so suddenly, you seem to have surprised the personages of your dream in full convocation round your bed, and catch one broad glance at them before they can flit into obscurity. Or, to vary the metaphor, you find yourself, for a single instant, wide awake in that realm of illusions, whither sleep has been the passport... (1).

The first thing Hawthorne relates is that this moment is a singular one: the reader still has the affirmation of a stable linear progression from sleep to waking to consciousness. However, through the point of view of 'you', Hawthorne's text becomes a struggle between the singular and the conflicting world-view of the other that haunts it, as the two cohabit in the narrative present. This difference in the singular moment is accentuated throughout by linguistic device, such as the repetition of the word 'half' and the number 'two': "You question with yourself, half seriously"; "one hour to be spent in thought, with the mind's eye half shut, and two in pleasant dreams, and two in that strangest of enjoyments" (1).

The idea of a 'you' that is neither truly awake nor asleep, but like the 'mind's eye' in Hawthorne's tale is always 'half shut', is illustrated in a pivotal passage from *A Man Asleep*:

You see yourself, you see yourself seeing yourself, you watch yourself watching yourself. Even if you were to wake up, your vision would remain the same, immutable. Even if you managed to grow thousands, billions of extra eyelids, there would still be this eye, behind, which would see you. You are not asleep but sleep will never come again. You are not awake and you will never wake up (Perec 194).

Perec's description of the point of view of 'you' speaks of a strange eye that is always able to keep observing 'you', regardless of how many other differing viewpoints present themselves.

However, in accordance with de Man's claim about the cohabiting of rhetoric and grammar that seeks to undo the opposite reading, the daunting idea of a 'you' that is never truly asleep or awake, has its darker underbelly. While on the one hand the narrative strategy of 'undoing you' demands that 'you' always be open to further interpretation, through the imperative power of 'you' to instruct, it also 'demands'. This is evident in the ending of Hawthorne's tale when "With an involuntary start, you seize hold on consciousness, and prove yourself but half awake" (Hawthorne 4). It is in this regard that by adopting the point of view of 'you', *A Man Asleep* and *The Haunted Mind* suggest that being free of the constraints of singular language, is also to know that through the imperative nature of 'you', 'you' are being told to do so: 'you' are under hypnosis.

In *Unnatural Voices*, Richardson notes the hypnotic effect that the 'you' voice seems to have on those that read it⁸, stating that "all critics of Lars Von Trier's movie, *Zentropa*, wrote their reviews in second person" (34). *Zentropa* (1991) aka, *Europa*, begins from the point of view of a moving train, accompanied by the narrative voice-over of Max Von Sydow, counting 'you' down to the beginning of the movie. It is interesting with regard to the hypnotic imperative of narrative 'you', that in *The Semiology of Rhetoric*, de Man highlights a notable difference in the construction of writings of grammar and writings of rhetoric in that rhetorical or figurative writings "are assumed to be inventions, the products of a highly particularized individual talent, whereas no one can claim credit for the programmed pattern of grammar" (Semiology 32).

"YOU ARE ABOUT to awake when you dream that you are dreaming" (Fleming 125) appears almost randomly as the only line of second-person narrative in Chapter 19 of Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953). There is no biographical information to indicate why Fleming chose to switch point of view from third- to second-person for a single sentence but it is mentioned by Umberto Eco in *Narrative Structures in Fleming*, who observes that this line is a play on Novalis' famous reverie of 1829: "We are near waking when we dream we are dreaming" (Eco 177). However, Eco halts at considering any further reaching effects of the 'you' beyond advocating Fleming as a literary writer.

⁸ Both De La Mer and Mohsin Hamid cite McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* as the main influence for writing their novels in second-person. When asked about the influences that went towards writing *Bright Lights, Big City* in second-person, McInerney said "I recently re-read it. It's sort of like reading a book by somebody else. [...] Where did I come up with that?" (McInerney, Interview) When I followed up on this idea of reading a book by someone else, by asking McInerney via email if he was conscious of a connection between his novel and Orwell's *1984*, he replied, "To tell you the truth I don't think there was any influence, although the unconscious has its own agenda, so I suppose it's possible" (see appendix for detail).

In *Casino Royale and Franchise Remix: James Bond as Superhero*, Robert P. Arnett draws on the hypnotic effect of language, citing the endings of ‘movie franchises’ to demonstrate how franchises reboot:

‘Who am I? I’m Spider-man.’ Last line *Spider-man* (2002)

‘The truth is . . . I am Iron Man.’ Last line *Iron Man* (2008)

‘The name’s Bond, James Bond.’ Last line *Casino Royale* (2006) (Arnett 1)

In contrast to the impact of this short and memorable movie ending, “The name’s Bond, James Bond”, the final line of the novel, *Casino Royale*, differs distinctly with a less memorable line, “‘Yes, dammit, I said ‘was’. The bitch is dead now” (Fleming 181).

In a review of *Martinis, Girls and Guns: 50 Years of 007* (2003), by Martin Sterling and Gary Morecambe, Rachel Cooke calls James Bond, “The ultimate male fantasy” and poses the question, “Bond belongs in the past. Isn’t it time we left him there?” (Cooke). Many theories by so-called ‘Bondologists’ contemplate why the character James Bond has stood the test of time so well. For example, in *Bond and Beyond* (1987) Bennett and Wollacott claim that Bond “is always identified with himself but is never quite the same—an ever mobile signifier”, referencing Eco’s notion of ‘Bond’ as a brand that is “already there” (Bennett 274). In this vein, I suggest that this idea of ‘Bond’ as something that moves and changes with the time is developed in the construction of *Casino Royale* by an awareness of the hypnotic effect of language, as demonstrated by the effect of narrative ‘you’ juxtaposed to the programming of the secret agent, James Bond. De Man suggests, “precisely when the highest claims are being made for the unifying power of metaphor, these very images rely in fact on the deceptive use of semi-automatic grammatical patterns” (Semiology 32), and it is in this sense that “YOU ARE ABOUT to awake” shows through like a skeletal part of the hypnotic language that moves unseen beneath the surface of Fleming’s third-person narrative. That is to say, the reader of *Casino Royale* may notice the figurative language and literary device; they might even notice the change of narrative voice and tense for a single sentence, but how many would stop and think to themselves, to what extent am I affected by the imperatives of language; to what extent am I hypnotised by what I read and hear?

It is perhaps no coincidence then, that Fleming follows this moment of ‘you’ narration with a scene reminiscent of the uncanny awakenings in *The Haunted Mind*, *Fight Club*, and *A Man Asleep*, where it is unclear if the protagonist is awake, asleep, or something entirely different: “He

watched the procession of his dreams go by without any effort to disturb their sequence, [...] in one of his twilight moments he thought there were people round him” (125). This destabilising of the conscious and unconscious provides foreshadowing for the following chapter where Bond questions his own programming as a spy. The combination of Novalis’ figurative meditations on reality, together with the hypnotic effect of the ‘you’ voice which resonates in de Man’s observation of “the impersonal precision of grammar and of a semiology derived from grammatical patterns” (Semiology 32), question the authority of the singular hypnotic imperative to say ‘you are’ and highlights the double bind in metaphysical language that instructs while simultaneously claiming freedom of expression.

Ultimately this conflict plays out in Fleming’s novel when Bond, intent on giving up his life as a spy, relays concerns about his own construction to fellow spy, Mathis: “in order to tell the difference between good and evil, we have manufactured two images representing the extremes” (136). De Man says, “grammar allows us to ask the question, but the sentence by means of which we ask it may deny the very possibility of asking. For what is the use of asking, I ask, when we cannot even authoritatively decide whether a question asks or doesn’t ask?” (Semiology 29). Consequently, the conditioning of Bond – constructed by firm logical oppositions – is countered in *Casino Royale* by Fleming’s attention to the difference of programmable imperatives and the rhetorical subversion of singular claims. This is evident in how Mathis responds to Bond’s concerns by telling him, “Surround yourself with human beings, my dear James. They are easier to fight for than principles”. It might seem then, that all is resolved in Mathis’ assertion that the ‘human’ essence will prevail over manipulative language, however, as a sinister sting in the tail, Mathis adds, “But don’t let me down and become human yourself. We would lose such a wonderful machine (Fleming 139)”. In this sense, it might appear that to be human is first to acknowledge that you are also something other than you think you are.

In Chapter One, I demonstrated how the pursuit of an unequivocal definition of second-person narrative by contemporary narrative theory disavows the plurality of the ‘you’ narrative because of a vicious circle where critics seek an unequivocal definition of a narrative voice that resists centrality and singular definition. Through a reading of McInerney, Nagel, Royle, de Man, and other works, I illustrated that second-person as a narrative strategy of undoing, challenges the singular reading and shows that there is always another way of reading something. However, by suggesting this other way of reading something, the narrative ‘you’ – like the hypnotist – ‘suggests’, drawing attention to the double bind inherent in metaphysical language.

Chapter Two. How to get by with no 'I's'

In Chapter Two I expand the thinking of self-deconstruction and the multifarious 'you' detailed in Chapter One, to suggest that the more insightful approach to the second-person novel is set in motion by undoing the conventional prioritisation of 'first sight' and singular 'I'ness' over 'second sight' and the 'you'. To illustrate this, I establish a relationship between the point of view of second-sight in its ability to contest fixed oppositions and singular language, and Paul de Man's thinking in *Blindness and Insight*.

Following this, through an oblique reading of Freud's psychoanalytic case study, *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis* (1909), where Freud seeks to restore his patient's fragmented personality by restoring the 'I' (das Ich), I make a comparison of Freud's thinking of 'undoing' with the critic of second-person who seeks definition, to illustrate how the second-person point of view destabilises all claims to a singular interpretation of the text.

Self-Blinding

"Enucleation" is defined by the O.E.D. as "removing the centre of the eye". It is in the sense of this homophone of eyes and 'I' that second-person narrative destabilises the empirical affirmation of 'sight and truth' by removing the centrality of singular texts. That is, with the narrative undoing of 'you are' with 'you are not' and vice versa, a point of view of 'second sight' is established.

One of the earliest and most memorable stories of self-blinding in Western culture is *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, who like the protagonist of H.G. Wells' story, *Country of the Blind*, who falsely believes that "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king" (Wells 554), realizes that what you can see with your own eyes is not always what is actually there. On discovering the underlying truth about the curse that plagues his kingdom – that he is married to his mother and has killed his father – Oedipus removes his own eyes. Initially, it is assumed that Oedipus does this so that he may not look upon his children, the product of his incest: "Henceforward quenched in darkness shall ye see/ Those ye should ne'er have seen". However, in his state of blindness, Oedipus finds new wisdom, not unlike that of the seer, Teiresias, of whom Oedipus exclaims, "Thou knowest, though thy blinded eyes see naught" (Sophocles 16).

The O.E.D. defines “second sight” as “A supposed power by which occurrences in the future or things at a distance are perceived as though they were actually present”. In *Veering*, Royle speaks of the readerly illusion of presence in the voice and suggests that “Literature is a space of second sight. ‘Point of view’ or ‘focalization’ always involves a sort of magical or telepathic logic (a narrator or author-figure seeing or sharing the point of view, as if through magical binoculars)” (Veering 21). It is in this regard, that Teiresias’ blind vision of truth, running in congruence with Oedipus’ sighted vision of fiction, act like the ‘magical binoculars’ Royle speaks of. This is noticeable in foreshadowing dialogue, such as when Oedipus warns Teiresias, “Hadst not been blind, I had been sworn to boot/ That thou alone didst do the bloody deed” (Sophocles 18). Royle says “Even if the writer or narrator claims not to know (and proceeds as if blind to) what she or he is going to say, the reader knows that the future has already been witnessed” (Veering 21), and it is in this way that in *Oedipus*, Teiresias assumes a role akin to the reader, who from her/his position of ‘future knowledge’ can observe the error of Oedipus’ thinking. Consequently, at the key moment of Oedipus self-blinding, the audience receives affirmation that what they had always suspected deep down was true, that Oedipus in his ‘sighted’ hubris was as Teiresias exclaimed, “in everything [...] blind”, affirming the truth in his earlier prediction, “Poor fool to utter gibes at me which all/ Here present will cast back on thee ere long” (Sophocles 20).

In *Blindness and Insight*, de Man suggests that the tradition of having to form a singular conclusion in literary essays causes the critic to disavow the ambivalence of their own writing prior to this moment. This leads him to claim that the history of literary criticism is a series of errors, built upon error, and consequently state that “The insight [of the misreading] exists only for a reader in the privileged position of being able to observe the blindness as a phenomenon in its own right” (Blindness 106). Where de Man’s thinking of ‘blindness and insight’ suggests the idea that one is always blind to the ambivalence of one’s own writing due to metaphysical traditions, I suggest that this concern is directly addressed by the second-person narrative.

In *Criticism and Crisis*, de Man quotes Husserl, “philosophical knowledge can only come into being when it is turned back upon itself” (Blindness 16), to suggest that he is blind to his own Eurocentric prejudice:

Husserl speaks repeatedly of non-European cultures as primitive, prescientific and pre-philosophical, myth-dominated and congenitally incapable of the disinterested distance without which there can be no philosophical meditation (Blindness 15).

This observation of Husserl and the various critics that make up the essays in *Blindness and Insight* causes de Man to assert that not some, but all critics are inescapably blind to the singular language that forms them: “— the question of his [the critic’s] own blindness being one which he is by definition incompetent to ask—” (Blindness 106). It is interesting in this regard that in the introduction to *Blindness and Insight*, Wlad Godzich questions the position of a “discourse that questions the status of all discourses” and raises for consideration, “Does de Man escape his blindness?” However, it emerges that Godzich’s question is a pointed one that leads to the conclusion that “if there is anything that de Man’s work has been asserting [...] it is that we do not know what reading is” (Blindness xvi). It is this observation that traditional criticism is blind to its position of central origin, that I propose is highlighted by the second-person narrative through the destabilising of singular discourse in the point of view of second sight. In a similar manner to the story of Oedipus, where the conflicting viewpoints of the sighted and blind worlds converge at the end of the story like ‘magical binoculars’, I suggest that narrative ‘you’ observes its own writing, challenging the idea of an authoritative singular reading through the knowledge of its own blindness.

For the purpose of illustrating this transition from self-blinding in narrative ‘you’ to the insight revealed through the point of view of ‘second sight’, I read Raymond Carver’s short story *Cathedral* (first-person) that concerns a blind man, in dialogue with Rumer Godden’s second-person short story *You Need to Go Upstairs*, where ‘you’ are blind.

Cathedral chronicles the meeting of a nameless narrator with an old friend of his wife’s who happens to be a blind man. At first, the prejudiced narrator objects to the visit, “A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (196) but is persuaded otherwise by his wife on the grounds that the blind man has recently lost his wife to cancer. The reader becomes privileged to the narrator’s negative comprehension of what it would be like to be a blind man married to a sighted woman: “--I’m imagining now--her last thought maybe this: that he never even knew what she looked like, and she on an express to the grave” (200). What is discernible from this is that the narrator’s whole idea of what makes life worth living is attached to the eyes, where ‘I’m imagining’ indicates the insurmountable distance between self and other. However, this all changes when the protagonist meets the blind man.

Initially, there is an unsettling moment where the protagonist observes the blind man’s eyes: “I saw the left pupil turn in toward his nose while the other made an effort to keep in one place. But it was only an effort, for that eye was on the roam without his knowing it or wanting it to be” (202). Royle states “the ‘literary work always sees us coming: it is clairvoyant by nature, it is cryptaesthetic and has seen its own future. It will have seen, for example, what a character

‘missed’” (Veering 21), and it is in this regard that the blind man’s eyes resemble the ‘magical binoculars’ that are able to see conflicting worlds differently, independently of each other, while still being part of the same viewpoint. A further moment of uncanniness occurs when the protagonist turns on the television which serves to foreshadow the insight of the story’s ending: “‘This is a color TV,’ the blind man said. ‘Don’t ask me how, but I can tell’”; “‘I have two TVs. I have a color set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It’s funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I’m always turning it on, I turn on the color set’” (Carver 204-205).

The moment the protagonist starts to become aware of his own short-sightedness happens when the blind man requests that he describe to him what a cathedral looks like, “‘I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it?’” (210), but nonetheless makes an attempt: “‘To begin with, they’re very tall.’ I was looking around the room for clues. ‘They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky’. What is clear from the way he has to look around the room for clues, is that the protagonist is only capable of using his imagination visually, and ultimately he gives up, exclaiming “‘The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me [...] They’re something to look at on late-night TV’” (212). However, rather than giving up on the sighted man, the blind man tells him to close his eyes, after which he takes him by the hand and asks him to draw the cathedral instead, and there follows a scene where the protagonist discovers a different way of using his imagination, by feel: “‘I put in windows with arches. I drew flying buttresses. I hung great doors. I couldn’t stop. The TV station went off the air. I put down the pen and closed and opened my fingers’” (213).

When the protagonist has finished, the blind man asks him to open his eyes again to observe the drawing of the cathedral but surprisingly, considering his earlier reliance on sight, he decides instead to keep them closed: “‘I had my eyes closed. I thought I’d keep them that way for a little longer’” (214). In the sense of de Man’s reading of Husserl’s blindness, Carver’s protagonist is able to observe the prejudices inherent in his own point of view of ‘first sight’. Through the closing of his eyes and touching the blind man, he has reversed the metaphysical privileging of ‘look’ over ‘feel’ and decentralised his own point of view, “‘I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything’” (214), and although he cannot rid himself of his self-context entirely, there is the implication that by closing his eyes, he is aware of the blindness of those constructions.

By contrast to Carver’s *Cathedral*, *You Need to Go Upstairs*, places ‘you’ directly in this point of view of insight to witness the blindness of singular language. In *The Uncanny* Royle claims “Writing is the double. Writing is a double writing, from the beginning” (The Uncanny 188) and from the beginning Godden’s story is very literally a double writing, placing the

viewpoint of the sighted reader alongside the blind viewpoint of the 'you' protagonist, Alice (nicknamed 'Ally'), and closing the two together like magical binoculars to create a point of view of second sight. However, there is nothing transparent about Godden's tale, no obvious indication that you are blind or any mention of the word 'blind' throughout the story; 'you' must gradually work it out for yourself by how 'you' perceive things otherwise, and how 'you' are treated differently by the 'sighted' world.

The story begins with Ally knitting in the back garden of her house in the presence of her mother. Where Carver's protagonist could not imagine the blind man being able to see his wife, as Ally, 'you' cannot see your mother's face, however, "you can always feel Mother's look". The priority of 'sight' over 'feel' is destabilised further in the difference of the mother's and Ally's descriptions of Ally's jacket when her mother remarks to her friend, "It's a nice jacket, isn't it?" [...] 'We got it at Pollards' bargain counter. Ally feels it's warm and gay". Furthermore, Godden introduces an extrasensory effect in the way in which the wind brings "scents and the sounds to you" (2), as well as the way in which the trees are "straining and moving their branches just enough to tell you where they are". Trees that you are informed, "are like people, they are alive" (1, 2). However, unlike Carver's tale where the reader witnesses the ignorance of the sighted world to otherness, the irreducibility of narrative 'you' in Godden's story enables the reader to observe how metaphysical language constructs and propagates that ignorance.

The difficulties of navigating the language of the sighted world are described when Ally explains that she has learned to count steps in order to get from one place to another "twice two are four. One-two-three-four, and your foot is on the last step", despite the fact that "you could have gone round by the wall to the stairs, feeling around the hat rack and chest, but you would not do that anymore than you would go up the stairs on your hands and knees" (2, 3). It would appear from this occurrence that not only does the language of the sighted world not cater for Ally's way of expressing herself, but that she must be seen to conform with its rules, even if her way of doing things is more effective.

In *Blindness and Insight* de Man proposes that the idea of free expression within metaphysical language is a fallacy:

We know that our entire social language is an intricate system of rhetorical devices designed to escape from the direct expression of desires that are, in the fullest sense of the term, unnameable— not because they are ethically shameful (for this would make the problem a very simple one), but because unmediated expression is a philosophical impossibility (Blindness 9).

In the sense of de Man's claim, Ally's attempts to hide her own unnatural way of doing things are for the daunting reason that philosophical language can continue to pretend that free expression is a possibility within metaphysical language. Or indeed, that by silencing the desires of the other in favour of nameable quantities, philosophical language hides the idea of its own linguistic impotence. As de Man further remarks, "we know that the individual who chose to ignore this fundamental convention would be slated either for crucifixion, if he were aware, or, if he were naïve, destined to [...] total ridicule" (Blindness 9), a sentiment shared by Godden's story when Ally relates the very real danger of non-conformity: "You feel the stairs behind you with your foot and they are still there but now you are afraid to let go in case you can't step away. It is steep-steep behind you. Suppose you don't move away?" Fearful of doing things her own way and equally fearful of the consequences of getting her blind calculations in the sighted world wrong, Ally becomes stuck in a position of irresolution between the world of the sighted and the world of the other: "Suddenly you can't move away from the stairs. Mother. Mother, but you bite your lips. You must not call out" (Godden 3).

Godden leaves it unclear as to how Ally manages to find her way from the stairs into the toilet, however, the moment when her mother calls upstairs to ask "Ally, are you managing?", provides an insightful moment that resounds in the irony of Deleuze and Guattari's question in *A Thousand Plateaus* "Is it really so sad and dangerous to be fed up with seeing with your eyes...?" (Deleuze 175). Ally is, as 'you' know, not alright, but for want of a language that describes and tolerates freedom of expression, she must say, "Perfectly" (Godden 4).

Writing the Rat Man

Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis (1909) is Freud's record of the patient he named the Rat Man. It is a significant case for a number of reasons, firstly because it is where Freud described and named the mental illness, Obsessional Neurosis, now more commonly referred to as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or O.C.D; it is also where he documented the concept he retrospectively termed 'undoing' in a later work, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926).

O.C.D., which is thought to have derived from the ancient tribal custom of dispelling evil spirits through ritual, is a growing phenomenon which was said to affect about "2.3% of people in 2014" (Goodman 257). In recent years it has seen an increase in reference in popular culture, inspiring many characters in films and television, and has accordingly affected colloquial

language as an adjective, for example, she or he ‘is so O.C.D.’, to denote a person who is insistent on doing things in a certain way. What is interesting about the way Freud describes the psyche and thought processes of patients with O.C.D., is how this modern ‘mental illness’ resembles the point of view of the second-person narrative. Besides the deliberate references to avoiding the cracks in pavements in Perec’s and De La Mer’s novels, the Rat Man’s impossible world-view, which Freud describes for the most part as two conflicting ‘you’ voices, resembles the way in which the plurality of ‘you’ narratives undo traditional metaphysical language. Of further significance is the way in which Freud, as a man of science, seeks a cure by restoring the ‘I’ to his patient and ultimately disavows the ambivalence in his own writings, which betray a different way of reading the Rat Man as a reading of the other. That is to say, what begins as an apparently procedural and standard documentation of a patient, turns into a struggle between conflicting points of view and realities where each attempt by the analyst to restore a stable ‘I’ to the Rat Man’s personalities, divides the character of Freud’s writing until it is unclear if Freud is analyst or merely another character woven into the Rat Man’s story. It is in this sense that like the critic of the second-person novel, Freud observes a subject capable of holding two conflicting world-views simultaneously, but is ultimately unable to shrug off his own metaphysical assumptions in his claim to have cured his patient.

Freud begins his description of Obsessional Neurosis by comparing the condition with hysteria, stating that Obsessional Neurosis is less debilitating than hysteria in that it does not degenerate into fits, however, it is harder to cure because it concerns a “symbolic language that is closer to conscious linguistic processes than is that of hysteria” (The ‘Wolfman’ xviii). This, he illustrates by describing how as a young child the Rat Man’s tendency to derealise his surroundings convinced him that his parents could hear his own thoughts, to the extent that he rationalized he must be speaking them aloud.

On first meeting the Rat Man, Freud describes his patient’s condition as having “disintegrated, so to speak, into three personalities, one unconscious and two pre-conscious [...] between which his conscious mind oscillated”, adding that, “one could easily predict that, if his illness had persisted, it would have consumed his normal personality altogether”. Freud defines the two preconscious personalities further, stating that one is cheerful and one is ascetic and prone to dark moods, adding that this is the same for another female patient he has. Moreover, he states that both preconscious personalities have access to the conscious mind, but that it is the ascetic personality that accesses the part of the unconscious “consisting of ancient wishful impulses, long repressed” (200). That is, while one personality sees a rational and logical idea of the world, the other expresses its unnatural opposite. Freud adds that when the Rat Man is

dominated by his ascetic personality, “he was in thrall to superstition [...], so that he was able to hold two sets of convictions and embody two ways of looking at the world” (199-200).

While in this state of deterioration, Freud relates that “Something that almost always features in the history of those suffering from compulsive disorder is the early appearance and premature repression of the drive to visual experience” (197). Furthermore, he notes that some Obsessional Neurotics display “vivid expression in a dislike of – clocks, which ensure that the time, at least, can be determined”, to the extent that they unconsciously try to “render harmless any instrument that excludes the possibility of doubt” (187).

From the initial summary of his patient it is evident that the Rat Man’s world-view is comparable with the point of view of second-person narrative, one capable of holding two conflicting ideas of the world at once by repressing or deprioritising the visual association with fact and casting doubt on linear time as proof of the metaphysical present. In this regard, it is perhaps no coincidence that like the critic of second-person who vies for unequivocal definition, Freud distances himself from the unnatural viewpoint of his subject.

In *The Uncanny* (Royle’s book), Royle refers to Freud’s tendency in *The Uncanny* (Freud’s book) to distance himself from the uncanny subject, as “Freud’s weird (no-)escape-clause”. ‘Escape’, because it allows Freud to delve into the unscientific, while preserving his reputation in scientific circles, and ‘(no-)escape’, because by declaring himself apart from his subject, he turns himself into “a sort of ghost, a fiction writer who will be concerned with auto-translation, ‘translating [my]self’ into the uncanny” (Royle, *The Uncanny* 17). It is interesting then, that like the critic of the second-person text who disavows ambivalence and concludes with a proclamation of restored ‘I’ness’ and incontrovertible definition, that Freud’s prognosis of the Rat Man’s condition is a loss of the ‘I’.

In the scale of how debilitating the Rat Man’s case is, Freud differentiates a neurosis – something that will not go away without treatment – from a mild disorder – something that does not always need treatment – by informing that a neurosis “sets itself up in opposition to the I [Ich] as if it were a foreign body” [translator’s square brackets] (The ‘Wolfman’ 87). Subsequently, it becomes Freud’s firm endeavor to cure the Rat Man by “bringing the compulsive ideas into temporal connection with the patient’s experiences” (149), in order to reconstruct his personalities as one.

In *Criticism and Crisis*, de Man refutes traditional methods of criticism that have always mistaken change for a crisis, claiming “all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis” (Blindness 8). That is, instead of seeing that interpretation is not a centre of knowledge from which to expand outwardly, but something always in a state of change, traditional criticism reduces new

ways of interpretation that threaten the establishment to a crisis. In this sense, it is interesting to review how Freud describes himself in relation to his profession and his patient in the introduction to the case study.

Freud declares that he is a famous man. He explains that he has to withhold more about the Rat Man's case than he would like because of "The irksome attentions of a city that focuses quite particularly on my activities" (125). It is because of this celebrity status that the Rat Man tells Freud the details of his early sexual feelings, not because he wants to, but because he has come to believe that is what will be expected of him: "When I ask what causes him to put particular emphasis on information about his sexual life he replies that that is what he knows about my theories" (128). Like the critics of second-person mentioned in Chapter One, who seek out established models in the text to form unambiguous definition and overlook the difference of a work narrated entirely as 'you' and one where 'you' is employed for effect, a relationship of counter-transference is established in the Rat Man's foreknowledge that discloses more about the central origin of the approach than the subject of study.

With regard to this position of centrality in the critic, de Man expands on his argument against traditional methods of criticism by pointing out a flaw in Lévi-Strauss advice to anthropologists on how to observe a subject objectively. Where Strauss says that "Prior to making any valid statement about a 'distant society', the observing subject must be as clear as possible about his attitude towards his own", de Man asserts that, "The observation and interpretation of others is always also a means of leading to the observation of the self" (Blindness 9). In this, and the sense of Royle's "auto-translation", Freud's attempts to look into the psyche of the Rat Man merely mirror the standpoint of fixed origin from which Freud embarks on his study, a position which de Man suggests is "the epistemological nature of all interpretation", where, "interpretation is in fact a generalization that expands the range of applicability of a statement to a wider area" (Blindness 29). Accordingly, what Freud achieves when he endeavours to cure his patient by aligning the Ratman's world-view with self-certainty, is simply an expansion of his theories of sexuality to a wider area. This is apparent in Freud's persuasive rhetoric, cleverly contrived to demonstrate the restoration of 'I'ness to the Rat Man, such as the difference of narrative voice between section *A* and section *B* of the study. In *A. Induction into the Treatment*, Freud documents his sessions with the Rat Man in third person, whereas in section, *B. Infantile Sexuality*, there is a noticeable change as Freud switches to relating the case in first-person from the Rat Man's point of view.

In section *A*, Freud draws on Alfred Adler's emphasis of "the particular significance we may attribute to the *very first* things a patient tells us" (The 'Wolfman' 172), to underline that he

has allowed the Rat Man to choose the opening subject to begin the therapy. The beginning he chooses concerns two experiences where the Rat Man comes to mistrust compliments about his person from his close male friends and is entirely forgettable in comparison with what follows in *B. Infantile Sexuality*: “My sexual life began very early. I remember a scene that took place when I was 3 or 4 years old...” (129). This striking opening to *B.* is followed by the firm statement: “I see this as the beginning of my illness. There were people, girls, that I liked the look of and whom I had an urgent wish to see naked” (130-131). Freud’s use of direct quotation to emphasise that this is the Rat Man’s first-hand account adds immediacy and a tone of historical evidence and authority to the account. By contrast, the account from section *A.* is relegated to “A piece of supporting evidence: the patient’s opening words emphasize the influence exercised over him by men”, a statement that brings into question Freud’s earlier emphasis of the importance of beginnings. This piece of supporting evidence, Freud reveals, will “allow us to discern a second motif that will later come to the fore, the conflict between man and woman” (172). The motif, revealed later on in the case, is Freud’s deduction that the Rat Man’s obsessive compulsion comes from a conflict between the wishes of his father for him to marry a rich cousin versus his own desire to wed the poorer woman that he loves.

A second notable device to convince the reader of a cure through the restoration of the ‘I’ is Freud’s changing from ‘you’ to ‘I’ narration after he declares a ‘cure’ in section *G. The Father Complex, and the Rat Idea Solved*. Before section *G*, Freud documents the conflicting commands and compulsions the Rat Man experiences throughout as ‘you’ imperatives. For example, on a particular occasion that he is revising for an examination and his mistress, whose emotional support he requires, is called away to look after a sick relative, the Rat Man experiences a compulsion to kill himself: “what if one were visited by the command to slit one’s throat with a razor blade?”. This is immediately followed by a counter command, “No, it is not as simple as that. You must go there and kill the old woman (150).” Similar employment of ‘you’ is found when Freud documents the Rat Man’s compulsion to pay money to a man, for fear that if he forgets, those he loves will succumb to ‘rat torture’⁹. Freud words this “You must pay back the 3.80 crowns to Lieutenant A.’, words that he found himself speaking half out loud” (135). We learn that after giving the money to another man to pay back Lieutenant A., and hearing the man did not find Lieutenant A., Rat Man is relieved because another man paying back Lieutenant A. would not have met the precise form of the command, “You must pay back the money to

⁹ Freud documents the Rat Man’s description of ‘rat torture’ as following: “The condemned man was tied up – with an upturned pot over his behind, into which rats were then put, which – *bored their way in*” (The ‘Wolfman’ 134).

Lieutenant A” (136). A further example is cited in an account of how the Rat Man doubts his mistress’ love after she shuns him in public, but after she informs him that she was, in fact, defending him from ridicule, Freud notes, it was “as if he had said to himself: ‘After this experience you must never again misunderstand anyone if you want to spare yourself’” (152).

What happens immediately after section *G.* is that the earlier scenarios are recapped to summarise the case, but with the Rat Man referring to himself in first-person instead. The debt to Lieutenant A., worded before on a number of occasions as, “You must pay back” is replaced with three instances where ‘you’ is swapped for ‘I’: “I will pay him back the money” (170), “I will give A. the money back”, and, “I will give the money back to A.” (184). It is as though with the solution of the rat idea, the neurosis is gone and a stable sense of ‘I’ness’ has been restored to the Rat Man’s voice. However, the nature of this conceit is evident in how Freud notes that the Rat Man’s compulsions must follow the precise form of the command, and yet, after the declaration of a cure, Freud confides he is “limited by the recognition that the patient does not know himself how his own compulsive ideas are worded” (180). It would appear then, that the change of ‘you’ to ‘I’ in his patient’s dialogue spoken “half out loud”, is of Freud’s interpretation, despite having the appearance of direct quotation.

It is in this strong rhetoric intended to persuade the reader of his patient’s cure, that Freud betrays his own conflict of ‘undoing’. In *The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau*, de Man suggests that the insight gained from readerly intervention into a critics writing is “gained from a negative movement that animates the critic’s thought [...] that leads his language away from its asserted stand”. In order to observe this ambivalence, de Man proposes the reader look “beyond some of the more categorical assertions and balance them against other much more tentative utterances”, suggesting that contradictions will not form logical oppositions that synthesize neatly like a dialectic or erase each other totally, but that they will lie “hidden within the other as the sun lies hidden within a shadow, or truth within error” (Blindness 102-3).

When considering the structure of *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis*, there is a clear narrative progression from start to middle to ending, the ending being where Freud proclaims the Rat Man cured. Given the narrative structure of Freud’s case study, a contradiction becomes apparent between the idea of the ‘cure’ and Freud’s observations of ‘undoing’ that unwind Freud’s conventional narrative and replaces it with a narrative of beginnings.

The following passage demonstrates the concept of ‘undoing’:

On the day of her departure he caught his foot on a stone lying in the road and had to move it to the edge because the idea came to him that in a few hours her carriage would be passing along the same stretch of road and might perhaps be damaged by this very stone, but a few minutes later it occurred to him that this was nonsense and he had to go back and restore the stone to its original position in the middle of the road. (151-2)

In a kind of love triangle, the Rat Man must choose between his father and his mistress: by moving the stone, he chooses his mistress and displeases his father and by moving the stone back, he kills his mistress and pleases his father. However, a further complication arises when Freud realises some way into the course of therapy “that the father of whom the Rat man spoke with such immediacy and whose welfare so absorbed him had in fact been dead for a number of years” (xxviii-xix). Furthermore, that the mistress concerned had several years prior to the event, refused the Rat Man’s marriage proposal.

From further analyses, Freud deduces that the reason the Rat Man’s father is opposed to his mistress is that he had to make the same choice between the will of his family and his own will to wed a poorer woman, and bowed to his parent’s will to marry a richer woman. This decision gave him the connections to join the army as an officer and in turn led to a scenario where while in the armed forces, the Rat Man’s father owed a sizeable gambling debt for which a friend had had to loan him the money to pay back. Before his father had managed to pay back the friend, he’d lost contact with him, something which cast shame on the family. As a consequence, Freud deduces that the Rat Man has inherited his father’s debt on a virtual level, rationalising that because his father punished him in childhood for masturbating, he has set up the will of his father in opposition to his own sexual desire.

The effect of this virtual inheritance of his father’s debt in conflict with his own desire becomes evident when, while in the army himself, the Rat Man’s spectacles break and he orders a new pair to be received by post. Because he is not present in the post office when the spectacles arrive, we learn that another officer, referred to as Lieutenant A, pays for the postage and that the Rat Man is compelled to pay back the debt. However, things become complicated when the Rat Man learns that it was not in fact Lieutenant A who has paid for the postage, but a woman who works in the post office, and that despite this knowledge, he is still compelled to pay back Lieutenant A. This, Freud reasons, is because paying a debt to a fellow officer meets the criterion of the virtual debt he has inherited from his father. Furthermore, that like the paradoxical situation where he must choose between father and mistress by moving the rock on the road, “He resolved this conflict, which was actually the conflict between his love and the

continuing effect of his father's will, by means of illness, or more precisely: he used his illness to escape the task of resolving it in reality" (158).

This observation of the Rat Man's reluctance to make a decision, is illustrated when Freud relays the importance Obsessional Neurotics attach to beginnings:

When one is attempting to trace the first appearance of a compulsive idea, the patient suffering from obsessive-compulsive neurosis will, in the course of the analysis, have to shift it further and further back and constantly find new 'first occasions' for it (184).

It is this deferment of beginnings in the subject with a conflicting world-view, that like the Rat Man's position of undecidability is exacted by undoing 'you' in the second-person narrative. In the sense that the Rat Man shifts beginnings further and further back, the second-person novel does so, to the extent that traditional Aristotelian narrative structures of beginning, middle and end, are replaced instead with a journey through a series of new beginnings. These beginnings, envisioned by the point of view of 'second sight' fracture the idea of the original beginning into many beginnings, dispersing them further and further into the future and past, and destabilising the idea of 'being' and self-certainty associated with the metaphysical present.

However, like the critic of second-person seeking unequivocal definition, what becomes clear through Freud's demonstration of the Rat Man's deferral of beginnings, is his own greater need to make a singular decision and find a 'real' beginning to the illness. Freud seizes on the doubt in the 'love triangle' between the Rat Man, his Father and his mistress, and by drawing on the final line from Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia¹⁰, "But never doubt that I love", he proclaims, "Whoever doubts his love might, nay, must doubt everything else, however small, as well" (194). It is in with this observation that Freud's quest to restore the 'I' and the 'visual' to his patient becomes inextricably bound up with a restoration of a singular idea of 'love'.

To support his case for a cure by restoring his patient's faith in 'love', Freud refers to another case of Obsessional Neurosis, a female patient who like the Rat Man "is similarly divided into two [preconscious] personalities, one tolerant and cheerful and the other ascetic and inclined to deep gloom" (200). Freud relates a scene described by this patient, where she enters a shop to

¹⁰ Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt that I love.
(Act II, Scene 2) (Shakespeare 63)

buy a comb while waiting for her husband to conduct some business in an antique shop. When her husband returns to find her, Freud describes how on seeing him, “she felt a tormenting sense of doubt as to whether she had not in fact always possessed the comb that she had just bought” (183-184). Like the Rat Man’s case, Freud attributes her uncanny experience to a doubt in love, derived from a suspicion that her husband is having an affair and that when he says he is conducting business in an antique shop, what she really thinks he is doing is visiting his mistress.

What is interesting about Freud’s deduction and diagnosis is how like the weird ‘(no-)escape-clause’ Royle mentions, by distancing himself from the unnatural world-view of the Obsessional Neurotic – the belief in “‘presentiments’ which ‘usually’ come true” (Freud, *The Uncanny* 12), the diminished drive to visual experience, the ability to hold two conflicting ideas at once, and the disassociation of time with the present – Freud invites a reading of his own position of authority in terms of this unnatural point of view. It is this reading of the self as other that highlights how from his position of self-certainty, Freud avoids questioning his own relationship with the unnatural subject, something that leads him to stress a doubt in love, rather than in the word love.

The irony of Hamlet’s love letter to Ophelia is that what starts as a letter professing ‘undying love’, becomes a letter that shows the very doubt it protests to be true, a doubt that leads both Hamlet and Ophelia into madness and premature death. It is this literal reading of Hamlet’s love letter in regard to the centrality of love, ‘I love’, in the restoration of the ‘I’ to the Ratman, that must therefore in terms of the weird ‘(no-)escape-clause’ be read back into Freud’s writing.

Of marked significance is the manner in which Freud attributes the diminishing drive to visual experience to ‘castration complex’ – where the child internalizes the mother as the object of desire under the threat of punishment from the father – but disregards how the loss of visual desire relates to the Rat Man’s abolition of singular meaning. This is evident in Freud’s reading in *The Uncanny* of E.T.A. Hoffman’s *The Sandman*, which demonstrates how Freud aligns sight with love and truth, and the loss of, with the simulacrum.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud relates how Oedipus’ self-blinding is symbolic of this fear of castration, firstly, by claiming that by the law of ‘lex talionis’, the punishment of castration would fit the crime of incest, and secondly, by claiming on “rationalistic grounds” that it is the fear of castration that gives “the idea of losing other organs its intense colouring” (*The Uncanny* 8). It is in this sense that Freud relates the preciousness of the eye to the preciousness of the male genitalia, and subsequent fear of their loss. However, Freud claims this simple contiguity does not account for “the substitutive relation between the eye and the male member which is seen to

exist in dreams and myths and phantasies” (The Uncanny 7), which he subsequently attributes to the ‘castration complex’. So positive is Freud about this connection that he says, “I would not recommend any opponent of the psychoanalytic view to select precisely the story of the Sand-Man upon which to build his case that morbid anxiety about the eyes has nothing to do with the castration complex” (The Uncanny 8). By contrast, I suggest that in a similar manner to the association of the visual, the ‘I’, and singular love as verification of empirical truth and central origin in the Rat Man’s case, what Freud’s reading of Hoffman’s text unwittingly displays is the fallacy of an authoritative reading that claims to be the true reading.

In *The Sandman*, Freud suggests that the protagonist’s father, the lawyer, Coppelius/salesman Coppola, and the physics professor, Spallanzani, all represent the oedipal threat of castration to Nathaniel. In a similar manner to the Rat Man’s father, who owed a gambling debt he could not repay, and whose debt the Rat Man imagines he still owes, there is the implication that Nathaniel’s father has sold his soul to the devil, personified by the lawyer, Coppelius, and that Nathaniel has inherited this debt. This is evident in how Nathaniel describes Coppelius as possessing a “repulsive, diabolical countenance”, and whose monstrous presence causes Nathaniel to doubt what he has just seen: “I seemed to catch a glimpse of human faces lying around without any eyes - but with deep holes instead” (Hoffmann 3).

Like the Obsessional Neurotic, whose personality Freud describes as fragmented and whose drive to visual experience diminishes, Nathaniel undergoes a similar loss of connection between what he sees and temporal affirmation of the facts. In the beginning of *The Sandman*, which relates Nathaniel’s letter to his fiancée Clara’s brother, he writes, “I must use every endeavor to collect myself, and patiently and quietly tell you so much of my early youth as will bring the picture plainly and clearly before your eyes” (Hoffmann 1). The picture that Nathaniel paints, however, is far from plain or clear. Nathaniel’s recounting of his childhood encounters with Coppelius, who his mother refers to as the Sandman, are distorted, leaving the reader unsure as to what has really happened and if they can actually trust Nathaniel’s sanity. This distortion is reflected in his encounter with Coppelius, who Nathaniel says, “was a hideous, spectral monster, who brought with him grief, misery and destruction - temporal and eternal - wherever he appeared” (Hoffmann 3). In this sense, the unstable sequence of events and unreliable narration seem like the effect of the Sandman’s dark magic. Furthermore, we learn that the Sandman punishes by taking the eyes, which Freud suggests is a metaphor for the ‘castration complex’, but what is remarkable about the moment when Coppelius agrees, under the pleas of Nathaniel’s father, not to take Nathaniel’s eyes, is what Coppelius replies: “Well, let the lad have his eyes and do his share of the world’s crying” (Hoffmann 3). This sentiment, I suggest,

presents an alternative reading of *The Sandman* where like the undoing 'you' narrative that moves through metaphysical boundaries, the Sandman becomes the hero of the story, who shows the boy the blindness of a 'sighted world' that attaches truth to the testimony of the eye.

For instance, Nathaniel's 'first love' before he meets the 'living doll' Olympia is his fiancée Clara. After first seeing Olympia, Nathaniel does not immediately experience 'love at first sight' and insists that "with Clara in his heart, the stiff Olympia was perfectly indifferent to him" (Hoffmann 10). However, it is by viewing Olympia through the telescope purchased from the salesman Coppola (who it later transpires is Coppelius 'the Sandman') that he finds his second love:

...as he looked more keenly through the glass, it seemed to him as if moist moonbeams were rising in Olympia's eyes. It was as if the power of seeing were being kindled for the first time; her glances flashed with constantly increasing life (Hoffmann 11).

What Nathaniel observes through the Sandman's eyeglass is a suggestion of what is missing from his traditional love of Clara – inner experience. For we learn that "He sat by Olympia with her hand in his and, in a high state of inspiration, told her his passion, in words which neither he nor Olympia understood" (Hoffmann 13). It is this other love through the eyes of the Sandman, that decentralises the singular idea of 'true love' and leads to the subsequent realisation that what he perceives as real life, is in fact blindness. After the revelation that Olympia is a doll when Nathaniel sees her eyes removed, it is not merely a conventional love he has lost, but like the Rat Man, a loss of belief in the singular idea of true love and ultimately, at the end of *The Sandman*, Nathaniel sees what the Sandman has tried to spare him from. By looking at Clara through Coppola's telescope and also seeing a wooden doll, Nathaniel realises what he has known all along. Far from a monster who seeks to punish, Hoffman's Sandman assumes a role more akin to the philosopher in Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*, revealing to prisoners that their reality is the shadows cast by fire on a prison wall. With this in mind, it is perhaps no coincidence that the two most intense moments of madness and despair in *The Sandman*, when Olympia and Clara are shown to be not what they appear to be, are always followed by the imagery of fire. Firstly, when Nathaniel realises that Olympia is a wooden doll, "Ho - ho - ho - a circle of fire! of fire! [...] Ho, wooden doll - spin round, pretty doll!" and again at the end of the story when he points Coppola's telescope at Clara to reveal a wooden doll, "Spin round, wooden doll! - spin round! [...] 'Circle of fire' spin round! spin round! (Hoffmann 15, 17)" However, what becomes openly contradictory in both Freud's reading of *The Sandman* and his case study of the Rat Man is that he presents the doubt of traditional love, rather than a doubt in the word love, as the reason for

both the Rat Man and Nathaniel's 'disorders'. This is evident in Freud's suggestion that the Sandman interferes with Nathaniel's true love for Clara, and refers to Olympia as Nathaniel's "second object of love", reducing what he calls the "senseless obsessive love for Olympia" (*The Uncanny* 8) to narcissism.

Freud's main argument for the narcissistic nature of Nathaniel's love for Olympia rests on the moment in the story when Spallanzani points out that Olympia's eyes are in fact Nathaniel's, stolen by Coppola. However, this moment in *The Sandman* is arguably as transient and deceptive as any other, and by mirroring the natural in the unnatural, what the love for Olympia also does in Hoffman's story, is caricature the inherent narcissism of the 'sighted' world in its prioritisation of the visual, or, 'love at first sight'. On the one hand, moments such as when Nathaniel declares "To me alone was the love in her glances revealed, and it has pierced my mind and all my thought; only in the love of Olympia do I discover my real self", could be construed as a narcissistic relationship reflected in an inanimate object, however, what follows, "She utters few words, it is true, but these few words appear as genuine hieroglyphics of the inner world, full of love and deep knowledge of the spiritual life, and contemplation of the eternal beyond", betrays a lament for what has been missing in the 'sighted' world: a language that describes Nathaniel's innermost desires. That is, not the narcissistic love Freud suggests, but an escape from the narcissistic nature of a conventional 'love at first sight' that marginalises otherness. In fact, almost as if to pre-empt a reading of narcissism from a position of self-certainty, Hoffman's concluding sentence in the description of Nathaniel's love for Olympia challenges the traditional ('sighted') reader directly: "But you have no sense for all this, and my words are wasted on you" (Hoffmann 14). Even so, despite this apparent concern in Hoffman's tale with 'inner experience' and the marginalised other, it is narcissism that Freud claims has led Nathaniel to "relinquish his real, external object of love", Clara (*The Uncanny* 8).

Freud's case for Clara as Nathaniel's 'real' love hinges on a pseudo happy ending where Nathaniel is resolute in his love for Clara before further trickery from the Sandman causes his death. This reading, I suggest, ignores the meaning in the subsequent revelation – through the Sandman's eyes – that his 'first love' Clara is a wooden doll.¹¹ Where Freud suggests other readings of eye loss in *The Sandman* are "arbitrary and meaningless in the story so long as we deny all connection between fears about the eye and castration" (*The Uncanny* 8), I suggest that

¹¹ It is interesting that Freud leaves out the moment where Nathaniel sees Clara through the telescope, describing the moment as follows: "Clara's attention is drawn to a curious object coming along the street. Nathaniel looks at this thing through Coppola's spyglass, which he finds in his pocket, and falls into a new fit of madness. Shouting out, 'Whirl about, my wooden doll!' he tries to fling the girl into the depths below. (*The Uncanny* 6).

Hoffman's text shows an aversion to the incontestable, such as the singular idea of 'love at first sight' expounded by Freud.

De Man suggests that "to understand something is to realize that one had always known it, but, at the same time, to face the mystery of this hidden knowledge" (Blindness 32). In the context of the connection of self-certainty and singular love in Freud's thinking, it is poignant to reread the beginning of *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis*, section *A. Induction into the Treatment*, in terms of how Freud disavows what the Rat Man actually says first.

Section *A* begins with an account of the Rat Man's doubt in reassurance given to him by a childhood friend over worries of criminal thoughts: "The friend sustains him by reassuring him that he is blameless but has probably been used to examining his life from this point of view since earliest youth" (The 'Wolfman' 129). The second and longer of the two accounts is the story of how when Rat Man is "14 or 15" he is befriended by a nineteen-year-old male student, who does wonders for his self-confidence, making the young Rat Man feel as though he is a genius. Through this, the Rat Man receives "the first great shock of his life", when later this man becomes his private tutor and treats him like "the worst kind of fool" (129). The reason for this, Freud reveals, is that an unseen narrative has progressed below the surface without his knowledge. The older student has deliberately befriended him to gain access to his house because the student wants to court one of his sisters. When the student is rejected, he no longer needs to bestow compliments upon the Rat Man and treats him with contempt.

What this beginning that hid behind the revelation of the Rat Man's sexual awakening in section *B. Infantile Sexuality* displays, is not simply a doubt in love, but a doubt in a singular reading of the present. In this sense, the more apt line from Hamlet's love letter may have been the penultimate line "Doubt truth to be a liar", which places under scrutiny the singular reading of the final line, "Never doubt that I love". De Man suggests, "It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to hide meaning behind a misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile. But it is the distinctive curse of all language, [...] that it is forced to act this way" (Blindness 11), and it is in this regard that Freud's claim of a cure in the Rat Man' is destabilised by a narrative of second sight that haunts his singular rhetoric.

This becomes clear in section *C. The Great Compulsive Fear* when almost in passing Freud reveals that the Rat Man has approached him, not simply for a cure, but for a second reason:

The decision to go to a doctor had been cunningly woven into his delirium as follows. He thought he would ask a doctor to prepare a statement certifying that he needed to perform an act such as he had thought of in connection with Lieutenant A. in order to restore his health, and A.

would undoubtedly allow himself to be persuaded by such a statement to accept the 3.80 crowns from him. [...] chance led him to choose me (The 'Wolfman' 139).

In a twist that resembles Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Red-Headed League* – where a red-headed man is tricked into accepting a job for red-headed men only, in order that robbers can access his house while he is at work – a hidden reading of the Rat Man is revealed. Not merely of a patient seeking out the help of the physician to rid himself of an illness, but of a man who has imagined Freud as a character in his own counter-factual narratives.

In *Unnatural Voices*, Richardson defines 'denarration' as "a kind of narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that had earlier been presented as given. The simplest example of this might be something like, 'Yesterday it was raining. Yesterday it was not raining'" (87). In this sense, the revelation that Freud has more than one conflicting meaning to the Rat Man, where on the one hand he is a famous physician with theories of infantile sexuality who can cure him, but on the other he is just a doctor who can prescribe a note that allows him to pay back the (fictional) debt to Lieutenant A, denarrates what was presented as given. Consequently, by overlooking the unnatural in the Rat Man's world-view and by making prognoses and diagnoses based on the centrality of the 'I' and visual stimuli, Freud opens himself up to the very 'auto-translation' into 'undoing' observed in the Rat Man.

With regard to the fallacy of the 'objective observer', de Man suggests that when the observer is observed, every observation made of the other positions a change in the other, which in turn positions a change in the self, so that "as the oscillation gains in intensity and in truth, it becomes less and less clear who is in fact doing the observing and who is being observed." The consequences of this vertiginous situation, de Man suggests, destabilise all centres of origin so that there is no longer any ontological hierarchy or position of the 'ideal observer' from which to analyse the subject. De Man asks the reader to consider the seriousness of this consequence if related to psychoanalysis, where, "consequently the highly embarrassing question arises, who should be paying whom?". It is in the sense of this destabilising of central origin in Freud's analysis – Who is observing who? – that I suggest the ending of Freud's case study undoes all previous readings of the centrality of 'I'ness', to see Freud and the Rat Man, as de Man says, "fuse into a single subject as the original distance between them disappears" (Blindness 10). Consequently, in the case of the Rat Man, Freud's 'I' is never simply 'I' and must be undone by the unnatural reading.

Richardson expands on his definition of 'denarration' by explaining that "The effect of this unusual strategy is variable: it can play a relatively minor role in the overall text, or it can

fundamentally alter the nature and reception of the story”, referring to Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* as an example of how the strategy of denarration can alter the whole story. Significantly, *Atonement* concerns a narrative where we are led to believe for the greater part of the book that one of the central characters, a soldier, has survived the Second World War. The moment of denarration happens when we realise that the soldier has actually died in the war and that due to guilt over this death on the part of the narrator, she has written the story of the soldier’s life as a fiction where he lives happily ever after. Richardson adds that “The effect it [denarration] produces is nearly always arresting, and to many readers it can be quite disconcerting” (87) and it is in this haunting manner that the Rat Man’s story witnesses its final undoing.

In the introduction to the case study Freud states that “the year-long treatment [...] brought about the complete restoration of the patient’s personality and the lifting of inhibitions” (The ‘Wolfman’ 125), however, in 1923 he made a late addition to the case study, informing: “The patient, who had recovered his psychic health as a result of the analysis described here, was – like so many other promising and estimable young men – killed in the Great War”¹² (200).

Instead of a traditional narrative that ends with a singular conclusion, *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis* becomes, like the narrative of ‘undoing you’, a narrative of counter-factual invention. In Freud’s prognosis of the Rat Man’s doubt in love, and subsequent claim to have restored the ‘I’ to Rat Man’s personality, Freud merges with the Rat Man’s world-view. That is, the coincidence of his patient’s death happening so soon after the cure undoes all claims concerning the ‘I’ as cure in that it is forever haunted by a counter claim that asks, what if he was not?

Through a study of narratives and works that showed a connection between the loss of sight and a plurality of meaning, Chapter Two demonstrated the difference between a work of first-person that decentralises boundaries through a figurative questioning of the narrative ‘I’, and the second-person ‘undoing’ narrative that always places the question of distance between the self and other under scrutiny. Furthermore, I showed how by creating a point of view of ‘second sight’ akin to the ‘magical binoculars’ that close together to view conflicting worlds simultaneously, second-person narrative exposes the fallacy of metaphysical language’s claim to be a language of free expression.

This thinking was extended through an oblique reading of Freud’s *Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis* in order to exemplify the concept of ‘undoing’, tracing some of the

¹² It is significant to note that very little is known about the actual identity of the Rat Man. Some sources suggest he was a lawyer named Ernst Lanzer, and others, such as Alan Bass, insist he was a man named Paul Lorenz.

similarities between Freud's writing of 'the Rat Man' and the plurality of the second-person narrative where the ultimate cohabiting of Freud as a man of science with the Rat Man's multifarious world-view, suggests a narrative strategy of 'undoing' for the second-person novel. As my thesis contends, it is the approach to the second-person novel and other 'you' narratives from the central origin of 'I', that overlooks that 'you' is never just 'you'. What I demonstrated by following a trail of 'blindness and insight' through Freud's case study, as well as highlighting the privileging of 'love' as an irreducible entity in Freud's reading of *The Sandman*, is the tendency to approach the second-person narrative from a distance of 'I' to 'you', that privileges metaphysical presence over a writing of the other.

***Chapter Three. Echographies of ‘the now’: Exposing the blind spots in
Bright Lights, Big City and 1984***

Chapter Three builds on the ideas of ‘self-deconstruction’ and the plurality of ‘you’ in Chapter One, as well as the ideas of ‘self-blinding’ and ‘second sight’ in chapter two, to illustrate the cultural and political effects of modernity that have influenced the second-person novel. Where my first chapter demonstrated how the second-person has been employed to challenge the borderlines of conventional thinking, and my second chapter suggested an approach to thinking about the reading and writing of the second-person novel as a process of ‘blindness and second sight’, my third chapter suggests a way in which the second-person novel is uniquely suited to critique the teletechnological present.

The need for speed

In *The Art of Fiction* (1884), Henry James’ asserts that “The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it *does* compete with life” (389). This assertion conjures the image of a race between the novel and modernity. James elaborates on his statement by noting a cultural prejudice against the novel form: “It is still expected [...] that a production which is after all only a ‘make believe’ (for what else is a ‘story’?) shall be in some degree apologetic—shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to compete with life” (388). Through the use of quotation marks to highlight “make believe” and “story”, together with the bracketed question, “(for what else is a ‘story’?)”, James draws attention to the repudiation of the novelist in relation to other disciplines, such as the historian, who James remarks, “is allowed to compete with life”, and “is not [...] expected to apologize”. James concludes by stating that the novelist “must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian” (389).

In 1948, two significant things happened which I suggest had a profound influence on the emergence of the second-person novel in relation to Henry James’ claim. Television had become a household item, broadcasting the summer Olympic Games in London to an enraptured nation, and in December of that same year, Orwell finished writing his final novel, *1984*, before its publishing in June 1949. The infamous quote from Orwell’s novel, “BIG

BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU” (3), reflected Orwell’s despair of post-war politics and projected this into an imaginary future which happened to be the year that McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* was published.

In the afterword to the novel *Quilt* (2011), entitled, *Reality Literature*, Nicholas Royle echoes James’ call to arms. However, where James stated that the only reason for the novel to exist was to compete with life, Royle’s insistence is that the novel must compete with the ‘live’: “the novel is a key to the experience and value of speed, and to a critical understanding of those forms of teletechnology in comparison with which it can seem like such a tortoise” (*Quilt* 155). This, I suggest, is the message of McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, the final line of which reads “You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again” (174), an ending which bears a striking resemblance to the moment in *1984* when Orwell’s protagonist, Winston Smith, decides “He would have to start all over again. It might take years” (293). Smith is referring to the creation of a “blind spot” (291) to prevent his innermost feelings from being discovered: “if you want to keep a secret you must also hide it from yourself. You must know all the while that it is there, but until it is needed you must never let it emerge into your consciousness in any shape that could be given a name” (294). ‘Blind spots’, Smith says, are “automatic, instinctive” (291) ways to prevent thoughts emerging from the unconscious that could give him away as committing thought crime and result in his execution. For we are informed that the scientists of *1984* are “a mixture of psychologist and inquisitor, studying with extraordinary minuteness the meaning of facial expressions, gestures and tones of voice and testing the truth-producing effects of drugs, shock therapy, hypnosis and physical torture” (201-202). The more frightening aspect for Smith is that it is not just the scrutiny of his fellow workers of the Party he must worry about, but that these indications of thought crime can be detected by the telescreen: “It was terribly dangerous to let your thoughts wander when you were in any public place or within range of a telescreen. The smallest thing could give you away” (65).

Like Winston Smith, who works for the Ministry of Truth whose task it is to delete the identities of convicted thought criminals by meticulously removing the fact of their existence from history and the media, Jamie Conway of *Bright Lights, Big City* works in The Department of Factual Verification for a prestigious New York magazine. However, where Smith consigns people to non-existence, Conway assigns them to absolute presence by checking that the writers who work there have gotten their facts right before a final edit by the company director: “Names are named. You must find out if these names belong to real people and, if so, how they are spelled” (McInerney 58). As Conway, ‘you’ learn that the magazine is run by a company director nicknamed ‘the Druid’, that the Druid oversees and always applies a final edit to ‘your’ work and

that like the interrogator, O'Brien, who Winston Smith initially believes he can trust because "He had a trick of re-settling his spectacles on his nose which was curiously disarming" (Orwell 12), the Druid is "famously near-sighted". Because of his fear of short-sightedness, 'you' are informed, "most references to myopia are edited out" (McInerney 24). In this manner, it would seem that facts and their association with clear vision are everything, for it becomes apparent that "If an error slips into the magazine, it is one of you, and not the writer, who will be crucified" (16). It is ultimately the failure to verify the facts that loses Conway his job, and in a similar manner to *1984* where people simply cease to exist, at the media company people do not get fired, they are simply not seen again. Conway remarks how "the magazine has a tradition of never acknowledging its mistakes. The folk history of the place has it that no one has ever been fired" (13). Even though this is early Eighties New York, the reader is left with the strange feeling that in the style of the Ministry of Truth, employees have simply been erased from history. As if to confirm this, Conway informs us that employees who fail are relocated to somewhere else in the building where they are never seen, illustrated through the metaphor of being shipped off to "a branch of the family business in a distant, malarial colony" (14).

While in captivity for 'thoughtcrime', Winston Smith is informed by his interrogator O'Brien of the method used by the Party to control the masses: "The command of the old despotisms was 'Thou shalt not'. The command of the totalitarians was 'Thou shalt'. Our command is 'Thou art'" (Orwell 267). It is this assertion of control by the Party through the association of the 'live' voice with truth that reveals itself in the Party slogan, "Who controls the past, [...] controls the future: who controls the present controls the past" (37). With this in mind, it might seem that the way that the Party actually controls the masses, is simply by imposing their will on the present by use of the repeated hypnotic imperative, 'thou art', or, 'you are'. This is indicative in Smith's description of the telescreen, "The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely" (4), which conjures the idea that a person is being conditioned even when they are not aware of it.

In the essay, *Artifactualities*, Derrida develops the neologism, 'artifactuality', which he defines as how "actuality is, precisely made" (Echographies 3). Derrida warns how actuality, by means of the association of truth with the 'live' voice of the media, is capable of transforming public spaces and political opinion at a very fast rate. He exclaims that each broadcasted moment is "calculated, constrained, 'formatted,' 'initialized' by media apparatus", adding that, "What is invisible, illegible, inaudible on the largest screen can be active and effective, immediately or in the long run" (7). The speed that public spaces and opinions are transformed is evident in *1984* when Smith observes the blind acceptance of one of his fellow party members to hearing the

news that Big Brother has raised the chocolate ration to twenty grammes, after only twenty-four hours earlier it was announced that Big Brother had reduced the ration to twenty grammes: “The eyeless creature at the other table swallowed it fanatically, passionately, with a furious desire to track down, denounce and vaporize anyone who should suggest that last week the ration had been thirty grammes” (Orwell 62).

This manipulation of the ‘live’ voice by the media becomes apparent *In Bright Lights, Big City*, when Conway enters a bar where he initially believes “no one has anything on his mind except drinking and sports”. Like the pubs in *1984*, where the proles argue endlessly over the lottery, organised by the Ministry of Plenty, where “the prizes were largely imaginary” (Orwell 89), there is the implication that with the aid of drink, the “big video screen at the far end of the long wooden bar” (McInerney 80) has emptied the minds of its viewers. However, Conway soon realises he is mistaken when he is accosted by a man sitting next to him who comments on the game of basketball they are watching and “seems to expect a response”. When Conway provides an uneducated reply by asking the man how far through the game they are, the man “looks you up and down, as if you were carrying a volume of poetry or wearing funny shoes”. Conway is shown to be at a loss, not just in a sense of having a lack of interest in, or knowledge of sport, but in that he is “locked out of the largest fraternity in the country”. The reason for this, Conway explains, is because while he was at school he took up “lone-wolf” sports like tennis and avoided team sports, something that has made him ignorant of “the sports metaphors in the political columns”, and consequently prone to the fact that “Men don’t trust a man who missed the Super Bowl” (81).

Contrary to Conway’s first impressions of the bar, it becomes apparent that the watchers of the big screen in early Eighties New York do in fact have something on their minds as opposed to just drinking and sport. It is this fraternity formed by the media that Derrida refers to when he suggests: “The silence of those who read the papers, listen to or watch the radio and television news programs [...] is not really as silent as it seems in those places where precisely these papers and programs seem or become deaf – or deafen – to everything that does not speak according to their law” (Echographies 7). In this sense, the down-to-earth sports bar where Conway had hoped to relax and empty his mind, adopts a more tyrannical figure. In a similar vein to Winston Smith’s learning how to create ‘blind spots’ to survive, Conway decides he must learn to recognise these silent metaphors so that he can be “the kind of guy who can walk into a bar or an eatery and break the ice with a Runyonism about the stupidity of a certain mid-season trade. Have something to hash out with truck drivers and stockbrokers alike” (McInerney 81). It

is this need to hide otherness that leads Derrida to observe that “In the news, ‘actuality’ is spontaneously ethnocentric. It excludes the foreigner” (Echographies 4).

In *1984*, the methodology of this persecution of the other is related by O’Brien when he informs Smith, “You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves” (Orwell 269). The implication is that after the thought criminals have been broken down, that they are re-educated by the ‘you’ imperatives from the telescreen, and filled with the metaphors of party propaganda. In turn, this allows for the very ethnocentrism that Derrida’s warns against, in the manner that the Party are able to rapidly change alliances and declare war on other countries without question: “The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago” (37). This manipulation that enables the exclusion of the other is further made evident in the association of the ‘proles’ and animals. After O’Brien has beaten Smith into submission, both mentally and physically, he asks Smith if he has anything left to say to defend his idea that humanity will win over in the end. When the demoralised Smith does not answer, O’Brien asks him if he has reverted to his idea that the proles will overthrow the Party, telling him, “Put it out of your mind. They are helpless, like the animals. Humanity is the Party. The others are outside” (282). This association of the proles and animals in Orwell’s world is made explicit with Party slogans such as “Proles and animals are free” (75). In the biographical film *Derrida*, Derrida says that “To put all living things that aren’t human into one category is, first of all, a stupid gesture – theoretically ridiculous – and partakes in the very real violence that humans exercise towards animals. That leads to slaughterhouse” (Ziering). In this sense, by grouping the proles and animals, the proles in *1984* can be manipulated at will without political conscience.

It is in view of the danger of the speed of the ‘live’ voice that Derrida suggests a new critical attention. In the sense of the shift from competing with ‘life’ to competing with the ‘live’ in the time between James and Royle, Derrida draws on Hegel’s reminder to the philosophers of his day to read the daily newspapers, to prevail upon the thinker of the time of teletechnology to not merely read the papers, but to think about how those newspapers are constructed. Derrida insists that the critic of the ‘live’ “must ask to see things from the other side, from the side of the press agencies as well as from that of the teleprompter”, because he says, “when the journalist or politician seems to be speaking to us, in our homes, while looking us straight in the eye, he (or she) is in the process of reading, on screen, at the dictation of a ‘prompter,’ a text composed somewhere else, at some other time”.

To begin with, Derrida draws attention to the double-bind in the word ‘must’, stating, “We must develop a critical culture, a kind of education, but I would never say ‘we must’”

(Echographies 4). That is, by insisting that the addressee ‘must’ critique the presence of ‘the now’, the addressee must obey a command and lose a freedom. However, as Derrida points out, we (the critic of the ‘live’) must act to prevent the tyrannical control of the ‘now’, so if we have to act within the binds of singular language in order to communicate this urgency, we should show an awareness of this double bind.

It is in the sense of an awareness to the manufacture and dangers of the ‘now’ that the second-person novel provides a unique counter critical point of view. Through the narrative strategy of ‘undoing’, second-person narrative puts all language under scrutiny by highlighting the fallacy of singular presence. This is evident in how the ‘actual’ is gradually but persistently destabilised in *Bright Lights, Big City*.

Recently divorced from his supermodel wife, the first chapter of *Bright Lights, Big City* finds ‘you’ in a night club, suffering a crisis of identity. McInerney shows this by repeatedly denarrating singular presence by what you are ‘not’, something that is evident when Conway informs, “Your presence here is only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits, reminding yourself of what you aren’t” (3). The idea of ‘your’ presence is further destabilized by temporal and spatial distortion caused by the effects of drugs: “The night has already turned on that imperceptible pivot where two A.M. changes to six A.M.” (1). Moreover, there is also the knowledge that “You are leaning back against a post that may or may not be structural with regard to the building, but which feels essential to your own maintenance of an upright position” (2), which reflects Conway’s resistance to and dependence upon the language of 1980s Manhattan to identify himself. This conflict is conveyed in how Conway envisions himself, compared to what he has become: “You see yourself as the kind of guy who wakes up early on Sunday morning and steps out to cop the Times and croissants. Who might take a cue from the Arts and Leisure section and decide to check out an exhibition” (3-4); “You see yourself as the kind of guy who appreciates a quiet night at home with a good book” (34). This idea of an ideal self, however, is somehow always beyond Conway’s reach, his only hope in the opening chapter being that “All might come clear if you could just slip into the bathroom and do a little more Bolivian Marching Powder”. Through the repeated metaphors of sight and their association with clarity, it might seem that the problem for Jamie Conway is all a matter of clear vision, however, McInerney’s narrative allows for no such single reading. “All might come clear” is immediately undone by the following sentence: “Then again, it might not” (1).

In view of this narrative undoing of singular language found in McInerney’s and other second-person novels – where ‘you’ are always deferred to a writing of the other – it could be argued that in its critique of the actual, every action is irresolvable and every question asked,

open to the paradoxical nature of the undecidable. In response to accusations that deconstruction leads to a void for fascism to fill, Paul Fry claims “undecidability is a perpetually vigilant scrutiny of all opinion as such, precisely in order to withstand and to resist those most egregious and incorrigible opinions of all: the opinions of fanaticism and tyranny” (142). It is in this sense that the plurality of the second-person narrative does not simply leave a question unresolved, but shows that there is always a further way of interpreting the text beyond the singular association of truth with the metaphysical present.

To demonstrate the idea of a 1980s society that is blind to the manipulation of the media and press on the ‘now’, McInerney creates the Coma Baby. Conway informs that the story of the unborn baby whose pregnant mother is in a coma, is the most sensationalized item of news in the New York Post: “The question that has confronted Post readers for days is whether or not the Coma Baby will ever see the light of the delivery room” (10-11). As Conway’s story is revealed, so is the story of the Coma Baby, until the two begin to merge when the Coma Baby starts to affect Conway’s dreams:

Inside you can see the Coma Baby. He opens his eyes and looks at you.

“What do you want?” he says.

“Are you going to come out,” you ask.

“No way, José. I like it in here. Everything I need is pumped in.”

“But Mom’s on her way out.”

“If the old lady goes, I’m going with her.” (51)

As the sleeping Conway tries to persuade the Coma Baby to be born, it starts to become apparent that ‘you’ have been living under the illusion that ‘you’ are awake, when in fact, your life is ruled by the hypnotic effects of the ‘live’ voice of the media, aided by the pacifying effects of drugs. It is in the sense of the danger of the seductive nature or the ‘live’ voice that Derrida adds a second precautionary measure to the criticism of the actual: “How to proceed without denying ourselves these new resources of live television [...] while continuing to remind people and to demonstrate that the ‘live’ and ‘real time’ are never pure” (Echographies 5). That is to say, how do you critique the seducer without being seduced?

McInerney’s narrative does this, I contend, by way of combining the ‘you’ with the present tense to derealise the singular truth associated with ‘the now’ and ‘real time’. It is this critical appreciation of the power of the media to control the present, combined with the dry satirical commentary of 1980s Manhattan, that I suggest has made *Bright Lights, Big City* the most

accomplished of second-person novels. It is also the reason that beginning with Hawthorne, most second-person narratives have employed the present tense.

In *The Fierce Fight Over the Present Tense*, Laura Miller remarks, “Ask the average, literate person to name a novel written in the present tense and chances are they’ll come up with ‘Bright Lights, Big City’” (Miller). Miller does not claim that the use of present tense is by any means a new thing, but draws attention to a large increase in the employment of present tense in U.S. Creative Writing classes from the 1980s onwards and attributes this to the success of McInerney’s novel. It is an increase that has angered many writers and critics, such as Philip Pullman and Philip Hencher who remarked: “What was once a rare, interesting effect is starting to become utterly conventional. Some of the novels on the Booker [Prize] longlist just seemed to be following fashion blindly” (Roberts).

In *About Time*, Mark Currie suggests the irony of a society that lives in the present while rejecting its very existence: “The present, as philosophy knows well, doesn’t exist, and yet it is the only thing which exists”. Currie elaborates on this contradiction by explaining that the present “can be divided into the bits of it that have been, and so are not, and the bits of it that are to be, and so are not yet, so that the very duration of its existence consigns it to nonexistence”. This state of the what has been and what will be that amounts to the ‘not’ leads to a situation where “the analytical framework of tense acquires a metaphysical importance” and consequently, metaphysical thinking imposes the ‘is’ on the non-existent present. The resulting impact on the novel, Currie maintains, is that “the notion of the present is divided between the thing reflected upon and the apparent modernity of the reflection” (Currie 8).

It is in this sense that Derrida’s concerns about the thinker who writes about the voice of the actual from within a language of actuality are warranted. However, it is precisely this usurping of the absent by the ‘live’ voice that second-person narrative highlights through the self-knowledge that proclaiming what ‘you are’, always also proclaims what ‘you are not’. That is, writing as ‘you’ demonstrates that while you cannot avoid the hypnotic seductions of the ‘live’ entirely, through the deferral of the singular voice to the plurality of narrative ‘you’, you are aware of this seduction.

This awareness to the seduction of the ‘live’ brought about by the self-critical point of view of ‘you’ becomes apparent in *Bright Lights, Big City* when Conway begins to remember the parts of his life that he has repressed. In a timely manner, as Conway awakens to this realization, it is announced in the New York Post that the Coma Baby will live:

There's a Fiery Nightmare on page three—an apartment blaze in Queens; and on page four a Killer Tornado that ravaged Nebraska. In the heartland of the country, carnage is usually the result of acts of God. In the city it's man-made—arson, rape, murder. Anything that goes wrong in other parts of the world can usually be attributed to the brutishness of foreigners. It's a nice, simple world view. The Coma Baby is buried on page five. No developments: "COMA BABY LIVES." The doctors are considering a premature Caesarean delivery. (54)

Derrida's third caution in the critique of the 'live' warns of the danger of 'neo-idealism' and believing the "delusion of the delusion" (Echographies 6). That being, where the reader becomes so convinced of the fabrication of actuality that all events by the media are ascribed the value of simulacra. This denial, or alibi for artifactuality by way of a hyperreal chain of signification, is seen in the way Conway skips past the fires, tornados, rape, arson, and murder, noting how the media blame anything that goes wrong on foreigners, to find the Coma Baby.

The Coma Baby, Conway relates, is 'buried' on page five, something that points to how Conway too has been buried beneath a superficial lifestyle that inhibits otherness. However, everything changes after the final Coma Baby article which announces that "Coma Baby was delivered six weeks premature in an emergency Caesarean and that Coma Mom is dead" (141). With the announcement of the mother's death, Conway realises what his self-delusion has caused him to forget. The strange man whose repetitive phone calls Conway ignores, and who he runs away from when he sees him in the street, turns out to be his brother, who has come to tell him it is the anniversary of the death of his mother. Like the Coma Baby, who in Conway's dreams ignores the situation of his predicament, Conway realizes that he has hidden the guilt he feels over his mother's premature death by cancer behind a shallow obsession with getting back together with his supermodel ex-wife.

This realisation leads Conway to make a striking observation. During a phone call to Vicky, who in her questioning of 'inner experience' in relation to Nagel's 'bat' provides an antithesis to the supermodel ex-wife, Conway confides that his repression of the memory of his mother has made him realise "we have a responsibility to the dead—the living, I mean" (172). It is in this sense of a responsibility to the dead, or absent other, that *Bright Lights, Big City* responds to James, Royle, and Derrida, by slowing down the faster and more seductive incarnations of teletechnology, to imagine new ways in which the novel can move and adapt to critique a singular language that would declare its death by pronouncing it a thing of 'make believe'.

My third chapter took the ideas from Chapter One that established the idea of the second-person as a narrative that defies singular definition, and the ideas of 'blindness and second sight'

in Chapter Two, to show how the second person novel has emerged alongside, and as a consequence of, teletechnological modernity. By drawing a comparison of the warning in Orwell's *1984* about the effects of the televisual culture with Derrida's urge for the modern thinker to provide a counter commentary to the 'live' voice, I illustrated how the second-person novel provides a unique way of scrutinising the fabrication of the actual through a strategy of undoing the singular present with 'you'. This, in turn, reinforced my observation in the introduction that the second-person destabilises claims that the novel is dead by highlighting the absence of the other through the instability inherent in the present tense when undone by the plurality of the 'you' narrative.

Conclusion

In keeping with my initial aims and argument, my Creative and Critical thesis has presented an original way of thinking about and approaching the second-person novel by placing ideas of ‘undoing’ in dialogue with narrative ‘you’. By demonstrating that in the second-person narrative ‘you’ can never conclusively point to a singular category or reading, I have suggested that while pursuing a narrative definition of second-person texts, the critic should always give consideration to the plurality of narrative ‘you’. In the same regard, by insisting that ‘you’ is never simply ‘you’, and by illustrating a different history of the second-person through ideas of ‘undoing’, I have contributed to the field of Creative and Critical Writing by providing a fresh way of approaching and thinking about the second-person novel. Furthermore, by differentiating the text written entirely in the second-person from the text that employs second-person for effect, as well as distinguishing the novel form from shorter works, I have highlighted the importance of the second-person novel in its own right to literary theory and narrative studies.

In Chapter One, I focused on what my research had shown was a lack of attention to the second-person novel, caused by a preoccupation amongst theorists with finding an uncontested definition of second-person to act as a basis for future research. Due to the relative modernity of the second-person novel and consequent lack of publications, I showed that this approach results in a regressive methodology that attempts to apply models and categorisations to a broader range of second-person works, and consequently ignores the difference between the second-person novel and the novel that employs second-person for effect, as well as the difference between the second-person novel and the second-person short story. This, I posit, is the main reason that the novels of O’Brien, Perec, Fuentes, Robbins, and Butlin are read primarily as novels that happen to employ the second-person, rather than considering what these writers achieve by writing their novels entirely in second-person.

It was with regard to showing this difference that I demonstrated a different way of thinking about the ‘you’ narrative. Firstly, in terms of Nicholas Royle’s ‘creative and critical’ subversion of the traditional essay form through the employment of narrative ‘you’, and secondly, by reading a number of texts that employed narrative ‘you’ in dialogue with de Man’s thinking of self-deconstruction, to show how the plurality of ‘you’ at the level of the sentence is conveyed by denarration and figurative device on the part of the writer. Through this, I showed that far from being naturalistic, the text narrated entirely as ‘you’ creates an unnatural narrative that is always open to a further reading, despite the claims of authoritative readings from

positions of central origin. In turn, this led to my assertion that in the state of ‘undoing’ the narrative ‘you’ becomes a kind of ‘hero of the story’ that transcends metaphysical boundaries in order to destabilise the singular present. This I demonstrated specifically by illustrating the employment of ‘you’ in Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, to denote the split between the protagonist and his imaginary double, who combine through the ‘you’ voice, but also throughout the other texts mentioned in my thesis, where the ‘undoing you’ narrative contests all narrative centrality.

Following these observations of the second-person narrative, the final part of my first chapter showed that in the sense that ‘you’ is always undone by the other, the freedom it incites by breaking with convention is also subject to its opposite, the hypnotic and imperative side of ‘you’. In the sense of how Pynchon suggests that double-think presented a dilemma to Orwell, where the freedom to contest fixed histories is also the ability to erase them totally, I demonstrated how the second-person narrative moves through a position of narrating and denarrating its own freedom, to mark the points at which language fails to be free of its own programming.

In Chapter Two, I expanded on the ways in which Chapter One showed how the ‘undoing’ narrative destabilises single meaning, by introducing the idea of ‘self-blinding’ and ‘second sight’. By outlining a history of texts, from Sophocles to the present that are concerned with decentralising the affirmation of fact through sight, I showed how the removing of the ‘I’s from a text creates a self-critical point of view – like the ‘magical binoculars’ mentioned by Royle – that observes two conflicting world-views at the same time. Moreover, by observing the difference between the first-person short story *Cathedral* that chronicles a fallacious association of truth with sight by a ‘sighted’ narrator, and a second-person short story, *You Need to go Upstairs*, that places ‘you’ directly in the point of view of a blind person to do so, I was able to show how ‘you’ – by its inability to be just one – removes visual affirmation from the narrative and proceeds through a point of view of ‘second sight’. Furthermore, in the comparison of Carver’s and Godden’s stories, I was able to show that what appeared as a smooth dialectical relationship between a blind man and a sighted man in *Cathedral*, where the viewpoint of the sighted man and the viewpoint of the blind man gradually converge in synthesis, was a relationship of ‘undoing’ in Godden’s story, where Alice is forced to hide her way of doing things, so that although truly incapable, traditional metaphysical language may continue to adopt the appearance of being a language of ‘free expression’.

The second part of Chapter Two introduced the second key idea of ‘undoing’ into my thesis. Through an oblique reading of Freud’s case study of the Rat Man in terms of de Man’s ideas in *Blindness and Insight*, I established a dialogue between Freud’s text and the second-person

novel, as well as drawing a comparison between how Freud and the critic of second-person approach the unnatural from a point of singular origin. An important reason for this, I determined, was a shared empirical approach where despite ambivalence towards the unnatural subject of their writings, both Freud and the critics of second-person distance themselves from the subject by seeking to restore the singular affirmation of 'I'ness' to the text. Through Paul de Man's destabilising of the objective position of the observer, and a close reading of Freud's association of the removal of the eyes with the loss of 'true love' in *The Uncanny*, I demonstrated how 'you' narrative moves through a point of view of 'second sight', which like Hoffman's short story *The Sandman*, shows the fallacy of the singular association of the eyes with truth. Towards the end of Chapter Two, I introduced Richardson's ideas of 'denarration' to illustrate how Freud's declaration of a cure, combined with the Rat Man's death soon afterwards, introduce a state of doubt that like the second-person novel, denarrates all notions of the singular authoritative reading. In turn, this denarration, or continual undoing of the present, supported my secondary argument that the second-person novel moves through a narrative structure of beginnings that forever decentralise attempts by singular language to occupy the present.

Chapter Three drew on the idea of a 'you' that can never be just 'you', as well as the ideas of 'self-blinding' and second sight, to exhibit how the second-person novel is uniquely suitable for criticising the teletechnological future. Through a close reading of the undoing 'you' narrative in *Bright Lights, Big City* in dialogue with Orwell's *1984*, I revealed that by slowing down the text to observe the 'blind spots' in the fast and seductive idea of the 'now', the second-person novel heeds James' call for the novel to compete with life and Royle's and Derrida's call for a critical response to the uncontested association of truth with the 'live' voice of the media and teletechnological culture.

It is by illustrating the narrative strategy of 'undoing you' in my novel and critical thesis, a strategy which contests all singular claims of language and evokes a writing of the absent other, that I have demonstrated a contribution to knowledge by proposing a new way of thinking about and writing the second-person novel.

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Appendix

Personal Email From Jay McInerney

Dear Kristian,

Please see Mr. McInerney's response to your inquiry below. Best of luck with your thesis!

All the best,

Beverly Burris

Assistant to Jay McInerney

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From: JAY MCINERNEY

Sent: Monday, December 07, 2015 9:49 AM

To: beverly@mazzpr.com

Subject: Re: PhD Student of 'second-person' lit: a brief question for Mr McInerney

Dear Kristian

To tell you the truth I don't think there was any influence, although the unconscious has its own agenda, so I suppose it's possible. In that scene I think I was just thinking of the Catholic sacrificial aspects of an exchange of bread and rebirth that is presumably available to sinners after a confession of sin. I'm honored to be part of your dissertation. Hope it goes well.

best

Jay McInerney

The Cutting Block

A True Story About the Love of Hair

A novel by Kristian White

“Hair is another name for sex.” Vidal Sassoon

CUT

There you are. Stuck in the glass like an exhibit of a guy you know is you but you don't recognise. Staring back from brooding eyes you tell them you get from your Italian mother but it's a lie. With sliced-out blue-black locks and post-ironic facial hair that flows with the fashions but you're no follower. No, you're one of a kind. All decked up in a suit by Gaultier, the suit with the leather corsetesque lacing and slim fit trousers you wear with a loose fitting silk tie and Parigi Horsebit driver shoes by Ferragamo. Just look at you, a sight to behold and it's true, you are one of the best. At times you are unstoppable, as good as any of the household names on product ranges that line the shelves in high street stores. But in spite of all your efforts and no matter how brilliant your haircuts are and how much your clients said they love you, no one will remember you. No one will say, it was Stretch that did that. And why?

You've never slowed down enough, stood still for long enough to see what was staring you in the face. You have no name and without a name you are nothing because no one remembers the good cuts, the great cuts, the fantastic, the creative genius and outright works of brilliance. But everyone remembers the bad cuts, the screw-ups, the running late, the no-shows and the getting fired when you're too coked-up and messed-up and broken-down to bother anymore. It's the fuck-ups they remember and that's all they remember. YOU'RE ONLY AS GOOD AS YOUR LAST CUT, that's what they say and the only way to survive in here is to just keep moving forward. So that's what you do. You live each day in the mirror, one fast cut at a time, for as long as you can remember till happily-ever-after and if you carried a warning tag stitched into the lining of that fake suit, fitted and tailored to look like Gaultier, it would say, CAUTION: HE SELLS HAIRSTYLES. Because that's what you do.

What you do is this.

Your next client is waiting. You catch a flicker of knickers as she shuffles in the seat. You've left the gown off 'til after you shampoo her. Told her it's because it's hot, said it's great weather we're having but that's not it. It's because she's hot.

Your gaze drops. She catches you. You offer her coffee.

She wants tea. You grab a trainee. Tell her to fetch it.

She smiles. She sparkles. You flash a row of caps you pay for in instalments.

"So what can I do for you?"

"I'd like a change."

You slap down glossy mags and cutting collections. She licks a finger and flicks the pages. There are pictures of pop idols and rock idols, teen idols and screen idols, It girls and tit girls, sports stars in fast cars and Czech babes in Wonderbras.

She laughs. Nods. Shrugs. Looks at you like she's trying to suss you. She's toying with consent but she doesn't quite trust you. And why should she? She doesn't know you. She's only just met you. And what's so special about spontaneity anyway? It's well past its sell by date. These days it's all about assurances and instinct died of AIDS.

"How much are you willing to lose?"

She starts to tell. You stop her.

"Show me in the mirror."

She shows a gap that will bring her hair up to shoulder level.

"Is it a change you want, or just a trim?"

"Well I suppose..."

"It has to be shorter."

“Does it have to be so short? Couldn’t you cut something in-between?”

You hate those words. Hear them all the time. In-between, in-between. There is no in-between. So you tell her straight ‘I could cut something in-between but it wouldn't be much of a change. It would still be the same old you.’ And it's true. You could cut something in between. Of course you could. It's just a technicality. But it wouldn't hang right. It would be like Michelangelo's David with a big dick.

She pauses. She ponders. She says, “And you think short will definitely suit me?”

“I'd stake my country cottage on it.”

“You have a cottage?”

You just smile. Not because you're happy but because hairdressers always do. Not because they get paid more than other people or because they are pumped full of endorphins from waving a dryer around all day like they're conducting symphonies on Angel Dust, it's because they're programmed to look happy in their jobs. Will never tell an outsider they are not happy in their jobs. It's like you somehow imagine your manager is there, even in your sleep, dropping in on your dreams and waiting to hear you say the words, My salon is the happiest salon in the world. We are even more happy and friendly than the salon up the road who think they are the happiest salon in the world but actually are not. Because we are even happier. And because we are so happy we give you this solemn vow, so will you be too.

“Just a country,” you tell her. But she's passed being amused. Now she frowns. Taps a finger. She is confused. You cornered her too quick. And with all your charm and all your training, still, you did just that. You hit her with too much jargon in a short space.

“Is there a picture?”

“A picture?”

“Of what it looks like.”

She can't picture what's on your mind. You can't picture what's on hers. And that's why in this land of wax and spray, consultation is king.

“There is no picture. This is an original. Don't you want to be first?”

“Well I suppose...”

“Think about it. Winners write history. Losers fade-out.”

She shrugs. Lips purse. “I've had long hair for ages. I've had it for longer than I can remember. I'm a bit nervous. What would you do if I let you have your way?”

You fake a pose like an artist. Tilt your head to one side. Then the other. She has long, thick, straight hair. Wild and un-styled, untainted and un-tinted. She has untouched virgin hair. But you hold yourself back. All that can wait. Clients think they've made your day when they offer you their

hair. They haven't. It just means you waste time trying to read their minds and rush to finish the job in time. In time for the next one.

You say, "Let's cut it short."

"Short?"

"Short."

"How short?"

"Short so you have a real change this time."

She turns her head and peers around. You don't even need to look to know why. You've watched this scene a thousand times before and you know all the variations off by heart. You know he's there, sitting in the waiting area by reception and you know why he's there too. He's one of those guys who thinks a woman is only a woman if she has long hair and can't face the thought that if she loses it, he will no longer want her. He's here to make sure you don't take too much off. But you're not having any of that. Not now.

She turns back to face the mirror. You give her a knowing smile. "Exactly, you say. So let's start again. Think revolution, the sexual revolution. Think Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton, Mary Quant. Think Isadora Duncan."

"Isadora who?"

"Exactly. Now think evolution. Evolution revolution. Think edginess, think impact. Think the style ABC."

"The style ABC?"

"Aniston, Beckham, Kylie."

"Kylie?"

"I don't get that either. Now stick them all in a blender. Add a pinch of Spice Girl, a drizzle of Hilton, a generous splash of Winehouse and salt to taste. Et —VOILA. The cut of today. A classic with a modern twist. A bob with texture. Sassoon meets Stafford."

"Stafford?"

"Lee Stafford."

"The one with the dog?"

"The silver dog on a pink pot."

"I know the one. It's sold in most shops."

"That's right. But enough of names and fame. Are you game or what?"

She looks around, she looks up, she looks down at her hands. Touches the tips of her nails together and forms the shape of an upside-down heart in her hands. Her nails are long, false nails. You can spot the subtle joins. You've seen enough to spot a fake. You trace the line of her

fingers. She has long fingers, fluid fingers. You wonder how many hearts they've touched, how many men they've ringed?

You are falling in love, "You look like that actress," you tell her.

She smiles like she knows your game but even so, she can't help asking, "Which one?"

"Charlize Theron," you say.

She raises her eyebrows.

"No, Scarlett Johansson," you say.

She beams. You've stroked her vanity G-spot and she opens up wide. She gazes at your reflection like you're the sexiest man that ever walked the earth and you stare at her like she's looking at him. "Do it," she says.

You unsheathe your scissors. Spin them round your fingers. She looks nervous. Looks like she's agreed to have sex and changed her mind and what's more, you're blocking the bedroom door.

Exactly forty minutes later you are done. You don't need a clock or a phone to tell you that. Nor do you need to look back at your client and her boyfriend as they leave the salon to know the conversation they'll be having. He'll act like he's ok with it until they get to the closest Starbucks but that's just 'cause he's in shock. When they sit down, when they take the first sips of the top of frothy lattes, that's when the effects of your work will kick-in. And then it will all kick-off. And possibly not today but they'll break up some time soon because they'd already hit a rough patch and on top of that, now he thinks she looks too manly with her new cut and he won't have the time or energy to face the fact that he only went out with her for her looks. She'll feel it, each unspoken word from him will hurt like hell, but she'll get over it and the next guy she gets with, somewhere down the line, maybe near, maybe far, will want her for how she wants to look. About two months into getting with the new guy, the old guy will probably realise he's fucked up and want her back. Don't they all. And maybe he'll get her back and screw up her life a second time, or maybe not but once she's out of that door, that's your part done. She's gone. Now all you think about is that black filter coffee and cigarette that await you in the staff room.

CUT

There are no windows in here but you always have the feeling you are being watched. The staff room is far too small, much too small for all the staff here, long and narrow and more like a corridor and probably was one, once. Plastic benches line opposing walls and give the illusion of order. Coats and various random items of clothing hang above the benches making it hard to lean back and give it the feel of a trench. That's all very well in winter. Right now it's stuffy and sticky and tempers flare up through clouds of perfume. There is a plastic fan but it's broken. It's been broken as long as you can remember. You couldn't imagine it ever working and perhaps it never did. There is a sink on a worktop at the far end and next to that a kettle, one of those kettles that's so full of lime scale you have to refill it without looking inside or you'd never use it. The sink is full of mugs. Not the clients' coffee cups. Those are always pristine, bone white and come with saucers. No, these mugs are full of brown rings that make them older than trees. Rings that no amount of scrubbing or scouring will ever remove, not now. Like most of the trainees in here, they lacked the proper care and attention when they were younger. Like the trainees you notice winding up a new boy. A new man in the salon is a novelty and this trainee, some mixed-up kid with an entirely forgettable name is completely outnumbered. They are all over him. They might even fancy him but they'll never tell him straight because things don't work like that in here. Instead, they ask him if he has a girlfriend. He says he has no girlfriend. Somebody shouts out, FREAK, the rest of them laugh. You want to tell him to ignore it but you don't. He has to learn sometime.

At the far end of the room sit the stylists and behind them, on a broken product trolley, rests the staff coffee machine. You grab a mug from the sink and shove your way through the glammed tanned girls with squeezed together knees, their eyes down in make-up bags or fingering phones that bridge inner thighs. They spend billions firing satellites into space, you think, all so we can look back down and see how small we are. And you think how small Blue Jean looks as you pour a black coffee and sit down opposite her. About five foot six in heels.

She's like an illusion, a trick of angles and curves. Wears a cowboy hat she never takes off but won't tell anyone why. She's the type you can never quite read under the second-skin she calls a face. A face she created from a range of products no one's ever heard of from some boutique in Hoxton no one except Blue Jean could ever find. What you can see under the hat are rose tinted Lennon shades, an aquiline nose and purple lips slashed on a base, primed pale. The hair, razored out and jagged, is Ice-Angel by Wella and matches the life-size Angel wings she has tattooed on her back. They call her Blue Jean because Company regulation states, **STRICTLY BLACK AND WHITE UNIFORM**. She always wears blue jeans. They'll never fire her though. She's way too good.

You nod a hello to her but it's like she can't see you, or more to the point, doesn't want to see you. She stopped talking to you when you got promoted to Senior Stylist last year and she didn't. She's been here two years longer than you have and figured it was her turn. You could sort of understand it if it wasn't for the fact that she still talks to Byron Bone after he got promoted to Senior Stylist a few months back. Either way, now she only talks directly to you if she has to, usually if a client is involved and she can't avoid it, or to indirectly insult you. Even if she's sitting right next to you, like she is now, she'll talk about you like you're not there. She'll say Listen to him talk, or, I noticed he was running late again this morning. So it's no surprise to you that when you ask her if she's heard about a competition, she just says, No. No, like she was talking down to one of the trainees. The trainees who you can still hear winding up the new boy. Now they are asking him if he's ever kissed a girl. Looking at him now, you'd say he's never talked to a girl before, let alone kissed a girl.

A girl like Agnes. Cue some music pre-programmed into you for just these occasions as sugar coated Agnes walks in, large Starbucks carton in one hand, giant star spangled handbag in the other. An even bigger smile rests between the two. She stops with her waist just inches from your face, arse wrapped hot-pants so tight they look painted on. The contours beneath are perfectly evident, sketched in with the lick of a fine brush. And she has these legs you only see in magazines. Photoshopped, the type that don't look real. Disproportionately longer and softer, yet somehow tighter and shinier, less blotchy than other women's legs. There's never a sign of stubble which makes you wonder if actually, she is a freak of nature that doesn't have any hair anywhere, like a textbook case of Alopecia Universalis. But no, her pony-thick chestnut hair is real alright. She's asked you to dry it for her on more than one occasion after work, before she rushes off like Cinderella on a date.

Blue Jean pipes up. In her low, smoky voice, she says, "Well if it isn't miss, Whoops, I just trod in another relationship."

Agnes touches the end of Blue Jean's nose like she's hushing a kid as she sits down next to her. She smiles into nowhere like she's posing for a panel of imaginary Miss World judges but under the smile that fits so well, you can tell she's not happy. It's in the eyes. Like that Barbie doll that for some reason is always left on the shelf in toy shops. You can never quite pinpoint what's wrong with her, but there is something that isn't right. Something that makes five-year-old girls everywhere leave her behind with an army of over easy, eager Ken dolls for company. All the same, a doll she is, so most of her clients are men. They love her. She's the only cutter in here who's never had a single complaint. Even when she leaves tram lines with clippers or snips an ear, they just sit there quietly in the cutting chair, undressing her curvy reflection, over and

over, top to bottom and bottom to top until she's finished the job. And the funny thing about Agnes is, that everyone in the salon says everybody has had her. Everyone says it but no one can actually name anyone that has. Except Stylist Byron Bone. He says he's had Agnes but he says he's had everyone.

Agnes sticks her fingernail in the froth of her drink carton and twirls it around.

"What's that you're writing?" says Blue Jean.

"Nothing," says Agnes, covering the cup with her hand.

"It is, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," says Agnes

"What isn't it?" says Blue Jean.

"It's not his name."

"So it is what's-his-name. You're writing his name in your coffee now. It must be serious. It must be..."

"It's not."

"So it's just sex?"

"It's not coffee. It's a frap. And you know very well his name is Rob."

"Rob the Nob."

"You promised not to call him that."

"Do you spell nob with an N or K?"

Agnes ignores Blue Jean, opens a beige makeup case and lifts it to her face. She applies a coat of lip gloss by Urban Decay, pouts at the mirror and freezes transfixed like she's fused.

Somewhere far away you imagine a little girl shouting to her mother that her dolly has stopped talking while over in the corner the trainee girls ask the blushing new boy, has he ever slept with a man? He says, What? They don't let him off that easily, ask him again, like really had sex with a man. You don't hear his answer because you really don't care but whatever he replied, the trainees have burst into hysterics. And as if by magic Agnes twitches back to life.

"The thing is," she says, "It's just that sometimes he seems far away."

"And you think what?" says Blue Jean.

"I don't know," says Agnes. "I really don't know what to think."

"But you love him, right?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"I just don't know if he loves me."

You try to imagine the man who would love Agnes. You've never loved her but there is nothing you haven't done with her in daydreams while idly ripping fools or sweeping clear your workspace. No scenario unseen, no position untried. But love?

Blue Jean does not forget about it. She puts her arm around Agnes's shoulders and in one of her impressions, a Scarlett O'Hara style Southern drawl, she says, "Why, any man would be lucky to have a girl like you, Aggy."

"You think?" says Agnes.

"You're too soft, darling," says Blue Jean. And Blue Jean is right. Agnes is too soft. She's too soft because she thinks Blue Jean is her best friend. She always believes everything Blue Jean says, always tells everyone how clever Blue Jean is. How Blue Jean should be doing something else, like a lawyer or clothes designer or something like that. Agnes loves Blue Jean like it's carved in a tree, Agnes 4 Blue, and it's true, Blue Jean is nothing if not clever. But Blue Jean does not deal in friends. You know this well enough. Because the most talked about thing in the salon right now, that everyone has heard about apart from Agnes, is how Blue Jean is also fucking Rob.

Agnes shuffles closer to Blue Jean. She checks around behind her to see no one is listening in.

"Blue," she says, in a voice she borrowed from an eight-year-old, "I shouldn't really tell you this, but..." She pauses right before speaking like she's going to change her mind about telling. You knew she wouldn't. "Last night we did it for the first time."

The blood drains from Blue Jean's already white face. "Congratulations, I guess."

"But the thing is," says Agnes, "he wanted to..."

"He wanted to what?" says Blue Jean, slowly, like she'd rather be anywhere else but here right now. But no, there's no escape for her, you think, as Agnes opens her mouth and the whole room falls instantly quiet like someone pressed mute.

Something distracts you away from Agnes and Blue Jean. A fleck in the corner of your eye. Something red. Red tights, over behind the apprentices in the corner. Legs stick out into the centre of the room. You could swear she wasn't in here when you came in but she must have been and you can't imagine how you didn't notice her before. No one except Agnes has entered the room since.

She must be a new girl. No one who worked here already would be stupid enough to come in wearing red tights. It's black and white. They'd be out the door. Feet wouldn't touch the ground. So she must be another new apprentice.

Probably started the same time as the new boy. They usually hire apprentices in twos or threes. So that would make sense. That's because apprentices leave in twos and threes. They just stop turning up. Not many people can take the shit they do.

And these drop dead legs, more of the curves of a dancer, you think, than Agnes's, snap you from your morning coma. There is something else though. The most striking thing is her hair. It is a deep mahogany and uncoloured. Nothing unusual about that of course, but it must be at least down to her waist, if not longer. You lean forward to try and get a look at her face but her hair cuts you out as she makes circular, square and pincer shapes on her phone screen. You decide to ask Agnes about this girl in the red stockings but Blue Jean gets in the way.

"He wanted to do the other thing."

"And you let him?" says Blue Jean.

"That's bad, right?" says Agnes.

Blue Jean shrugs, "Lots of people do it."

"Even if it's their first time?"

"Don't see why not?"

Agnes smiles and pulls out her phone. She taps out a message and rocks her head to the theme of some romcom she's watched far too many times. She imagines love. You imagine something quite different. Agnes waits on the bed, examines with horror a crack in her nails as Flyboy unbuckles with one hand, holds his phone in the other. You quickly switch channels for a better view. Now you are Rob and you can see it all happening like it's actually happening to you. You place your hands on her haunches, all clear for take-off. But no matter how hard you go for it, from a pulse-raising lift-off and a steady rise through the clouds, Hold on tight they forecast turbulence, she just keeps staring down at those fucking nails.

Blue Jean brings you down fast. "Just one thing?" she says. Agnes looks up from her phone. "What is the other thing?"

"Yeah, what is the other thing?" the new boy says from all the way across the room.

"Everyone knows what the other thing is," says senior stylist, Byron Bone, who's slinked around the corner to stand above the new boy, looking like, he tells everyone, the very image of the legendary Marc Bolan.

Agnes' face drops. 'Now everyone knows.'

You want to tell Byron to shut up but you don't. You and he have this unspoken pact. You are the two most senior stylists in this salon and you simply don't mess with each other in any way. But fortunately you don't need to. Blue Jean does it for you.

"He'd like to think he's everyone, but he's not. Just butt out Byron."

The trainees all watch him. They all love him. Wait on tenterhooks for his next delivery. Some of them have started giggling already and he hasn't even said anything yet.

"Butt in more like," says Byron,

"SEE. He knows everything," says Agnes.

"He does now," says Blue Jean under her breath.

Byron notices you and winks as he dunks a pyramid tea bag, up and down. Adds about a half dozen sugars, Until the spoon stands up in it, he always says. Then he drops himself on the bench making a sound like a belly-flop, in the slightly too small gap between Blue Jean and Agnes, but not before stopping level with Agnes' head and pointing a long finger down at her chest.

"Hey Darling. What's that stain down you front?"

She falls for it every time. Looks straight down to see what he's on about and he strokes her chin.

"Just fuck off, Byron," she hisses. But she falls for it every time.

"Ignore him," says Blue. "He knows nothing about anything."

"I know enough," he grins, trying to attract your attention with an over-familiar, you-know-the-score look. "And I know you might as well chuck in the towel if you've given a man everything already."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a wanker, Byron," says Blue Jean.

"Just his mum and dad and all the friends he hasn't got," says Agnes, who starts to laugh at her own joke, but you're no longer listening to her or Byron. Over in the corner sits a new girl. A new trainee in all likelihood. You can't say she's all that much to look at but what you do look at, what gets your attention is the skirt she's wearing and her long legs. They reach right out to below the bench opposite. But it's not that that's attracted your attention. You see all shapes and sizes in here. What's got your attention are the red tights she's wearing. You guess no one told her it's black and white only, during her induction.

Byron taps your arm. "What?" you say, slightly annoyed to be interrupted. He grins at you like he's just solved some complex mathematical problem that's defied all experts. He mouths the words, Watch this. Then turns to Agnes.

"The problem you are faced with, Agnes darling, is this. Love is a sales pitch and you are right out of product. You have *nada*, zilcho left. You see, the thing you women need to understand about all this, is we men..." he nods at you, "...we men are adventurers. It's in our blood. Call it instinct, call it chemistry, call it whatever buzzword Womans Weekly are pushing down your throat at the moment but the fact is, what it boils down to is this. We men always want the latest. Are always searching for that next best thing. The thing that gives us an edge over the next man. That

makes us think ourselves just that little bit taller than our neighbours. And when a man stops thinking like this, that's when he's lost it. It's that simple. He might as well jump off a cliff. In fact, Nicky Clarke once gave me some very special advice after a hair show. He said, Byron...'

"What hair show?" says Blue Jean.

"What does it matter what show? A show. Okay? So there we are, sitting there, me and Nicky just like that, and I ask him, What makes a man like him a great, when so many others have failed?"

"I know this one," says Blue Jean. "It's the size of his dick."

"Are you gonna let me finish or what?" says Byron, taking a long, audible slurp from his gooey tea. "So anyway, Nicky's sitting there. He buys me a drink. And he looks me right in the eye and he says, Byron, we all stand in the dirt but some of us look up at the stars."

The whole room seems to look at Byron, gob-smacked. Everyone, that is, except Blue Jean.

"You're so full of shit Byron," she says, "Nicky Clarke didn't say that."

"Yeah? And how would you know that?"

"Because Nicky Clarke would never drink with a loser like you."

Agnes bursts out laughing. Byron casts her sideways glance. You know he won't be able to let that go. The guy's a sadist but that's not your problem. You grab yourself another black coffee and start to down it, even though the coffee seems to antagonise your mild hangover. You wonder if you can get through your next client without making an excuse to go and take a halfway cigarette break. You hope it's something easy. Something medium length with straight hair and basic layers would do the trick nicely. And nothing too thick, so it dries fast.

"I'm no loser," says Byron. He nods towards Agnes. Tries to say it so only you can hear but fails epically, "You wouldn't catch me with a woman like that."

"A woman like what?" says Agnes.

Byron grins. You knew he won't be able to stop. Agnes stands up, and strides for the door, trips on her way out and starts to sob.

Blue Jean shakes her head at Byron.

"How the fuck is that my fault? "She was the one who insisted on telling the whole world."

"She was talking to me, Byron."

"Don't make me out to be the wanker here?"

"You did that yourself."

"This is a staff room. Not a knitting circle."

"Sewing circle."

"Like I said."

He tries to change the subject but she tilts her hat down over her face. Conversation is over. It's not up for debate. She's got the knack of making any man feel small when she wants to. It's simple. She ignores them and it works every time. It makes every last creature great and small fight for her attention. More than any curvy blonde with eyes and big tits, they want little-girl Blue. And even if they know that's her game, that only makes them want her more.

Byron laughs. Looks up at the ceiling and grins at the constellation of paint dimples, the fucked up bastard spawn of a rushed paint job. A single creamy layer laid on even thicker than his yarn.

"Whatever," says Byron, "Nit-pick as much as you like. It doesn't change the truth. A man likes a challenge. Always has. Always was."

"Will," you say.

"Was", he says.

He stands bolt upright on tiptoe. Throws his hands up at the ceiling so his fingers touch plaster, and cries out, "SPACE, THE FINAL FRONTIER."

The girl with the red tights turns around suddenly to see what all the fuss is about. As she turns, she starts to uncross her legs and you lean forward instinctively but Byron gets in your way.

"TO BOLDLY GO"

You stare transfixed. But then you get that feeling. Goosebumps creep across your shoulders. That feeling like...

She's looking right at you. You look away quick.

"WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE." Byron starts to hum the theme tune. The trainees in the corner are stunned. They have stopped winding up the new boy. This is far more amusing.

"Stretch," says the Shampoo Napoleon. His face fills the doorway, His voice fills the room. You freeze to the spot. Try to blend in with the coats and girls. Hope the man is looking for someone else.

The bottle stops spinning. He is looking at you.

"Stretch. A quick word?"

"I've got a client waiting"

"I know you do."

Of course he knows. He knows everything. You could do without this. You could do with a cigarette. Inwardly you just say, Fuck, fuck, fuck, a track stuck on repeat. Outwardly you say "Okay" because there is no choice. It's manager's choice. It's always manager's choice. Like the salon CDs all day on repeat and even in your sleep it's manager's choice. So you go with the flow but you know something is wrong. Something about the way he said your name felt wrong and

he never keeps a client waiting. It wasn't the tone of a boss who wants a friendly word. No, you are as sure as you can be that it was the tone of a guy who's about to fire you, you think, as you follow him down the hardboard corridor that narrows off as it reaches the door to his pokier office. On the door is written IF YOU DON'T LOOK GOOD, WE DON'T LOOK GOOD and underneath is a small mirror on which someone, probably a trainee, has drawn a sad smiley face in lipstick. Napoleon pulls a pale blue handkerchief from his top pocket and makes an effort to remove the lipstick, but gives up when he sees he's just smudging it in.

The office used to be a broom cupboard, now it's Napoleon's battle HQ. He likes to joke with new employees that this is where he makes all the important decisions, like Coke or Pepsi? Shows them he's human or something. And it doubles up as a laundry room for a whole ton of black and white towels with the company initials H.G.S. printed on them.

They call him the Shampoo Napoleon but his real name is Stuart Adams. He made his break with housewife makeovers on morning television back in the nineties and he always tells everyone that he used to style Whitney Houston. He'll say, My good friend Whitney this and my good friend Whitney that, like they were best friends, but no one really knows if he actually did ever style her hair. Either way, it never fails to impress his clients. He got the nickname, Shampoo Napoleon, on account of having a half share in three Hair Gang franchise salons around Brighton and his finger in another dozen in London and spread around the country. He is co-owner of the East Street salon where you work, along with Yasmin. Unlike Napoleon, Yasmin is the real thing. She's a legend in The Hair Gang, a top colour technician and used to tour with the International Arts Team. She's so well known that in any of the four hundred plus salons worldwide, all you have to do is mention her first name and they'll know who you're talking about. No one ever remembers what her surname is but they make damned sure they're doing as they're told if they hear the name Yasmin. She strikes fear into trainees everywhere and prowls the salon like a white Grace Jones. A hairdresser since she could walk, when she was ten years old her aunt had her standing on a product box so she was tall enough to shampoo the customers.

He nods at you to sit while he takes off his jacket. A decade ago when you started at this salon he was slim, but now he struggles with the buttons done up tight around his gut. And something is never quite right in the way he dresses. You can never put your finger on it but there is something that doesn't work, like one of those cars that is actually two cars, welded together with a good paint job to hide the join.

He sits down opposite, crosses his legs tight the way politicians do with something to hide. And he has got something to hide, he's a fake. He's in it for the money and that's when you

wonder why it didn't occur to you before that he doesn't want to talk to you about any competition. No, he's going to fire you right now, right here on the spot. Because what else could be so important that he's making a client wait? Napoleon never keeps a client waiting. Under no circumstances must you ever. On the clipboard behind him, in thick marker pen is written, WITHOUT OUR CLIENTS WE ARE NOTHING. And phoney or not, he never forgets this.

You wait. It's all you can do. Wait to hear what's on Napoleon's mind. For him to ejaculate whatever crap he has blocking the U-bend to his brain. You pray for him to get on with it but you know he'll take his time. The only thing he ever rushes are students with discount vouchers. But when you think about it, he can't fire you unless he has a really good reason for it. Male cutters are worth their weight in gold and not easily replaced. You and Byron Bone are the driving force behind this salon. You have more regular clients between you than the rest of the salon put together, but you worry anyway because the truth is you do have something to hide.

You remember the king size waterbed. The empress lies there smiling. She has that look as she beckons you to join her but it's the small insignificant things that stick in your mind. Two bloated Weetabix that have soaked up all the milk in a cereal bowl on the bedside table. Napoleon left for work in a hurry that morning. Normally he's always on time. It's something you hate about him but as you stood under a nearby bush on your day off, soaking in the autumn rain, you don't. You love him for his punctuality as you rap the polished knocker of the front door. Enter the house. Admire the trappings, the benefits of being a franchise boss as you follow her up the stairs. The ceiling mirrors that you'd wager could tell a few tales. The big walk in wardrobe the size of your living room. Another pointless pale blue hanky folded triangular under the satin pillows, initialled in navy blue stitching, S.A. Kicking his Vick smelling silk pyjamas off the back of the bed with your first good thrust inside her. He'd had a cold that week.

But you will pay for it. Nothing goes unnoticed in here, from a stolen tip to a missing hair clip and sooner or later this information will arrive on his desk. It's just a matter of time. Because he is by all accounts a know-it-all and like any emperor worth his salt, he has his spies. Colour Technician Anton says Stuart used to tape a voice-activated Dictaphone under the benches in the staff room. But Anton says a lot of things.

"Right then, Stretch." He calls you by your name but he's not your friend. That said, as long as you keep cutting and the clients keep rolling, he doesn't give a shit what you do or how well you do it. "Two things," he says. It's never just the one thing with him. Even when it is just the one thing, he'll still say, Two things. "I'd like you to teach the trainees on Tuesday evenings instead of Mondays." So you're not getting fired. You can relax. But at the same time you can't

help feeling strangely disappointed, deep down somewhere. A feeling you hide by grinning inanely at him like you have nothing better to do with your Tuesday evenings than teach sets, plaits, one-length trims and finger curls to a bunch of pubescent teens who'd rather be eating happy meals at the Marina drive-through. "And the other thing, says Napoleon." He reaches down the side of his desk and pulls out a large double-sided window poster, holds it up next to him for you to see. Underneath the company logo in silver lettering, it says, Coming to a home near you, THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN.

"Have a guess," he says.

You shake your head and shrug. You could easily hazard a guess but you don't because you know how much he likes to build up suspense.

"Stretch. It's the most important thing you'll ever get a chance to take part in." At first you feel a little insulted that he'd presume whatever he's got happening is the most important thing that will ever happen to you but when he explains what it is to you, you have to confess that he is right. Nothing this important has happened to you before and you can't imagine it ever will again.

"The Hair Gang have been asked to produce seven of our top stylists for a brand new television series. It's called The Magnificent Seven. Every week the chosen stylists, picked from the company, will visit the home of an unsuspecting housewife whose friends and family have set her up for a hair make-over. Originally The Hair Gang had chosen seven stylists from the London salons, but Maida Vaile dropped out at the last minute so I got the call. Stretch," he says, smiling at you like a long lost son, "I've been asked to select one stylist."

You cannot hide the smile that forms from cheek to cheek as you realise what just happened. This is your chance, the sort of thing that makes a person in your business. Getting on a TV show like this will give you a name. A real name. Get you the kind of reputation that lifts you off the salon floor and gets you the backing for a salon of your own. Then you can start all over again, but this time you do it all right. With your own philosophy like Sassoon had, like Stafford had. Like the Mascolo family.

"I'll do it," you say, extending your hand across the desk to shake Napoleon's hand. He leaves your hand floating midway.

"Then I'll need you to present a model."

"A model?"

"That's right. I want all my stylists to have a shot at this. Yasmin and I will decide who to put forward, based on tomorrow's model night."

You look at him like he's having you on, examine his face for the joke. You are the top stylist here and you've been here the longest. And now he's expecting you to go head to head with all the rest, and on top of that, with this little notice? No one ever organises something like this in twenty-four hours. It just isn't practical. You need a good week at least to arrange a time with your model, then you need to design and complete the cut beforehand in order to style it for judgement time.

"I'm sorry Stretch," he says, "I need to give them a name by tomorrow evening or they'll ask someone else. And I can't pass over an opportunity like this. "You have got a model, right?"

As part of your duties as a stylist with The Hair Gang, you are supposed to keep at least one regular model that you can call on in the event of fashion shoots or hairdressing competitions. The problem is that you stopped being interested in hairdressing competitions a couple of years back which is about the last time you spoke to your model, but you can't tell him that.

"Of course, Stuart."

"Then I suggest you give her a ring at the next convenient time. Perhaps in your lunch break."

You nod slowly. Watch him reach slowly in his pocket for a pack of Oral-B, unwrap a couple of sticks and bends them double before wedging them between his gums and teeth and you wonder why he's left it until now to tell you when he told everyone else yesterday. You've not been yourself for the past few months, but that doesn't change the fact that you are the most highly ranked cutter in the salon. Or at least, you were before Byron was promoted but that still doesn't excuse them telling all the other stylists in the salon before they told you. Something is wrong. You smell a rat. A six-foot rat in the shape of Yasmin. She has to be behind this. She's never liked you. She wanted you gone from the moment you set foot in here ten years ago. No matter how you tried to please her, with the most technically perfect and creative cuts you could muster, she never seemed to notice or give you any recognition.

Napoleon gives you that look to say he's finished speaking and starts to shuffle some papers on his desk to look important. But as you get up to leave he stops you.

"Stretch?" The washing machine turns into spin cycle along with his jaw.

"Your next client is waiting. I've asked Jesamine to shampoo her for you.

You look at him confused.

"You know. Jesamine. Like the song." Seeing the blank look on your face, he starts to hum some tune but you don't recognise it or even try to recognise it. Nor do you remember that you have in fact met Jesamine before. Some teenager that worked here as a Saturday girl briefly last summer but you never gave another thought to, and nor do you now as you start for the

customer toilets, frantically searching for your model, Beatrice's number, on your phone. Like fuck you'll leave something this important to lunchtime.

"And Stretch. Your client, give her one of those expensive biscuits for keeping her waiting."

"The cinnamon ones?"

"That's right. Give her one of the Dutch ones. The cinnamon ones."

"I'll give her a couple."

"Give her one."

You nod and grin 'cause you won't be giving her any. Not one. They are all gone already. You can't tell him that though. He'd freak out and that would be the end of salon biscuits.

As for the biscuits? You went looking for them yesterday for your last client. There were none left. Not even the remnants of a crumb. No one knew who'd eaten them all but you remembered Anton boring everyone with some crap morning story. Not the usual shit about his conquests from the night before. No, he told everyone that'd listen and some that wouldn't that cinnamon is the in thing. Celebrities are all downing the stuff like its going out of fashion. It makes your semen taste sweeter.

"STRETCH. Your client is waiting." You ignore the voice that calls you as you speed past reception towards the customer toilets and nearly collide with a client with a head full of foils. As you apologise, the voice calls you again. You can't ignore it this time, not in front of all the clients sitting in the chairs in front of the window. You stop in your tracks and turn to face Mell the receptionist, stern brunette with pinched lips, broad arms and a tan so dark it makes most clients ask if she's from abroad, a polite way, they think, of asking if she's black.

"Stretch. Your client is waiting. I've seated her in the far corner."

Mell is the salon receptionist. It's her job to take the bookings. She splits the days into appointments, scribbles names in blocks in columns and it's her job to make sure everyone sticks to them. If she doesn't keep time inside the blocks, the column will crumble and the salon will fall.

"I'll be right there", you say.

"She been waiting ten minutes already."

"Just a minute. It's all I need."

"It's never a minute though is it."

"So what would you like me to tell your client?"

"Something."

"Like?"

“Anything.”

“You know what Stuart says, don’t you? The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.”

“That’s Sassoon. Not Stuart.”

She shakes her head in this over pronounced way but never takes her eyes off you for a second. She never takes her eyes off anything because if anything goes missing it’s on her.

CUT

No one really uses the customer toilets much, customers tend to go before they get here, so it’s the perfect place to conduct this sort of business. Ok, you might get the odd toddler dragged off the street for a nappy change, but apart from that it’s spotless. There is never a smell to remark of or a stain to complain about. Yasmin makes sure it’s a thousand times cleaner and nicer than the staff toilet which always smells of something unidentifiable. Where you’re always admiring someone’s artwork down the back of the pan. But you don’t think about that right now. What started out as a day from hell has turned into the opportunity of a lifetime, you think, scrolling down through your address book. There are over five hundred names. Most of them are home hair clients or random people you never remember meeting in pubs and clubs across Brighton, but under B, you find what you’re looking for.

Every great cutter has a muse and Beatrice, whose friends call her Bea, pronounced, Bee-a, is yours. Even without make-up, she has a face that turns heads in a crowd and such dark, thick hair that most people think it’s extensions. Better still, she always lets you do whatever you want to her hair, whenever you want. You last used Beatrice three years ago at Salon International, the biggest hairdressing convention in the UK. You won the runner-up prize for The Hair Gang in the Modern Classic category. Everyone that saw it told you you should have taken first place but one of the judges, some old queen with a soft perm, showed favouritism. He had that look you know all too well. The one that said he’d made up his mind who was going to win even before the competition had started, regardless of ability. Even when they introduced you and it was your turn to cut, he couldn’t take his eyes off this particular boy who looked like he’d stepped straight out of a West End production of Oliver, complete with leotards and jazz shoes. Sure enough that boy won and last you heard he was running his own salon.

You thumb the graphic for Bea. Wait with your ear pressed to the screen.

As far as you remember, last time you spoke to her was when you bumped into her and she told you she was branching out her retro handbag business into 1950’s underwear or something

like that, but you didn't really pay attention. Now you wish you had because for all you know she might be the other side of the world right now saving lamas in the rainforest.

There is no reply. You try again. Still nothing. On the third attempt you leave a message, trying your best to convey the matter with a tone of urgency and hoping you have not come across sounding, as you are, desperate.

Next, you open your contact list and scroll down to find Julie. Julie is a student you sometimes use for demonstrating the more advanced cuts to trainees. Unlike Beatrice, who universally turns heads in the street, Julie has that kind of new-agey beauty that most women find beautiful but men don't tend to go for as much. For some reason men find her threatening and because they find her threatening, women tend to promote her beauty even more because they know she won't run off with their men-folk.

Again you thumb the graphic and again you hit an answerphone. You start to wonder if perhaps your phone is set to some kind of divert option, but then you tell yourself it's more likely she's busy. It is just the morning after all. You leave another message, this time calmer sounding, you think, and reassure yourself that no doubt you will have some returned calls and messages by lunchtime. Even so, you know you must not, cannot be complacent and you continue trying other models. Some good and some borderline, still worth ringing up as backup in the tragic event that you can't find anybody better.

You try Sarah. You try Amy, Alice, Molly, Magda and Tegan. You try Tara, Taylor and Talya, Kitty, Katie, Kathy and Katherine. You try Amber, Fatima, Kumiko, Uma, Uri, Elsa, Ruth, Klara, Cara, Leona and Mae, June, Julia and Heidi. You remember a second too late not to ring Heidi.

She gives you such an earful that you wish you'd remembered to delete her a year ago, but it always amused you too much to paw back through the sexting. Something you do now just to remind yourself that you can, could, do all the things you've done that often feel unreal to you. Click on the messages and flick your finger to scroll like a fruit-machine through all the raunchy, some just suggestive and some our-right pornographic stuff you'd sent to her until the scrolling stops dead on a message you'd blocked out of your mind and forgotten, where you'd lied and told her you loved her. Because you figured, as you always have, that she'd do anything you wanted her to if you told her that. And you think how there's no such thing as a womaniser. It's just a myth. Womanising has never been some detached thing, like that friend of a friend who works in a bar in Ibiza and, he fucks a new girl every night, and if they walk away without an orgasm he refunds them on all their drinks. No, what you figured quite early on in your career, from watching the pros at work, the other guys who were really successful with women was that

it's not about how you look, it's the picture of yourself you paint in another person's mind that counts. And what better way to talk a person back into your bedroom than convincing them that picture is not a fake.

All of a sudden you need a cigarette badly. Are already running fifteen minutes late into a forty-five-minute appointment. But still, you can always blame the new girl. It can take new girls a good ten to fifteen minutes just to shampoo. A further five or ten minutes to finish the head massage. Yeah, people always blame the new girl. You light up a cigarette and think how you always got blamed when you were a trainee. You were back in your twenties and you were properly in love. With hair.

You boot the wall, sending the toilet roll sprawling behind the toilet, knocking over the bog brush with a slap, bounce, bounce.

Send out a blanket text asking your models to get back to you urgently. Add a couple of kisses and a smiley for luck. Then you scroll through your address one last time, in case you've overlooked some name you've somehow forgotten is a good model. But scrolling through all these women's names is making you think of women. Lots of them. Their shapes. Their sizes. And visualising all your home hair clients only makes you imagine sex, especially on a day like this. A day when anything can, and will, make you horny. The hangover horn is biting at you and you feel it creeping over you like a natural anaesthetic, an inbuilt drug against the pain that is nature's way of rubbing in the fact you came up empty last night. So now you can only think of sex at a time when what you really need to do is relax, stay calm and focus on the day ahead. But no, all you can think about now is bodies, strange shapes and curves that draw you in even though you have no idea why. Why, why are you always alone when everyone else is doing something else with someone else. Anybody else. Just not with you. No thank you sir. Not today. There you go, the door is closed. No one's buying from you. You're left with a full sack but everything must go or you'll never go home. There's no room at the Inn. No sex Samaritans and no Dial-a-Date. No bored stewardess serving you pussy on a plate, seven miles up on a jet into nowhere, you imagine yourself pressing the flush to mute the sounds from a couple sitting just outside the door with a baby. And the thought is driving you nuts. You have to take the weight off somehow.

You think about your waiting client. Another two minutes won't kill her. In the wake of the world who will remember your crimes? You'll just have to make sure the blow dry is just that bit straighter than straight, sleeker than shiny, to make up for it. And dig out a new product to try out with her. They always love that.

You weigh it up. You're fairly sure you can do it in a minute or two with the right mental projection. It's just finding the right one.

Unzip. Lean against the sink. The rim cups you like a cool porcelain bottom lip that welcomes you like an old friend. You try hard to think of something to get you off quick. You imagine this woman sitting near you on the bus on your way to work. You imagine you'd bunked off and she came home with you there and then. It excites you for a little but the fantasy soon fades. You need something more intense. So you think about Pink from the George Street Franchise. Pink is always a sure fire bet if you need to get-off quick. You think about Pink and...yeah, you think about the other thing. Pink doing the Other thing with who? With you?

But it's not working. You've used Pink far too many times and it's just not doing it for you anymore. In your mind you've been lovers for years. There is very little you haven't done in your lifetime together. There was this one time you got lost in the Himalayas. Had to huddle together for warmth. The experience brought you closer than ever. And another time you were a policeman and she was a speeding celeb in a convertible. She went to quite some lengths to keep her driving licence and you risked your career as a cop when you let her drive you into that abandoned carpark. Shit, you were even married once but right now all that's wearing thin because you visited that scene too much. You're going limp. You're running out of time.

You face the mirror above the sink. Squint at your reflection as you try to conjure up another woman in the glass. Older, younger, taller, shorter, what's it gonna be, Stretch? But you can't help noticing instead how your stubble seems darker, sharper in artificial light. And you wonder if you should get your eyebrows shaped again. It looked great last time. You could even try a tint. A shade or two darker perhaps. A depth five with four percent peroxide should do the trick nicely. And your hair. It's blue-black but it's been a couple of weeks now and the blue mix tone is starting to fade, leaving it black-black. That is, the blackest black you can get. Even blacker than Asian hair. A flat spot near the crown needs your attention.

With your free hand, you twist chunks into jagged spikes. Keep doing it and think how your hair actually looks pretty cool up. You rarely wear it up. Normally you have a short textured fringe. You prefer it that way. It flatters your face. But women are always telling you it looks better up. And that's when it comes to you. Right there in the mind's eye she comes to you. Those long legs. Those red stockings. The new girl.

You try to imagine her properly. Can't really remember her face enough though. Even so, just the memory of the red tights, such a refreshing sight in this salon, is doing the trick.

She places her hands on her knees. Then she opens her legs. Slowly at first. Then splits. The walls seem to brighten and everything lightens. Your right hand is just a blur below as you close your eyes to give her your full attention. And somehow you can see her face now or you've made it up, even though you saw her what must have been a millisecond in the staff room. She looks

right at you and smiles like she knows what you're thinking. And those eyes. Glowing green. Now they're blue. Brown. They grow and they grow and you groan and they keep growing til they block out the world behind her. You try to look away. You can't. Then you no longer want to. Lips touch hers. Be inside me, a voice tells you from somewhere. Inside me nothing matters. It's safe in here. Her eyes swallow you up. You see a glow in the distance. Something like a burning building in the distance in the dark. Then a wave of light crosses the nightscape of your mind like a nuclear blast. You've seen this moment before in all the movies. You know you can't survive this. No one can. Faster and faster it comes...AND...

"IS YOUR CLIENT OK OUT THERE?"

It doesn't. Everything shrinks away. You shrink right down until you feel like you're right back at school. You say, "Yes Yasmin. She's fine Yasmin. Just getting her a coffee Yasmin."

"IN THE TOILET?"

You wonder how long she's been out there, ear to the door, waiting to hear the characteristic flick of your Zippo lighter. Trying desperately to listen in on your thoughts. Could she have heard you? Maybe she did hear you. Maybe she's been there for several minutes listening in on you.

"I got a trainee to do it."

She huffs. She puffs. "Which trainee?"

The new girl. Blame the new girl. If you could just remember her name. "The new girl," you say.

And then you get the weirdest thought of all, from somewhere, you wonder if she didn't put the fantasy of the new girl in your head. Why? Because she was standing outside the door watching the new girl and wanting her, herself. But no, "What new girl?"

It's on the tip of your tongue.

"Jesamine."

"WHO?"

"You know, like the song," you say. And immediately regret it.

Yasmin's shouting still rings in your ears as you walk up behind your next client just a few seconds later, smelling of the half bottle of spray you gassed the toilet with to disguise the smell of smoke from Yasmin. Yasmin, who is most likely in there right now, trying to work out if that really is cigarette smoke she can smell, in amongst the lavender and lemongrass. Clutching her mobile in photo-mode in one hand to document the evidence if she finds a filter tip, and regretting that she can't somehow document the smell and send it off to a lab for analysis. The

image soon fades as you see a very real evil sitting in your cutting chair. The hair-monster waits and she's been waiting for you longer than you should ever make a hair-monster wait.

A hair-monster is the sworn enemy of every hairdresser. Your worst nightmare. More than any other client you fear them. You can hardly see their faces for the tangled mass on their heads and it can take forever just to comb through their hair. They all have record thick damaged hair and as if that wasn't enough, they always insist you don't cut too much off their hereditary stack of split-ends. And they always, always, insist their hair is beautiful with a look in their eyes that would back down a cage fighter.

In the end you will just nod. You will do whatever they say.

"Could you cut a centimetre off," she says, "and no layers. Layers make my hair go frizzy."

Restricted to trimming just a centimetre off the length and with no possibility of layering out the split ends, there is no way you can do a decent job.

"And plenty of serum. Make sure you use plenty of serum."

She says it like the product had been invented that would stop her looking like a burning haystack, but she knows better, they always do. And you wonder if that's not their game, that that's the only reason these split end sadists come in here at all. So they can pay to see a mug like me broken by their hair.

You part the tangled mass to find what she's hiding. She has a face as round and pale as the full moon and she doesn't look at all impressed that you are blinding her with her own reflection. You take the haystack in your hands and form shapes with it in the mirror. Look for approval from your client. She just sits there.

"How about I take an inch or two off the layers? Thin it out a bit?"

"A centimetre. No more."

"A softer look will really suit you."

"No layers."

"How about I trim a centimetre?"

Three large helpings of Intense Moisture conditioner and a half can of detangling spray later, you manage to comb through her hair. You are ready to start the cut.

She crosses her legs under the gown. You ask her to uncross them. She raises an eyebrow but you explain that "Crossed legs means a crooked spine. Straight legs ensure an even length." She eyes you like you just told her to take her clothes off. Like she thinks you're the kind of molester who would ask her to take her clothes off. She doesn't uncross her legs, nor do you ask her again.

She eyes you impatiently. She can sense you're distracted. Can see your thoughts are elsewhere. You notice the red tights approach in the mirror, then the waist length mousy hair as you climb this lacklustre Rapunzel up a skinny frame to a face as dull as the front of a terrace. This girl, because she couldn't be much more than a girl, is standing next to you with her arms extended like she's going to ask you for change. On a second glance, you see she's holding a cup.

"Tea for the lady," she says.

The hair monster snatches the cup away from the girl and not a word of thanks.

"Thank you," you say on behalf of your client.

"Jesamine," she says. There is a sharpness in her eyes and when she smiles a small scar appears at the corner of her mouth. "I'm..."

"You're Stretch. I know."

Somehow you knew she would know this. She probably knows everyone's name in here already, just from being told them once. You've seen trainees like her before, all variations on the same theme. Didn't finish school but has the capacity for mental arithmetic and memory for large numbers of an autistic savant. Probably has some mother who's never really bothered with her or given her the support she needed, possibly because she blamed her for her father leaving them. Some father who probably tells everyone down the pub he walked out because the whole thing was never real, That the mother had tricked him into not using protection on a one-night stand, when he claims he was too out of it to know the difference, but that'll just be the thing he makes up to tell himself, because the real reason is he can no longer look his daughter in the eye after he got too drunk and tried to touch her up on the evening of her thirteenth birthday. Some crap like that. But whether he did or not hardly matters, because unless she comes out and tells someone, something she probably won't do for the sake of the kid she'll have in a few years' time who she wants to grow up thinking he or she has a normal respectable family out there somewhere, then the secret will go to the grave. To all intents and purposes, this girl standing in front of you now might have a background like this, or she might have a background nothing like this, but one thing you do know for sure is that this salon doesn't give a shit about any of her life history. She'll be a total waste in a place that eats up and spits out girls like her. Look at the website for any big hair salon and check the staff photo, then check again in ten years' time and you can guarantee the only faces you'll recognise are the managers'. The managers live forever. If anyone else survives it will be because they are that lucky kind of person who naturally blends in with their environment, so well that nobody notices them. They are neither good or bad, nice or nasty, nosy or quiet, attractive or ugly, but that perfect amount of all of them. But you don't give this any thought because you don't have enough time to think about anything but living from

one day to the next. At least, this is how you've always rationalised your complete lack of interest in other people on the few occasions you feel guilty enough to bring it up and discuss it with yourself. You'll tell yourself that you don't have enough time. You'll say this is not your fault, but your managers, for running you off your feet so much that all you can do in the zombified state you call your free time, is snort coke and drink spirits, cocktails, or whatever booze you can get your hands on just to keep awake. You've surprised yourself with what you've stooped to when needs must. But you've always told yourself that when your life slows down again, stops being a matter of your own survival, that is, when you've made a name for yourself, a real name, then you will go back to showing an interest in other people's problems. But right now you're not so sure anymore. And as if to stop you from thinking about it anymore and realising some important thing that's been under your nose the whole time but is always just beyond your vision, the hair monster locks onto your distracted thoughts, sweeps a thick wrist from under the gown to stare at a clunky antique wind-up watch she must have inherited from the great aunt she inherited her thick wrists from.

You turn back quick to face the mirror but are still aware of the red glow of tights next to you in the mirror. "A tip from your last client," says Jesamine, handing you a twenty-pound note. You pocket the tip and continue with the haircut like you're giving it your fullest attention.

You are not, because now you are wracking your brain to remember who could have given you this twenty-pound tip. This can't be a tip from your last client because you remember quite distinctly her handing you five pounds as you showed her to the till and ticked the products you'd recommended she use on the product form. In which case, it can only be a tip from your last client from yesterday and it's been sitting in your tip bowl overnight. No doubt Mell told Jesamine to come and give it to you because she's OCD about the tips bowls being empty at the start of each day. That has to be it, except you're sure you emptied your tip bowl on the way out, precisely because you don't trust Mell with your tips. You remember counting a ten-pound note and about seven pounds in change and thinking how stingy your last client of the day was, despite you having devoted so much time and effort to her cut, the best grad bob you've done in a year or two. You distinctly remember thinking how it was strange she didn't tip you, especially after saying the last time she had a bob that good it was cut by Sassoon, or at Sassoon's, you're not sure which.

The hair monster notices you idling. A minor deceleration in your scissor-action that no regular client would notice, but she does. "I wouldn't normally come here," she says, "my usual hairdresser is on holiday."

You mouth the words, Breakdown more like.

“I’m sorry?” she snaps. You are fairly sure you made no sound, but it occurs to you she may have read your lips in the mirror.

“Gone somewhere nice?”

“He’s gone to Milan. He holidays there every year. I normally get my haircut in London by Laszlo Gianpardi. Do you know Laszlo?”

You should just say yes. Tell her the two of you are like brothers. Lovers. Something. Anything just to spare yourself the pain you know will follow if you tell her the truth that you haven’t the slightest fucking clue who she’s on about.

“I don’t think so.”

“You must know Laszlo. Everybody knows Laszlo.”

“Where does he work?”

“At Charles’.”

“Charles?”

“Now don’t tell me you don’t know who Charles is. Everybody knows who Charles is. You run the blades of your scissors across the rubber neck shield. “CHARLES,” she almost roars the words, “CHARLES WORTHINGTON.”

You want to ask her if she’s ever heard of Sweeney Todd? And, perhaps she’d like to meet him. You have some influence in this department, you’re sure you could manage to arrange an introduction.

“Laszlo is his top stylist. He won Hairdresser of the Year last year. Surely it pays to know these things in your business?”

You bite your tongue. You’re used to clients being annoying but only a hair monster knows the pressure points. Hits this hard.

“Have you ever won an award, Stash?”

“It’s Stretch,” you say, “and actually I’m going to be on television soon.”

She keeps on talking about her beloved Laszlo Gian-horse-shit like you didn’t just top-trump her. Like you didn’t just tell her you’re about to be more famous than Laszlo will ever be. Perhaps even more famous than her precious Charles Worthington. But you know full well she’ll go back to Lorenzo and make the poor bastard’s life a misery when she tells him all about this famous hairdresser she went to in his absence. For he must surely have heard of Stretch. Stretch is famous. Stretch is on TV.

Except, Stretch is not on TV. Not yet and not if you don’t find a model and win this thing.

You finish the cut and await the client’s verdict.

“It’s longer on one side,” she says.

You knew she would. And she shows you where. You nod in agreement. You don’t bother to check it yourself. This is not about who’s right or wrong.

You take a minute amount of hair from the area she has imagined is longer and wish you had the guts to say different. To stand up to her like Antony Mascolo once did when a client complained that one side was longer than the other. Legend has it he tilted her head sideways until it was even and said...

“Is that better, Madam?”

She frowns and you smile all the way to reception to make sure she doesn’t complain about a part at the back that you’ve just noticed, really is slightly longer.

The unexpected happens. She tips you thirty pounds.

You are not sure why you didn’t check the colour room first but with hindsight it’s the obvious place to find a new trainee. Jesamine stands with her back to you, her long hair hides her face from you, tint bowl in one hand, skinny arm extended up at forty-five degrees to take a selfie with the other.

She sees you approach on the phone screen, spins on her heel like she’s fending off an attack. Flicks tint from the applicator brush as she goes.

You look down to check yourself for stains but somehow, miraculously, the tint missed you. The rest of the room is less fortunate. There are spatters on the walls, on the colour charts and on the shelves stacked with tint tubes. There are marks on the boxes of bleach powder, peroxide bottles, perm kits. Carmen rollers and a dozen other things that Yasmin will find stains on later. She’ll conduct a witch hunt to find the perpetrator.

“That’ll stain,” you say, pointing to a greyish blue lump on her black trainee T-shirt. You grab a can of hairspray from a nearby product trolley and before she can look surprised, you coat the spillage with a thin layer, then another to make sure the stain is evenly covered. She squints at you like you just molested her. Then squints like she’s wondering if she can sue you for it. You are about to explain that the hairspray will prevent staining, but then she points down at a similar lump of the same consistency, about the size of a thumbnail, just above her knee.

You offer her the can of spray.

“Can’t you do it?”

You shake your head, “You’re old enough to do it yourself,” you say.

“I’m too young for you,” she says, tossing her head to one side like a pole dancer.

Trying not to rise to the bait, you nod down at the red tights. “You do know it’s black and white uniform, don’t you?”

“They’re my favourite.”

“Yasmin has fired people for a lot less.”

“And who said I want to be a hairdresser anyway?”

They start out like this but they soon learn. You’ve seen enough of them follow Yasmin into her office brimming confidence, only to leave again looking green. Which is exactly why you tell her, “Here, you can do the tights.”

“Stockings,” she says.

You sigh but your sigh quickly becomes a silent gasp as in one quick action she lifts her skirt right up to the waist and back down to show you that, Yes, she is wearing stockings, and that underneath them she is wearing a G-string so thin you could floss your teeth with it.

You should walk out right away. You know that if anyone walked in on you right now the suspicion could as easily fall on you. You would more than likely end up with a suspension from work while they tried to figure out what had happened. They might even decide it is easier just to get rid of you and avoid a scandal, split your clientele up between Byron and Blue Jean and within a week or two you’d be forgotten. Or they might suspend you for a couple of weeks, but by the time you get back, the model night will have passed and one of the other cutters from this salon will be on their way to being a household name.

“Look, stand still,” you tell her. She leans back against the work surface and rests on her elbows.

You hesitate but then with one eye on the door, you bend forward and aim the spray can at the stain. She lets out a short gasp as the cool spray strays onto her skin and goose bumps form above the elastic. You take the lower part of her skirt between your thumb and forefinger to hold it out of the way of the stockings and continue spraying. “What’s with the black and white thing anyway?” she says, “I thought hairdressers were supposed to be fashionable.”

“A uniform shows our clients we are different from the rest,” you tell her.

“By dressing the same?”

“The Hair Gang has a unique philosophy and very high standards. We dress the same to show we represent that.”

She grins, “I get it. So The Hair Gang is unique and Stretch is the sheep.”

You shake your head like you know her game but you don’t.

“Who gave me that tip?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Tell me,” you say, “or...”

“Or what?” she says. “What are you going to do to me, Stretch?”

“I won’t do anything but Yasmin might.”

“No one did, Stretch. I did it. You’d get nothing off a woman like that otherwise.”

“A woman like what?”

“Like snobs.”

“She gave me thirty pounds.”

“Of course she did. She could never be seen to tip less than your last client.”

You stare at her, trying to hide that you are in fact a bit shocked. Not wanting to give her the satisfaction of knowing that a sixteen-year-old girl could surprise you like this, you reach in your pocket for the twenty-pound note and hand it back to her.

“Thirty,” she says.

“What?”

“I want my commission.”

“You’re lucky I don’t report you.”

“You wouldn’t report me, Stretch.”

“I might.”

She holds up her phone to show a picture of your hand holding her skirt. You prise the phone from her hand but she just laughs and she keeps laughing like it’s the funniest thing she’s ever seen as you are prompted for a code.

You hold out another ten pounds. She goes to take it, but you tell her, “Uh, uh, you first.” She takes back her phone and you watch her delete the photo and what you hope is the backup. Then you hand her the tenner and make a mental note to stay the hell out of her way.

CUT

Lunch break comes as lunch break must do, even in here. It’s law. They can’t break it, so typically, they bend the rules. They let the staff have it at stupid times.

It makes no sense having lunchtime this late in the day but that’s the way it is. That’s how it is in every Salon you’ve worked in. Lunch break comes late and you eat on your feet. They might as well let you go early and not bother with lunch at all. You are well beyond feeling hungry. But they won’t do that. It’s a wonder you get lunch at all. If Yasmin had her way everyone would do without. Not because she’s tight like Napoleon. Her trousers are tight but they still cost a packet. It’s because she’d say you don’t work hard enough to deserve it. And now, as you stand in the alley

next to the salon try for about the tenth time to ring your model, Gemma, the trainee you bribed to get your lunch twenty minutes earlier from the sandwich bar just up the road comes slouching around the corner, baguette in one hand, phone in the other. She's far too occupied tapping out messages on her phone to notice the lettuce leaves blowing in her wake. Her name is Gemma but there's nothing gem-like about this girl standing in front of you now. She's sweet sixteen and could lay out most blokes with a single punch. Short and stocky with swollen fingers from the gold sovereign rings Yasmin always makes her take off, but somehow always seem to have grown back by the end of the day.

She slaps the baguette hard in your palm like a relay baton.

It's tuna. You can't stand hot tuna.

"They didn't have Meatball and Mozzarella," she says. "I got you Tuna Melt."

"I said I don't like tuna."

"You said, Get me anything."

"I meant something decent."

"Anything means anything."

You shake your head. Drop the two cigarettes you promised her into her hand and she returns the favour by dropping your change from a height so that half of it slides through your fingers. Before you can swear, someone shouts her name from inside and she runs back through the fire door.

You stoop to pick up the coins. At a glance you are short by three pounds. You think about chasing after her but it's too risky going back in the salon, even in your lunch break. Napoleon, Yasmin, or Kim, could easily grab you to take a walk-in if you're found on the salon floor. Instead you light up a cigarette and scroll through your phone for replies but there are none. Only apologies from models you hadn't really intended to use saying that tomorrow is too short notice. Of course it is. This is madness, you know that, you think as you smile back at the well-dressed redhead who asks you for a light as she passes you by on her way to the business unit at the back of the alley.

You extend the lighter and flick. She parts her lips and rings the orange filter tip, drags back and holds it in, one, two, three, exhale. There is instant chemistry, you think, and you wonder what the chances would be of her saying yes if you asked her to be your model right now.

She tells you she has a work-do on tomorrow evening. She tells you she'd have loved to otherwise. You curse inwardly but you're nothing if not a professional. You tell her to pop in for a consultation sometime. Say you'll give her a discount. "Ask for Stretch," you say, placing the silver backed salon card in the palm of her hand.

“Stretch?” she says.

“OI, STRETCH.” You feel his presence just before the nitrous-voice sucker punches you in the jaw from the front of the alley. In the moment it takes you to close your eyes, count to three and wish him dead, the woman is gone and you are faced with the over-familiar figure of Byron Bone, arms splayed wide and puffing hard on a cigarette like a smoking bi-plane coming in to trash your peace and quiet. For a moment you think he’s going to walk straight into you but he veers at the last moment.

“Not eating that?” he says, eyeing your sub.

You offer him the tuna sub. He chucks his cigarette end up in the air and punts it into the salon wall, clenches his fist like he’s just scored the winning goal and snatches the tuna sub from your grasp. And there goes your lunch.

“Got your model sorted yet?” he says, through a mouthful of lettuce, tomato and spring onions.

“It’s all sorted,” you say.

He raises his eyebrows like he knows you’re lying and you don’t bother to ask him back because you can tell by the smirk he’s already found his. And to rub it in, he starts to tell you yet another one of his glory stories about his latest conquest. Bone stops smiling like he’s given away too much already. Changes the subject. “Hey, you should have seen this girl I met last night...”

He looks suddenly blank like he’s totally forgotten what he is going to say.

“This girl?”

He winks at you.

“A gentleman never tells.”

He has this way of telling people things they don’t want to know as if it was their idea. Especially his sexual conquests.

“That’s right. She was seriously fit and we’re talking cover girl stunning here.”

He smiles. Runs a buffed nail against the grain of his stubble like he knows you had a shit night last night. Like he has this knack of knowing when you’ve struck empty. It’s uncanny, like he somehow picked up your book and he’s written himself in as an extra part with no other purpose than to fuck you off.

“And she’s just standing there at the bar and every fucker in the club is looking at her. And they’re going up to her, one at a time, buying her drinks, asking her to dance. They’re even proposing marriage to her right there on the spot. That’s how hot she is. And they’re getting nowhere, right. Cause that’s not what she wants, see. So I go over ‘cause I know what she wants,

straight away. I tell her straight, 'They're all puppies, love, what you need is a wolf. And she turns to me and she says, Do you know where I can find a wolf?'

Bone shakes his head like it's the stupidest question anyone's ever asked in the history of stupid questions.

"Can you believe it? Do I know where she can find a wolf?"

He stops right there, but that's Bone's gift. And like sniffing a sock after taking it off, you have to know how the story ends.

"Well?"

"Well what? Oh, that. It was all over after that. I fucked her in the toilets."

But the most annoying thing though, is he's probably not even making it up. He has this way, like he does with all his clients, of saying stuff to women that no one else could get away with. They hang on his every word and with every word he utters, their hearts beat a little quicker till everyone in the salon can hear a, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. He'll say, "It's like this, I won't cut your hair as a hairdresser, I'll cut your hair as a man."

Cue the soundtrack of orgasms as snip by snip, he transforms them into something that minutes ago, you wouldn't have thought possible. But the worst thing about all this is, he does it just that much quicker than you do. He's ten years younger than you and in the short time he's worked here, just under a year, he's already been promoted to senior stylist, like you.

Your evening on the other hand? You shudder from a night recapped in flashbacks where you started out doing so well. So on form, so charming, you thought you were being. You remember quite clearly her agreeing to come home with you, but she went to the toilets and never came back. You looked around the club for her, walking round and round and round, until you finally found a girl who looked quite a lot like her. When you asked her if she was her, she said she'd never met you before and this seemed to make sense, because although she had very voluminous, curly mahogany hair like the first girl, she was like a less attractive version, like a replacement for a film star who'd demanded too much for the sequel movie. After that it just got worse and worse and you plain forgot what happened but just lately this sort of thing has been happening more and more often. In fact, ever since your thirty-fifth birthday, six months ago, when some woman guessed your age as higher than it was, things have started going from bad to worse. Starting to look older was something that you had never worried about. It was something that happened to other people, but not to you. And not this soon at any rate. You had always told yourself you'd have a salon by the time you hit your mid-thirties. Sassoon did. Stafford did. The Mascolos probably had a few dozen by then.

Your thoughts are interrupted by a high pitched creak as the fire door opens a crack about large enough for a cat. Byron's eyes narrow like he's spotted prey in the long grass as Anton emerges, while you are relieved to see Anton so you no longer have to listen to Byron go on.

Anton is a colour technician. The staff room walls are plastered with thank you cards from all the female clients that adore him who will never have him. He says he's French-Algerian by descent and you take his word for it, though Blue Jean once told you she knew someone from where he used to work that said he'd made the name Anton up. Either way, he's slick as they come with his whipped up straightened black quiff and if you hung him on a dartboard in a gay bar he'd be the bullseye. He taps the bottom of a gold cigarette pack and is quick to put it back in his pocket before Bone's arm arcs and swipes for the packet.

"Get your own, scrounger," he says, with none of your diplomacy.

"I see someone didn't get any cock last night," says Bone.

Anton extends the middle finger. "Suck on this, Brian," he says.

All at once Bone looks very serious. The one thing he really hates is anyone calling him by his real name, Brian. At least, it's Anton who says that Brian is Byron's real name. He says poor Brian Bone got the name Byron by accident, reason being that back at school he was so slow he couldn't even spell his own name. Now, most teachers were polite and didn't embarrass the poor boy about the many odd variations of his name, but on this one occasion when it came to handing back a homework assignment, a particularly sadistic history teacher held up his assignment for the class to see and shouted out, Do we have a BYRON BONE in the room? The classroom erupted with laughter, people rolled out of their chairs, and the name Byron stuck. At first he hated it, but then he discovered a new talent where spelling just didn't matter. Cutting hair. And so the legend that is Byron Bone was born. Now he loves his name almost as much as he loves winding up Anton. And in the same way Anton knows how to wind up Byron, Byron knows just how to wind up Anton. Byron retells the story of his night club conquest, all over again, but instead of starting with the details of how he won her over, like he did with you, with Anton he zooms right in with a blow by blow, high-carb account of what he did with her in the toilets. No detail is spared because Bone knows it's not the bragging that Anton really hates. What makes him really squeamish is hearing men talking about having sex with women. You once asked him why this was and he just laughed and said, It's just not normal. You shake your head as Byron mimes pulling her hair and slapping her arse in rhythm with an exaggerated hip movement, "So I'm there and I'm riding her like a pro at Ascot, and she's got this perfect ass, an' I mean perfect arse...an arse to die for. And fuck me, you just want to eat her up all at once. And she's got this long blonde hair right down to her..."

“To her arse?” you say.

“Right, to her arse,” he says, “So I grab hold of it both hands and...” he turns around to make sure he’s got both of your attention, “...and I’m yanking her hair back hard and I’m ready to you know what, get about it, you know, get about the fucking business. So I give it that final big thrust and what happens, I only go and let go of her hair by accident. She literally goes flying off me. Hits the fucking wall with a SMACK!”

“WHAT THE...?” you say in unison with Anton.

“I know mate, I know!”

“So what happened?” you say

He pauses. “She lost four fucking teeth.”

“What the F...” says Anton, “So what did you do?”

Byron starts to grin. “Ah, nothing. It was just her milk teeth.”

Anton stands shocked, his mouth agape like a record wide shark skull from the Museum of Biggest Records in West Australia. “YOU TOTAL CUNT, Byron”, he says, “You can’t joke about stuff like that.”

“Just fucking did, didn’t I,” says Byron, “And I had you. I fucking had the both of you.”

Anton turns to you and points his finger at Bone, “Some guys should be neutered,” he says, “Seems like a new one every night.”

“Hold-up,” says Bone, “I’ve had my share alright but it’s nothing compared to your lot.”

“MY LOT?” says Anton. You don’t envy Bone at all right now. Anton is sharper than most and you’ve heard him cut dead bigger, smarter guys than Bone. “You’re a fucking loser, Brian. You know that?”

“And you’re lucky you’re...” He stops.

“What, Gay?”

Byron stops grinning, his forehead creases.

“Or what?”

“Or, you know what.”

“Why don’t you show me what.”

There is no chicken and egg about this situation, Bone hates Anton simply because Anton makes twice the money he does, in tips. Anton gets all the wealthiest clients because they love hearing all his stories about the world of high fashion that he’s lifted straight from the pages of Italian Vogue. Anton makes in tips what the rest of you only dream of, and it drives Byron nuts. But right now, Anton does something you’ve never imagined him doing. He squares up to Byron

Bone. Standing a foot shorter than Bone, you don't fancy his chances much, but judging by his eyes, popping out of his head like an angry Pug, you'd say he fancies them just enough.

Bone is unphased. Says nothing. This champ does all his talking in the ring. You step in between. Put a hand on each of their shoulders.

Anton snaps out of it and moves back a little but Bone shrugs violently, removing your hand with a strength you didn't know he had. He turns to face you, moves up right inside your comfort zone. He is actually going to hit you.

Your arms feel weak. Your brain says run. But you don't run because where would you go, and Bone doesn't hit you either because where would he go?

Neither of you move. The two of you stand locked. Then Byron looks upward and as if on cue, the sky opens up. You run for shelter, pressing yourself against the wall next to the fire door. The slight overhang of the roof is only enough to half protect you from the rain.

The smell of wet tarmac makes you sleepy and you wonder how your sodden cigarette stays alight through all this, but some things you just have to take for granted. You flick your fifth and final lunchtime cigarette into the side of the yellow skip. It lands, one in a thousand orange filter tips that partner off in the puddles, dance a ring in the raindrops.

You get going, head out of the alley towards the mall armed with salon cards to find a model.

If you stand in the same place long enough you'll meet the whole world sooner or later, you think, as you stand on the ground floor of the Churchill shopping centre, desperately trying to find a model. The place is packed out with shoppers of every description but even so and even though time is running out, you need to be very picky. You can be one hundred percent sure that Byron and Blue Jean's models will have stepped straight off the covers of magazines but apart from that, there are so many factors that you need to consider when finding a decent hair model. She has to be so much more than other models, than glamour models and even catwalk models. She can have the face of a supermodel but she's nothing if she doesn't have the right hair. Personally you prefer thick hair and lots of it. It's perfect for sculpting and allows for a higher margin of error. Thin hair requires far more effort in the styling just to get the required volume.

Straight or curly?

It doesn't really matter. It depends on your vision, on the personality of the model and the reaction you want to achieve in the eye of the beholder. But be warned, you can still straighten out curly hair if you want it to be straight, but it takes more effort to turn straight hair curly. With sets and perms and tongs and plenty of product.

In a perfect world you'd have your pick of professional models, but catwalk models don't limit their job prospects by parting with long hair, so the standard way to attract a potential hair model is with flattery and the offer of a free cut and colour treatment.

GOOD MODEL HUNTERS MAKE GOOD HAIRDRESSERS, you repeat to yourself as you measure the different lengths and tones and depths and shades on passing faces and bodies of all shapes and sizes.

You start with a couple of tall brunettes lingering near the Apple Store and approach them holding out a salon card to look more legitimate. They tell you they are from Hamburg and are flying back first thing tomorrow morning. It takes you longer than you'd like to ditch them as they are both very talkative, asking you if the salon you work at has a web page for next time they come back on holiday. You give each of them a salon card and tell them to look out for you in a TV programme called The Magnificent Seven. They eye you very seriously as you tell them you'll be in it and one of them writes the name of the show on a piece of paper.

Next you try the bakery. On several occasions you've suggested a Twiggy hair-do to a very attractive young Chilean woman who works in there who tells you she used to be a professional ballerina. She always says no to the Twiggy-do.

"Hi Stretch," she says in that fuck-me-now voice she always uses on you. She uses it on all her customers but you never see that. "I bought that stuff you recommended."

"Unbeatable" you say, "The dogs!" you say, "The best shampoo money..."

"Not shampoo," she says.

"Like I said, the best conditioner..."

She slaps you playfully on the wrist, "Damage Remedy from Aveda."

"Right, the treatment pack." If you did recommend it, you certainly can't remember and the way she's squinting at you now you wonder if that's all you don't remember. Did you, you wonder?

No, you didn't says her look like she read your mind and then she says no to being your model. She is trying to grow her hair. You frown at her, her hair has already grown down past her waistline.

Next you try the chemist and the department store, there are always plenty of women in the cosmetics sections. They are already focused on the idea of hair and beauty treatments so there is less groundwork to do. Sure enough, you find a stunning redhead in her late teens with shoulder length hair, eyeing up the home-dye kits. You mention to her that you are in fact a hairdresser from Hair Gang Salons, East Street, and ask her what colour she's intending to dye her hair. She says she hates her natural hair colour and her pale freckly skin and wants to change her appearance. You tell her you think her natural hair colour is beautiful but that you could make it look even more beautiful. You offer to do it for her tomorrow at four and she tells you that's

fine. There is an instant feeling of relief and weight off your mind as you give her your card and scribble your mobile number on it should anything come up. Then you ask for her number but hardly have you typed in the first three numbers when this stocky woman strides up out of nowhere and grabs the girl's phone out of her hand. You look at the girl as if to ask her if she actually knows this woman to which you get the response from the woman, "Leave my daughter alone, she's only fourteen." You try to explain to the woman where you work and that age really isn't a problem, fourteen is old enough for a cut and colour, but she tells you "No way," her daughter is at boarding school in Switzerland and they do not allow their students to look unconventional or dye their hair. The girl, who has turned crimson from embarrassment has time to say, "MUM," before the woman ushers her out of the shop, throwing you a filthy look back over her broad shoulders as she goes.

With just ten minutes left of your lunch break you are beginning to feel disheartened but all is not lost. You can carry on your model hunting after work, after all. You lean against a pillar near a make-up stall in the centre of the hall and sink a can of cola, watching this guy who works there with a permanent smile and massive buck teeth. He's not much to look at by any account but he's the most successful salesman in this place. Not because he's good at selling his product but because he's build up a reputation that it's only the pretty ones he stops. You've seen some women walk past him again and again and again until he finally stops them and after twenty minutes of pampering, sells them whatever sea salt based facial treatment he's selling. You stand there watching him watch them like a bigger predator waiting for a smaller one to catch something so he can steal it. That's when you notice the cowboy hat, over behind the make-up stall, outside Costa Coffee. Lady Blue-Jean twists into focus. She's chatting to this guy who has his back to you but you recognize the posture and mannerisms. At first you think it's Stuart. He has the same hair and charcoal grey jacket, but he's taller and in better physical shape. This guy looks more the type to impress women by doing Iron Man events for children's charities, than bragging about having once done housewife makeovers on morning TV.

You can't tell what either of them is saying but you can tell by Blue Jean's expression and by the sharp turns and angles of their body language, they are arguing over something. You've never really thought about what Lady Blue Jean's type is, but you guess this must be it. The type with no taste but enough money to take her out to eat in places she can't afford to go herself. Just like the type Agnes goes for too. And as he turns in your direction and stares straight at you and you force away the thought that actually, you can sort of see what she sees in him in that airline pilot, father replacement kind of way, you realise that you have in fact seen him before. You've seen him hanging about outside the salon enough times waiting to pick up Agnes.

You get back to the salon five minutes late, grab your kit bag from the staff room and try to push The Magnificent Seven out of your mind as you bound down the stairs to the salon floor. Your client has already been seated, next to Byron's client. In fact, you notice that she is chatting to Blue Jean's client. They are friends. Even before you can say hello and introduce yourself to the woman sitting at your chair, she turns sideways to address Byron's client in a language you don't recognize but sounds Eastern European. In turn, Byron's client says something to Byron and reluctantly, he turns to you.

"Your lady is open for a change," says Byron.

"How much of a change?"

"I don't know," he says, "Just play it safe. Trim, layers and forward grad."

Byron turns away from you and faces his client's reflection but you're not going to let him get away with telling you what to do, that easily. You turn back to your client and try with hand gestures and mime to find out what she really wants. You show her pictures in magazines and she paws through them, laughing and pointing out different styles but nothing that is suitable for her thin hair. When you point to pictures you think her hair type can handle, she just shrugs. Resigned to the idea that you are never going to find out what this client really wants, you grudgingly take Byron's advice to play it safe. And even though you know your client will probably not understand you, you speak the words, "trim, layers and forward grad," out loud to her and take her smile as a yes. However, as soon as you sit her at the basins, you notice that what you took for a smile was more a trick of the mirror. When seated right up close and face to face it's really more of a sneer.

You walk across the salon and grab the first trainee you come across to shampoo for you. Crystal doesn't even hear you out.

"I'm assisting Yasmin," she says

You begin to point out that she is not in fact doing anything at the moment except slouching over a broom and chewing gum, and that Yasmin is standing behind reception waiting for a head of highlights to take, when Bone flanks you and asks Crystal to shampoo for him. By the time you can spit out the word, BUT, Byron is instructing Crystal which shampoo and conditioner he would like her to use and you are left shampooing your own client.

The upside down face stares at you like she'd talk to you if she knew how. A look you gladly reflect back at her as you work up a lather, knowing all too well the language barrier is just a convenient excuse. That she and you will always be upside-down faces. That you'd have fuck all to say to her in the real world because she's just not your type and you don't have time to learn

foreign languages. That's what you tell yourself. But you keep on smiling and pretending that there is more to you, that you don't feel the same stuff down all the way down to your core, and as you rinse her hair and nicotine withdrawal hits you, you picture Byron Bone out the back with a cigarette and remind yourself this is not the time to start changing. There's only one winner in all this so you need to be yourself more than ever.

Byron kicks off by parting a horseshoe section. There is a crispness in the way he combs his sections you have never been able to emulate, but then again, you've always told yourself he does this because he overcompensates for his inability to maintain balance throughout the shape and hairline in the way you do.

Already knowing you can't take as many risks with your client, you bang in the trim, then direct the hair up to point-cut in a long round layer, around the curve of your fingers. This will produce a look with enough volume and movement to compensate for a client with such thin hair. As you finish off the round later and begin to section off for the forward graduation, you catch sight of Bryon as he starts to disconnect the lengths between the horseshoe section and the hair below, leaving longer length on top and shorter lengths beneath. To blend the two, he back-cuts deep into the roots. It's a complicated look to achieve and you do wonder why he's trying something this edgy, not to mention time consuming, on a regular client. Then you see why.

Stuart and Yasmin stand at reception, one either side of Kim. They are all watching Byron Bone. Yasmin's face carries a look that you've rarely seen her wear, one that could only be described as admiration, while Stuart and Kim just nod and smile in agreement with whatever Yasmin is telling them. By the looks of things, you'd say she's lavishing praise on Bone. Bone, who is obviously all too aware of the three of them watching him and is putting on a show of skill.

This is wrong. You know you can't let Byron get away with this with what is at stake. You can't have him showing you up by cutting a better cut in front of them this close to them making a decision about which of you is the best cutter in the salon. If there is little between his cut and yours on the night, this demonstration now may sway them to pick him over you.

You stop what you're doing with the forward-grad and take a step back to reconsider your cut. Your lady has thin hair, that's true, but maybe if you over-direct enough away from the hairline, you can maintain enough weight in the base to allow yourself to create something more interesting.

First, you take your client's hair back, twist cubed sections into cone shapes, and snip at various points starting from the roots and working through to the ends. This will achieve a jagged, multi-layered look through the hair.

Byron stops what he's doing and turns round to watch what you're doing. A sly grin forms on his face and with good reason. He knows what you're attempting is risky as hell. That only the very best could pull it off. Byron's client has the hair and face for a whole range of innovative and breathtaking cover girl hairstyles. But yours? She has limp hair and looks like she could do with a course of Prozac. But you don't have time to regret what you've started because now Byron is stepping it up a gear.

From delicate precision, he switches tempo and attacks the hair with delicate thrusts and refrains, interspersed with large jagged chopping motions like a butcher chopping ribs. Then he takes alternate sections vertically, long and then clipper-short, all around the head. What he's left with is a design worthy of the cover of Dazed Magazine.

His client looks stunned. His client is in love with him.

What you are left with, on the other hand, is a client whose natural hair can barely manage the layering you've inflicted on it. Even with a hefty coating of hairspray, you know she'll never get any real volume.

You feel the gaze of the unholy hair trinity at reception. You know you will not be able to avoid a comparison with what Byron has just done. You know you have to do something to salvage an ounce of pride right now.

But then it comes to you. You haven't just figured out how to salvage your cut, you've realised how to make yours stand even more than Byron's cut.

You don't bother to ask your client first. Like the moment the hero grabs hold of the heroine and kisses her out of nowhere, she will either love you for it or hate you for it.

So you do it. You cut in a Joan of Arc fringe.

No, it's even shorter than that.

CUT

"What a wanker," says Blue Jean.

"I thought he looked cute," says Agnes.

"Of course you did. He had a pulse."

"No. I thought he looked distinguished."

"With that tan?"

“Better than no tan.”

“It was bottle tan.”

“And?”

“On a man? And anyway, he was going on like he thinks I’ve got nothing better to do than talk about his hair all day.”

“Don’t they always.”

It plays in your head like a radio channel and you hardly notice it anymore. You’ve heard the same kind of stuff for about nineteen years now. All different stories with the same endings, where you, as the male minority just sit there listening like a fly on the wall. Like the fly you now follow, jumping from one coffee cup to the next near the sink, as Blue Jean tells Agnes about some poor guy who has probably done nothing to deserve all this bashing right now. Who probably thinks he had a great chat with Blue Jean and who almost certainly tipped her at least a tenner for what probably amounted to a bit of a trim around the sides and back.

“And then he puts on these glasses to get a better look and I say, would you mind leaving them off, so he says, Oh yes, of course, and he just chucks them on the work surface in the middle of all my stuff and nearly knocks my scissors on the floor. If they knew how much those scissors cost.”

“I caught my ex cutting his toenails with mine once.”

“What did you do?”

“He’s my ex.”

“So this guy, he’s squinting in the mirror, right, and he’s jerking his head one way, then the other, like if he waves his head around enough an idea might drop out of his ears. And I’m thinking, this guy needs to make up his mind. But instead of making up his mind, he starts on about my hat.”

“They always do.”

“He says, Why am I wearing that cowboy hat? I have such a pretty face. I shouldn’t hide it.”

“Perhaps you should stop wearing it.”

“Perhaps he should just roll out over and die.”

You notice something different about Blue Jean, something that’s changed in the lunch break. Or rather, she has changed something. During her lunch break she has gone from wearing Blue Jeans to wearing white trousers, much like the white trousers you often see Yasmin wearing about the salon. At first you figure she’s **had an accident**, made a mess over lunchtime of something. Perhaps she’d met up with Rob for a liquid lunch somewhere private and white jeans were the easiest thing to buy as a replacement in the shopping mall, but this doesn’t make sense.

Why couldn't she just buy replacement blue jeans. And then it dawns on you, she's trying to impress Napoleon. She's trying to show him she's worthy of representing this salon by wearing white trousers like Yasmin does.

But Agnes is right. If Blue Jean really wants to impress Napoleon, she has to ditch that hat. It's the hat the Napoleon really can't stand. Everyone knows that. The satisfied smiles on her client's faces might blot out the blue jeans, but it's that hat she never takes off that he really can't stand. He looks at her with such an indescribable look when she pulls it low to cover her eyes. God only knows why she wears it. It's not like it's a particularly fashionable hat or anything. It's just a tattered brown cowboy hat, that right now is pulled even lower than normal and as she yawns, a trickle of eyeliner crosses her cheek to where she blots it with a shaking hand.

"So what did you say?"

"What can you say? I just smiled. And like I've just given him this big in-your-face come-on, he asks me, Am I waiting for the right cowboy to come along?"

"So what did you tell him?"

"I said, Even if I was he'd never be my John Wayne."

"You said that?"

"Chance would be a fine thing. And he says, it will happen when I least expect it. Can you believe that? So I'm standing there and I can't wait to get him out of my chair, then just as I think my head is going to explode, he makes up his mind. Again, it's something he hasn't got long enough hair for. So I explain this to him and finally I get him to agree on a French Crop. But only by telling him George Clooney has a French Crop."

"George Clooney has a *façon*."

"Hardy has a *façon*. Clooney has a Crop. And he's eyeing me like I've just told him he looks like George Clooney. And I can tell right away he thinks I fancy him. I mean, like I'd fancy a guy like that."

"It's about time you got with someone."

There is a pause where Blue Jean's face turns serious like she's not quite sure whether to take serious offence, or whether she should just ignore it.

"Well anyway, I'm cutting his crappy crop and suddenly the gown starts moving."

"He wasn't?"

"I know. UP, and down. UP, and down."

"You're joking. That's all you need after that guy on the tube last week."

"Which one?"

"The one playing with himself behind the Sun."

“It was the Times.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad if you fancied them. But why is it always the old ones?”

“Or the ones wearing rings?”

They both shake their heads like they’ve finally stumbled upon the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything. And why not, because no one else in here is going to tell them otherwise, especially not you, right now.

“So you told reception?” says Agnes.

“Like fuck I did,” says Blue Jean, “I yanked the gown off his lap.”

“You did what?”

“I know. And there he is just polishing those fucking glasses. He’s only gone and grabbed them back off the shelf when I wasn’t looking. So he looks at me all surprised with one side of his hair long and the other side short and he says to me, Are we finished already?”

“Are we finished already?”

“I know. Can you believe it?”

You can easily believe Blue Jean is capable of repeating this story to Agnes and everyone else in the salon, all day long as you try to concentrate on pushing away the morbid feeling of not finding a model. And as you do so, you wonder how Blue Jean is managing to be so talkative and act like her whole world might not collapse tomorrow. For whoever loses this model competition, it’s back to being a regular salon hairdresser and for Blue Jean, who can’t be any more than a year younger than you, this can’t be a pleasant thought.

CUT

The last time anyone saw Agnes look this excited was a couple of months back when she announced she’d met a pilot called Rob, who most of the salon nicknamed Flyboy Rob but Blue Jean called, Rob the nob. This was a full week after the traumatic ending of her previous relationship when her ex-boyfriend, the manager of some franchise gourmet burger place, uploaded pictures of her to the internet which Byron Bone claimed to have found, although you suspect he was lying because he wouldn’t show them to anyone else and he’s nothing if not a shower.

“Who’s client was that talking to Stuart out there?” she says to Blue Jean, “he just gave her a full refund.”

You sit by the staff room door, eyes closed, hoping something heavy will just fall through the ceiling and crush Agnes. You are quite sure you'd never feel a moment of pity for her.

"There's no way Stuart gave her a refund," says Blue Jean. "Stuart wouldn't give his own mother a refund."

"Well, he gave her one. So what happened?"

"Ask him," says Blue Jean, and you don't need to open your eyes to know she's pointing at you.

"He's sleeping," says Agnes.

"He's not sleeping," says Blue Jean. "No one could sleep after that mess-up."

"The guilty always sleep."

You open your eyes suddenly, hoping to catch Blue Jean looking at you, but she's looking right across at Agnes. You feel like telling Agnes all about Blue Jean. How you saw her together with her boyfriend in the shopping mall at lunchtime. How everyone in the salon says they are fucking. But you stop yourself. You're above that, you tell yourself. "You told me she was open to a change," you say.

"You're supposed to be a professional," says Blue Jean, "at the end of the day it's your decision."

"So what is it? What did he do," says Agnes.

"Oh, nothing much. He just cut a fringe," laughs Blue Jean.

"So what's the big deal with that?" says Agnes.

"Oh nothing," says Blue Jean. "Except he didn't ask her first."

You know full well you're lying but there's no way you'll tell any of them that, "I did. I thought she was clear about what I was going to do."

"She didn't speak a word of English," says Blue Jean.

"Then why was she in here?" you say. You know you are walking yourself into a corner but you can't show any weakness in these places. Not to staff and not to management either. There's no such thing as confess and you'll be forgiven in here.

"That's rape," says Agnes. "That's hair rape", she says, starting to laugh at her own joke. "He's a hair rapist." The laugh turns to a giggle.

"So what are you saying," says Blue Jean, "we shouldn't cut foreign clients? Last time I looked there wasn't a swastika on the window."

"I'm just saying she should be able to say how she wants it cut or bring someone in to translate for her."

"Or bring in a picture of how she wants it," says Agnes, "that's the best thing to do."

“Copying pictures is what hairdressers with no imagination do,” says Blue Jean.

“I love cutting from pictures,” says Agnes.

“I know,” says Blue Jean.

Agnes looks at Blue Jean in a way you’ve never seen Agnes look at Blue Jean before. Genuinely hurt. Then again, you’ve never seen Blue Jean insult her like that before. Blue Jean has always treated Agnes as an equal, even though she’s better than Agnes in nearly every way. It’s something you’ve always respected her for. Now, she doesn’t even try to take it back. She says nothing. In fact, no one says anything as you head to the sink to pour yourself a coffee and check your phone for replies from potential models. No sooner have you started pouring when you hear Crystal behind you, “Yasmin wants to know why you’re not with a client right now, Stretch?”

“Why do you think? I don’t have a client.”

You ignore her and continue pouring the coffee.

“Yasmin said, What if there was a walk-in? What would you have done then?”

The scalding liquid spills over the rim of the mug and onto your hand. You grit your teeth and say very slowly, “But there wasn’t, was there.”

“But there could have been.”

You are starting to wonder if Yasmin has put her up to this. To try and get you to walk out or quit your job from the constant nagging from this trainee. You gesture around the room wildly, sucking the flesh between your thumb and first finger.

“Look around you, Crystal. I’m not the only free stylist right now.”

“Everyone else is busy. I checked with reception.”

You point at Blue Jean and Agnes.

“Do they look busy to you?”

“I’m just waiting for Yasmin to finish colouring my client so I can cut her,” says Agnes. Blue Jean doesn’t say anything. Then Anton, who has obviously overheard the conversation as he approached from the hallway, enters the room and holds up his hands. “Don’t look at me,” he says, “I’m on lunch.”

“How many lunch breaks is that today?” Agnes says.

Anton laughs. “When you get to be as good as I am, dear, they’ll let you have more lunch breaks too.” You turn around to talk to Anton but you find Crystal still standing there right behind you.

Crystal takes a step closer to you.

“Yasmin says you should be on the floor.”

“What the fuck Crystal?” Now you know she’s just making it up.

“She’s just doing her job, Stretch,” says Agnes.

Crystal does not need this kind of encouragement. “Yasmin says, If you’re not cutting your clients, you could be ripping foils or sweeping the floor.”

“Hey Crystal,” says Anton. Anton has a way with the trainees you don’t have. “Fuck off,” he tells her. She does not talk back to him or even look like she’s going to. She just leaves the room immediately. For a moment you think she’s back again but the girl who enters the room is a tall woman with waist length platinum blonde hair. A woman with amazing hair, and red stockings. You do a double take before you recognise Jesamine.

“Look at you,” says Blue Jean. “Who coloured your hair?”

Anton raises his hand.

“Oh,” says Agnes, “and look, not a hint of yellow in it.”

“Cheeky tart,” says Anton. “What did you expect?”

You are not sure what you expected, but you are wondering how you didn’t notice her potential before. Hair colour can transform a person, change the way they look to others, but this is something else, like the hair colour has somehow made everything about her just that much better. Even the way she holds herself is. She no longer slouches and has a new poise about her.

“Is she your model for tomorrow?” Agnes says.

“I’ve got a model,” Anton says.

Agnes seems surprised. “As good as this one?”

“Different, that’s all.”

“How different?”

“My model has a penis. Why don’t you use her?”

“I’m using my sister,” says Agnes.

“Jesamine is a better model,” says Anton. Blue Jean nods in the background. Then she stands up and walks around the back of Jesamine and without asking her first, slides her hands up into her hair to feel the texture and thickness.

“There’s nothing wrong with my sister,” says Agnes, still agitated.

Anton keeps a straight face for all of two seconds before he grins so big and wide it forces his eyes closed. Seeing this coming, Agnes picks up a water spray from the top of her kit bag and aims it at Anton.

“It’s loaded,” says Agnes.

Anton Points a warning finger. “Don’t. This shirt is Marc by Marc Jacobs. Spray me with that and I’ll fucking sue you.”

“Then don’t take the piss out of my sister.”

“I’m not. I just don’t think she’s a good model.”

"I know a good model when I see one. I was one once." Agnes looks around the room like she's waiting for someone to grin or snigger. Blue Jean's mind is elsewhere. She ruffles the sides of Jessamine's hair, then walks around the front of her.

"If you were a model, then I was a movie star," says Anton.

Agnes looks hurt. "What, so you don't think I'm good enough?"

"It's not that. I've seen you walk in heels."

"You've never seen me walk in heels."

"Exactly, you always fall over."

"Oh, you mean then."

"Yes, then."

"That doesn't count, I was drunk and you pushed me!"

He sways back and forwards in front of Agnes while off to the side of them, Blue Jean asks Jesamine to tilt her head forward.

"You see the thing is, most modelling agencies are just a big scam. There are these people from companies that call themselves modelling agencies. They hang around the shops in Oxford Street looking for young girls. And the first thing they do to get you hooked is they tell you you have potential. And they don't just ask everyone either. I was with four other friends at the time. The poor sweethearts all started to pout and tried to stand up a little higher on their toes but they only asked me. It makes you feel on top of the world to be singled out like that.

So then they tell you to turn up at some random place for a test shoot. It's usually some empty office they've hired just for the day to hold the so-called test shoot. And you sit in the waiting room with all the other girls, all dressed to impress, or at least, the best you can do at that age. It's only then that it strikes you that some of the people waiting don't really look like models. They are too short or too fat or wearing far too much make-up. But you don't see it at the time. Because at the time you are so excited you don't really think about it. You picture yourself at Paris Fashion Week and go with the flow. That is, until they usher you into this empty room, one by one, and get you to undress."

Blue Jean asks Jesamine if she can take a photo of her hair colour. Jesamine shrugs like to say, it's a silly question, of course she can. Blue Jean combs the hair into sections and examines the natural movement of the hair before snapping off several pictures from different angles. You kick yourself for not getting in there first. Look around for a way to distract Blue Jean so you can ask Jessamine first. The only thing that springs to mind is going out into the corridor and smashing the fire alarm. You ditch that thought quickly. No model is worth the risk. But then again, looking at Jesamine. The hair, the eyes. That nose and face that only yesterday struck you as dull.

Anton looks horrified. "Everything?"

Agnes taps the end of his nose.

"Almost everything. They make you stand there in your knickers while they take a few polaroids of you. Then they say they like you. And like the child you are you fool yourself into thinking this is all for real. And it is. You are a model. Right up until you feel the sting in the tail, you are a model."

"So you were a model then?" says Anton.

"Kind of. You see, that's when they tell you you need a portfolio. Some photographs so that they can promote you to clients. And you just grin and nod at everything they say. Where's the harm in photographs, right? That's what you're all about, after all. And that's all very well but then they tell you it will cost you a thousand pounds. And how many teenagers do you know with that sort of cash? I took on two extra paper rounds just to get the money. You sell anything you can get your hands on. You'd sell your body if someone asked you to. But no. You've been had. And somewhere inside you knew it all along."

Agnes's phone buzzes. She looks down, sombre. Now she's in tears.

"I was only joking," says Anton, immediately. "Of course I knew you were a model. You're gorgeous, babe."

"It's not that," says Agnes. She holds up her phone for Anton to see. "Rob just dumped me."

"Why?" says Anton, looking horrified.

"I don't know," she says, handing the phone to Anton, "it doesn't say."

Anton stares at the screen. "There must be a reason."

Of course there's a reason, you think, looking at Agnes and watching the tears streak her makeup like sharp charcoal cuts.

"I don't know. A few days ago he asked me how many people I'd slept with."

"And you told him that?"

"I told myself I'd never lie to him. He seemed alright afterwards."

"Of course he did. But there's lies and there's lies. When they ask how many, you lie."

"Why?"

"You just do."

"I did sort of."

"How, sort of?"

"I rounded it down."

"You did what?"

"To the nearest ten."

“Never admit to double figures.”

“And he just lay there. And then rolled over and went to sleep.”

“Well that’s it then,” says Anton. “I guess he wasn’t man enough for an independent woman.”

With hindsight you are not sure you why you decided to do what you did but you stare at Agnes like a wounded animal that no one else has got the guts to put out of its misery. “I can’t listen to any more of this shit,” you say, “Agnes, life just isn’t that complicated. He’s dumped you because he doesn’t give a shit about you.” She looks around at you like to say, What the fuck would you know? “On top of that, he’s fucking her too,” you say, extending your arm to point at Blue Jean.

Agnes frowns, for the first time ever her smile has actually gone. She looks at Anton but Anton just looks at the wall. Next she looks at Blue-Jean who turns slowly from inspecting Jessamine’s hair and begins to laugh it off like it’s all some kind of stupid joke. She’s always been a good actress and you’ve often thought she’d be good in that business, but it’s not good enough to stop Agnes from running out of the room without her phone, something she never, never, leaves behind. Jessamine looks around, first at Anton and then at you. She’s not sure whether she’s supposed to laugh at this or not. So she doesn’t. But you smile to reassure her as you ask her to be your hair model.

“I can’t”, she says. She almost looks like she means it as she says she’s sorry and tells you the last thing you wanted to hear. “I’m Byron’s model.”

CUT

The last client of the day is always the best client of the day. No matter what, the last client always passes the quickest, even if it takes longer to cut them. You know that after, you’re a mere ten minutes away from your first drink. But today is different. At all costs, you need to find a model tonight.

You look at your watch. Your client is already ten minutes late, another five minutes and you can wave her goodbye, even if she turns up you can call it a no-show. To your right, Byron is tearing his way through another simple ‘shag’ cut without a worry in the world right now. Looking at Jesamine as she sweeps the floor before reception, you are starting to feel more than a bit threatened.

A handsome looking woman in a beige mac stops by the salon window to look at the price list and you wonder if she will be your next. You hold your breath and wish her to pass by so you can call a no show and go out model hunting and smile as she carries on past the door in the direction of the main road. Your client is now twenty minutes late which means you can cancel the

appointment even if she turns up. As you reach reception and pick up the pencil to cross out the appointment, your lady walks in. She apologises and explains that she was caught late in a meeting. You begin to explain to her that it has become too late, and would she mind rearranging for another time soon, but Kim stops you. Asks you why you are cancelling your appointment. You explain to Kim that your client is now over twenty minutes late and this will not leave enough time for the haircut. This would normally be reason enough, but Kim interferes further by pointing out to you, in front of your client so that you can't argue back, that you do in fact have time because there isn't another client after your appointment.

Fuming inside, as they never pay you for time spent in the salon after closing, you smile at your client and conduct her to your chair. Hair salons always expect you to work past the end of the day, and always make you feel like it's your own inadequacy that is somehow responsible for you working overtime. On the other hand, this client looks easy enough. A woman in her mid-thirties with overly bleached, short blonde hair with more than a hint of orange in the roots. The sort of person you imagine is never satisfied with their hairstyle for very long because too many false starts have led to too many quick break-ups, have led to too many revamps and style changes.

You examine the existing hairstyle. There is a fair bit of mousy blonde regrowth in the roots but even so, you can tell that her last cut was a modern cut with plenty of movement and texture. This is a good indication that your client will be open to suggestion. Either way, short hair like this is a breeze. You can go in deep with the scissors, hand dry it, then rub in some sculpting wax and hey presto, the perfect finish. And because of the length, it's done in minimal time. You don't need the full forty-five minutes to do it. Best of all, because the hair is already in such bad condition, and because she is already twenty minutes late, you have the perfect excuse, she can't expect the world

But of course, she will.

She starts off the talking. She wants to get stuck in quick. This is always a good sign because it means you have to do less of the thinking. "I've just had a promotion," she says. "I need to look a bit more conservative for my new role."

You walk over to the magazine rack under the salon window and pick up the new copy of Woman's Weekly, last month's copy of Hello, and a couple of other magazines which might contain some conservative women's hairstyles. You point out a particular cut, known as a Short Round Layer, and suggest this to her.

"That's a bit mumsy," she says. "I don't think I'm ready for that just yet."

"Then how about a modern classic? Something you can style smartly in the week and mess up at weekends."

“How do you mean, mess up at weekends?” she says, suddenly very serious.

“If you want to let your hair down. Party a bit.” You know you shouldn’t have said the party bit. You should know by her expression that you need to back off a bit but you’re not your normal self. You’re far too distracted. Seeing she is far from amused at the insinuations she parties at weekends, you point to the far corner of the room, where Yasmin applies a tint, dressed in a light grey suit with a retro eighties design by Lagerfeld. “Something like that. A versatile style that can be both smart and messy can look great with a suit.”

It does the trick. Yasmin looks nothing if not authoritative and business-like. “Oh, well I do wear a suit. It’s part of my job,” says your client.

“So are we decided?”

“She looks amazing. And I do want it to look modern. But I can’t look like that. I’m a team leader.”

“Ok,” you say, “so supposing I take an inch off the layers and break up the fringe a bit to make it more modern? I think that would look nice.”

She frowns. “Isn’t that just a trim?”

You smile as somewhere high above satellites collide and all communication is lost. “It’s either that or we need to take more from the top.”

“I want to grow out the length on top. Can’t we do more with the underneath?” And suddenly she’s an expert. She grabs hold of the hair above her ears in both hands and pulls at it until the skin of her scalp stretches. “Like this,” she says, but her hair isn’t long enough for what she’s describing. If you take the bottom shorter and leave the top long, she’ll end up with that mumsy cut she’s already said she doesn’t want. You stare at each other in the mirror, each waiting for the other to break the stalemate.

“There was this picture I saw,” she says. “Of a haircut something like I wanted.”

There you have it. You should have known. There’s always a picture if you dig deep enough. She’s wasted your time pretending to be unsure, when all along she knew exactly what she wanted.

“Have you got it with you?” you say.

She shakes her head.

“Can you remember where you saw it?”

She hesitates. She knows where she saw it. They always do. This just means she’s embarrassed to tell you.

“Can you describe it to me?”

“Well,” she says, “it was short and blond and it curves up at the sides. It was in a film.”

“Can you remember which film?”

She pauses for moment like she's trying to think. She's not trying to think, though, you know all too well she's trying to decide whether or not to tell you.

"Which actress then?"

"What?"

"Who starred in the film?"

"Oh," she says, "I don't really remember. It was on one evening last week."

You start to name different movies and different actors and are surprised with how much difficulty you are having doing this. You like to think you have your finger on the pulse but you mostly only read about new movies in the magazines by reception, you rarely have time to actually go to the cinema. Every time you mention a movie, what it's about, or someone in it, she just looks at you like you couldn't be further away. But just as you are starting to wonder if you will ever get out of here tonight, she helps you out.

"I think it had Tom Hanks in it," she says.

"I'm not sure if his hairstyle would suit you," you say, regretting the joke straight away. Never joke with a client unless you're quite sure you know what they want and are one hundred percent confident you can achieve it.

It will come back to haunt you.

But you don't need to know any more than that. You know straight away it's the Meg Ryan, You've Got Mail cut she wants and she nods smiling as soon as you mention it. You also know the reason she won't just tell you straight away. It's not just a matter of being embarrassed, it's a matter of the spell being broken. She's living a double life as a character in a movie and no doubt there's some guy out there, probably some other mid-management lackey who's playing the part of the male lead. The problem with leading this double life is that if anyone finds out you are copying a character from the screen, that's it. Like a ghost in the room that haunted you as a kid, as soon as you tell someone else about it, they'll tell you how insane that is.

You know what she wants and it should all be a breeze from now on in, but the thing about the Meg Ryan cut is it's impossible to style it just like she does unless you have hair exactly like she does. It's just like the old Meg Ryan cut that everyone asked for ten years before and no doubt there was a similar cut ten years before that and ten years before that. You need exactly the right hair texture and wave for it, hair with enough movement so it flicks up at the sides. Sure, blow-drying helps, but in eighty percent of cases, it doesn't last. Then it just drops and looks like a bowl cut.

So much for leaving early. What seems like an eternity later and well after everyone else has packed up and gone home, you've dried one side of her Mulligan hairdo, but the other side won't sit right. The hair texture is way too straight. You put all your body weight into the tension, heat it right up around the brush, but still you can't get it to sit right.

After several valiant attempts, wetting it down again and re-drying, you get it to stay right by backcombing the roots and fixing it with a half a can of hairspray before she gets a chance to ruin it.

With hindsight you should have pleaded with her more. You should have told her that Meg Ryan has naturally wavier hair than her. That Meg Ryan is a Hollywood actress with fabulous blonde hair, she doesn't dye it from a packet. Finally, you should have told her that her hair will never grow long enough for the styles she wants if she keeps dating guys that she thinks are like heartthrobs from movies based on books written by dreamers. Because as it stands, the moment she steps out the door, her hair will flop in the wind like the wing of a model aeroplane glued on by an impatient child.

CUT

This place is soaked by neon tubes that smooth out skin, with walls so dark they hide the dirt but dark corners have their uses too. Snorting, snogging, groping. A hidden climax in a waiting mouth beneath tables shaped by gum like the dark side of the moon. If you saw this place in daytime, you'd never come in here. Not for all the retro goddesses and almost-actresses that pack this dried ice swamp. This club does not stand the test of daylight but is the perfect setting for fairy tales that can come true with a little lube from the ever flowing drinks promotions and hypnotic tracks that sail through the mind until dawn. Judging by the buzz there is meat for the picking. New kids in town with dreams of the city. All are lured by the two-for-one cocktails and all are easily flattered by a man of fashion. A man that stands apart from the saps on the pull that line the dance floor, soaked in Boss for men, armed with the latest pick-up tips they read off their phones on the way in. You look at them all scoping around for some straggler whose skirt-length is ruled by the position of the moon and who according to leading sexperts is Looking for you even more than you're looking for her, even though she might not know it yet. Guys who for the most part will leave it too late to make a move because every fairy-tale has a formula and why should a hip affair be any different? End of the night equals drunk enough to lunge. Drunk enough to lunge plus boozed up birds equals a fuck. That's all very well if you want ugly sisters.

The sickly smell of sandalwood or lotus flower that follows you around seems to have become more and more prominent as time passes. You curse the smoking ban for those scents they designed to hide bad smells in clubs. The people smells that cigarettes did such a good job of covering up. They realised too late that nothing hides a fart in a crowd quite like burning tobacco does. And you think how the things we love like to fuck us up as you home in on about the tenth potential model in nearly three hours of searching through the clubs down West Street. Your latest target, a student in purple skinny jeans and a mahogany bob who has moved to stand just a few feet away, sipping tonight's luminescent blue promotion through a curly straw. She's not a classical beauty but she has those elongated features and big eyes like a Modigliani painting that Yasmin just loves. Yasmin loves unusual women and at the end of the day, even if she hates you, she'll never compromise her professionalism, and even more so, her artistic integrity. It's the one thing you know she thinks she holds over Napoleon and the one thing she stands firm about.

You nudge her, a touch harder than intended. She has these big eyes with tiny lids.

"Have you ever noticed how bad it smells in these places since the smoking ban?"

"Christ, I hate smoking," she says.

"I know, a dirty habit.

"I don't think it's dirty. My mother died from it."

"Cancer?"

"She was an drunk. She fell asleep and set fire to her mattress."

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't be. I'm pulling your leg. And you know what I do like?"

You shrug.

"I like Charlie," she says, raising an eyebrow.

"Fine," you say, "how about a line while we discuss business?" you say.

"Business?" she says, like you're going to ask her to turn tricks.

"I'd like to cut your hair tomorrow. I need you to be my hair model for a contest."

"I love having my haircut," she says. You beckon her to follow you to one of the booth tables. She hesitates a moment and stands on tiptoes to scan the dance floor. Then she shrugs and follows you to the one remaining free booth towards the corner. You make yourself comfortable but no sooner have you reached in your pocket for your gear, this armchair accessory of a woman with pillar box red hair and jams herself into the booth alongside the walking Modigliani painting and forces her tongue tonsil deep into her with a force that makes her chest heave like the heroine of an old silent movie.

“This is Lou. Lou, this is...”

“Stretch,” you say. You get a disinterested nod from the dyke who seems to be looking at the other woman for some kind of explanation.

“Stretch has gear,” says the other woman and the woman-mountain lightens up, satisfied with this reason. She still doesn’t look entirely happy, but at least she’s in control and she’ll be more than happy to snort all your gear while keeping a close eye on things, should you get any ideas. “Well, let’s get to it then,” she says.

“I asked...”

“Carina,” says the woman.

“...Carina to be my model.”

Lou’s grin is loaded with sarcasm as she asks, “Oh, which agency are you with? Storm? Models One?”

“Actually I’m a Hair Stylist,” you say.

“Snap,” says Lou. “So am I. Where do you work?”

“The Hair Gang, East Street.”

“Sassoon’s. London,” she says with a smug grin.

You look down at the table to avoid the smug grin you know without looking is on Lou’s face. They study your every move as you measure a line with an out-of-date gym card you’ve never used on a mini road atlas you’re not sure why you own. Divide it into four and take the first back in one go. It takes her three goes to mimic your effort, and you start to wonder if she has tried it before but eventually she gets it right and her stress diminishes with the incline of the drug. “Lou cuts my hair,” says Carina. “She does a great job too, don’t you think?” She reaches up to style her hair a little but you don’t bother to look. Even if it is a good cut, you’d never admit that. Not now. “And there’s no question of anyone else cutting it,” I need Carina next week to demonstrate a Box Bob to my NVQ class.

You nod, but you’re not really interested in how good the cut is and you don’t let Carina finish telling you how Lou won Hairdresser of the Year a couple of years back. Nor do you look back at Carina’s puzzled look, or Lou’s gaze of victory that you know is boring into your back as you move into position next to a girl you’ve noticed on her own near a pillar. On her T-shirt, in big white pixelated letters against a turquoise background, under what you think at first is a skull, but is actually a children in need badge, is written, SIZE DOES MATTER.

You watch bubbles rise and spin in the curly straw, vanish between lips that reflect the floating raspberries.

“Go on then, she says.”

You shrug as if to say, Say what?

“That you’re the man for me.”

“I was just going to say how much I like your haircut.”

“That’s original”, she says.

“So are my cuts,” you say.

“Hairdresser?” she says.

“Hair stylist.”

“What’s the difference?”

“About fifty pounds usually.”

They always laugh at this but she doesn’t. She looked like she was thinking about it but changed her mind and it didn’t quite happen. Instead she does the next best thing, asks you, “What would you would do with my hair?”

You reach towards her, pausing half way, for the obligatory nod from her to go ahead. “She leans towards you a little.”

“Have you ever done any modelling?” you say.

With hind sight you shouldn’t have messed around, you should have just grasped what you wanted, asked her outright if she wanted to be your model, but you’ve never been able to resist the foreplay of a situation. You can kind of see why she reacted the way she did, but it’s too late as she says, “Don’t you think you’re...?”

“What?”

“A little bit old.”

“A little bit old for what?”

“A little bit old to be in here chatting up girls like me.”

“Girls like you?”

“Half your age.”

You know you should just ignore her and focus on why you are here. Just write it off as childishness, like that girl that once insisted you leave a club in Camden because you were wearing Eighties gear at a Seventies night. Forget about everything else and ask her outright if she wants to be your hair model but you can’t. Your curiosity is getting the better of you and besides, what harm can it do to ask her this one small question, “How old do you think I am?”

At first she shrugs like she’d really rather not answer. You smile to encourage her, “Go on,” you say, “have a guess.”

“I don’t know,” she says, “Forty-three.” Then seeing the look on your face, she quickly changes it. “Thirty-nine?” she says.

“Seriously?” you say. And then, “Do I really look that old?” She gives you that look like she really doesn’t have time for your man-crisis. That she just doesn’t know you well enough to care or to tell you that, No, you don’t look your age, to say that, Yes, she would pity fuck you after last orders just to prove you can still carry off twenty-five. She isn’t the type for dragged out goodbyes and you doubt waving has ever been her thing. She swings her hips in a perfect ellipse and heads for the dance floor. Bends and blends somehow out of time with the movement of the other dancers until she vanishes behind a group of language students that you don’t really notice in oversize Baseball shirts, Eighties hot-pants and fluorescent socks. Yellow. Orange. Pink.

You call time-out. Dart for the toilets, barge and nearly spill the beer of some Trustafarian who shouts something after you to impress some half-cut art student with a home-made mini skirt displaying a visible panty line he’s planning to romance along the seafront later on.

An excessive amount of bleach does not hide the overbearing smell of several hundred guys with drunk aim. The two cubicles along the far wall look shut, but you give them a gentle shove just to check. The first swings and slams. It’s empty but there is no seat. Not really a problem for what you have in mind but the toilet is full of newspaper and unrecognizable stuff people have used to wipe themselves. All of this you would normally tolerate for the sake of a fix, except for one thing. On top of the pile is a cheap white sports sock with a clotted brown stain.

The second cubicle is in use. You push hard at the door to make sure but it doesn’t budge. Then you notice the soles of some trainers poking out from underneath. They are pink trainers with white soles. You press your ear to the door and sure enough you hear the low sound of someone sighing and groaning with pleasure. From the position and colour of the trainers, you’d say a woman is going down on a man. Another more manly groan confirms your suspicion. Either way they should get a move on. You tap the door gently to hurry them up, but at the same time you can’t help wondering if they’ll swap over, which in the spirit of fair play they probably should.

You wait. Check yourself out in the mirror above the sink as you reach in your pocket for your mini pot of Hair Shaper. Next you scoop out a ball the size of a pea and apply the wax generously, twisting and ruffling, for that perfect, fuss free, get-out-of-bed look. But something’s not right. You can’t seem to focus on your face as well as you could earlier in the evening. Can’t make yourself look as good as you did just an hour before. You try different angles in case it’s the lighting but whichever way you tilt your head, or how far you stand back from the mirror, you cannot make yourself look as good as you did before. The harder you try to look good, the less you recognise the person staring back at you. Like the body you are standing in is somehow not yours, borrowed

from someone else. A body that bucks and jolts and tries to throw you off at every turn. That longs for its real owner, in some epic battle, to come and take it back.

Your hands start to shake. You hold them up to the unshaded yellow bulb that hangs from the centre of the room but it's not your hands that are shaking, it's your whole arm. No, your whole body. It suddenly occurs to you that you haven't eaten anything in quite a long time. You try to remember whether you had anything for breakfast but your thoughts are interrupted. An unearthly retching comes from the cubicle. No one is going down but someone is throwing up. Suddenly, the cubicle with the clotted sock looks like a very good option.

The cubicle door won't lock so you hold it closed with your foot while you take back a line in one with a twenty a client tipped you, off the back of your mobile phone. The light from the ceiling makes you sneeze and you lick the gooey mix off the back of your hand to avoid wastage. Your tongue tingles and numbs as you push it around your gums.

You are not sure why it has never occurred to you that people might think you looked older than your age before. Or why you've never thought to ask anyone over the past few years how old you look. When you think about it, you've never felt the need to ask anyone how old you looked because you've always assumed you could carry off ten years younger, because the girls you've dated have generally been ten to twelve years younger. Apart from that, you always thought you could tell roughly how old you must look because of how people treated you, in the salon and outside of work. People always told you you looked young for your age without you ever having to ask. And this had been the case when you were younger too. When you were eighteen, people thought you were fifteen. When you were twenty-one, people thought you were eighteen. And when you were twenty-four, you were still getting ID-d in pubs. When you were twenty-seven, they thought you were twenty-one, so at thirty-five, why should you suppose it would be any different than it always had been. People would think you were at best, twenty-five, and at worst, around twenty-eight.

It must have been a wind-up, you tell yourself. She spotted you for a womaniser in your suit and tried to make you feel small. That has to be it. She knew just what she was saying and the effect it would have on you. That must be it because what sort of person would actually tell someone they looked older than their age, when asked the question: How old do you think I look?

But then again, what does it matter if she did think you looked forty-three, right? She is just one person and it's the view of the majority that counts, and the majority of people think that you, Stretch, are much younger than you look. If she wasn't trying to wind you up, then that's

got to be it. Some people will always think you are older than you are, and you just happened to be speaking to the wrong person.

So that's what you tell yourself and you are already beginning to forget the whole thing. But what you don't tell yourself and what hits you deep down is that in all likelihood, the majority of people are actually not that much different to you. Clients often ask you to guess their age, it's one of their favourite games to play with you when sitting in your chair. When they do, you always guess roughly how old you think they actually are, and then deduct five years. More if you think they look old for their age. You'd never dream of guessing a client's age in the wrong direction. But that's just it, if you've always lied to your clients by telling them what you think they've wanted to hear, what makes you think they don't do the same to you?

And when you think about it, some of your friends these days are beginning to look like people's dad's did in episodes of soap operas in the 1980's. And then you look at your own selfies and think, maybe the reason you don't like any of them is that you're that age too.

You don't think about this. You can't. There isn't time but the gear has invigorated you enough to wink at your reflection in the sink mirror as you leave the toilets and continue your model hunt. The dance floor is thinning out but you feel growing confidence as you renew your search and recognize a familiar face in the crowd. Seated around a table in the far corner you spy this rep from Aveda who took your number at the Salon International conference last year, standing in a circle with some women who look familiar and vaguely recognise but you can't put your finger on it. This tall girl who resembles a young Iman hangs on his shoulders, all Mocca legs, gold braids right down to her leopard print leather trousers. You start your way over to them but halfway there someone grabs your arm just above the elbow and tugs you in the other direction.

"This is Stretch."

You turn to see a stunning young woman, standing with some steroid case with a shaven head that might be a couple of years older. He doesn't look at you. "I thought you said this is our night," he says to the woman.

Jesamine and this guy who you presume must be her boyfriend are obviously in the middle of a domestic of some kind. Far too busy to be a pawn in the argument of some sixteen-year-old and her psycho boyfriend, you start to walk away but Jesamine has a tight clasp of your elbow.

"This is my boyfriend, Cole," she tells you, "Cole, this is Stretch."

"I couldn't give a fuck who he is," says Cole, even less in the mood to talk to you than you are to him. He obviously has stuff he wants to resolve with her and she's not in the mood for it. Again, you try to pull away from Jesamine's grip, and again she holds fast to you.

"Stretch is a hairdresser where I work," she says.

“I need to get moving,” you say.

“Stretch is going to cut my hair, aren’t you Stretch?”

“Am I? Yes I am,” you say. You wonder what she’s playing at. She’s supposed to be Byron’s model, but you decide to go along with it to see where this takes you.

“He said he’s got to go,” says Cole.

“Oh, I can hang out for a little longer,” you say. “So when exactly am I cutting your hair, Jesamine?”

In full view of Cole, she winks at you. You guess this is her way of letting you in on the joke. That she’s just said this to make this guy jealous and she’s still Byron’s model. “Whenever you want me Stretch.”

“You can hurry this up, yeah,” says Cole.

“Look Stitch...”

“Stretch,” you say.

“Whatever,” he says, “we were just going.”

“You were just going,” says Jesamine, “I want another drink.”

“You said you wanted to leave an hour ago,” he says.

“Why don’t you go then”, she says, “Stretch will look after me, won’t you Stretch?”

You don’t answer. You watch Cole, looking around like he’s checking if anyone is watching before he goes for the sucker punch. He doesn’t. You realise he’s got more brains than you gave him credit for.

“So you work at Gang Bang Salons too.”

“You know he works with me,” says Jesamine, who looks like she’s also trying to work out his game.

“George Street right?”

“East Street.”

“That’s right. East Street. There’s so many of them, aren’t there. I’m surprised they haven’t built a drive through,” he says, laughing at his own cleverness. You are used to this kind of shit, you hear it all the time but Jesamine isn’t about to take it. At least, not from him.

“Since when do you know so much about Hair salons, Cole?”

“Unlike some, I read the papers.”

“Cole gets his hair cut at Croppers.”

“They do a top job too. Better than when I’ve paid an arm and a leg at McHair. What is it now, three hundred salons nationwide and growing?”

“A lot of famous people get their haircut where we work, don’t they Stretch?”

“There are a few,” you say.

“Like?” Before you can recite back the few retired pop stars, an ex-champion boxer and some nearly forgotten winner of Big Brother from ten years ago, Jesamine jumps to your rescue.

“Stop it, Cole, Stretch doesn’t want to talk about that sort of thing now. And it’s probably a secret anyway, isn’t it Stretch? You know, like what doctors have.”

“Client confidentiality? Don’t make me laugh.” He turns to face you, “No offence mate but you’re hardly a surgeon.”

Jesamine turns to face away from him but you are far from finished with him.

“About this cut,” you say, lifting both your hands up to touch Jesamine’s hair. Cole goes red. Looks like he might take a swing at you. “I think a creative variation on a natural inversion would look perfect with your long hair and new platinum colour.”

She looks confused. “I meant after it grows out, Stretch. I’m Byron’s model, remember?”

“I know,” you say, “I’m just toying with ideas.”

“Toy as much as you like,” she says, getting back into the spirit of things, but still eyeing you like she’s wondering what the fuck you’re playing at. And the thing is, you’re not sure what you’re playing at either. But you’re going to go with it just that bit longer.

“It’s the very latest thing,” you say. “A cut that challenges conventional norms by reversing what is normally viewed as,” she raises her eyebrows, “As beautiful.” You are sure Cole will go for you this time. But again you’ve misjudged him.

“You said inversion,” he says, “not reversal.”

Jesamine sighs, “Who cares.”

“There is a difference. That’s all,” says Cole.

Jesamine grins, “Cole has a G.C.S.E. in physics.”

“It’s an A-Level,” says Cole.

An awkward silence follows where they stare at each other. Then Cole turns to you. “I’m getting a drink,” he says, eyeing you with a look that says you’d better be gone by the time he’s back. Then he storms towards the bar, shoulder-barging some tomboy in a kid’s T-shirt with visible snail trail, collecting glasses. Jesamine rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know why he has to be like that.”

“Like what?” you say.

“Like everything’s a competition.”

Everything is a competition, you think, as you take Jesamine through your idea for a haircut step by step, while behind her Cole competes for space at a bar packed four deep for last orders. It’s amazing how orderly pissed-up guys form like cement when a last drink is at stake. There’s

not an inch of space to speak of anywhere. But this doesn't stop Cole. He's on a mission. In an ambitious move, he flanks the crowd to the far side of the bar. You can only just make him out as he tries to force his shoulder into a gap that you can tell even from this far away, is far too small. It's hard to tell what happens next, for the push and shove of bodies as the bouncers run in but you don't notice all that because Jesamine is telling you all about why she and Cole are arguing. How Cole fucked another woman while on holiday in Magaluf just two weeks ago. The very same Cole that you now see tumbling through the fire exit before a wall of security guards. Cole, who is probably outside somewhere arguing with the police and the security guards right now, while you try desperately to convince Jesamine that she should let you cut her hair instead of Byron. How you'll make her look so much better than he ever could. She still says no, just can't. She is about to tell you one more time that she is Byron's model, but she stops half way through as she turns around to face a deserted bar.

"Can you see Cole anywhere?"

You feign a look of genuine concern. Shrug. Crane your neck to check the balcony. You even offer to check the toilets for her but she asks could you wait here for a moment in case he comes back while she wanders off around the other side of the bar and returns holding her phone to her ear. After a couple of attempts, she drops it back in her handbag. "I can't believe he's done this again," she says.

"Done what?"

"This. Just walked off and left me here."

Lights flash to announce 'time' at the bar. You see the faces of disappointed men staggering about in the brightness, wondering what happened to the last three hours.

"So how about that haircut, Stretch?" she says.

"I thought you were Byron's model," you say.

"I was," she says. "And now I'm yours. So when do you want me?"

"Tomorrow first thing," you say.

"How about now," she says.

"What, now?" you say.

She stands frozen like a shoplifter on the brink of her first crime. "Right now" she says.

CUT

You seat her and position yourself behind. Triangulate your legs until you reach a comfortable height, then cradle her neck to support the weight as you lean her back, lower her head into the

basin. Next, you lift the tap and give it a half turn to the right. Water fans out through the locks, a little too hot. She jolts. It streaks down her forehead. You take a folded towel from below the basin and blot the area dry, avoiding damage to a practiced make-up job.

In your mind the crime has already been committed. You are now on the run through the far away regions of your minds, with nowhere to flee to except your future and this haircut is just you, going through the motions of getting there.

Beneath her head, the sink starts to flood and you curse some unseen trainee for not cleaning it properly, then reach down, remove the filter and push your finger in as far as it will go. Hook a lump of gunk and tangled hair, all the colours of the rainbow, from the plughole. Experience a strange feeling of satisfaction as the water drains.

When the hair is sodden, you select a gentle cleansing, frequent use shampoo, and press down hard on the pump. The Shampoo is nearly empty. You unscrew the lid and turn the plastic bottle upside down.

Tap. Tap. SPLAT.

Next, you work your fingers into the roots and rub, begin with small circular motions, then expand out kaleidoscopically.

After you've shampooed her thoroughly, you rinse the hair until the water runs clear, then squeezes out a generous helping of Smokey Oak and Honey conditioner and works it into the roots. This will nourish and repair damaged hair, giving a deep shine to the finish.

"That stuff smells like ice cream. Like you could eat it."

"It contains an agent to make you throw up."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"Just the ones who like ice cream."

"Every girl likes ice cream?"

Next you apply the head massage. This will help to relax and invigorate, while stimulating the pores and encouraging hair growth.

Start by applying light pressure to mapped-out points of the scalp.

She closes her eyes. Lips peel apart. Your breathing soon slows to the rise and fall of her cup. It is the perfect angle to ogle and you follow the curve of her chin down the contours of her neck, between the collarbone to where you circle the outline of her breasts, move your way down to her outstretched legs. Once she is sufficiently relaxed, you rinse and dab dry the hair to prevent dripping. She opens her eyes, disoriented. Blinks. You lift her head slowly from the sink, leaving the towel loose around her neck to collect excess water. Wet locks plait with the shadows

of strands under the salon lights as you lead her away from the basins and seat her at a cutting station. She gazes at the reflection in front of her like she's forgotten who she is.

"I look so pale."

"Everyone looks pale with wet hair."

"Not this pale."

"It's just the lights."

"I'd use a sunbed if they weren't so bad for you."

You picture her in a sunbed. She smiles like she's read your mind. And you wonder why you ever worried a girl like this would get eaten up in a place like here. She was born out of a place like this.

And then, out of nowhere, "He fucked another woman you know."

"He did?"

"Much older than him, she was."

You try to look surprised as you pour her another glass of vodka, her third since you unlocked the back door and deactivated the alarm using the keys and code Napoleon gave you for teaching trainees after work on Monday evenings. Then you more or less pushed her all the way up the stairs in front of you to the first-floor cutting area. Earlier, when you passed the off-licence to get some take-outs, she made you detour passed the 24 Hour Tesco because she has to have ice with her vodka and coke. She told you it tastes like vomit otherwise. As you place the neat vodka on the glass shelf in front of her, she's well past caring about the ice, or the coke for that matter.

"It was when he went up to London last week. That's when he did it."

You are beginning to think the extra booze was a bad idea. She tosses her head askew, spatters the mirror in an arc.

"It's fine. He's the one that just walked off and left me there."

"I'm sure there's a reason," you say.

"There's always a reason with Cole," she says, "but the truth is he can't stand me talking to other men."

"Have you tried calling him again?"

"His phone's switched off."

"Perhaps his battery died?"

"You don't know Cole. He always carries a spare in case his clients call him."

"Clients?"

"He thinks he's a dealer."

“Maybe he lost it. Or dropped it.”

“He does it all the time. Last time was with this waiter. He was just being nice, telling me all about his hometown in the countryside near Naples. And what does Cole do? Out of nowhere, he stands up and has a right go at him. He bit the guy’s ear off.”

“Off?”

She laughs, no he didn’t but you should’ve seen the look on your face. “The top bit. I had to jump in between them or I don’t know what would’ve happened. But the worst part was that when I got home he didn’t even apologise. Not even a sorry. He said it was my fault for flirting with the man.”

“He seemed like such a nice guy.”

“I know. It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it?”

It is not hard to imagine, the look of anger on Cole’s face as the bouncers slung him outside is still imprinted on the backs of your eyelids.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” you reassure her, hoping she’ll just drop it.

“Oh, I know he is. He always is. He’ll be fast asleep at home by now, snoring like a baby while I’m worried sick. It’s the same every time.” Then, “How about a line?”

“What, Charlie?” you say, studying her and realising you still don’t know her age.

“I’m old enough, she says. I’m seventeen next year. I’ve had it plenty of times. And before you start getting any ideas you’re not my type.”

You stare at your haircut in the mirror as you straighten out the layers and think how much the shape around the face brings out her eyes and flatters bone structure that wouldn’t look out of place on a super model. “You’re not my type either,” you tell her.

“Don’t take it personally,” she says, “It’s just you’re a bit too...”

“Too old?” you say.

“No,” she says, “I love older men. But I like a man to be a man.”

“And how am I not a man?”

“Well, I’m not being funny but...”

“But I’m a hairdresser?”

“Sort of. I suppose,” she says, “but some hairdressers are hot,” and then, “Byron’s hot.”

A fly lands on your forearm and you brush it off, irritably.

“So he’s hot and I’m not?” you say.

She pauses “It’s just different. And anyway, he’s gay.” And then, “But isn’t that always the way!”

“Byron’s not gay,” you tell her. And then it makes sense. “You’re thinking of Anton.”

“I know who Anton is,” she says. “I mean Byron,”

You've never really thought about why you are only offended when someone says a straight man is better looking than you. You've always assumed that this is because deep down, your own looks only matter to you as far as how far they get you with women. And suddenly you no longer feel bothered that she thought he was hotter than you. Except, when you point out to her again that she's mistaking Byron for Anton, because you're trying to get her to admit that no one could possibly think of Byron Bone as hot, she won't concede. Instead she changes the subject.

"If you didn't think I was hot, you wouldn't have chosen me as your model."

"Being a model isn't about being hot," you say.

"Everything is about being hot, Stretch," she says.

"It's about being right for the job," you say.

"It's about being beautiful," she says, pouting at the mirror.

"Look, I'm not saying it's not. All I'm saying is it's not just looks that make a model. Cutting hair is about bringing out a client's inner beauty."

She laughs. "That's what he said."

You panic inwardly as you think she means someone else in the room. "Who said?"

"Byron," she says.

Your smile vanishes. She spits vodka at the mirror as she laughs, "Oh come on, Stretch, you're far too easy to wind-up." You ignore her and proceed to detangle her hair with a squeeze of After Party from a fluorescent pink tube deliberately made to look like a dildo. Next you comb the hair back from her forehead to the nape of the neck, spreading the product evenly throughout, then splitting the hair into a clean centre parting and sectioning off below the occipital bone before angling your scissors to thirty degrees and point-cutting in the trim and layers.

Once you are satisfied the cut is even, you rub a little Pump-Up mousse into your palms and fingers and shake it out through the hair to create real volume where it's needed and a professional salon look. Next you select a paddle brush from your kit bag to achieve the desired blow dry and finish. She eyes the brush, points her little finger to the corner of her mouth.

"Oh my mister, have I been a naughty girl?" she says, but you hardly hear her as you blast the hair around her head using the natural shape of the head and plenty of tension in the roots to achieve sleekness and volume. When the hair is dry, you add texture by slicing through and back-cutting. Finally, you cut in a fringe.

To cut the fringe, you circle the chair to face her and place your little finger gently under her chin to raise her head to the correct angle, before pointing in a long fringe to just below the eyebrows. Her eyes shut to avoid the falling hair and this is when you first feel something touch your knee, so slight you could easily have imagined it. You lower your eyes to find her hand

resting there. Then you feel a sharp pain. A fraction of a second's loss of concentration is all it takes to nip the end of your finger with the razor sharp shears. It's a very small but deep cut and it'll make a fine addition to the other thousand very tiny V-shaped scars upon scars you've accumulated all up the inside of your middle and index finger.

Jesamine reaches in her pocket and hands you a tissue. You wrap it around the injured finger.

"How's it looking?" she says.

"I'll live," you tell her.

"Not you," silly. "The hair."

Of course it's the hair. It's all about the hair. That's why she's here, that's why you're here and you mustn't forget it. Winning the model night, your whole future rides on you cutting your best right now. No, better than your best. This has to be the best cut you've ever done. And looking at her now, you are positive this is the best haircut you have ever done.

"It looks amazing," you say, "not everyone can carry a cut like this off."

"Really?" she says.

"Just a very small percentage."

"Of?"

"Models."

She beams and you reflect the smile back at your winning design. Hold the back-mirror in front of her face and spin the chair so that she can see the full reflection of the profile and back.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

"The refugee crisis."

"I think it's a travesty..."

"The haircut, silly."

She lifts her fingers to stroke her layers. You slap her hand playfully.

"All in good time," you say, grabbing your phone from your pocket and moving around the chair, snapping off a couple of dozen pics as you do so.

She starts to shuffle in her seat. Looks up at the clock. This is where you should walk her to the door, make sure she gets into a cab and drum it into her that she will be required to attend the model night after work. But you don't do that. You are feeling so confident with your creation that you can't see what harm it will do to celebrate with another line, offering her one, but she declines. She has other ideas. And before you have time to step back away from the front of the chair, she grabs at your belt buckle and pulls you closer. You feel the cold of a silver ring

scratch down your outer thigh in a move that takes your trousers and underwear straight down to your knees. She doesn't even bother with the fly.

"I can't believe I'm going to do this," you hear her tell herself, and you're not sure how you didn't see this coming. You know you should stop her, but the only thing you do stop is thinking, as she grabs you too firmly in her right hand.

"Wait", you manage to squeeze out.

"What?" she says.

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to."

You are not sure if the look of anger she gives you is meant for you or for Cole, as she starts to yank you, up, then down hard, up, then down hard like she's plunging a sink. The pain is almost enough to kill the whole thing and you want to ask her to slow the whole thing down. Take a step back and think about all this. If she's going to do this anyway, then why not take her time about it. Take off her top. Hell, why not both of you just strip out of everything and go for it.

You reach down and lift the light cotton T-shirt until your fingers run to a stop against the underwire of her bra.

"Stop?" she says.

"Why?" you say.

She doesn't give you an answer. Instead she clutches her freshly blow-dried hair up and out of the way in both hands and holds it there in a clumsy ponytail. You wonder briefly what she is going to tie it back with. A hair band, an elastic band, a clip? You can see none of those at easy reach and nor does she but then again, she's not looking for them. She remains in position, her arms and the points of her elbows resembling the shape of a pretzel.

"Close them," she says.

You frown at her.

"I don't like being watched," she snaps, like you're already on your final warning and one more strike is out. So you obey. Close your eyes and tighten your lips as warm breath starts to probe around your stomach, circles your navel, tickles the hair on your upper thighs. Then you get that pause where nothing happens for a sec, where you imagine she is picking off that compulsory bit of underwear fluff. And then...

...and then somewhere in the distance you hear it, muffled by the lining of her handbag, tissues, lip gloss, purse, receipts, faded old cinema tickets she kept because she lost her virginity on the same night to a language teacher called Francesco, cheap Hepburn shades she bought in

Bournemouth because she told Cole she'd left hers at home, but actually just wanted to look like Hepburn, brochures, tampons, an address book bought from Paperchase with a psychedelic cat on the cover and a random pack of colour stickers stuck inside she bought with it just because she just wanted to own something colourful to get her over that emotionally fucked-up guy she's never really gotten over, who dumped her just two weeks before Cole started hassling her to go on a date with him, every minute of the day until she did just that, even though she'd never liked blonds. Through all this stuff comes the angry buzzing of a muffled phone that you hope she cannot hear as your legs begin to shake, then wobble involuntarily as your vision turns from a dark nothing to a pre-lightened white that you know all too well signals the arrival of the point of no return. But no, right on the edge, she stops, jumps out of the cutting chair and rushes across the room for her handbag.

"It's Cole. He's been arrested."

You try to look surprised. Shocked. Sympathetic even. "See you tomorrow," you shout after her. "And don't be late."

"I won't be," she shouts back.

You hear the rattle of heels on the stairs and the slamming of the Fire door.

You run a bath. You leave the bath running and go back into the living area, kick away a clump of red hair from the rug and pour a glass of Whiskey. Check the ice box but there's no ice. You must have forgotten to top it up like you always tell yourself to when you use the last bit. But you really don't remember using the last cubes.

A half empty two-litre bottle of cola stands near a pink microwave. It's a gimmicky looking thing with just a dial and a start button, left over from the previous owner, or a previous life perhaps. You imagine it belonged to another tenant as you cannot imagine the landlord ever wasting money on something like that. It looks like something you might buy, not because you liked it yourself, but to please a little girl whose favourite colour is pink.

You unscrew the cola. That off smell you always get from flat fizzy drinks hits you, after hung-over lips swigged it straight from the bottle at four AM one night.

You pour the flat cola into the whiskey glass and down it. You think about pouring more whiskey but instead you grab the bottle and return to the bathroom.

The bath is close to overflowing and you leap across to turn off the tap. You place the square bottle on the edge of the tub and sink into the warm water. Entering slowly will avoid a tsunami.

Breathe in.

Your genitals surface and spread.

Breathe out.

Nipples sink to palm tree islands. Under the water you open your eyes. Everything looks bigger and yellower.

Resurface. You rest your soles on the tops of the taps, careful not to scald yourself on the hot one. The hot one always drips, no matter how hard you turn it. The drip of the tap takes on a hollow sound. Is making you sleepy. Out of the window clouds move fast, faster than they should you think.

You should get out. You don't want to fall asleep in here. You might never wake up. But you don't get out. Instead you pour more whiskey down your throat and let in more hot water.

The warmth creeps up your body. Calves, knees, inner thighs, genitals, stomach, navel, nipples, shoulders, collarbone, neck, chin, sockets, temples.

Above the dark blue flats the clouds move fast under the endless black ceiling. Faster than they should, you think.

Am I awake? You are somewhere. You are standing outside work and you are running late. Something is different but you can't put your finger on it. It looks normal enough, looks the same, but no one is cutting hair. The cutting stations are all empty. So you just keep doing what you always do. You walk inside.

There is a reception. It's plain white painted but not modern. The receptionist stands behind reception. Except now, the receptionist has Yasmin's body. And when you examine her, she suddenly has the face too. She looks exactly like Yasmin. She is Yasmin. All red mouth and fangs like she always is, you think. But you're fairly sure she's forgotten who you are. At least, you hope she has.

You do your best impression of being sober. If she realises you've been drinking you've had it. She sniffs the air. Looks at you suspiciously but to your surprise, says nothing. They must be used to shy guys coming in here. That has to be it. Of course they are. They are probably experts in how to put you at ease. That's why she can't say anything, even if you're pickling her skin with each exhale.

She says it's twenty pounds for a massage. You can pick your own girl. And by now you are pretty sure she can't have recognized you as she ushers you upstairs to the staff room.

You stare around at the room full of girls. Even in a dream, which you are now fairly sure this is, you can't help but be polite.

And then you think, fuck politeness.

I'll have Jesamine, you say.

Yasmin leads you down the corridor and into the upstairs cutting area. There is quite a crowd waiting for you there.

Your masseuse is waiting. She's one of the cute Asian ones. Except, she isn't your masseuse. She's actually just there to lead you to the room where your real masseuse, needle marks and blotchy skin, waits. For you.

You lie face down. Get this quick massage. But it's a head massage. Just like you're being shampooed.

Turn over, says a voice.

And you know that voice.

You stare up. Your masseuse is gone. Or rather, she's changed. Changed into Jesamine. But not the Jesamine you know from the salon. It's someone else. And like she read your mind, she says, I'm Heaven.

So what do you do? she says like she doesn't know you. And you think, What the fuck? A meaningful question. This never happens in internet movie clips. And you can't tell her you're a hairdresser. It will never suit the macho image required by this situation.

I'm a fireman, you say.

You don't look big enough, she says.

What?

I thought a fireman would be bigger.

You look down. As if on her command, you shrivel right up and shrink.

I thought all firemen were big, she says.

That's just what they show you on TV, you say. It's all just a lie to make you think that. To make you watch next week's episode.

And you stare at your shrivelled cock, willing it to grow, shouting inside, All firemen are big and brave. BE BIG. BE BRAVE.

And suddenly, you are brave. And...

It grows. And it grows and it grows and...

She raises her eyebrows. OH my, she says. Raises her eyebrows. You really are a fireman aren't you.

Fuck yeah you say again and again. FUCK YEAH, you shout, slapping your thighs as you grow, and keep growing.

She puts her hands on your chest. Starts to massage, chest, navel, lower stomach, outer thighs, inner thighs, balls, hose...

HOSE?

You have a bright red fireman's hose.

Would you like extras? she says.

Extras? you say, still looking at your growing hose in wonder. But you suppose a hose is better than nothing, and you don't want to break the flow of this dream. It feels too good. So you say, what extras?

Happy ending, she says.

A what? Doesn't everyone want a happy ending? you say.

That's Fifteen for manual, twenty for oral, forty for full sex and sixty gets you everything.

Everything?

Lets you do anything you can think of.

She places a hand on your hose. It unwinds a bit more. She smiles. Lips smack purple hue. You hear music, sweet music. It's everywhere. It's a Beach Boys track. You know that. But it's one you've never heard. It's never been released. It's a bit like a lot of their songs but not exactly like any. And somehow you know no one has ever heard this song. It's an amazing discovery. And you think about how cool it's going to be when you wake up and tell the whole world all about it. But right now, something else has occupied your concentration.

With her free hand, Heaven picks up scissors from somewhere. Somewhere you know there weren't scissors before. Of course not. This is how these things happen. You try to move. Can't. You are exposed. All shorn and ready.

STOP, you shout at her. I don't even know who you are yet. You can't do this. You must stop this. We must...

Don't do this. I need it, you say, looking down at your unsuspecting hose, which is still unwinding, proud as you like, doesn't have the vision or sense to roll itself back in.

What for? says another voice. Yasmin stands next to you, Fangs bare. Looks you in the eye, mouths the words, It's better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all...

Fuck me, who invents that shit? you shout at the world.

Yasmin grins. No, sneers. The song increases in volume as Brian Wilson gets ready for the chorus. The bit everyone's been waiting for. The bit they can all sing along to.

And it's a chorus to beat any other Beach Boys chorus. A billion layered harmonies, overlap, underlap, twist and cut, in and out on each other in different patterns and colours, until the unbearably sweet sound is just too light and angelic for human ears. It cracks the ceiling of the room. Dust is falling, fissures forming, bricks loosen.

Stop it, you say. STOP IT. I WAS NEVER REALLY A FIREMAN. I WAS ONLY HAVING YOU ON.

The song it seems, is called, Heaven. As if it could be anything else.

Heaven, you shout. HEAVEN. JESAMINE...

It only comes out as singing. Anything you try to say comes out in perfect harmony in an angelic voice you didn't realise you possessed. And even though you are scared shitless, you can't help feeling secretly proud.

HEAVEN. STOP THIS. YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS. Brian Wilson smiles at you. But how the fuck did he get in here? Yasmin cackles in the background.

Heaven opens the blades. She grins. She also has fangs. Now why the hell wouldn't she?

Without moving her lips, she says, Have you got a last tip for me?

You try to think, but now her mouth is a grinning stick of dynamite, her tongue a burning fuse.

There is an explosion. All sound is gone. Everyone is gone. Cold water pours through the ceiling onto you.

CUT

You wake up feeling much happier than you should for someone who has only had three hours sleep but you don't think about why. All you feel right now is your hard-on. It feels warm and it feels good and you don't even know what it is but like a new-born, you don't care. You just grin and go with it. And you can't even remember your own name yet but this thing pointing skywards reassures you that everything is working just fine. You have a purpose. You have a job to do.

What's your job?

You remember your job. The joke is on you. Your manhood staggers forward and drops like a stage death. Somewhere above you hear a buzzing sound. You open your eyes and light pours in hard, much harder than it should do. Everything is bright, brighter and harder than it should be. You are lying in the bath. The water has mercifully drained. There is a slow leak, something you always curse, vowing that this time you'll make the effort to go somewhere and buy a new plug. You never do. There are aromatherapy oils around the edges and a pink bath bomb someone gave you as a secret Santa that no longer smells of strawberry, it's been there that long. There is a blue scrubbing glove by the taps, so old it's dried up with soap and welded upright in the shape of a fist. You don't use it. Not any of these things. They are all things that one person

or another tried to bring into your life at one time or another to shape you into something you've never been able to be.

The buzzing sound you now see is a fly. For a while you just lie there staring at the ceiling like a lifeless embryo, preserved on the floor of the Tate modern. Your eyes trace the movements of the fly and your nostrils take in the stale rubbery smell of a six-month-old condom you chucked down the side of your bed one night and forgot about, along with the person you used it on. The fly does not disappoint, a figure of eight followed by a pirouette lands it in a web. It bounces there in an act that scores high for a while but has to end.

You need to be in work by ten. You look around the room for your phone but you can't see it anywhere. It takes an effort like parting the seas of Galilee just to step out of the tub. A coke can lies on its side by a full-length mirror next to the window and you half twist your ankle on it as you take your first step. There you stand. You are naked. You could be anyone. You are...

Your heart drops into your gut as you pick your phone off the windowsill and realise you are already three hours late for work. A WAITING CLIENT IS A SAD CLIENT, says the voice, A WAITING CLIENT IS A CLIENT THAT WON'T COME BACK. The buzzing in your ears gets louder as you notice the empty bottle of vodka on the windowsill and your head starts to throb. Above you, the spider approaches in slow motion. Stops. What is it waiting for?

You call the Salon. Someone, either Kim or Yasmin, answers quickly but puts you on hold. A minute later the voice says, "Hair Gang Salons, how I can help you?" You tell her you have overslept your alarm, the first time in two years. The voice that you now recognise as Kim's tells you in what you think is a daunting tone but with hindsight is a standard response, "Don't worry," she says, I got Blue Jean and Byron to cover for you. just get yourself here." You hang up and kick yourself for not asking her if Jesamine was there. But you know that's just paranoia because why shouldn't she be?

You drag yourself over to the sink and rest an elbow either side. Mystery rings surround the plughole, they come in orange and brown like that close up in a sex movie you don't enjoy, but you can't help watching.

The tap is old and rusty and stiff like no one's used it in years and it bruises the fleshy parts of your fingers to turn it on. The water comes out fast and the stream is fast but it's somehow wrong. It never gets cooler than lukewarm but you dip your head down anyway, closing your nostrils to hide the sulphur smell that seems to belch from the plughole, only when you are feeling like this. You drink and you drink, even though you've been warned not to drink from the sink. The landlord said it's not drinking water and last time someone fixed the water tank they found a dead mouse in there. You wonder how the mouse got in there. Perhaps it jumped

in to rescue a piece of floating cheese and never gave a second thought to how it'd get back out. It floated for a while but in the end the temptation was too much. It ate the cheese and sank.

Even so, you drink and you drink and you drink till your gut feels like an overfilled water bottle, swallow hard and drink more. Thousands of unseen bubbles of all shapes and sizes detatch and surface, tickling your chin. You are drinking too fast, way too much. This will make the brain hydrate too fast and your headache worse, but like the feeling of falling from a height, it's great while it lasts.

Above you, the buzzing noise stops but you don't notice this. Nor do you see the fly cease its struggle and with its final prayer to be a spider in the next life, embrace its fate. The spider stops too, each creature suspended in that moment when they forget who they are. In another life they could just be friends. Waking up is murder.

And you were having such a good dream. You'd already won the model night and you were far away from this, this sublet flat in a tower block up near the racecourse. This place you've told yourself is only temporary but here you still are, ten years later. Your landlord lives next door, he's Polish but not like the variety you see congregate in shell suits at the Aldi. No, this guy's a gypsy. He's one of those five-foot-tall guys from a breed of five-foot-tall guys who wear white shirts and leather waistcoats that are born playing instruments. Like the guys who play accordions in gangs outside tourist cafes, the ones who play 'The Godfather' Theme over and over until you pay them to go around the corner and piss off someone else. And he's nuts. Completely. You spent several days on edge after he came home drunk once, forgot he lived in the flat next door and booted in your front door. You were in the bathroom at the time. You thought about jumping out the window. You seriously considered it. You live seven floors up. But one thing he does have in common with every other landlord in the world is that he's always round early, hassling you for the rent. Always saying it's for his sick wife who needs money for some mysterious operation she's due for at the hospital. With all the illnesses he says she has, she should by all rights be dead and buried but she always looks perfectly fit to you, especially when you see her begging with her eight-year-old daughter down in the underpass to the seafront by the Odeon at the bottom of Kings Road.

The throbbing gets worse. You need a line, badly, to get you focused enough to do what you need to do today. Wander into the living room but there's just the old TV you never watch and the smell of the bin from the kitchen. Your bedroom is the same. You search around in despair, kick the twisted piles of black and white work shirts, trousers, pants, socks and accessories with labels hung out like tongues that mock you as you shake a half dozen empty cigarette packets checking for that one cancer stick you somehow magically overlooked.

Think hard.

In your jacket pockets you find an unopened three pack of condoms, Ribbed for pleasure, it says in italics, that you vaguely remember buying from a vending machine some time back in a club toilet one night after what you thought was a certainty. You Frisbee them into the corner of the room and they ricochet off the oversized grey CD player you inherited from the previous occupant and never use.

You retrace your footsteps back to the bathroom where some black work trousers hug the radiator in a way only wet skinny jeans can. You unpeel them from the radiator. Finger the musty pockets like an unwanted lover and come up empty. Just a folded receipt and a lifetime of mystery lint. No charlie and worryingly, you are fairly sure it didn't rain last night. Then the worst fact hits you, you've blown your money. All of it. You have nothing left. Some people say they're broke when they've still got twenty grand left in the bank, they are saving to buy a house, a car, a stomach tuck, a postal bride, but when you say you're broke, you mean it. It means the small change clusters of sticky coins in your worn out carpet are the sum total of all your worth. To top all that there are no clean trousers anywhere. Yesterday was your allocated wash day. Every pair is either trashed or stained with whatever takeaway you don't remember buying and spilling down your front.

The hairs on your leg stand on end as you pull up yesterday's sorry looking trousers and blast them dry with your shiny, black, 2000 Watt dryer from Tigi. The result is far from clean but they do a passable impression after you coat them with deodorant and pull on a black vest and grey sports jacket whose Eighties design and angular lapels are guaranteed to draw attention away from the trousers. Finally, you put your keys in your right pocket. You always put your keys in your right pocket.

You feel something crumpled and familiar. You can't understand it. You turned your pockets inside out but somehow on a second look, a twenty-pound note has magically appeared. You unfold it, careful not to rip it and dry it out with your dryer on half-blast. Peace of mind depends on this soggy piece of paper staying intact long enough to get to the newsagent.

The buzzing in your ears is back but now it is almost tuneful like a barely audible voice. A voice that you could swear just said the word, Help.

NO ONE WILL HELP YOU IF YOU DON'T HELP YOURSELF, you say like you're reeling off slogans in your head you didn't know where there. Then, for no reason you are consciously aware of, you lift your arm and tear the cobweb with a fingernail. The spider forms a protective ball as the fly drops half way to the floor, jumpstarts and hits a right angle towards the window.

You grab your charcoal parker and run for the door.

Dylan Thompson lives next door. Tall and bony and pale to the point of transparency, a feature not helped by an uneven grade one he cut himself with some nameless black clippers from ASDA or Argos he asked your advice about whether to buy a while back. What the fuck do you know about cheap clippers? You're a stylist, not some back street barber. You tried to tell him he should shop somewhere else and that the stuff they sold there was cheap and would break, but he spent the next ten minutes insisting that there isn't a thing you can't buy in either ASDA or Argos. He hardly ever comes out of his room. When he does, it's to cash his giro or collect a crisis loan. He's signed off work permanently. Tells people he's diagnosed psychotic but he's quick to add that does not make him a psychopath. Too quick, because he's exactly what you'd expect a psychopath to look like. That is, not like the stylish ones in Hollywood played by heartthrob actors but more of the English type you see in the news. Panda eyes under a low brow in a faded Man City shirt he always seems to wear. But he once told you his madness is all a front. Part of his greater plan to start selling cat tranquilizer full time. It's a smoother hit than horse tranquilizer, he says. You just nod at everything he says and keep walking. Never reply. A question about anything is a direct invitation for him to never shut up. And he never tires of repeating the latest shit from the latest conspiracy theory blog he's been reading. He drives you up the wall with the third tower of 9/11 and how flu-jabs are just a ploy to cull the population but just lately he's stopped talking to you completely. You never even noticed until your other neighbours warned you that he was waving a knife around at the foot of the building one day and saying it was you who grassed him up for subletting his council flat to foreign language students. He's never said anything to you about it though and that suits you fine because when you buy coke off him, like you do now, you can get on with it without having to waste time.

You knock hard. Nothing. Then the voice rebounds with a SLAP.

"What?"

"It's me."

The door opens a crack.

"I know who it is. Hairdresser."

"Stretch."

"Like I said, hairdresser. I was trying to sleep."

You know he's lying. He's one of those guys who doesn't work but still gets up earlier than the rest of the world, just so no one gets one over on him.

"What do you want?"

“You know what.”

“You were here yesterday.”

The door opens. An overwhelming smell of joss sticks he’s lit to cover the damp bedsit smell in your nostrils. He stands there, topless and bony, crouched forward and suspicious.

“The answer is no.”

“No?”

“I’ve only got a bit. I need it myself.”

“Forty.”

“It’s not the money.”

“Fifty then.”

“I can double that in Ship Street.”

This walking cliché is a waste of your time but you know his game. You’ve seen the same movies. You turn to leave. “Wait,” he says.

You hand him the twenty and tell him he’ll get the rest later. He eyes you for a moment like you just swindled him but he takes the twenty and backs off into his room, returns with a small clear bag of white powder. You take hold of your goods but he tightens his grip. “There’s something else,” he says.

He’s right up close to you now. Closer than ever. Right inside the breath zone and it’s warm and familiar as Sunday roast. Week old Sunday roast.

The white film covers the grey world. As the screen clears, old movies roll into colour TV, High Def becomes 3D. You see beauty in the small things and even though your head still aches, you really don’t care anymore. You know everything is going to be just fine as you follow the trail of cigarette ends and gum down the hill to where you find the usual bunch of winos sitting on the steps next to the bus stop. Some young girl, quite pretty, comes round the corner with two skinny guys and they sit on the steps next to the winos. The two guys wear no tops, are skinny and muscular with no fat. One of them has a tattoo on his shoulder. You can’t quite make out what of. The guys are obviously out of it. They hold a can of Super each and probably have more in the blue plastic bag one of them is carrying. These guys are on stronger stuff than that though. You’d guess heroine. But you’re no expert.

It’s too cold to go without a shirt. One of them, the young looking guy with brown hair is shaking. He looks ill. The girl clutches his arm. Gets close to him. Whispers again and again “I love you. Remember that. I love you.” She’s far too young and pretty to be hanging round this guy. For sure.

Three scooters roll up. Three girls, all stocky, the same height. Sporty looking in tracksuits. They get off and walk up the steps between the winos and the pretty girl. One of the winos, a red headed guy, perhaps in his fifties, maybe a lot younger, asks them if they have a cigarette.

“No,” says the one at the rear without looking him in the eye, like she might catch something. And she might well at that.

“We’re all in this together,” he calls after her. She turns to her friends and says loud enough for him to hear, “Did you hear him? He said we’re all in this together. I’m not the same as him. I’ve got a job.”

The wing mirror misses your head by inches as the bendy bus swerves in and normally you’d curse the driver, but today you don’t. Today you need to keep a clear sight of your goals and not tempt fate in any way. You sit near the intersection of the two halves. The motion of the bus is hypnotic and the sunlight magnified through the windows makes you feel suddenly very tired again. You reach in your kit bag for your aviator shades.

Part way down the hill into Kemp Town, the bus stops for an overweight black woman in a baggy green sweater to get off. She drops her knitting on the way and as she stoops to pick it up, you mouth the words, “Move your arse,” a little louder than intended. In the time it takes her to look around and see who insulted her, you’ve dropped down in her seat, rested your head against the hardened glass and are watching the rush in the morning sun, as the street lights up take away cartons like gold bricks. And as a dog pisses against a poster of perfect lives while mannequins watch with eyeless heads, sleep creeps in again like a slow poison.

You are woken what is probably a mere five minutes later by your eye socket bouncing off the re-enforced window, again and again, and you wonder if you’ll have a black eye. A group of school kids pile on and run the length of the bus to the back. They sit there comparing ringtones at top volume and one of them writes the word CUNT backwards on the window in black marker pen. Then they spend the next five minutes knocking on the window at passers-by until they get off a short distance later and two old ladies get on instead. One of them tries to make out what the writing on the window says.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” one says.

“I think it’s foreign,” says the other.

As the bus nears the levels you start to feel sick. You could brave it, hang on two or three more minutes but a sudden tug at your solar plexus tells you that’s not going to happen. You jump off the bus and dash into the park by the Pavilion. Fresh air offers you a momentary stay of execution but the nausea soon comes back, double.

There's no one in sight as far as you can see but you know better than that. There's always some dawdling school kid with a phone or tourist with a camera getting a lock on you from some angle you didn't cover. However, needs must so you pick the nearest bush and bend into it.

Something attracts your attention at the bottom of the bush. There are shards of glass, a broken cider bottle held together by a sticky white label. You look down and wait while your face stares back at you, reflected again and again like the unnatural fruit of a glass apple tree.

Nothing happens.

You massage your stomach. Gently at first, then jab your fingers hard into the soft parts and kneed. Slide your finger down your throat as far as it will go, tickle, force it just a fraction more, that centimetre further than you thought it possible to poke your finger down your throat without swallowing your fist whole.

You give up hope. Drop to your knees. Then it happens.

You remember Dylan Thompson trying to kiss you in the doorway. The warm breath. The dark seed between his front teeth.

Liquid fills the channels between the glass shards like a fucked up stained glass. And from somewhere close by you hear the voices of somebody asking directions to somewhere you've never heard of.

CUT

Your first cut is a re-cut. A re-cut is like a sequel to a film that was never that good in the first place. People went to watch it because the director was known to make good films. The problem is he's got complacent. He's aged, less cutting edge, takes fewer risks and he messes up with this one because living in his own private little Neverland up in the Hollywood hills, he thought he could please everyone. He forgets that how he got famous in the first place was by putting it out there and by not being afraid to offend anyone. Nonetheless, because he is famous the film was a box office hit on the first day, even though critics slated it. And because it was a box office hit, his ego is too big to see it was shit and he makes another. And this is that sequel. Your chance to fuck up the same haircut, all over again in exactly the same way you did the first time, but with even less material to play with. It's a pain to do and it's public humiliation in front of your peers. They throw you in the stocks for your rivals to walk past and gloat. Because with a re-cut you can't win. You'll never get that chance again. The client already isn't satisfied, so there's no leap of faith to

be made on her part. She's already stopped trusting you. She's come back to have your work corrected. And what she really wants is for someone else to do it. In her mind you are the last person she wants to touch her again. She'll want to see a superior. This way she can imagine that, even though she didn't get that cut she wanted, at least the new cut is worth more money. And even though the Shampoo Napoleon knows this, this is exactly what he won't do. He thinks it's character building for the stylist to dig their own way out. But all he's really achieving is that the stylist digs their own grave.

Sure enough, Meg Ryan is seated at your cutting station. She doesn't turn around to greet you. Nor does she smile. The time for politeness has passed. Instead, she looks forward at the mirror. That person who stands there facing her can be somehow less real to her. She can ignore his feelings. She can forget that, like her, he is a human being too.

"They said I look like Rod Stewart."

"Who did?"

You'd arrived at the salon four hours late and you seemed to have gotten away with it. As it happened, two of your morning clients had cancelled anyway, so booking the rest in with other stylists had not proved too much of a problem. Better still, you'd had a free slot first thing after lunch, so you could relax and try to freshen up a bit with hand-wash and deodorant in the staff toilets before having to face any clients.

You'd felt anxious about running into either of the management but even that seemed fine. But as you stood behind reception, running your index finger down the list of bookings to see when your next one was due, Napoleon didn't seem even the slightest bit vexed. "Good morning?" he'd said with some degree of sarcasm while pawing through a stack of receipts, but he'd added, "it's been a good week," smiling and shaking the receipts in his hand. It was at this point, while pocketing some change you'd never gotten around to removing from your tip bowl, that you'd dropped a fifty pence piece on the floor. The coin rolled a couple of paces before you stamped your foot on it, stooped down to pick it up. As you stood back up, you noticed Blue Jean positioned in the corner of the salon next to the window, cutting what it struck you, must be her model. And what a model. This striking Japanese woman with dead straight black hair. That thickest and darkest of hair types. She'd cut a very simple and very sleek, classic bob, but disconnected in three sections and used extensive free hand throughout the top section, above an asymmetric fringe and was just adding the finishing touches.

There was a precision in how she carved out the shape, a lightness in the touch, and you find yourself under her spell, unable to take your eyes off the hypnotic motion of her scissors as it strikes you that this really is a very extraordinary creation of genius. And all at once you need to

see Jesamine, right away. You need to reassure yourself that your cut is still significantly better. And if not, you need to go through it again before you have to present her.

You look around you for Jesamine. You didn't see her in the staff room and she's not down here on the cutting floor either but you are quite sure Kim did say she was in when you spoke to her on the phone earlier. But could you have misheard Kim? It is possible but you dismiss the thought when you consider that there are at least three other places Jesamine could be right now. She could be assisting someone on the upstairs cutting floor, or in the colour room mixing tints, or in the stock room ripping foils or doing something else for Yasmin. She might even be in Napoleon's office loading the washing machine or folding the towels after they've dried. For that matter, she could also be on her lunch break.

You really had no reason to feel nervous about this but there was something that bugged you above everything else. Byron is just cutting away in his usual spot, smiling like he hasn't got a care in the world. You were not expecting him to just walk right up to you in the middle of the salon and lay you out, but you expected some serious grief, a few death stares containing threats of things to come, but he hasn't so much looked in your direction. It just doesn't seem right considering you've stolen his model.

Half way up the stairs to the upper cutting floor to check for her, you hear Yasmin's voice behind you

"Stretch, your client is waiting."

"Walk-in?" you asked.

You are sure you hear a faint, but definite hint of satisfaction in her voice.

"Recut."

"It seemed alright when I left the Salon," says Meg, but when I got back to work, the guys in the office starting teasing me."

You frown.

"I'm a team leader."

You begin to tell her that she said it herself, they were teasing her, and seeing that is failing, you try to reassure her she looks nothing like Rod Stewart and that in fact, Rod Stewart's hairstyles are actually women's hairstyles anyway.

"He's a man."

"You look like Meg Ryan to me. Like she did in that film."

"You've Got Mail?"

"Yes, that's right!"

“You said you hadn’t seen it.”

“Look,” you say, “if you style it differently, more like this...”

She flinches away from your hands.

You notice Blue Jean, watching you from over by reception. She’s finished with her model and can afford to just relax and wait.

You freeze mid frame with your hands above Meg’s head. Because there is nothing you can do to save this moment. You cannot cut it back to how it was before, any more than you can travel back in time and stop yourself doing all the things that messed up your career and left you where you are now. Little better off than when you started as a junior stylist, fifteen years ago.

Blue Jean comes closer and leans against the empty cutting chair in the station next to you. Meg sees her and turns in her chair to face her.

Mulligan turns to Blue Jean.

“I’m a team leader,” she says, “I can’t go around looking like this. I just can’t.” Blue Jean nods with what you take to be a look of sympathy.

“If you can cut it so it looks how it was before, we’ll leave it at that,” she tells you. You tell her to hold on a moment while you walk off to find Anton. Anton is always your first choice with awkward clients. He has a way with women clients, an assertiveness and persuasiveness and way of convincing them, that no matter how you might try to imitate him, you can never emulate. Not in the way Byron does, by seducing the younger clients with dreams of sex-appeal but with the authoritative voice of high fashion. If anyone can make Mulligan see sense, he will. As well as that, you need an excuse to find out where Jesamine is. Just a confirmation, whether spoken or visual, that she is somewhere in or about the salon.

You pace fast to the colour room, then up the back stairs to the staff room and along the corridor, past Napoleon’s office, to the upper cutting floor. You try the stock cupboard, before descending via the main stairway back down to reception to find Kim and ask her to confirm as she did on the phone, that Jesamine is actually here, or off on her lunch break. Because right now Jesamine is nowhere to be seen.

“Yes, I think I saw her first thing,” says Kim, “but I haven’t seen her since then.

“You think you did, or you did?”

“Look,” she says, “thanks to your little lie in it’s been a busy morning.

“But you said very clearly she was upstairs ripping foils.”

She just shrugs at you and raises her eyebrows, but not in a don’t know way, but more like a, I can’t tell you, kind of way. And there is something just not right about the way she’s speaking to you. Something in the tone of her voice that doesn’t quite clink right. But it’s not that, what really

bothers you about this is how calm she's being. Normally she'd have told you to be about your work using some pretty strong language.

"But you said very clearly she was upstairs ripping foils."

She just shrugs at you and raises her eyebrows as if to apologise for something. But what?

"We don't rip foils," Stretch, "we tear them," says Yasmin across the front of reception, as she checks the bookings and calls out her client's name. "And haven't you got a client waiting for you, Stretch?"

"I was just looking for Jesamine."

"What's all the fuss with Jesamine? I had to warn Byron to keep his voice down this morning."

So Byron had found out you've taken his model. But then why did he act like nothing happened when he saw you. None of this is making sense.

"So she is in work?"

"Was in work. I sent her home."

"You fired her?"

"I did what I had to, Stretch, and unless you want to follow her, I suggest you get back to your client."

"She was my model."

"Then I suggest you give her a call, as soon as you've finished with your client." Before you can risk your job by saying anything else, Yasmin turns to greet her client in reception. You turn to Kim and shake your head. Expect her to hurry you up but for the first time in the ten years you've worked here, she actually looks sorry for you. "She turned up for work in an orange T-shirt."

"And no one could lend her one?"

"I did suggest that to Yasmin," she says.

"There are spares in the stockroom."

"I know. I said all this."

You reach into your trouser pocket for your phone but leave it there. You don't have her number. And why would you, she's a trainee you only met yesterday?

Seeing the look on your face, Kim kneels down and pulls a red clipboard from under the tills, which contains a list of names and numbers. "It should be on here," she says.

You run your finger down the list until you find the name, Jesamine Noakes. Even as you tap in the digits, you realise the number is one number too long. You try removing a zero from the middle, the seven from the end and various other variations in case she'd just written the number down wrongly by accident, but no, THE NUMBER YOU ARE CALLING IS NOT RECOGNIZED. And you're not sure why this surprises you when you think back to yesterday in

the colour room. When you'd warned her Yasmin might fire her for wearing the red stockings, she'd made it pretty clear she didn't really care all that much about a career in hairdressing. With this in mind, you wonder why you were so sure she'd turn up at all. Why were you so stupid that this didn't even enter your mind, before you wasted your time fucking around last night when you should have made sure you had not one, but two or three models as backup for this evening. With the amount trainees get paid, added to the fact that half the female ones don't even want to be hairdressers, trainees drop out all the time.

"Fucking trainees," says a voice. You turn to see Anton. "Never one around when you need one," he says, reaching up to the top shelf for a stick of styling wax. You don't hang around to hear him tell you how Agnes pushed Blue Jean into the front of reception this morning, in front of a row of shocked clients, with Yasmin trying to hold her back. Or that the reason Jesamine turned up in an orange top today was because she'd been locked out of her flat all night and spent the early hours wandering up and down the Brighton seafront until Kim opened up this morning. Or that the reason Byron still looks so happy despite you using his model, is that he only asked Jesamine as a backup. That the first thing he'd done when he heard about the competition was to get your model, Beatrice's number off the model list in the stock room. Called her up and asked her to be his model, to which she'd said fine because you hadn't used her in anything for over two years, and because Byron reassured her by saying it was fine with you. Something he'd related to Anton during lunch break with much pleasure, all the more so because, you, Stretch, had in his words, nicked his fucking backup model. No, you don't listen to any of this because none of it really matters anymore. It's all gone out the window. And so has your professionalism.

CUT

Meg Ryan is red-faced when you return. "I really can't look like this," she says. "And you've kept me waiting half an hour already."

"You shouldn't listen to what other people say." She looks at you incredulously. "You liked it when you left. All that's changed is some guys at work didn't like it."

"Let me get this straight," she says, "you're telling me that I shouldn't listen to the opinion of my team? That I should take the word of a complete stranger over the word of those it's my job to trust?"

"I'm a professional," you say.

She points up at her hair.

"Does this look like the work of a professional to you?"

No, you think. It doesn't. A professional wouldn't have cut his model in the early hours of the morning. He'd have booked a proper time in the slots booked-out by the management. And a professional would have made damned sure he had at least one working contact number. No, you're not professional. You've always been that stupid and you've just made the same mistake again that messed up your career ten years ago and made you pack your bags and jump on the train from Victoria to Brighton. You still remember the haunting sound of the recorded announcement as you approached, "This is Brighton, your final destination," it said, as though you had died and were taking the ferry to the underworld. And in a sense, this was true. Your career in London had died very suddenly. Everything had gone from you very suddenly. At least, that's the excuse you've always given yourself for the endless nights of burning the candle at both ends. There's always been an excuse. You smoked the cigarettes to wake up, you drank the coffee to stay awake, you took the drugs to stay sharp and you drank every night as soon as you left work because that was the only way you could handle betraying that young guy who believed in himself. Would a professional do all that?

"Let me spell it out for you," says Meg. "I can't look like this."

"You're right," you say.

"You made me look like a man."

"No I didn't," you say. "God did."

You stand outside in the alley. You know there is no point in going back to the salon, not after what you did. There is no way back from that. You just left your client sitting there in shocked silence and walked out the front door. No one said anything to you. No one came running after you and they still haven't come looking for you. Why? Because that's it. They'll only come running after you if they want you back.

For some reason, as you head through the fire door and up the narrow stairs to the staff room, you are still hoping not to bump into anyone. It won't make any difference if Stuart or Yasmin see you right away or later on, but for some reason, you try to escape the inevitable. The inevitable fact that come tomorrow morning you will not need to get out of bed when your alarm goes off.

The staff room is empty except for Blue Jean. She doesn't look up when you enter but even if she was looking, you wouldn't notice now. The sooner you get out of here and don't have to see her face again, the better.

You take a seat on the empty bench opposite her and wait. Blue Jean turns towards you and smiles from under her hat like a doll that came to life in a horror film. You think how fake she is and how all the warmth is her toner. And that hat. You wonder if she's not bald under that hat.

How you'd like to rip it off her head right now in front of the whole salon and laugh at her when they all see she is bald. What you don't admit to yourself and what it kills you admit is that deep down you think she is a better cutter than you.

Your first client after lunch will be arriving soon. At two minutes past three, the phone rings. Blue Jean answers and says something to Kim but you don't hear or notice it. A couple of trainees walk in, chattering, then filter back out to their duties. Then Crystal sticks her head round the corner. They sent Crystal. Of course they did. She probably camped outside the manager's office as soon as she heard the news you were in trouble, just so she could be the one sent to summon you.

"Stretch," she says.

She never says hello to you. Here it comes.

"Your next client called up. She can't make it."

She puts on a good front, you think. No doubt she'll laugh at you later after they tell you to collect your things and go. But before you can give this further consideration, the staff room phone rings.

You hesitate at first but if you don't pick it up, you know Crystal will. You don't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that Stuart or Yasmin need to see you right now, if she hasn't already heard what you did.

It's Yasmin's voice.

"Is that Stretch?"

After a brief pause where you think about putting the phone down again and walking out the back door, you tell her, "Yes, this is Stretch."

"Can you take a walk in?"

The voice is not Yasmin. You must have imagined it. The voice is Kim.

There must be some mistake here. Maybe Napoleon has been called off somewhere, or word of the catastrophe where you told a woman she looked like a man has somehow not reached the ears of management yet.

"Be right down," you say. You reach under the bench and pick up your kit bag. You might as well do this one last cut.

Kim points you to your client who leans back against the front window, reading a magazine. If she knows this is your last day, she's doing a good job of hiding it. You walk up behind what you imagine is your last client at this salon.

This is the crowning glory, you think, as you walk up behind the chair to find your last client before getting fired, the culmination of a career in fashion, is a greying man in his mid-fifties. He asks you for a short back and sides and you can't be bothered to suggest an alternative or try to persuade him otherwise. The company allow half an hour for a male client but half an hour is barely enough without clippers.

Good salons don't use clippers.

Why?

Pure logic. Clippers only cut evenly on an even head. There's no such thing as an even head. Every film star has a bump or crevice somewhere.

Scissor over Comb is the preferred technique of top hairdressing salons. It is a precise but slow technique and guaranteed to make you late. If halfway through the cut the client decides it's not short enough, you have to start the haircut all over again. It's not as simple as cutting just the sides or just the top. The cut has to connect in. Take one minuscule part of the haircut even a millimetre shorter, and the rest must match. And the moral of the story?

"You have to be one hundred percent sure you know exactly what's on your man's mind," says Blue Jean as you sit in the staff room, drowning yourself in coffee and wondering how you're going to explain cutting that fringe to Stuart later.

So you simply pick up your barbering comb and start.

Half the appointment time passes in silence. He has that look of clients who are either shy or want to be left alone, which suits you fine because the last thing you feel like doing right now is talking. Except, he doesn't leave you alone.

"Stretch," he says. "Unusual name."

Despite everything, you can't help laughing at how ridiculous it sounds to you now. "It's just a nickname," you say and you tell him why. He laughs at the reason but he doesn't just leave it there. He asks you another one, the inevitable question most of your clients will ask you, Why did you become a hairdresser? You recite the usual answer, the same answer you've given to rows upon rows, perhaps thousands of clients over the years.

"I thought it would be creative and creativity has always just sort of come to me."

"Oh," he says, smiling, "And I thought men only did this sort of job to be around a lot of pretty women."

"Well, Vidal Sassoon did say that hair is another name for sex," you say. He frowns.

"Sassoon really said that?"

You wouldn't normally be this frank with a client but right now it hardly seems to matter. "He did," you say, "And I became a hairdresser for the sex."

Your client smiles at you like he can't quite work out if you're having him on. Like perhaps he doesn't want to believe that the only reason you cut hair is the sex. That he wants to believe there is something more, something creative or artistic, just something extra to raise you above the animal. And it occurs to you to tell him a different story. A story that you think might please him, a different story about why you became a hairdresser. Of course, you don't tell him any of this but if you did, If you would have, then the story would probably go something like this.

You would tell him how you first fell in love with hairdressing in London in your late teens. You're not sure why you did, but isn't that just the way with love. Either way, yours was not the normal way into the business, like the way so many hairdressers begin their careers, fresh out of school when they're sixteen. No, you fall in love a different way. One day while working as a casual labourer you decided you wouldn't eat your sandwiches on site like you normally would. You can't remember whether it was because you were tired of listening to the usual lunchtime banter or that you were keen to avoid a conflict between your agency and another that were working on the site, but either way, you took a detour down South Molton Street and for some reason you can't remember you stopped by the window of a large hairdressing salon and that's where you saw her.

What you don't remember about this situation are the real reasons you stopped there. The red double-decker that swerved around a corner and clipped the head of a skinny black guy in his mid-teens, who swears loudly and looks like he's going to give chase but doesn't. Nor did you notice the old lady that walked over to him and offered him a tissue for the blood that had started to run down his temple. Or the way he looked at the old lady as if to say, What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? But he took it anyway and after explaining to her that this bus driver did it on purpose, he smiles and hugs the old lady. But you don't see any of that because you are entranced. Captivated by the backless black dress and the random freehand tattoos that you will later realise cover her whole body and she will later tell you, each tells a story of a different lover. You remember just standing there, transfixed by this woman in the moment she appears to turn and face you like some mechanical figurine in a music box and stare right into you. There is nothing in the stage directions to say the young hero will fall for her but you did just that. It is, you think, the most magical moment of your life but what you don't realise is that she isn't staring at you. She is staring just past you at the young black guy hugging the old lady across the street behind you. She will mention this in passing to you a year later but you won't take it in. You'll just remember her staring right at you, holding your stare and smiling in wonderment at what you think is you. And then you remember the voice from next to you that asked you, "What do you think?"

“It looks great,” you said before even turning to see the guy talking to you, “It all looks amazing.” The guy, who you’ll later find out is the junior manager of the salon, laughs. Tells you they’re recruiting for apprentice hairdressers and if you fancy having the idea, to give them a call to arrange for an interview. You smiled at him as if to say this was very unlikely but by your afternoon tea break, after a guy from the rival agency tries to drop a concrete slab on your hand through a gap in the building roof, you think, What the hell, and you give the salon a call.

When you started work at Hair Gang Salons in South Molton Street along with two other female trainees, the manager, whose name is Steve, drums it into you that you’re not merely a team, you’re a family. But a fucked up family you were. There were all these rules telling you where and when you could do things, not just at work but in your free time too. Not official rules of course because they could never get away with that but you are told in no uncertain terms that you must comply with all of them. The strangest of these, you think, is the one where you must not socialise in the same place as salon clients. At first when you are told this, you think they mean you to avoid a specific place or area of the city in the evenings but it’s worse than that. What is actually meant is that if you enter a pub or nightclub and you see salon clients that you recognise, then you must put your drink down and leave the place. As well as this rule there are also other matters, like the way you are treated by all the stylists as less than nothing. You were lead to believe in your interview that this was a glamorous and exciting job where you’d get to interact with stylists and clients in a mature and progressive way but what you actually have to do from around eight AM to well after the salon closes at seven PM, is clean floors, toilets, combs and brushes, mirrors and run out to the shops ten times a day to get sandwiches for the stylists. And as for Steve. This guy who was so friendly to you when you first stopped outside, the guy who offered you a cigarette and seemed so interested in your life, treats you like you are less than nothing. Every evening after he inspects the mirrors that you have spent ages diligently cleaning, he would pick on you, and while the rest of the staff and trainees had gone home, you’d be there for an extra half an hour polishing the mirrors for a second time. You often ask yourself how and why you managed to stick doing this for a full two years. With hindsight it seems utter madness, considering the hours you were doing and the amount you were getting paid, but somehow you did it. Somehow you stuck it out. You’d stuck it out because you’d noticed something change in your life. If you were out in a pub, a bar or a club, despite the fact that you barely had enough money for a pint and a ten pack of Marlborough Light, people wanted to know you. Everyone was interested in you in a way they never were before. People who’d never paid you any attention before had started to notice you, whether in a busy club or bar or even queuing up in a supermarket. They just seemed to be drawn to your attitude and

energy. And when after the two years you graduated as a Junior Stylist, this affect only seemed to double and then triple. For the first time in your life, you felt like an important person. Someone who people respected, someone with a proper trade and someone who fitted in. Although strangely, the happier in your work you became, the faster, the more creative, the lonelier you were beginning to feel. Because the only person you wanted to notice you had said all of two words to you in the two years you'd worked there. With hindsight, you will later realise this was just her way. As she would tell you one day soon after you had your photo taken together after your first hair show with the salon team, she didn't do smiling. Smiling was so uncool. You try to remember what happened to the photo. You kept it beside your bed for years in a glass frame but even so, it somehow vanished or you lost it or broke it or set fire to it. Or more likely it just fell off the side of the bedside cabinet one night when you finally stopped thinking about her and was gradually buried and lost in all the junk there. And now you have to try that much harder just to try and imagine looking at her again.

Her name was Heaven and she came from Lewisham. That is, she came from some small village near Hastings that no one's ever heard of and moved to Lewisham when she was very young but it was easier and better for street cred just to say she was a Londoner. While doing your day to day duties as a trainee you'd watched her. Each day you'd find something new, some small minute detail to file and store as you created her in your mind. The only problem though, was that she was Steve's girlfriend. You can never be sure if Steve noticed you doing this and picked on you as a result, stacking up more and more shitty duties, hoping that if he stacked them high enough they'd fall and crush you, you would just leave of your own accord but either way, his doing this achieved the reverse effect. Because the more duties you performed and the more of Steve's shit you ate, the more you came to the attention of the senior manager and number two man in the company, Simon Hartley, who despite Tim's efforts to demoralise you, took you under his wing. That is, you shadow him all day, shampoo his clients, fetch them drinks, go out and get his lunch, cigarettes or whatever he wants. It is the hardest trainee job in the salon, but it is also the most rewarding and profitable if you stick it. You get to learn from the best, watching how he conducts consultations, deals with new clients, regular clients, walk-ins, quiet clients, awkward clients, rude clients and best of all, famous clients. As well as the fact that every one of his clients is wealthy with an infinitely more interesting life, he has a whole load of showbiz celebrities as clients, from film stars to premiership footballers. You don't get any higher up the ladder than Andrew in this business and at the age of twenty-one, you dreamt about becoming just like that. And you dreamt about having someone like Heaven as your

girlfriend. Except, you'd never be happy with someone like Heaven as your girlfriend. You wanted her.

The accident that changed everything happened one evening after an annual staff Dinner. They'd booked it in the basement of some pseudo-posh hotel north of Oxford Circus that gave a discount in return for a discount at the salon for their staff. Everyone had arrived in high spirits and nearly everyone was drunk already by the time the waiter had even started to take the orders. No one was really bothering that much about the food, except for the management who'd forked out for it, because what really matters to anyone on these annual staff do's is the piss-up and clubbing afterwards. It's a chance for everyone to show off their hairstyles and individual fashion sense and perhaps have a drunken lunge at that person they've had their eye on all year but never had the guts to do anything about. You for one could have done without being there that night for the one reason that Steve had chosen this occasion to announce his engagement to Heaven. Even though it killed you to do it, you'd attended because of how much you owed your career to Andrew and you'd even joined in the toast to Steve and Heaven.

That said, rather than torture yourself any longer than you had to, you left at the first opportune moment. As soon as you'd shovelled your main course down and Andrew had occupied himself talking to some other managers from the company he'd invited along, you headed swiftly for the stairs and made your way up to the street. It was still daylight when you surfaced and you'd made your way steadily down to Oxford circus and west along Oxford Street when all at once it started tipping down with rain. You'd ducked into the nearest burger place and sat there in the window with a large diet coke and fries.

You have never really believed in fate because you've always felt that fate is what you see when you don't notice everything else going on around you. But if you did believe in fate, this is where you would have a hard time convincing yourself that the following events were just a coincidence.

You could easily have missed her but at that moment you happened to look up from your phone and see her walk past the window of the burger place. She didn't have an umbrella and nor did she have a jacket, although you couldn't be sure if she had a jacket because you didn't see her arrive at the dinner. You were already in the hotel bar on your third double to try to forget about the fact the staff dinner would be her engagement party.

In the time it took you to rush out of the burger place with your cola and fries and make after her, she had vanished. Even so you'd paced off in the direction she was going, and broken into a jog to try to catch up with her. You had no idea what you were going to say if you caught up with

her, you weren't exactly close on speaking terms beyond conferring over clients and salon duties but all you knew was that it was the most important thing in the world to find her.

Twenty minutes later you'd all but given up on finding her. You assumed she must have simply turned off one of the many side streets or alleys, or more likely, just slipped into one of the hundreds of shops lining Oxford Street. Besides that, you knew you shouldn't be following her in the first place. She was, after all, Steve's fiancée, something you'd told yourself time and time again that you were just going to have to accept. There could be any number of reasons why she'd have left the staff dinner and her engagement party early. Any number of reasons you'd thought, except that you couldn't think of a single good one.

You had all but given up on finding her and regretted following her in the first place. On top of the fact that she was Steve's girlfriend, something you had told yourself you were just going to have to accept, it had now started tipping down with rain, soaking you through your black Lauren polo shirt and newly bought trousers and turning your fries into a soggy mess. Still, you were already soaked and you had nothing better to do right then so you carried on walking in the direction of Marble Arch. That was when you saw her again, crossing the road up ahead.

You'd immediately broken into a run to try to catch her up but when you reached the pavement on the other side of the road, you'd lost sight of her again. But that's when you noticed the sea of umbrellas about a hundred yards further up, bobbing up and down ahead of you and completely obscuring the pavement. The sea of umbrellas, that you would realise, were a small crowd gathered at the roadside. It was impossible to tell what they were looking at but as you closed the distance you noticed they were all looking in the direction of the street, where a bus had stopped crookedly across the centre of Oxford Street. The next thing you noticed were the blue flashing lights approaching from far in the distance, lots of them. With hindsight it will seem strange that you never heard the sirens until much later. That everything fell silent around you as you'd pushed your way in among all the people with umbrellas and looked to see what they were looking at.

The double decker, it seemed, had hit a small blue car. But you know this couldn't have been the way it really happened because in-between the double decker and the tiny car lies a bicycle. But that's when you noticed the mannequins. One, with black afro hair leaned against the driver window of the car while a child dummy sat next to her in the passenger seat, unmoving. There was another on the road by the bike wearing a bicycle helmet and another couple just randomly strewn in front of the bus. You didn't notice the blood at all and later on when you'd tried put all this together in your head, you realise that there was so much of it that you'd blocked it all out. But all this was incidental because what you always remember about this moment is seeing her.

At first you thought she was admiring her reflection in the shop window. It struck you that this was vain behaviour considering the extent of the accident right there on the road, not three metres distant from her. The next day someone would tell you that six people had died in that accident, but at that moment, all you could think about was Heaven, standing there glued to her own reflection in the glass. Even when you approached her and even when you spoke her name, she did not turn around. "Are they dead?" she'd said twice and you'd replied, "I don't know," twice. After that you'd taken hold of her hand, something she did not object to and pulled her slowly sideways. After about ten paces or so she'd snapped out of it enough to turn and look at you. As you'd moved away along the pavement, you cast a final glance over your shoulder at the accident. The street was almost entirely obscured by people now but you've still caught a glimpse of the small blue car, which this time you noticed was a Fiat, as well as the curly haired woman driver who you were now no longer sure had afro hair and might be Caucasian. What you didn't notice but Heaven will tell you about later on was the circular cobweb pattern and outward dent of the glass from the impact of the woman's head.

It had started as a drink in a pub along Bayswater Road to calm her nerves and dry-off but three hours later you found yourself walking through Hyde Park in the pitch black and pouring rain, both of you drunk, with her trying to remember the words to some song she couldn't sing in tune and you pretending you'd actually heard of that song. She'd said cutting through the park was a shortcut but as she scaled the fence with ease and stood there laughing as you got your shirt stuck on a spike, you struggled to remember where the shortcut was to and when you asked her, she just laughed more, she couldn't remember either. On the bright side, you'd managed to calm her, and yourself down after witnessing the crash and you'd even managed to get her laughing and smiling despite the fact she'd stormed off from her engagement party just three hours before. All in all you figured it was probably worth tearing your shirt, leaving a sizeable rip over your right nipple, because at least this way you were getting to know her a bit better for the first time.

You'd focused on the glow of her hair in the dark and remember wondering if she actually knew where she was going as she moved swiftly through trees, over mounds, and up a long grassy verge. How you didn't walk into anything you'll never know but somehow you didn't and after a few minutes, your eyes adapted better to the dark, a relief at first, you'd thought but in other ways it just helps you to see more perplexing things, like the shapes through gaps in trees that resembled creatures or the thing hanging from a tree off to the right that looked like a person but turned out to be large branch when you got closer, broken and swaying. If you had been soberer at the time and not pumped full of bravado from being with Heaven, you'd

probably have thought more about all of these things and legged it out of the park, but such was the effect she had on you. You didn't even care that you were drenched and that it just kept on raining.

After a while you'd reached a clearing surrounded by high jagged bushes. All at once she'd stopped dead in her tracks

"Which way now?" you'd said, still laughing at the insanity of being there, but she'd shushed you. The sound reverberated around the clearing. All sensations were magnified and you got that irrational feeling that something was coming for you out of the shadows of the trees. Except this time, something really was coming for you. You'd heard the dull hum first and felt her hand clamp your elbow. The clearing started to lighten and the shadows of bushes grew longer like jagged mountain peaks as the hum and revving of a car engine became audible.

You scanned for somewhere to hide but there was no real shelter and even if you tried to run, you'd never make it to the nearest group of trees before a car could.

"Who is it?" she asked you.

"I thought you knew," you'd told her as you both dropped to the ground holding on tight to her arm, pulling her down with you as the whole clearing had lit up like a football pitch.

You'd laid on the ground facing inwards towards each other, legs touching, faces just inches apart, rain filling your ears and pouring down your faces, while waiting for what must be certain discovery. Whoever was in the car would have to be blind not to see you both lying there, but that soon became a secondary worry as the engine noise crept closer and all at once you were more worried about getting run over than you were about discovery. So you decided to stand up but as you moved to do so, Heaven grabbed hold of your shirt collar and pulled you to her.

"Lie still," she whispered and so you lay there inhaling her vanilla body lotion and praying for the car to stop moving. Sure enough, the engine idled and you waited for the inevitable sound of car doors slamming, but they didn't. Perhaps whoever was in the car hadn't seen you. Maybe they, whoever they were, just happened to be heading that way and had stopped for a cigarette break or something.

The car backed up into a U-turn and before you could tell her to hold on a second, Heaven stood up and shouted at you to run.

The blue lights flashed first and the sirens followed. Engines groaned as the car steered and looped back in your direction. With hindsight you don't remember exactly how events unfolded next, but you remember flinging yourselves, arm in arm, at the darkness ahead, sprinting blindly through a small thicket of thorn bushes towards a cluster of distant trees. Just a few metres behind you heard the car screech to a halt at the entrance to the thicket. There followed a throaty

sound and a heavy clunk like the gearbox had dropped out and within seconds the revving started up again and the headlights appeared off to your right. You'd not been chased by police before and you haven't since, but even as you ran, faster than you could ever remember running in your life, what struck you the most is just how hard they were going for it. Considering all you'd done was trespass, they'd come after you like you'd dropped your shorts in a church on Sunday. But somehow and unbelievably you'd reached the trees before them.

You'd heard doors slam and people shouting and twigs snapping close on your heels but you'd kept on running, pulled on by Heaven. She was fast, you'd been surprised how much faster she was than you were as you'd resigned yourself to the fact there was no way you could keep this speed up. Your lungs were burning and your knees were buckling and how you managed not to fall or trip you'll never know, and just as you couldn't take another step and had made up your mind to tell her to go on without you, she'd yanked your arm sideways, steering you both in the direction of a towering, dark, shape. And then you fell into it.

You were not sure how long you lay flat against the soil, trying desperately to muffle your heavy breathing but slowly the glint of torch lights faded and the voices disappeared. Even so, you both kept very still. You still hadn't heard a car engine which could only mean they were still out there somewhere, moving around in the shadows of the trees, just as still as you were.

Just when you were beginning to think they'd leave, that they would spend the rest of the night camped out in their car short of something better to do, you heard the faint crackle of a radio. Seconds after that the engines start up and the noise of the car trailed off.

She began to laugh.

"Quiet," you'd whispered. "They might still be out there."

"It's not like we robbed a bank," she said.

"Tell them that," you said. "They've never chased me before. It must be you they want."

"Perhaps I'm going to kill you," she said. "And bury you under this Weeping Willow. No one will ever find you. You'll haunt this place forever with the ghosts of highwaymen. They used to hang them here, you know." Her voice trailed off, sounding oddly different as she'd said it. And for a moment you wondered if she was there at all. You asked her why she'd left the dinner but still she remained silent. Outside of the tree the rain beat down but even so you could still hear the sound of her shaking. "Are you cold," you'd asked her but still nothing. Then you'd felt her hand and then her arms reach around you as she sat herself sideways on your lap and embraced you with her chin on your shoulder and the side of her head pressed so hard against yours that it hurt your ear when she moved.

“We must look like a pair of drowned rats,” she’d said as you’d moved your arms around the back of her to keep her warm and realised you were hugging her soaking wet, naked body.

You never remember much about the sex except when you really try to and each time it gets a little harder to picture until you’re not sure if you’re remembering what really happened or filling in the ever widening gaps with memories of other sex you’ve had, and movies you’ve watched, over the years. But you do remember when after, as you lay back in a mud puddle while she shuffled around, looking for something in her handbag, the inside of the tree lighting up like a cave. You don’t remember the shapes and shadows wavering around on the branches but you do remember Heaven, sitting there clasping a small red box of matches. This perfect unmoving golden statue of a woman. With tattoos of different sizes spaced out around her back, her stomach, her thighs, her shins and her ankles. There is a space midway up her back where she will have another tattoo done two months later but you’ll never see it or even know that it was there.

“Got a smoke,” she’d said, “mine are soaked.”

You checked your trouser pockets and mercifully, your cigarettes had survived the chase. Better still, there was still more than half a pack left. The light faded and Heaven struck another match. You handed her a cigarette, heard the reassuring sizzle as she lit, first her own, then touched ends with you. Then she lay down beside you and said: “There lie they, and here lie we.” “What does it mean,” you’d asked her and she’d said it was just something she’d read once. She said she wasn’t sure, but just before the match light faded leaving two orange embers floating in the dark above you, she’d said she thought it meant that in the end we all sell each other out. At that moment you remember swearing to her you would never do that. It would always be her. When she said nothing in reply, you twisted your cigarette in a figure of eight and laughed as she mimicked you, the embers appearing like comet trails chasing each other in the dark of space.

After a while the cigarettes burned out and the lights disappeared, hers first and then yours. You’d offered her another but she’d said no. Instead she’d told you the last thing she would tell you. There would be plenty of conferring with her over clients at work in the three months before she left to run a salon in Australia with her soon to be husband, Steve, but this is the thing that always stayed with you. It meant nothing when she said it but you thought about it a lot after you learned she’d died quite suddenly of cancer, less than three years later. You have never been quite sure why she’d felt the need to tell you, but she told you the story of her name.

“My father named me Heaven,” she’d said. “It’s the only thing he gave me before he left my mum when I was very young. Just that silly name. “It’s not silly,” you’d said, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh at which point she started laughing too. “The thing is, I used to blame my mother for him not seeing me because she would never tell me where he was or even tell me his name. If I ever asked about him she’d just go on about how he’d left us both for this other woman, or just change the subject. For some reason though, just after I’d turned fifteen, perhaps she felt guilty or perhaps she’d just gotten over him, but my mother told me his name. So I googled his name and came up with thousands of people with that name, even a champion snooker player. Even so, I went through all these names, I had like these files on every one of them I thought might be a possibility and still I couldn’t find him. Then one day, when I’d all but given up hope that I’d ever find him, I found this guy living just down the road from me. About five minutes away from where I lived with my mum.

The thing is, I always thought he’d be somewhere far away like LA or something. I’d never imagined he could have been living down the road from me all that time and never once think to come and look me up.

So I emailed this guy and at first he ignored me. So I thought I had the wrong person and I was just about to forget the whole idea and accept that my father was never going to be a part of my life when I got a reply. Just a short one. He told me to meet him in this park by the Peter Pan statue. Did you know, they put the Peter Pan Statue here at night so people would think it’d arrived there by magic? And it did feel like magic. I was so excited when the day came. Just imagine, I’d dreamt about this moment all my life. In my mind he was this tall handsome guy like George Clooney or someone. And he’d left me and mum for this really important reason. Some reason that meant he couldn’t come back to us but I always knew one day he’d be back for me. And that day came.

I got there way too early because I was bricking it. I couldn’t remember what my father looked like. I had these images in my mind but I was never sure if they were real memories or just faces I’d remembered from old photographs. So I found this spot where I could see all the approach routes, It’s strange how you plan these things.

There were some kids playing down this one path and there was this nanny making my head dizzy by pushing a pram in circles around the statue, over and over again trying to get this kid to sleep, and poor old Peter Pan, he’s just stuck there and looks like someone poured road tar all over him so he couldn’t fly. And then I see this guy coming and I’ve never felt my heart beat so fast in all my life. I start to worry I might actually wet myself before he reaches me. Because he looks right. He ticks all the right boxes. He’s tall and he’s handsome as a film star in these black leathers

and dark glasses. And he comes walking right up to me and I say, Richard, because that's my dad's name and he says, No, but can I tell him the quickest way to get to the Hilton, so I point him out the way and he says, Thanks, and he asks me, Would I like to come to his hotel for a drink? I mean, this guy must have been forty if he was a day and I'm there, just barely passed my fifteenth and..."

"So what did you tell him?"

"I know what I should have said but the thing is, when you're fifteen you like it when people think you're older than you are. So I said, Thank you very much but I'm waiting for someone. So there I am just sitting and waiting and by now it's nearly twenty past twelve and I don't think he's going to turn up. And there's proper tears starting to form in my eyes and I'm worried if I cry it's going to mess up my make-up and I won't be able to impress him. I'd spent hours doing it that morning. But just at that moment I see something from the corner of my eye. This yellow shape comes floating towards me and I turn just in time to see this big fat smiling man in T-shirt and shorts come roller skating up to me, holding an ice-cream in one hand."

"Your father?"

"He'd stopped to buy an ice cream on the way."

"So what happened?"

"We spoke for a bit and said we'd meet again but we never did. We swapped numbers and we texted for a bit, kept saying we'd meet again, but all at once I couldn't be bothered anymore. The thing is, I could have forgiven him. For leaving my mum and for leaving me. For living just down the road and never bothering to look me up. For never coming to any of my birthday parties or going to any of the shitty parent's evenings at my shitty school. For not being there when I sang out of tune in front of three hundred people in the nativity play when I was ten. All those things I could have forgiven him for. But you know what upset me more than anything else? More than any of that?"

You shake your head in the darkness.

"It was that fucking ice-cream. After all those years he didn't even buy me a fucking ice cream."

CUT

You once saw a documentary some time back about the police's treatment of tourists in Portugal's holiday hot spots but it stuck in your head. In the documentary the police inspector explained that tourists committing minor crimes like drunk and disorderly received harsh treatment from his officers in order to put them off offending again, but that surprisingly,

tourists arrested for very serious crimes like armed robbery were in fact treated very nicely because there was no point in deterring them. They were going down for a very long time. That's how you feel now as Yasmin's tells you in a voice so soft it is almost a whisper, "Stuart wants to see you in his office, Stretch," just before she disappears down the corridor where you hear her scream at a trainee with such venom that you think it impossible she won't hit this girl.

You know you've gone too far this time.

"What happened out there, Stretch?"

You are for it now, you think, as Napoleon tenses his jaw. And it's worse than you thought, he's leaving the woman you called a man as the main course. He's kicking off with your client yesterday and the Joan of Arc fringe.

"That was some of the best cutting I've seen yet," he says, "It's a shame it wasn't what she wanted."

"She couldn't speak English," you say, "I..."

"It's not your cutting, Stretch. It's your attitude."

No shit, you think. You told a woman she looked like a man. "My attitude?"

"The clients are dangerous, Stretch. But right now you're worse."

"I'm what?"

"You're dangerous and foolish."

You eye him like he's lost his mind. In all probability he has.

"If you don't understand your client, then find someone who does, but you NEVER, NEVER..." He squints at you. He BANGS the desk.

"Oh, come on, Stretch, that's Top Gun," he says.

You look at him, dumbstruck.

"You know, the movie."

"I've never seen it," you say.

He starts to laugh, "Fuck sake, Stretch. Everyone's seen Top Gun."

He starts to hum some tune you vaguely recognise but the thing is, you really have never seen it. Despite all the references you always hear and the countless showings late night on obscure TV channels with far too many gambling and insurance ads, you've always managed to miss this movie. There is something not right about all this. He's being way too friendly.

"Alright Stretch," he says, "let's get down to business, shall we?"

You nod. Try to think up some reason, any reason why you abused your client the way you did but you're struggling.

He dangles a tiny self-seal bag in front of you. You recognise the remaining half gram or so of your gear. That solves that mystery.

“Kim found this on the upper cutting floor this morning. Do you know anything about this, Stretch?”

You eye the self-seal bag. Shake your head slowly. Wonder if he knows you were in here last night cutting Jesamine’s hair. Whether he’s checked the CCTV by the fire door.

“CCTV’s broke, unfortunately,” he says. His eyes bore into you. “Just let me know if you hear anything, alright?”

Hear anything? He’s got to be messing with you. That’s it, he is messing with you. He’s lulled you into a false sense of security and this is where he tells you he was bluffing about the CCTV not working and he knows you abused his trust. That you came in here late last night with the keys he’d trusted you with to teach the trainees, and instead of teaching them, took oral sex from a girl half your age and left products scattered everywhere, leaving drink spills and cigarette ends strewn all around the upper cutting floor. Except, he won’t care about what you did with Jesamine, only that you’d wasted salon products.

But it’s worse than that. Of course it is. And you can only smile as he touches the corner of a silver picture frame and turns it to face you.

There she stands, strangled double-D’s in a buttoned-up white blouse under the navy blazer of a B.A. Stewardess.

“My wife, Katia,” he says.

You look at the photo. Her smile seems to mock you like she knows the mess you’re in. She has one of those faces that’s so ugly, it’s sexy. It somehow works. Large cartoon eyes, pencilled-in eyebrows and this double-barrelled nose you have to really force yourself not to stare at when she’s riding cowgirl.

“We’ve met.”

“You don’t say.”

You think about the last time you saw her. Napoleon was inspecting the ranks on the outer edges of his empire. She called you up. The Empress wanted to wrestle. Demanded you come right away. Threatened to tell Napoleon all about your little Russian initiative if you didn’t. You said you’d come over for a coffee. But just a coffee.

And what a coffee it was. “At Salon International,” you tell him, looking him in the eye and holding his gaze while trying to prevent your eyes from darting to the right and giving you away.

He points to the self-seal bag on his desk. “This stuff any good?” he says.

“I...I don’t...”

“Come on Stretch, I know you all take it. I know I’m the only guy in this entire fucked-up business that doesn’t.”

He pulls open the self-seal bag and pours the remaining powder onto the back of the ‘big black book’ of Hair Gang classics to the right of his desk. Carves a line with the edge of a pintail comb. Your eyes widen.

He looks at the photo. Sighs. “I remember when I first met her,” he says. “I was based back in Bognor then. She worked in the perfume factory just down the road from the salon. She never had any money. I’d always find her waiting in the reduced section at the supermarket, you know, the stuff with the yellow stickers, and all her wages went back to her family in St Petersburg. So I married her, Stretch. Just like in a movie.” He stares wistfully at the cardboard boxes and towels stacked up in the corner of the room. “I always hoped one day they’d make a movie of my life. Or at least a documentary. That’s when you know you’ve really made it. Can you imagine that, Stretch? A movie that’s just about you?” He chuckles to himself, “Who do you think they’d get to play me?”

You shrug. It’s something you’d rather not put too much thought into or risk getting wrong. He smiles, “I’ve always fancied Colin Firth for the part, myself. Do you think he’d go for it?”

“I can see that,” you say without hesitation, “I think the two of you...”

“Can you Stretch? Can you really? I can just picture it now. His agent on the phone to him. Hey Colin, congratulations on getting that Oscar for *The King’s Speech* and by the way, how do you fancy playing a fat hairdresser in your next film?”

“You’re not fat, Stuart.”

“You can’t bullshit me, Stretch. I’m the same as you, remember that. I know I’m fat. ‘Fat Stu,’ that’s what they called me at school, that’s what I know every employee I have calls me behind my back now.”

“It’s not,” you say.

“That’s nice of you to say, Stretch, but it doesn’t touch me anymore. You see, I got used to it a long time ago, and you know what? Sometimes I even quite like it. Because there is one thing I have, one thing I realise that all those people don’t have, Stretch, and you know what that is?” You shrug at him. “I know myself, Stretch. I know who I am and when I wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, I’ll say, morning Stuart, how are you doing today? and that guy in the mirror will say, Hiya Stu, I’m doing just fine. Just fine. And by the way, your wife is fucking someone else.”

You think about getting up and leaving. Why wait to humour him over all this when you know he’s just warming up to fire you. But you don’t get up and leave because you’ve always

known that that's the way they get you. They make it so hard that you have to leave but that's where they've always misjudged you. Because you always sit tight to the bitter end.

"I know my wife doesn't love me, Stretch."

"I'm sure she does."

"She loves someone else."

You shake your head slowly. Here it comes.

"Know who that is?"

"Do I know who...?"

He measures out another line.

"Do you have any idea, Stretch, any little inkling who this man might be?"

He takes back the powder through a rolled up fifty with a big hollow snort. "This guy who's not even a man, Stretch, this insect who's fucking my wife?"

You don't know what to say so you don't say anything. And he just grins at you with this fixed grin like at any second he might leap over the desk and start smacking you round the head with the black book of Hair Gang Classic cuts. Like he's genuinely thinking about doing this and weighing up all the logistics of it inside his coked-up head.

Instead he starts to laugh. Slowly at first and then all-out hysterical laughter until he nearly falls sideways out of the plastic chair.

Eventually he settles down to something that resembles a giggle and points a shaky finger at you.

"You're a gullible sap sometimes, Stretch. To think someone was sleeping with my wife. I mean, my wife." He holds up the photograph and thrusts it towards you, "Christ, have you seen her nose?"

You look at him horrified. Then you look back at the picture like you're having another look. "It looks fine. She looks..."

"Beautiful? I've tried to get her to have it fixed, every day since our marriage. Now he laughs and for the first time while sitting here it occurs to you that this meeting with him might actually only be about the drugs. That you may actually get out of this with your job. That perhaps your client didn't complain at all. That after she climbed out of her chair and took the gown back off by herself, that she went straight back to work, to whatever meeting she was desperate to get back to, without complaining or even saying a word. And the walking out without saying anything and never coming back will be her way of giving you and the whole company, the middle finger. That has to be it because the more you think about it, there's no way you'd still be in the salon right now if the management knew you'd told a client she looked like a man.

“About that client,” he says.

“If you mean the re-cut, I can explain.”

“No need to explain, Blue Jean told me everything.”

“Everything?”

“It happens to the best of us, Stretch. Try not to take it personally.”

You glance around the room like this is some sort of setup. Like some TV show host is poised with a microphone behind a curtain by the back door, ready to run in and tell you this is all a big set up. And that Meg Ryan was just a humorous plant thought up behind the scenes by a team of script writers. Some actress trained to wind you up to breaking point, just like she did.

“And Stretch?” he says.

This is where he tells you it’s all a big joke. To pack your bags and get lost.

“Your model called up.”

“Jesamine?”

“I told her to get here no later than five. Go and get yourself a coffee or a pint, or whatever you drink. I need you Stretch. You’re my boy, remember that.”

CUT

You lean into the bar at the local pub and order a whisky and coke just to steady your nerves. You have the best part of two hours to kill before your model arrives. The short stocky barmaid who everyone thinks is a dyke because of her man’s haircut, greets you with a warm smile and serves you a JD and ice.

While you’re waiting for your drink, this drunk guy intrudes on your thoughts. Looks in his sixties but is probably much younger. He looks at your glass like he’s dropped something in it. Tells you JD isn’t a real whiskey. You tell him you don’t give a fuck but he starts explaining the difference anyway. Between real whiskey and perfume, as he calls your drink. To back it up he starts to order shots of all the different kinds of whiskey behind the bar, to show you the difference. Tries to get you to taste them, but he’s not particularly bothered if you do or not. He probably does this every night. He’s got a method and he lives by it. You want to tell him to fuck off but you don’t. Instead you block him out as background voice and look over in the corner at Yasmin, who sits at a small table with a woman who looks strikingly similar to her. So similar in fact that you wonder if this woman is her twin, except she is less handsome and prettier than Yasmin with a softer hairstyle. Next to them, making up an awkward threesome, sits Blue Jean. Even now she wears that hat.

At the end of the corridor is a badly painted red door, the gents' toilet.

You stare down at the trough, one hand resting on the tiled windowsill to steady yourself while you direct your stream onto a fresh yellow soap and wonder how long it takes for one to dissolve. You imagine about a week, but it probably depends on how many customers they have, how much lager they sell and how many people like you, aim for the soap with the pointless intention of moving it as far towards the drain as they can.

Barely has the soap moved a foot when another stream hits the soap, sending it back in your direction.

You smell the Gaultier body lotion first.

"We must stop meeting like this," says Byron.

"People will talk," you say.

"You stole my model," he says.

"You stole mine first," you say.

"But you didn't know that," he says.

"I sold you and you sold me," you say. He looks at you blankly. "It means we all fuck each other over when it comes to being on TV." You aim your stream directly at the soap and push it back in his direction. He grins down at the trough and takes careful aim.

"May the best man win," he says.

"Or woman," you say.

He laughs and shakes his head like the idea is too stupid to comprehend. And perhaps he's right.

"And here's to your model actually turning up," he says.

"Why wouldn't she," you say.

"Things happen," he says.

"Things don't happen, Bone, people happen."

"She was really quite cut up when Yasmin told her to go home," he says. "Almost in tears, she was." The soap shoots past you and you lift your left foot to avoid the spatter of his stream. "But don't you worry, I said I'd take her out for dinner tonight. It was the least I could do. Make it all feel better."

You zip up and turn to face him. "Whatever floats your soap," you tell him. "Perhaps you can console yourself for losing while you're there."

He turns to face you, only, he hasn't zipped up.

"Look buddy," he says, "when you've got one this big..." He nods downwards. "Nothing stops you from winning."

You try to avoid looking and fail. And you hoped a big headed guy like this would have a small dick. That's the way these things are supposed to be. Big head, small dick. Small dick, big car. That's nature's way of equalling things out. But no such luck. You feel the pain of the chimp who'll never play more than a supporting role to his Lord of the Jungle.

"Lie to me," he says. "Tell me you've seen one bigger."

You don't tell him anything. You feel something land on your neck. Crawl around.

"Why do they call you Stretch, anyway? I should be Stretch, not you."

You grin at him as you think about why they do they call you Stretch. You used to think it was because you were tall and you had a thin waistline. When you danced in competitions at Northern Soul nights at some of the clubs in Camden and Kentish town, that's when you got the name Stretch. But just lately you've been thinking, perhaps that was never the reason. Perhaps it was just for the simple reason that people thought you were full of shit. That every tale you told, every bit of advice you gave was nothing but a stretch of the imagination. And that's why you're Stretch, because you've simply never been able to face the truth about who you are. Or out of all the things you've done, you couldn't point to a single one, not a single little thing and say with any kind of pride, it was Stretch did that.

You hear the fly buzzing around your head like a small musical voice in your ear. Like a small voice that tells you just what to do. What you've really known about Byron Bone all along, somewhere deep down inside.

You place both hands on Byron's shoulders and kiss him full on the lips. At any second you expect to be shoved back hard, but he doesn't move an inch.

The whole thing from start to finish lasts about two seconds, but it feels longer. Slowly you pull away from him. Leave him standing there with his dick hanging down a little longer than before, while you walk to the basin and press down on the taps.

The voice hits you first. "Don't turn your back on me, Stretch." You rub vigorously to build a lather in the hard water. "You really think you're something special, don't you Stretch! You think you know something the rest of us don't."

You keep rubbing your hands together, left over right, then right over left, the same pattern you've used for years. "Your secret's safe with me," you tell him. A bubble rises and pops against the end of your nose. You do not turn around. You imagine Byron's face right now, as he stands there behind you sobbing. And you start to laugh.

"DON'T," says the voice.

You laugh and you laugh.

“DON’T YOU TURN YOUR BACK ON ME,” says the voice. The unseen hand grabs your hair in a way that only a professional like Byron could do, just before your face travels towards the sink faster than your face has ever approached a sink before. Then rattles back and forth against the taps.

You can hardly see for the blood in your eyes as you navigate your way back up the corridor into the middle of the pub. For the first time ever, you are happy to hear Yasmin’s voice.

“WHAT THE FUCK?”

Byron, who lingers close on your heels, is lost for words.

“That’s it. I’m calling the police,” you hear the bar woman shout, somewhere off to your right. And then Byron isn’t lost for words.

“This fucking queer just tried to kiss me in the toilets.”

You wipe your face with your sleeve in time to see the barmaid come up beside a shouting Byron and execute some sort of over the top judo throw that lands him on the carpet, where she pins him to the floor. There follows a round of applause from a table of guys in overalls.

Half the pub move outside holding onto a shouting Byron while the other half follow to watch. Left all alone, you move behind the bar and help yourself to another JD. You catch the mirror above the fireplace and hold back a smile as you feel the pain of that front page striker, who no matter how good, will never be the best. He has a fucked up face.

CUT

Downstairs, the salon is starting to fill up with trainees and Saturday girls and other guests that Stuart and Yasmin have invited along to view the spectacle. Because it will be a spectacle, though, not as much as it would have been. One of their prize bulls is missing.

Byron has been arrested. You will not press charges against him, nor will you speak ill of him to anyone, but none of that will save him. Later tonight or maybe tomorrow morning, they will release him from his cell. Depending on the time of day, he will either hit a bar, or if it’s in the morning he will go to an off-licence and find a park bench to sit on. He will note that, despite the fact he’s spent the night in a police cell, he still looks pretty smart in his suit by Ralph Lauren. Women are still looking at him sat there, some of them admiring him, the ones that give him a second look wondering how such a handsome man is so down on his luck, he’s drinking from a

bottle in broad daylight. They will soon change their minds as he drinks more, as he becomes more aggressive, as he shouts at passing tourists, schoolgirls, and eventually tries to kick pigeons.

He will wake up on Monday, and he will come into work. Where else would he go? Here, Yasmin will fire him because Stuart won't have the heart to deprive himself of such a good earner. Agnes and Anton, it seems are also out of the running. Agnes is on a two-week suspension for pushing Blue Jean in front of the clients and Anton's model sent him a message to say his sister had an accident in Leicester. By the look on Anton's face, you can tell he doesn't believe the guy, and the way he swears as he passes you at the bottom of the stairs, you'd say the guy has let him down in this way before.

As you go to take your first step up the stairs to where Jesamine is waiting, you catch Napoleon's eye behind reception. He nods at you and then he winks. At this moment you wonder why you ever worried about Byron or Blue Jean or anyone else. You've always been Napoleon's boy. Of course you have. It was staring you right in the face the whole time and you couldn't even see it. And the only reason you fucked his wife was because he let you fuck his wife. He's been grooming you for this role all along and you were too hyped up and stressed out to notice.

Jesamine sits alone with her back to you, washed and ready to go. Her left leg is pulled back onto the chair in a half lotus and the other rests on the cutting shelf in front of her. She waves at the mirror as you approach and you wave for her to drop her foot from the shelf.

"Thought you'd be pleased to see me," she says. Then she sees the look on your face and arranges herself neatly in the chair.

"I didn't think I'd see you again."

She laughs. "You mean you were hoping you wouldn't see me again."

"Yasmin said she fired you."

"She didn't fire me. She sent me home to get changed, that's all."

You just stare at her as she tells you all about how Cole had locked her out of his flat and that her sister lived way too far away for her to go there at four in the morning. So she walked to the A and E and waited there in reception for a couple of hours before heading along the seafront in time for salon opening. Yasmin had not, as Kim had told you, sent her home for wearing an orange top. Far from it, Yasmin had been very sympathetic when Jesamine told her how her boyfriend had locked her out and given her some money to go and get some breakfast. After that she had put Jesamine in the stock room to tear foils because Yasmin thought she looked a bit tired. Yasmin hadn't seen the need to lend Jesamine a black trainee top because she was out of the way of the

clients in the colour room, but Yasmin did give her a new top to change into when she'd arrived back at the salon from her sister's flat fifteen minutes ago, in a cab that Yasmin had paid for.

"Are you going to style my hair or what?" says Jesamine.

It is ten minutes 'till noon. Leaves circle in the breeze like they're chasing each other, each trying to catch the one in front. As you light your cigarette, you read the endless names scrawled on the side of the skip, in different states of erasure. Most of it is written in marker pen or biro but some of it is scratched into the yellow metal, probably with a pin tail comb, a key, or a broken hair clip. In very small letters low down and to the left, you can just make out the word, STRETCH. It is written in what appears to be red marker pen and almost worn to nothing. On closer inspection you see there were words before and after it, but they're no longer legible. In all likelihood it was written by a trainee and it said something like, FUCK STRETCH, or, STRETCH IS A WANKER, like someone once wrote on the front of the salon window in red lipstick. You never found out who did that.

"Looks like it's just you and me then," says a voice nearby.

"Like old times," you say to her, without turning around. Blue Jean moves closer to you and as she gets next to you, you see her visibly wince. You reach up and grimace as you touch your nose, notice that you have in fact started bleeding again.

"Hold it there," she says.

She grabs a tissue and you hold it up to your nose. Again you feel a shooting pain. This time she reaches in her bag and pulls out a hip flask.

"You should probably get it seen to," she says, offering you the flask.

You take a sip of neat Scotch.

"You haven't poisoned this, have you?" you say.

She laughs and so do you.

"You really think I want this thing that badly?" she says.

"I know you do," you say.

"Not as much as you do," she says. "That trick with Agnes."

"She deserved to know," you say.

"And I bet Byron didn't just attack you for the hell of it either."

"I just got lucky," you say.

"You don't look lucky from where I'm standing," she says, nodding at your nose.

"And I got lucky with Napoleon too."

She looks confused.

“Lucky he didn’t fire me,” you say. “Lucky you lied to him for me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she says. “I didn’t do it for you. I did it because it wouldn’t make any difference if they fired you or not. They’d have picked Byron. They’d even let Anton on TV sooner than me.”

“Yasmin will pick the best,” you say.

“Yasmin loves you, Stretch. I told Stuart your client abused you but it was Yasmin that told him right there and then, to drop the whole fucking thing. And he did.”

It pains you to admit it but when you really think about it, she is right. Yasmin has always loved your work. Of course she paid the cab fare for Jesamine. It wasn’t some lecherous scheme she’d dreamt up because she fancied her, the first conclusion you’d come up with, it was simply for the reason that even after Jesamine had slept rough in the A and E last night, when she turned up for work at 9 am this morning, Yasmin fell in love. With your haircut.

“It’s the hat,” you say. “Why don’t you take off the hat? Just for the presentation.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “That’s lame, Stretch,” she says, “how long have we known each other now and that’s the best you can come up with?”

“Why do you wear that hat?”

“How many female stylists have you counted on shampoo bottles in Boots lately? They want a man on that poster outside the salon and you know it.”

“Yasmin will pick the best cut!”

“Alright, you want to know why I wear this hat, fine! But first give me one of those cigarettes.” You remove two cigarettes from the pack and hand her one, lighting hers first and then yours. “I Moved to London when I was sixteen,” she says. “I was homeless and I used to sleep rough, in squats and even in doorways, until the social services found me somewhere. It was just a big old room but it was the first place I ever felt at home. The thing I remember most was the electric fire. I didn’t have to pay bills and I used to keep it on, three bars blazing, all the year round. People who visited couldn’t bear it but I loved it. I would close my eyes at night and imagine I was on a desert island. But even with my eyes closed, there was always this smell, underneath everything.”

“Damp?”

“It was more than damp, Stretch. It was something deeper. You know the kind of thing, like even the buildings have given up wanting to live. But I hadn’t given up. I still remember getting the idea one Sunday morning. I was eating breakfast in the caff up the road and I picked up the paper and like I always did, I read my star sign. It just said, APPLY YOURSELF. It said more than that but that was enough for me so I did just that. I turned the pages until I found this add. I applied to go to acting school.”

You laugh. "You, an actor?"

"Well, not really, because no one just walks into something like that. First you have to learn two speeches off by heart. But even if you're good, talent will only get you so far. Then there are the auditions and they cost money. On top of that there's all the other things you need too, like having the right shoes. Most people buy jazz shoes. And then there's the leotards and stuff like that. Those things don't come cheap and you have to wear neutral colours, preferably greys or blacks. I mean, you can wear other colours, but you don't want to take a chance when there are so many people applying. There are literally thousands. Just like you and all with exactly the same dream.

So anyway, I saved. I saved and I saved and I scraped and I stole. I would've done anything. And then there were my friends. I had these friends, right. They lived in my building and in the neighbouring streets. We always hung out and did everything together. We talked about boys and we talked about who we would marry and how many kids and where we'd live and we scrounged cigarettes and we stole food and makeup and underwear and even bigger stuff than that. One of the girls once rolled a sandwich trolley out the back door of an office canteen.

With hindsight I know should've avoided them. But hindsight is a fine thing and you never see these things coming until they bulldoze you in the face! Because then it came to that day."

"The audition?"

"No. The evening before the audition. It was my seventeenth birthday. We were on our way back from the cinema and we got off the bus at the nearest stop to home. It was only five minutes away but we had this pact that we always walked each other home. You need that when there's heroin addicts, dealers, tramps and ex-cons, sitting right there on the front wall. It wasn't all bad though. I had some laughs while I lived there and the girls would sit there and listen to me rehearsing. They even encouraged me. They genuinely wanted me to get into acting school, I still believe that now, despite what happened.

In my first speech, which was the one I knew best, there was this Princess and she'd disguised herself as a boy. You see, she's on the run from her husband who's trying to kill her because he thinks she cheated on him, but the truth is another guy tricked him into believing it.

And now she's lost and miles away from home and desperate for shelter when she finds this cave. But the thing is, she's too scared to go inside. There could be robbers in there and worse. She might get mugged, or raped or killed or worse.

So she has to talk herself into it. And I practised the speech over and over and over again whenever I walked home alone. It made me feel brave. The more I said it, the more I felt like I

could handle anything my world could throw at me. I had it word perfect. No one could say that speech like I could.”

She stares you hard in the eyes and you think for a moment she has finished. “When we got off the bus that night, we didn’t go back to the flat like we usually did though. The girls insisted on going to the local to celebrate my birthday. I didn’t want to go with them but they said just for the one and then they’d walk home with me after that.

So I said yes. I didn’t want to push my luck walking home alone the night before the audition. You see, that was the problem really, Stretch. Deep down I knew I could never be as brave as the princess in the play. I could only pretend, the way I pretended to be old enough that evening in the pub. But I’d never have gone there with them if I’d known the real reason they wanted to go there.

So anyway, I insisted on getting the drinks in. I had some money left and I wanted to see how good my acting really was. See if I could get served, underage without ID. It went without a glitch and we all sat there sipping our drinks. One of the girls joked about how I was going to be famous one day, and how they’d boast about how they used to know me. And I told them not to worry, I’d pay for them all to come and live with me when I was rich and famous.

Now the oldest girl in our group was Kelly. She had this boyfriend called Mark who had this head that looked more like a skull than a head, and just as I thought we were about to leave, he turned up with a mate. This was the entire reason they wanted to go there in the first place and they had no intention of leaving but I never realised that until it was too late.

I’d never met Jason before but I’d heard about him enough times. He was nothing like Mark and all the other girls fancied him. And the thing is, I didn’t even fancy him but I knew straight away he fancied me and I knew the other girls could see it too. So I went along with it, not ‘cause I fancied him but because I wanted to look big in front of them. So we stayed for another drink, Mark was buying and he and Jason promised to walk us home afterwards. And they were fine with that, in fact, everyone was being really nice to me. Genuinely really supportive. All was fine, except, I needed to go to the toilet first. I told them to start walking without me and I’d catch them up but no, they insisted on waiting for me.

Now, for some reason as I walked off towards the toilet, I looked back over my shoulder and I saw Jason smiling at Mark. There was something about that smile that I couldn’t place. Nothing like the charming one he’d smiled at me just seconds earlier. So I hurried up going to the toilet and rushed back out to the table.

Everything seemed normal at first, but I knew something was wrong. And then I saw what was wrong. My purse was gone. I'd left it on the table with my drink. All my money, my tickets, everything I needed for that audition was in that purse.

Kelly tried to calm me down. Said she'd sort it out for me but the guys just sat there laughing. Every time I tried to explain how badly I needed that purse back, they just laughed more. It was like my life, my career, everything I'd ever dreamt about was worth fuck all to them.

Normally I would never in a million years have said anything to blokes like that but I lost it. And the more angry I got the more they pointed at me and the more they laughed. Until I got so angry that I said to them I would turn around and count to three. And if that purse wasn't back on the table, I'd call the police.

People always complain they take ages but they turned up quickly enough. They must've been parked nearby because they got there even before Mark and Jason reached the pub door. Either way, it all kicked off. Not because the police took it all that seriously. They looked at me in the same way Mark and Jason had. Like I was wasting their time. Like everything I might care about was all too small in the scale of things to ever waste their time on. But things could still have been alright. It was only when they asked Jason if he had the purse that things turned bad.

No, he said. He didn't have the purse. They asked him again and he asked if they were calling him a liar. They told him to calm down or they'd arrest him. He told them if they didn't back off him, he'd give them something to really arrest him for. The nearest policeman took a step forward straight into Jason's fist.

The ambulance arrived shortly afterwards. The cop's jaw was broken. That's when the landlord called me over. He handed me my purse back. Said I'd left it on the bar when I ordered drinks.

That night I tried to sleep but I kept drifting off and waking up because I was so nervous about the audition the next morning. And when I did finally get to sleep, I kept having these dreams where I was totally stressed out and wasn't sure if I was awake or not. Like these dreams where I was waiting in the corridor outside the audition room but when it came to my turn, I couldn't speak. I'd lost my voice. And there were other dreams where I was running late and couldn't get there in time. And then finally, in one of the dreams, I was in the street running towards the acting school, trying to get there in time. And just as I got to the doors, this massive security guard in a black puffer jacket punched me in the face.

It's the worst feeling ever when someone hits you hard when you're asleep. There's this moment where you're still asleep and you know it's happened for real but you're too dazed to move properly.

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was Kelly, sitting on top of me, pinning my wrists behind my head. Then I saw Mark's bald head in the moonlight, just before he pulled the curtains shut. I never shut my curtains.

"He...?"

"Raped me? No. I had this really beautiful long chestnut hair at the time. Anyone who met me always said it was the loveliest hair they'd ever seen. Like a Disney princess, they'd say. So that was that, Kelly held me down while Mark shaved my head. They left me there, crying and bleeding from all the cuts on my scalp where the batteries started running out and he'd kept going, just ripped the clippers free. I never made it to the audition and I didn't bother with any others."

"So that's why you wear the hat?"

She laughs, "God no. I wear the hat to piss off Stuart." Now you laugh too. "It's the look on his face when he sees me, it's the only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning," she says.

You hear someone near the fire door and turn to see Jesamine approach. "It's time," she says. "Napoleon and Yasmin want you indoors."

"Hey, Jesamine," you say. "I'm gonna get an ice cream. Want to come?" She looks at bit confused but then she smiles. "Yeah, why not."

As you start for the seafront you check back over your shoulder and see Blue Jean vanish in through the fire door. And you think about Napoleon's face when he sees you are not there. And you think how if you could, you would tell him a story. It's The only story you know. A story about hairdressing. You would tell him exactly how you cut a fringe, beginning at the left recession point, diagonally down past the eyebrow on the right-hand side, down around the back of the head until you ended up with short hair on one side and long on the other. You'd tell him how next you sectioned off a diamond shape on top, and pointed in an inversion, but this time with a difference. You took a shorter length above the crown than you ever have before. This created the severe anti-head shape which gave your cut an Art Deco feel, but when ruffled up resembled something contemporary in its geometry. Next you tell him how you connected in the disconnection of the top and bottom layers by slicing through to the base, opening and closing them fractionally as you go to avoid tearing. How you took larger sections all the way around the head and thinned out the weight by back cutting throughout to create lift. How you refined the fringe, pushing the hair to the side with your comb, checking the fall of the hair into her face by tapping it lightly with your fingers. And how when you were finished with the cutting you dried the hair by leaning your model forward and blasting the hair downwards, coating the roots evenly with a fine wax spray.

Finally, you'd tell him that unlike him, when you wake up in the morning you never know who you really are, but how once in a while when you look in a client's eyes, you see a you you can never be but for a moment frozen in glass, you can almost believe in.