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***Floating Home* and ‘An incomplete rite of passage? Liminal White British Masculinities
in Hong Kong’ – A Creative and Critical Thesis**

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University of Sussex

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Statement and Note for the Examiners**Note**

This PhD was written before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, there were some interruptions and challenges along the way. I have detailed this in Appendix 1, 'Training and Learning During the PhD: A note on studying and writing during a pandemic'. Thanks for your understanding.

Statement

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signed: Louis Pilard

Acknowledgements

There are several people and institutions without whom I would have been unable to even begin this PhD, let alone complete it.

Without my writing groups, the novel would have stagnated. The feedback provided over the years helped me home in on the voices of my characters and get to the core of the story. I want to thank everyone from my New Writing South group, especially, Liz (thank you for reading the novel in full!), Charlie, Julie, Paul and Patrick. I also want to thank the amazing writers from my weekly Sussex writing group, Hanna, Monica and Yas; we met weekly for more than two years – so much precise feedback and close reading was indispensable to my growth as a writer.

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Summary

This thesis explores the contemporary identities of young men and their experiences of sojourns in East Asia as an incomplete rite of passage. Due to the interweaved similarities and associations of travel, rites of passage and storytelling, the thesis uses novel writing (creative) and anthropological methods (critical) juxtaposed in open-ended dialogue, exploring the research topic through an affective journey (the novel) that is then empirically grounded and problematised (anthropological study).

The novel begins with a reunion between Maggie and Jean, three years after the implosion of their undefined relationship in Hong Kong. The story then returns to Jean's late teens where he begins travelling the world in search of a rite of passage that will help him 'grow wise, have epiphanies, get a tan, go on adventures and whatever else people did on their sixth-year holidays.' The novel switches to other characters throughout the rest of the novel. Amadou, a burnt-out development worker, struggles to balance his career ambitions with his long-term relationship. Suzie (whose section has been cut from this thesis) is an idealistic 'social justice warrior' from Glasgow, and deals with the disappointing realisation that her attempts to change the world through volunteering abroad are more difficult than expected. Maggie, a Hong Kong local who was bullied at her international school, finds that leaving home for university is not the solution to confronting her trauma. Jean is a recurring character throughout these sections, seen through the eyes of the new characters. The novel finishes by returning to Jean as he slowly approaches his long hoped-for 'epiphany' in Hong Kong.

The critical section involves research with participants who visited Hong Kong for a medium-term internship or student exchange before (2010-2011) and during the Hong Kong Protests (2019). Despite visiting two very different Hong Kongs and having access to different spaces and to different activities, the processes through which they engaged with the local space, the way they narrativized and conceptualised their experiences maintained many similarities. I argue that this is because young western men who go to Hong Kong for specific medium-term activities such as work experience, graduate schemes and student exchanges, perceive and enact their time in Hong Kong as a rite of passage; a rite of passage that they have specifically sought out and anticipated. Using Van Gennep's framework of rites of passage, their journeys involve a similar trajectory of anticipation, separation, liminality and reintegration. Due to the informal nature of the return or reintegration stage of the rite, I call it an incomplete or uncomfortable rite of passage. Their liminal stage involves behaviours and attitudes corresponding with notions of imagining themselves as conquerors; undertaking perceived risk by testing their limits; and 'going native'. These experiences are built on neo-colonial imaginaries of Hong Kong as an exotic frontier, a risky unknown destination, where participants can adventure and test themselves while also integrating with locals and separating themselves from types of white masculinity that they do not wish to associate with. At the same time, either during the rite of passage or in retrospect, the participants are aware of their own problematic associations and fantasies, which destabilises their own narratives and aspirations for their time in Hong Kong.

This study reveals new understandings of contemporary masculinities in motion and how new mainstream awareness around 'social justice' is transforming global masculine identities.

Contents

Statement and Note for the Examiners

Acknowledgements

***Floating Home* and ‘An incomplete rite of passage? Liminal White British Masculinities in Hong Kong’ – A Creative and Critical Thesis**

Introduction	p.6
<i>Floating Home</i> , a novel	p.12
Part 1	p.16
Part 2	p.27
Part 3	p.75
Part 4	p.96
Part 5	p.98
Part 6	p.132

An incomplete rite of passage? Liminal White British Masculinities in Hong Kong

Introduction	p.184
Chapter 1	p.193
Chapter 2	p.218
Conclusion	p.228
Bibliography	p.230
Appendix 1: ‘Training and learning during the PhD’	p.233
Appendix 2: ‘Synopsis’	p.235
Appendix 3: ‘Thesis Summary’	p.237

Floating Home and An incomplete rite of passage? Liminal White British Masculinities in Hong Kong – A Creative and Critical Thesis

‘Movement through space, literally and figuratively, generates stories – narration equals migration squared.’ – Aleksandar Hemon

‘The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupation groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts...Territorial passage can provide a framework for the discussion of rites of passage...The frontier, an imaginary line connecting milestones or stakes, is visible – in an exaggerated fashion – only on maps. But not so long ago the passage from one country to another...was accompanied by various formalities...Like boundary posts, they [occur] only at points of passage, on paths and at crossroads.’ Arnold Van Gennep

‘Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice.’ De Certeau

Introduction

Journeys and stories share many things in common. Like narratives, journeys tend to have a beginning, middle and end. As with voyages, stories take us through a series of obstacles that we must pass through in order to grow. It is no surprise that one of the most popular forms of structuring narratives is referred to as ‘the hero’s journey’, in which the stages of a protagonist’s journey are plotted according to the emotional highs and lows and ultimate climax and resolution of a story (Vogler, 1999). It is also no surprise that rites of passage – metaphorical journeys from childhood into adulthood, which are often undertaken as literal journeys such as the Australian Aboriginal walkabout and the Victorian Grand Tour of the European elite – mimic the same structure as the hero’s journey with a call to adventure, guidance from a mentor, the overcoming of obstacles, and the final return home (Van Gennep, 1961). Finally, any reader knows that the feeling and experience of reading a story is much like going on a journey. Similarly, as Hemon and De Certeau describe in their own thoughts on movement and storytelling, the act of travelling forces us to tell stories to ourselves and those we meet along the way.

It is only fitting then, that a creative and critical PhD on the contemporary rites of passage of young men travelling to East Asia should explore the topic through an original narrative in the form of a novel and through anthropological methods, which, as well as having generated Van Gennep’s concept of rites of passage, are rooted in the narrativization of humans

generating their diverse life journeys and histories. My novel tells the story of Jean, Amadou, Suzie and Maggie, four characters searching for belonging, meaning and rites of passage through intersecting global migrations. Meanwhile, the critical section involves the exploration of contemporary mobilities to Hong Kong as rites of passage through the life histories of young white British men, paying close attention to gender, race and class. Indeed, both methods used in this thesis – fiction and life history interviews – are based in narrative. The key difference is that narrative fiction involves the crafting and weaving of plot, character, and emotion to create a suggestive, symbolic, associative and affective exploration of themes, while academic qualitative methods require a logical, coherent, empirical and theoretical engagement that builds an argument grounded in data. Implicitly, the creative and critical methods in this thesis intersect and complement one another. The novel is an affective journey that is empirically grounded and problematised in the critical section; discourses and concepts highlighted in the critical analysis are reframed through intertext and juxtaposition in the novel.

By institutional design, the Creative and Critical PhD consists of parallel creative and critical explorations of the same theme and does not include a critical reflective component. The two sections are therefore juxtaposed in an open-ended dialogue. Unlike many creative writing PhD programmes that require a reflective section, the parallel, open-ended design of the Creative and Critical PhD programme at Sussex allows for a deeper analysis into the themes of the writing rather than focusing on the techniques used in the creative work. However, while an explicit discussion on the relationships between the two sections is beyond the assigned remit of the Creative and Critical PhD at Sussex, I wish to foreground these open-ended parallels and intersections in the rest of this introduction.

As previously highlighted, the two-pronged, interdisciplinary approach is key to a holistic understanding of contemporary mobilities and rites of passage. Novel-writing is vital to this topic. Readers on a narrative journey can experience the subjectification of different identities. As novels have “a unique ability to seize their readers” (Mullan, 2006), the engrossing effect of stories pulls the reader into the momentum of their characters’ trajectories and into a new world. Indeed, I was inspired to write the novel (and subsequently apply for a PhD) by a desire to communicate a feeling so ambiguous and broad that no other form – academic or reflective essays, poetry, theatre, even music – seemed appropriate to explore and evoke it.

The feeling I wished to explore through the novel was a strange sense of simultaneous multiplicity and lacking – of being nowhere and everywhere at once. This was a feeling that had grown deeper over time. I was raised as a second-generation immigrant, feeling foreign in both my countries of adoption and origin; then I spent a lot of time travelling for fun, education and work, making close friends all around the world; finally, I found myself in a relationship with another immigrant and realised that I had someone else's country of origin to add to my list of homes. Fragmentation led only to further fragmentation. I found that if I was hosting a friend from France in the UK while scrolling through the Instagram photos of a friend from China, I could be in three places at once while not being truly present anywhere – a very specific but equally and increasingly common situation for people of all ages, especially young people. I realised that I had expected that after growing up with a divided sense of self and travelling the world, I would eventually reach some sense of internal unity as an adult – the state expected after the reintegration and reincorporation phases of Van Gennep's rite of passage that follow the liminal phase (1961: p.11). During the several trips to study and work abroad that I undertook in my late teens to mid-twenties, I also noticed the very gendered and racialised power-dynamics through which westerners tried to find themselves abroad; the colonial and neo-colonial narratives of western adventurers going abroad and returning victorious were being recreated. Further, I questioned the possibility of travel to function as a complete rite of passage in a world where life-changing journeys are expected on a yearly basis in our self-branded, live-streamed lives in the age of social media. Indeed, there is an inherent contradiction in our expectations for exceptionality and uniqueness to be part of our daily routine, for each brief holiday, whether a weekend city-break or beach holiday yoga retreat, to be a transformative adventure. And yet holidays, sojourns, exchanges, semesters-abroad, have always often been sought and sold for their transformative potential. Questions arose. Was this all in my head or indeed a common feeling? How much did the location of travel matter? How rooted was this in western colonial expectations of exploration, adventure and conquest? How gendered was this expectation that one can leave fragmented and return whole? Thus was born a creative project and set of critical research questions about the reproduction of identities through travel and rites of passage and the subsequent concept of the unifying theme of this thesis: the incomplete/fragmented rite of passage.

I knew from its conception that the novel would explore this topic by mimicking the structure of fragmentation leading to further fragmentation. Each character in the novel is divided between several cultural identities and places. But each subsequent part of the novel, following a different character, then questions, undermines and recontextualises the previous character's part. I decided not to do what many international novels do and have foreign languages written through English, such as using different words and tonalities to suggest that in some cases the English is meant to imply another language. As I was interested in representing different regional and global Englishes, I decided that the novel would function only through English while foreign languages would be there as themselves, incomprehensible to those who do not understand them. This allowed me to explore fragmentation not only through different English dialects but to explore alienation through the limits of comprehension involved in a multilingual novel. Of course, each character is portrayed in a moment of transition, geographically but also in their life trajectory. This captures the moments of anticipated transformation that the characters are seeking, driving the plot forward, while exploring different moments of coming of age and rite of passage. An important part of the novel is that each character has a detailed and traumatic backstory that they grapple with reflectively in their new destination. While from an academic thesis perspective these backstories may seem tangential to the specific theme of 'rites of passage through travel', they are key to the dramatic tension between what the characters are seeking and what they are attempting to escape. Sadly, due to word limit constraints I have had to cut some of these backstories but have summarised key passages. The novel engages with coming-of-age and travel literature narratives by questioning the ability of travel to provide emotional growth. The text plays with the white male tourist gaze, as Jean, one of the main characters, finds himself embodying tropes such as the white saviour, the authenticity-seeking backpacker and the party tourist. The entire novel, especially the final section, overflows with inter- and intra-textual allusions to the various literary, musical, and pop-cultural influences that shape young people's and, in particular, young men's minds. I also wanted to both engage with and subvert the hero's journey (Vogler, 1999) to question rites of passage through the conflicting narratives of the different characters; their journeys are central to themselves but marginal to someone else's. I used pastiche, homage and satire to engage with this kind of novel's lineage, making reference to key colonial texts (*Heart of Darkness*), decolonial texts (*Black Skin, White Masks* and *Ambiguous Adventure*) and neo-colonial and travel/adventure narratives (*The Beach*, *Tintin*).

Due to the word limit of the PhD format, my novel, *Floating Home*, is presented in a trimmed form with as little disruption to thematic and plot development as possible. Nevertheless, I have included a more detailed synopsis of the novel as an appendix to fill any gaps. The novel begins with a reunion between Maggie and Jean, three years after the implosion of their undefined relationship in Hong Kong. The story then returns to Jean's late teens where he begins travelling the world in search of a rite of passage that will help him "grow wise, have epiphanies, get a tan, go on adventures and whatever else people did on their sixth-year holidays." The novel switches to other characters throughout the rest of the novel. Amadou, a burnt-out development worker, struggles to balance his career ambitions with his long-term relationship. Suzie (whose section has been cut from this thesis) is an idealistic 'social justice warrior' from Glasgow, and deals with the disappointing realisation that her attempts to change the world through volunteering abroad are more difficult than expected. Maggie, a Hong Kong local who was bullied at her international school, finds that leaving home for university is not the solution to confronting her trauma. Jean is a recurring character throughout these sections, seen through the eyes of the new characters. The novel finishes by returning to Jean as he slowly approaches a final breakdown and his long hoped-for 'epiphany' in Hong Kong.

The critical section begins where the novel ends and follows the experiences of young white British men in Hong Kong. While the novel format allows for a broad range of associations between factors influencing experiences of rites of passage and identity without making a specific argument, critical writing requires focused and addressable research questions. For this reason, the demographics of research participants had to be limited to a specific group in order to better make conclusions about the meaning of these journeys to the participants. The research aims to understand: A) What are the experiences and practices of young white British men who sojourn in Hong Kong on temporary mobilities? B) To what extent are sojourns in Hong Kong rites of passage for young white British men? C) How do these sojourns reinforce their gender and racial identity? The qualitative research involves conducting semi-structured life history interviews (Connell, 2005) with young white British men (ages 18-30) during and after a stay in HK. The research enquired into their motivations for going to Hong Kong, their experiences while there and how they frame the memories as part of their life-trajectory. In this critical enquiry, I draw from de/postcolonial, gender and race/whiteness theories, viewing masculinities as non-reified, relational and intersectional (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The critical section, as well as providing new knowledge

and understandings of contemporary changes in masculine identities and mobilities, provides an empirical basis to the novel by providing a more diverse array of experiences within a homogenous group of participants. Whereas it's important for the experiences of my characters to feel emotionally true – the crucial elements of plot and narrative can of course give an incomplete picture of a phenomenon or subculture. While academic studies can be incomplete in their own ways through a lack of emotional salience and the limitations of speculation as a result of academic rigour, having a critical study follow the novel is the surest way to provide as complete a picture as possible. A more detailed introduction to the critical section will follow the novel.

As you will see, there are some clear similarities in the stories told by my research participants and what occurs in the novel. Though I conducted this research to understand whether my own perceptions on rites of passage on sojourns to East Asia were empirically sound, many of these overlaps were coincidental rather than being informed by the other, showing how common certain experiences and traits are. If the research had contrasted significantly with the novel, I would have cut some of these similarities to ensure the novel was more based in reality. In the end, my memory of anecdotes and events that I witnessed and experienced were very much in line with the experiences and memories of participants. Rites of passage for young people, especially in an increasingly mediatised world, can be awkward and cringy affairs as well as meaningful and foundational experiences. They can be full of unreasonable aspirations with intense and climactic experiences, which, in hindsight, can seem entirely underwhelming. But the hopes and fantasies of adventure and growth, before it begins, are real forces that must be understood if we wish to know how young Western men are changing in a world that has re-evaluated the legacy and history of the west. I'll let my characters take it from here.

Floating Home

By Louis Pilard

Contents

Part 1 – Maggie

Part 2 – Jean

Part 3 – Amadou

Part 4 – Suzie [Cut]

Part 5 – Angel

Part 6 – Jean

Epilogue

Something like Rakim said,
“I could quote any MC but why should I?”
- Saul Williams, *Penny for a Thought*

Billow and breeze, islands and seas
Mountains of rain and sun
All that was good, all that was fair
All that was me is gone.
- Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Skye Boat Song*

倫敦

Winter 2019

There is no longer any place on the surface of
the earth left unknown...Our age is crammed
with so much knowledge that no space for the
imagination
is left.

- Dung Kai-Cheung

It was all a dream.

- The Notorious B.I.G

Part 1
Maggie

Chapter 1

Venice: flooded. Notre-Dame: scorched. The Port of Athens: sold to China. Europe was a disappointment.

And London was haunted, Maggie observed, as she zigzagged through Peckham towards her rendezvous with the past. The streets were crawling with the spectres of home. The letter boxes, the buses, the sidewalks and roads were all familiar. Hong Kong was like a spirit – present but invisible. Even the Christmas lights, strung up on wires behind shopfront windows, glowed and floated like a procession of ghosts. What's more, the transport system was inefficient, food was too expensive, and it was always cold and wet.

These days, Maggie's mind was always racing. Being in a new country forced her into a permanent state of alertness. Every detail jumped out at her and triggered a whirlwind of thoughts and memories. But she could not avoid the possibility that her mind was currently in overdrive because of her imminent meeting with Jean.

She didn't know whether Jean was an old friend or an ex-boyfriend. It was hard to now categorise something that they had not categorised all those years ago. (Sure, it had only been three years – but for some reason it felt like a *lifetime*.) When she pictured him, it was as a superimposed, long-exposure photograph of all the moments they'd spent together during their tumultuous *thing*. But the layer she saw most clearly was the Jean of their first meeting; the handsome, tall, intimidating stranger who surprised her by making her laugh.

Jean hadn't posted any new photos of himself in the last few years. It was easy to picture him as the same Jean whom she'd last seen in Hong Kong on his year abroad.

As she entered the bar in Peckham – scanning the room, seeing only a few old men and noting that, as expected, she had arrived first – she felt an irregular beating in her chest.

The bar looked nothing like it did in the photos. Online it was a cyberpunk bunker fantasy, with low dark neon lights and retro video games but IRL it was like any other old man pub (as they said here) with an arcade game and a Nintendo 64 in the corner below a buzzing red light.

She sometimes wondered if it was a family curse to be perpetually disillusioned. She had experienced a similar feeling during her trip to Paris with mama just last week. But though she had often been disappointed throughout her life, she also saw that these false impressions were a distinctly Western phenomenon. How could a place that had conquered the world and exported itself around the globe ever live up to its own projected fantasy?

Maggie's phone vibrated. She looked suspiciously at the buzzing block, expecting the call to be from mama.

'Wai?' he said. It was him. Playful and silly.

'Hey, what's up? Where are you?' She didn't know how to react.

'Lei hou ahh?' He was putting on a performance, trying to sound like an old Hong Kong man. There was a strange echo in his voice.

He was already messing around. She had pictured a mature reunion full of other-worldly reminiscence and sly observations of how they'd both had a glow-up since university. But Jean was diving straight back into the past.

'Where are you? I'm here,' she said.

'Shenme? Ting bu dong.'

'Okay, that's Mandarin, you're mixing your Chineses. Where are you?'

'Que? No hablo ingles. Donde estas?' Maggie could hear him restraining laughter. She was caught off-guard by all the memories sweeping through her mind. It was like a film reel but each frame was a discrete snapshot with its own story, disappearing before she could register it.

'Jean!'

'Turn around,' he said. The call ended with a beep.

Maggie felt dizzy. She turned around and scanned the room again, only seeing the same greying men. He was playing tricks on her already. She couldn't believe it.

The man sitting at the table behind her was looking back at her. He had a receding hairline and deep wrinkles along his forehead. His eyes were freckled, sun damage dotted around the eyes and nose. His cheeks were bloated and buried in beard. Just as she started to feel uncomfortable with his staring, he gave a familiar smile.

'Alright?' he said. 'Is it better over there or are you just leaving me on my todd?'

'I don't recognise you.' Could he hear her heartbeat as it accelerated?

Jean laughed, 'People rarely do. I've been many people, many places.'

He grinned and time seemed to freeze as they watched each other from their own separate tables. Jean König. A western European blend with a German father, French mother and Scottish accent. She was struck by a strange memory; his obsession with the mythical blind prophet, Tiresias. On their first date, after saying Tiresias was lucky to have experienced being both man and woman, he had kissed her in the street in Sheung Wan. He was the first person to ever kiss her neck, sending electricity zipping down deep into her hips. Her head had swum with triumph that she was capable of intimacy with another human. She

remembered his strange texts, his self-deprecating jokes, his peculiar brand of confessional honesty. He had this openness to the world mixed with a sense of confidence as if he always knew what was happening around him. In those moments, he made her feel like they shared a brain. But she always knew they didn't share a body – his was beautiful with skin so smooth and golden that girls got jealous. He was the only person who had ever attempted to kiss every inch of her body. Literally.

'You look tired,' Maggie said, remembering too late that you weren't supposed to say such things to westerners. (She was spending too much time with Hong Kong people here in London.)

'Ouch,' Jean said, laughing.

'Oh my god, sorry, I didn't mean to say it like that,' she laughed.

'You still cover your mouth when you giggle,' Jean said. 'It's cute.'

They both got up and hugged. While their bodies were briefly pressed together, she picked up a hint of his familiar scent (a fruity tobacco musk). His body was wider and rounder as if someone had stuck a bicycle pump in him and started inflating.

The Pac Man machine was free, so they played as they spoke. The conversation was easy, not stifled as it usually was with reunions. Maggie sensed that Jean was used to reuniting with people he had not seen in years. While Jean dodged the ghosts that chased him, bashing the buttons with his fingers and the base of his pint glass, Maggie told him how she larked at being British by attending pub quizzes, eating fish and chips and kebabs, and how this summer she had discovered the ladies' pond at Hampstead Heath. In exchange, he told her he was shocked by how easily he wasted away his days at a desk doing nothing; there was no space for big ideas in his world because work forced him to squeeze into small, repetitive ones.

'I don't really think anymore,' he said.

She told him how she had dreamed of living in London and working in a media start-up only to end up working in a Chinese restaurant called *The Sleeping Lion*. She had expected Jean to laugh at this and comment on the mythical Napoleon Bonaparte quote about letting China sleep. But when he looked at her, his eyes matched the grey in his hair. She changed the topic and told him about her argument with her mother in Paris.

The previous week, mama had flown over from Hong Kong. Together, Maggie and her mother spent a week in Paris, where the sights looked nothing like the photographs; the sky was grey, there were too many crowds, and the monuments were smaller than expected. On the Champs-Élysées, Maggie had tried not to stare at the middle-aged mainland Chinese

men and women, with their umbrellas and selfie-sticks. These tourists struggled with all their shopping bags as they attempted to take family photographs in front of the Arc de Triomphe with the crowds and traffic cut from the background. Maggie had quietly laughed to herself until mama forced her to do the same. There, in the centre of the giant ring road, Maggie tried in vain to find the correct angles for a photograph of the second Arc de Triomphe framed by the arch of the main Arc de Triomphe. It turned out there were three Arcs in a row and mama was upset that they couldn't get one photo with all three. (Also: two Arcs de Triomphe? *Really?*) As her own mother, who had made the perilous journey from the mainland to Hong Kong in her youth, made her demands, while complaining that the other Chinese tourists were spoiling Paris, Maggie lost her cool.

They quarrelled all week. Maggie felt claustrophobic, wedged between her own mother's frustration towards the other foreign tourists and the obvious intolerance of the French towards herself, mama and all the other Chinese people. It didn't help that Maggie was literally trapped with mama in an overpriced three-star hotel room with one double bed and a too-soft mattress. (Mama associated Paris with hotels and had refused to get an AirBnB – that should have been a red flag for the trip from the beginning). Things only got worse after they made the stupid mistake of going for a walk in Belleville. An old white man had approached them, mistaking them for sex workers. Maggie didn't get a chance to react to this – as soon as mama had harrumphed and tutted as loudly as possible, shrugging the man off like a wet coat, she launched into a polemic about the Dongbei women on the streets and Maggie snapped again and accused mama of being racist towards mainland Chinese people. (It was remarkable to her that some adults managed to survive at all considering their unique ability not to learn or adapt to anything, ever.) They parted at the end of the week in cold silence, mama flying back to Hong Kong and Maggie taking the twelve-hour bus back to London.

'Classic case of Paris syndrome, eh. Even I get it when I visit my family there,' Jean said. 'You should have taken her to that replica of Paris in China.'

'Tianducheng! That's what I told her before she came!'

They laughed as Jean ate a big, pixelated dot and sent the ghosts into a frenzy, the siren sound ringing and whirring.

'Chasing ghosts with an Angel,' he said, smiling.

'Oh, I didn't tell you. My English name isn't Angel anymore.'

'What?'

'It's Maggie now.'

‘Wait, you can do that? Change your name? Just like that?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Maggie, shrugging.

The ghosts stopped flashing and Jean’s Pac Man got caught in a corner, bleeped and shrank into nothingness. It was funny to Maggie that these old games, these historic series of mazes that led nowhere, brought out so much nostalgia in people like herself and Jean who didn’t have the memories required in the first place for such nostalgia. She watched Jean select his three letters for the scoreboard, the arcade equivalent of a tombstone.

Jean stepped back and sighed.

‘There’s this thing I can’t stop picturing,’ he said. ‘I imagine that the world is a giant treadmill or conveyor belt. I never move. It’s the places that come to me. And all I’m doing is moving around the objects that I come into contact with like it’s a lazy obstacle course. My life is just sitting, standing and walking around different sets and backdrops. Does that make sense?’

Maggie watched Jean. He looked nothing like himself. How had all this happened in three years? He couldn’t be older than twenty-four or twenty-five. He wasn’t ugly but all his charm had gone. It was a small but significant tragedy. Even the way he spoke had flattened, as if living in England had ironed out the sing-songy tones of his Scottish accent. She was no longer attracted to his physical exterior but there was something of his old self still submerged under there. For some reason, even though she knew it was probably a bad idea, she invited him back to her place.

Chapter 2

‘Shhhhh,’ Maggie hushed. They were stumbling in the dark corridor as she remembered. ‘You’ll wake Mark.’

‘Who the fuck is Mark?’ Jean whispered.

‘My boyfriend.’

‘You have a boyfriend?’

‘Kind of. It’s complicated.’

‘Great.’

Maggie led Jean through the house, wondering if she had really forgotten about Mark or if she had simply ignored that awkward fact. She knew that they were only together because they had been flatmates first. He was more of a ‘flatmate with benefits’ than a boyfriend but he had insisted on the label.

They entered the kitchen and Maggie held out a bottle of whisky and a bottle of wine for him to choose. He took both.

Instead of sitting down, they stood a metre apart, leaning on the counter. Maggie switched on the tiny speaker on top of the microwave, opting to continue the nostalgia binge with Drake’s *Take Care* oozing out in low volume.

As Jean drank, he made strange grunting noises and shrugged his shoulders. It took a few minutes for Maggie to realise they were tics.

‘I keep hoping some massive humanitarian disaster will happen so I dunny have to get my shit together,’ said Jean.

‘What?’

‘You know, like, if the gulf stream stopped and a second ice age killed millions of people, my relative ineptitude wouldn’t matter so much. Or if a drought caused a famine that killed half the planet, my directionless zero-hour job would seem trivial.’

‘Isn’t that kind of the world we live in already?’

Jean thought for a second. ‘Aye, I guess so. But I need more.’

‘More suffering?’

‘Aye,’ said Jean, ‘more of that.’

‘You sound like a teenager who just watched *Fight Club* for the first time.’

Jean laughed, ‘Savage.’

There was an awkward pause and he shifted uncomfortably before saying, ‘You know, not even one of my family members lives in the same country. We all moved for work

but none of us actually like our jobs. You know that feeling when you're somewhere and you wonder why the fuck you're there?'

Maggie nodded. She was beginning to feel that way about this kitchen. The conversation slowly turned into a rant, and she participated less and less as he described and analysed all the things that were wrong in his life and in society. She noted that he didn't once mention the protests in Hong Kong, nor did he enquire about whether she intended to stay in the West, as her parents were encouraging her to. Instead, he lamented the way he had treated certain people in the past. She stiffened, thinking he was referring to her, until she realised he was talking about a man called Aaron, whom he claimed to have misjudged and betrayed many years ago.

'Who's Aaron?' Maggie cut in.

'It doesn't matter,' Jean sighed. 'I was naïve back then and I'm paying for my sins.'

After a twenty-minute monologue about the collapse of Western civilization, Jean's voice became quiet, 'I've always been proud of myself for being self-aware. I've spent a lot of time imagining the world from other people's perspectives, trying to understand other people's realities. Sometimes I think I've misread everything and that I drew all the wrong conclusions.' He took a deep breath. 'Ach. We live in a time defined by Frankensteinian cultures,' he concluded, vaguely.

Suddenly, he turned to her and took her by the hand. Behind him, she could see the overflowing trash that Mark had forgotten to take out, again. There were cracks in the paint of the walls. Usually, the orange glow of the one functioning lamp in the kitchen gave her a reassuring sense of warm seclusion like YouTube videos of crackling fireplaces in log-cabins. Now, the illusion was wearing thin. Maggie looked down at the cracked skin on Jean's knuckles as he observed her.

'I like your jacket,' he whispered.

'I didn't think you had noticed.'

She was wearing a varsity jacket with an incongruous nineties-style vaporwave floral logo. She had chosen it earlier that day because it was retro-futuristic in a way that she knew Jean would appreciate.

His breath was warm on the top of her head. There was a strange but familiar elastic tension in her chest. She wanted to push him away and pull him close at the same time. Now, maybe, she understood why boxers hugged during fights. She looked up to see that look of his, which reminded her of those long humid nights sitting on top of tower blocks in Mong

Kok, sipping and smoking and looking down at the tiny people, feeling glorious and separate from the rest of the world. He was giving her those sadboi eyes.

He leaned in and kissed her. His lips were soft as they had been then. The smell of alcohol and cigarettes. She didn't really want to kiss him. More than anything she wanted a platonic hug and to sink into a big body. Mark was all bones and his hugs were cold and brief. She hadn't hugged someone properly since she had left Hong Kong.

He wrapped his arms around her. She tried to settle into the kiss but it felt like suffocating. What was going on? It was as if the oxygen levels in the air were dropping. She tried to take a breath in her mouth but his lips were in the way. She wriggled and he didn't seem to notice. Instead, his arms pulled her in closer to his body. Without thinking, she pushed his chest hard. She stepped back and tried to catch her breath.

He shook his head and blinked. He had switched so seamlessly from his previous ranting to quiet softness. How could she trust his affection, which had appeared so suddenly? Men, she had learned, were capable of being much more deceptive than she had once thought.

'Are you okay?'

She nodded and tried to regulate her breathing. How much had she misremembered about him? Now, that year came back to her quick and clear. There was the constant ghosting. The taking a whole week to reply to a text and then acting like it was nothing. Flirting with other girls in front of her face and then claiming it was all in her head. There was more but she couldn't grasp it.

He raised his eyebrows and the wrinkles on his forehead deepened. How had he aged so prematurely? He reminded her of those old men who suddenly tried to be loving to their grandchildren but didn't know how like stray dogs brought into a family too late in life.

'What's going on?' he said.

She realised she was stalling because she was afraid he would resist. 'I've got a headache,' she said. 'I need to sleep it off. You should go.'

'What? Now? It'll probably go away if you take a painkiller,' he said, stepping forward. 'It's still early.'

She stepped back. 'I think Mark is awake. I should probably go up there.'

Jean stopped. He stood there for a few seconds then nodded and went to put his shoes on.

Her breath stabilised and she accompanied him to the front door. She worried she had overexaggerated. Embarrassment flushed hot on her cheeks. Thankfully, in the dark corridor neither of them could see each other's faces.

'It was nice to see you,' he said. 'When I look back, I think that was probably the best year of my life.' He laughed self-consciously before patting her on the shoulder.

She opened the door and watched him walk away.

Had she imagined it all? She had agreed to meet Jean again out of nostalgia for a past that she had not yet processed. On paper, online, in her mind, up until that moment, Jean was her friend. They had reconnected after he left Hong Kong and messaged occasionally. But they had never discussed the events that had led to her quitting university in her first year, the year they had met. (She still thought she was lucky they allowed her to start again in her second year.) And in practice, what had he done? This man was just a passer-by. He was the guy you had a surprisingly profound conversation with on a train and then never saw again. Except Jean had come back, had persisted. But it was always this, a seemingly profound conversation in transit with no real connection. To be a friend you had to stick around, you couldn't behave as if consequences didn't exist.

She remembered the white man who had propositioned her and mama in Paris. At the time she had directed her frustration to mama because it was the safest way to let it out. Now she regretted being so hard on mama, who had, after all, risked her life to make it to Hong Kong, given birth to her, raised her, only for her spoilt daughter to criticize her.

Maggie stood in the hallway looking at the faded light through the window. She didn't go up to Mark's room. She stayed downstairs and made herself a makeshift mattress out of the couch cushions. Here she was. Alone but with herself for once.

She took out her phone and called mama. It was dark and cold in the living room but the sun had already risen in Hong Kong.

มายอร์ก้า

Summer 2013

Before I studied English, when I went with a customer I could only say 'same to you.' If he asked me what I wanted to drink, I would say, 'same to you'. I would eat what he ate, go where he went. Can you imagine everything 'same to you'?

- Som

Someday this war's gonna end.

- Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore

Part 2

Jean

Chapter 3

The airplane icon appeared at the beginning of the arc on the low-res map of the planet. In the groaning, creaky darkness, the screen glowed green and blue.

Jets fired and the mechanical roar and hum consumed the airplane. Thundering along the runway, the acceleration and leap into the air made Jean's body tingle with that zero-gravity buzz. Looking out the window, he observed the bird's-eye view of what had previously towered above him, the cars and people shrinking into Lego. There was a rare flutter of excitement in his stomach.

He took one last glance back at Edinburgh fading through the clouds. Ordered a beer from the trolley lady. (Didn't even get ID'd.) Sipped the drink and looked around.

He had made it out. Roll the credits and fade in the closing soundtrack like the end of *Drive*. Up in the sky he would forget about high school and life would resume.

Still had texts coming in from the lads though.

Greg: Where the fuck are ya mate? Plane to Maga is about to take off

DD: You better no be dinghying us

Pete: Mate, what's hapnin?

Texts from Claire's friends.

Tasha: I'm just writing to tell you that you are terrible person and should be ashamed of yourself.

Siobhan: Ur a pure utter cunt

They weren't wrong if you asked him. He'd always been a troublemaker. Mum said so. And Dad had often said Jean was a dummkopf when he was wee. Even his gran, who'd called him her little mousebear and said he'd been a sweet little boy who gave lots of cuddles and kisses, accused him of becoming a little monster.

It was all good just a week ago. Everyone had dressed up for prom night, acting all sophisticated in their kilts and dresses. When the last dance had ended and everyone was singing *Auld Lang Syne*, the lassies had started crying and hugging everyone. Got hugged by people he hadn't spoken to in years. The afterparty had been the usual mess just with more intricate patterns. Then Claire had shown up and started crying, begging him to talk. The party had got shut down anyway because a crew of lads were square going and some snitch called the police. Still couldn't shake off that sight of Claire's bare feet and the broken glass sparkling in the yellow lamplight.

Claire was his ex, obviously. Claire Romero. She had lived with her dad since her mum had divorced him and remarried. She was half-Spanish, popular and older. But she barely spoke any Spanish. She had inherited her mum's Scottish accent and her dad's olive skin and dark hair. Jean had been miserable with her for longer than he cared to admit. He wasn't going to lie – he was still bitter about her cheating on him a year ago. It had happened last summer.

Soon after, he'd started acting out in school and his teacher had said he was troubled and sent him to the school counsellor. But he couldn't bring himself to talk in that stuffy room so he only did two sessions. See, there was nothing wrong with him – he was just a bit of an arsehole!

But for some reason, he hadn't broken up with her then – he wasn't sure why. Instead, he had clung to her until a month ago. He had been a pretty spineless kid if he was being honest. It had taken him a long time to grow some cojones.

The plane was rattling and rumbling. He realised his hands were cramping from digging his fingernails into the armrest. The plastic seats and luggage compartments trembled and the dry conditioned air blew into his face, spreading a sharp piercing sensation where his nose met his eyebrows.

It was officially summer. Childhood had ended. He wanted to grow wise, have epiphanies, get a tan, go on adventures and whatever else people did on their sixth-year holidays.

Didn't matter if his friends hated him. A happy ending to high school would have been too mainstream, too Hollywood. He was okay with a more ambiguous ending – indie, alternative, analogue.

He closed his eyes but an hour into the flight he still couldn't sleep. His neck was stiff. He tried to push his back rest further into recline but it was stuck. It was impossible to stretch out. The chair was folding in on him. He tried to rest his head on the pull-out table but it was too flimsy and the chair in front of him pressed down on his head.

The lads had judged him for staying with Claire. He couldn't explain it to them or even to himself. His whole life it had felt like he was watching his world on a screen rather than living in it. The first time he hugged Claire on her couch he had wished he could just lie there and sleep forever, fusing into her. People didn't get it. Adults thought adolescents couldn't feel anything. Jean had seen his parents argue before they broke up. He had seen how his mum cried and his dad just stood in the doorway looking down. He knew that he had

felt it as much as them. And anyway, Claire's ex-boyfriend, before Jean, had been in his early twenties and everyone said she was mature for her age.

Sometimes, he and Claire had been like a proper couple in a film. Whispering childhood secrets while spooning in Claire's warm bed. Walking in the woods in the autumn, fractured beams of sunlight breaking through the trees, sharing a glove to keep each other's hands warm. Not so long ago, Claire had told him she wanted to have his babies because she was sure he would make a great father. He was flattered that Claire had thought of him that way. She had hugged him then, her hair, dyed black but brown at the roots, getting tangled in his face. Sometimes they'd been like a proper couple.

Sleep was ducking him. Still didn't feel like himself. Like he was a stowaway, not just on the plane but in his own body. He got up and joined the queue for the toilets. Something quiet and distant tugged at his ribs like he was about to start an argument but knew it was a bad idea. Glanced at himself in the toilet mirror as he entered and tried not to miss the bowl.

For a second, as he washed his hands, he felt the weight of her head on his chest, remembering the smudges of make-up on his t-shirt, tracing the line where her tanned foundation ended on her jawbone and her pale neck began.

He was getting sleepy. On the wobbly walk back to his seat he knew what he had to do.

He took out his phone and dragged the file, the one that had every photo and video of Claire he had ever seen, into the bin. He opened his contacts, tapped Claire and pressed delete.

Chapter 4

[Chapter cut where Jean gets the wrong train upon his arrival. There is a flashback where Jean remembers his friends making fun of him for staying with Claire after she's cheated on him. Jean sees Aaron for the first time, follows him to his hostel and checks in.]

Chapter 5

Spent his first couple days doing some touristy shit by himself. Checked a map at one point and saw sure enough that he couldn't have been further away from a beach.

Soon he got the jitters. Couldn't control the doubts and questions rumbling in his head. Why was he even here? Why had he come on his todd? When would he next chat with someone who wasn't a waiter? And why was he so horny?

It was shameful how badly he was gantin for it. He tried his hardest to get out of bed in the mornings but his body rebelled, instructing him to snooze and wank all day instead. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't leave his room before noon, and even then, that was only because he needed to buy water and rehydrate.

He had sacrificed a lot to be here. Abandoned everything that had held him back. He had escaped Lanark Road, broken up with Claire, left the lads behind – so why wasn't he happy?

He wondered what the boys were doing and if they had forgiven him yet. Last summer they had begun fantasising about where they would go for their lads' sixth-year holiday. Jean had always had an imagine of Asia in his head – of beaches and palm trees and crystal-clear waters. He had always known that one day he would get away from this quiet suburban village where all you could hear were whispers. He was going to see the world like Huckleberry Fin or Tintin. He pictured adventures in other worlds with other people, where he himself was someone else. He would leave and change, evolving like a Pokémon into something bigger and stronger, and one day he would return and everyone would see how much he had changed. He knew he was retelling himself the tale of the ugly duckling but he'd always related to that story, you know?

He had worked weekends at the local sweet shop for a year to pay for the trip. He spent those days imagining the lads drinking on beaches, smoking weed in the jungle, meeting people with dreadlocked hair and baggy clothes. He regularly watched *Platoon* and *Tomb Raider* and had started reading *The Beach*.

Pete also wanted to go to Asia but Greg and DD wanted to go to Magaluf. As Stevo was undecided, the race was on for who could convince him and get the majority vote.

‘In Shagaluf you have no choice *but* to shag,’ said DD.

‘Doesn’t sound consensual,’ said Jean.

Stevo nodded pensively.

‘In Cambodia, everything’s cheap. You become a rich god,’ said Pete.

‘Aye but you’ll never know if you’re shagging a bird or a ladyboy,’ said DD.

‘*Jesus Christ*,’ said Jean, shaking his head.

DD and Greg laughed while Stevo thought.

‘Are there elephants in Cambodia and Thailand and that?’ Stevo asked.

‘Yes!’ Pete said, glancing briefly, uncertainly, over to Jean, who nodded in confirmation. ‘Aye, loads of elephants, mate, jungle’s full of ’em.’

Jean did his best to convince Stevo that Asia would be a life-changing adventure but DD made Magaluf sound like the world’s only pleasure island. The debate had continued, unresolved, for the rest of the summer.

A month before prom, Stevo decided the boys were going to Magaluf. The pristine beaches that Jean had imagined now appeared littered with condoms and beer cans. He pictured a hotel room full of sunburnt lads, weeks of chanting and competing for girls. He tried to get Pete to help him change Stevo’s mind but Pete was beginning to like the idea of Magaluf too.

Jean was outnumbered. He couldn’t believe that he was going to Magaluf. He bought the tickets to Mallorca for the day after prom.

DD started looking up the best bars and hotels. He calculated the easiest place to come home to when blootered on a night out.

DD also decided that the boys needed matching t-shirts. Stevo liked the idea and Greg and Pete seemed to think it would be funny to do it ironically. One day, a week before prom, Jean found himself at the t-shirt shop arguing about what the t-shirts would say.

‘How about Ladsaluf,’ said Jean, staring blankly at a row of t-shirts.

‘That’s shite,’ said DD. ‘How about Mega-Maga-Lads.’

‘*That’s* shite,’ said Jean.

Greg hummed out loud as he thought. ‘How about we keep it simple and classic: Lanark Boys on Tour, two K thirteen?’

‘That’s boring,’ said Jean.

‘*I* like it,’ said DD.

Jean looked at DD. He was hunched over, his nostrils tensed in a constant sneer, a couple scabs from picked-at spots on his chin. Why was he friends with this guy? They had nothing in common. They didn't like any of the same TV shows or video games. Why was Jean wasting his hard-earned money on a holiday to Magaluf when he'd been dreaming of Asia all this time?

'I don't know if I can do this,' said Jean, shaking his head.

The boys looked at him, perplexed.

'What's got up your fud?' said Pete.

'Dinny be a drama queen, mate.' said Greg.

'It just all seems so *stupid*,' Jean said.

'Aye, well, too bad, mate. Majority vote and that. It's not up to you. It's up to the group,' DD scoffed.

'I don't know,' Jean said quietly, looking down. 'Maybe I can cancel my tickets or something.'

They all looked raging when he said that. He had expected to be afraid but he didn't feel anything. He was proud of himself for that. His mind was strong.

'Seriously?' DD sneered. 'You gonna go somewhere on your todd like a fucking loner?'

'I guess so,' Jean shrugged. Maybe he was making a mistake.

'We're gonna be in Maga, having a mental time, getting pished every night and ridin tidy lassies and you're gonna be riding fucking elephants like a stormin norman.'

Jean felt his face going red while the others laughed. In the end he shrugged and paid his tenner for a pink shirt that said *Lanark bois on tour* on the front and *Magaluf here we fucking go* on the back.

Later, repeating the argument over in his mind, he wished he had just told them to fuck off. Instead, like a wimp, without telling the lads, he cancelled his plane ticket and bought a new one for himself. On the day of their departure, they still thought Jean was coming.

Now, finally in Asia, it was as if he wasn't really here. He floated about feeling invisible, as if he was hovering outside of his own body just watching his life happen – disconnected, unplugged.

Over the week following his arrival, he observed and overheard details about the backpacker scene during his solitary meals at the local bars and cafés. It was as if everyone else was starring in a sitcom that he was binge-watching. New people regularly arrived and

were automatically sorted into the different social groups. He'd only seen Aaron and Stacy a couple times since the first day but he'd overheard enough from others to know that Aaron and Stacy were popular. Jean had assumed they were together, looking, as they did, like a perfect couple. But apparently, they were known for their occasional fiery arguments and were only friends.

Stacy: she was *unreal*, man. She had long brown dreadlocked hair and wore loose clothes that showed off the smooth, tanned skin on her arms and belly with its shining stud. She had a nose ring. One of her ears had a row of piercings down it and her legs and arms were illustrated with mystical tattoos. She always had a joint between her fingers except for when she did yoga on the rooftop. Apparently, she was kind of Mexican even though she sounded English. She had travelled all over the world to countries he hadn't even heard of.

Aaron's story was less clear. Everyone had something to say about Aaron. The German hippies who listened to psytrance. The Americans who taught English in the local primary schools. The tourists who were just passing through on their way to an elephant sanctuary or a zipline adventure. The old men who had young local wives. All these people would pass through the pool bar and tell their stories and theories but nobody seemed to know anything about him for sure. There were many strange contradictory tales that surfaced and floated around.

Apparently, Aaron could afford to stay wherever he wanted and yet he spent his days sleeping on the crappy couch on the rooftop of the hostel. He spent his nights drinking and partying in the dive bars but would occasionally disappear for work. People said he was kind and compassionate. Unlike many other seasoned travellers, he supposedly didn't distinguish between the first-timers, the regulars and the expats. He was as friendly with the pink English families lost in the streets, sometimes helping them to fix their broken flipflops, as he was with the development workers who looked unimpressed at everything as if they were still back in their home country.

Some said Aaron was picking a place to retire. Others said he was too young.

Some said he was a pimp. Others said that was racist.

Some said he was gay. Others said he was straight.

Some said he had grown up as a street kid begging for food. Others said that he was a millionaire.

Some said Aaron might not even be his real name. Others said that it was hard to believe that Aaron was a single person or that he existed at all.

All Jean knew was that Aaron was cool as fuck.

Chapter 6

After a week of lonely faps, Jean woke up in his room, tangled in his sweaty sheets, knowing something had to change. The bitter scent of cum hung in the air. What time was it in Maga? The lads were probably steaming, bloated out their nuts, huffing balloons and chatting up girls. Despite the prom disaster, Claire probably had a new boyfriend or she was racking up hundreds of likes and comments from posting sexy new-life-new-me *single ladies* *whoa oh oh oh oh* revenge-body pics.

Good for her, man, good for her. Good for all of them.

He tried not to think about Claire's feet walking bare on the pavement and the beer bottle shards twinkling green and yellow.

He lay alone in bed. He had stupidly assumed that he would blossom after his escape and instead he'd fallen apart here in a room that smelled of failure. High school was finally over and all he wanted was to live in the moment, you know? He didn't want to overthink all this fake-deep stuff. He watched his own body spinning from the perspective of the ceiling fan, trying to feel the space between his mind and his flesh.

Awch, fuck it. YOLO. He scrambled out the bed and clambered up the stairs to the rooftop and into the sun. He saw Stacy. His heart was beating from climbing the stairs but he felt embarrassed as if somehow she knew she had also raised his heart rate. Aaron was sitting opposite her at the table in the corner, his eyes half-closed and vacant as she gestured and smoked. Her arms moved with the precision of a gymnast. Her back muscles flexed. From her shoulders draped a loose cloth that fell into a deep V, leaving her back mostly bare. He saw now for the first time the geometric spiritual-looking tattoo below her neck, some sort of flower with jewellery hanging from it and, below, a hand with an eye inside it.

Jean's feet edged towards them. He wondered if this was really happening. He considered turning back but Aaron looked up at him and their eyes locked.

'Hi,' said Jean.

Stacy stopped mid-sentence and looked up at him. There was an awkward silence that he realised too late he was expected to fill.

'Can we help you?' she said.

He had no idea what to say and went with, 'My name's Jean.' It was so fucking stupid, man. He sounded like an awkward toddler trying to join a group of kids in a sand-pit.

Stacy raised her eyebrows and said nothing for a few seconds before Aaron broke into a wide grin and extended his hand, 'Hello, Jean, I'm Aaron. This is Stacy.'

Jean almost said, 'I know.' Instead, he nodded like a dumbass and waited silently, Stacy looking bored and impatient.

'Would you like a beer?' said Aaron.

Jean accepted and sat down at the table opposite Aaron and next to Stacy. Was it really this easy to meet new people?

Stacy kept her eyes on Aaron and continued talking about a party she wanted to go to.

'I like your tattoo,' Jean blurted. 'Looks artistic.'

'It's a mandala,' Stacy said, without looking at Jean. She breathed smoke from her nose and continued, 'So will you take me?'

Aaron yawned and sighed. 'It's starting to get rather crowded there. Satoshi says he's considering making it a legitimate establishment, perhaps even administering an entrance fee. Then, you can go as often as you wish. You probably don't even need me to get in.'

'Like Nelson?' Jean asked.

'Mandala not Mandela,' Stacy rolled her eyes. The smoke twisted around her piercings and into her hair. Her lips were full. Strawberry syrup would pour out if you bit them too hard. 'Typical Aaron. You hyped up the place for weeks and now you won't take me there. You know fine well they won't let me in without someone they know.'

'I like the hand thing too, what is it?' said Jean. He considered placing his own hand on top of it but it was too pervy.

'It's Hindu symbolism, alright? Hindu cosmology, the universe and that.' She crushed her cigarette and reached for another.

Aaron shook his head for a second then brought his hands to his temples and winced. 'The hand isn't. The hand of Fatima is an Islamic symbol, for protection and fertility. Or something of the sort. My parents had them all over the house.'

'Yeah, well it's all connected innit? One love and all that,' said Stacy.

'Well, not quite,' Aaron said, pinching the top of his nose. 'Hinduism is polytheistic, one love is a monotheistic concept.'

Jean had no idea what they were on about but it was cool to be talking about something real for once.

There was a loud screech. The bench scraped against the concrete and Stacy walked over to the speakers and fiddled with the phone. Bob Marley's *One Love* blasted from the speakers and Aaron jumped as if he had fallen asleep in the two seconds since she had walked away. Stacy drifted back to the bench doing – *guess fucking what, mate*: a belly dance. Jean couldn't believe his eyes. The smoke floated around her. *Let's get together and*

feel all right. Their eyes met and she smiled and looked down and back up at him and he had to look away.

Jean glanced at Aaron. Aaron seemed to watch her calm and cool, enjoying the performance without looking guilty or weird. Even the way he sat had style. He was leaning back slightly in his chair, one arm stretched out on the table, cigarette floating above the ashtray, the other resting on his crossed legs, his wrist glistening even in the shade of the corrugated shelter as his watch reflected stray sunrays. His shirt was smooth and unwrinkled, the delicate and bright material seemingly tough like Kevlar. The sky was now a deep blue and the sun leaked in and flooded the rooftop with gold.

Stacy extended her hand to Jean.

Jean shook his head.

‘C’mon, make yourself useful,’ she said.

His hands were sweaty but she didn’t seem to mind. Her eyes were calm and godly like a Buddha statue as she danced. Jean stood up and mimicked her movements always a half-second late, dancing like a demented old man with his nurse.

This couldn’t be real life, could it? After years of living through that scripted high school world like a never-ending bad teen drama, was it finally happening? It was exhilarating and terrifying. Jean’s body was stiff and sensitive, weird noises coming from his gut as he moved. Stacy’s hair swayed and spread the honeyed smell of her clove cigarettes. *Is there a place for the hopeless sinner?* Jean twirled under Stacy’s finger and – she laughed! Mate, she giggled, like she was charmed, like she was having fun and enjoying his company.

‘See Aaron?’ she called. ‘We’re all connected, even me and – was it Jean, yeah?’

Aaron flopped his hand at them as if to shoo them away.

Further back on the rooftop, a few other hostel guests watched in silence. Jean felt famous making Stacy giggle and talking to Aaron as others watched. They glowed and exuded warmth like dense tropical heat and sunshine. Jean stepped back and sat on the couch to watch Stacy dance. If the boys saw this, they’d realise they were wrong about everything. They would see he’d made the better decision. He was able to meet cooler people by himself without them. He wasn’t having a terrible time on his own. The lads would be in shock.

He pulled out his phone and opened the camera app. Turned and started with a panorama, watching the pixelated view of the city become smooth as the screen adjusted to the new light. Panned across, past a smoking, finger-clicking Aaron, towards Stacy. But Stacy had moved, spinning her way round the back of the couch so that he had to twist round to get her and as he turned, she snatched the phone from his hands.

‘What’s this?’ said Stacy.

‘Just a wee—’

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought. *Delete*,’ she said, tapping his phone and handing it back, video gone. She was standing behind the couch and Jean was twisted and trapped below her. She looked down at him, unimpressed. ‘Only I get to choose when I get posted, okay?’

‘Shit, I’m sorry, it’s just – I thought you wouldn’t mind because—’

‘Don’t victim blame me, either, darling. Just the apology will do.’

‘Yeah. Yes. Sorry,’ said Jean, not understanding what she was saying but not wanting an argument either.

Jean glanced at Aaron, who was laughing with his hand covering his eyes. Stacy shook her head.

They drank all day on the rooftop and went out to the pool bar but Stacy barely spoke to Jean for the rest of the afternoon. Jean kept waiting for Aaron and Stacy to get bored and tell him to leave but they never did, even if Stacy avoided eye contact.

It had been awkward with Claire too. After he had decided to linger on with the relationship, there was always an uncomfortable silence, an itch, or a lump, blocking something between them. Jean snuck over to Claire’s after school as usual, hoping not to get spotted. At weekends he went into town or hung out in the woods with the boys, kicking a ball about or drinking. The two worlds never touched.

At school, Jean and Claire didn’t acknowledge each other. It was as if time had been rewound and they were randoms to each other again. When Jean saw Claire in his peripheral vision, he looked down and pretended to be lost in thought until she was at a safe distance. He was always on guard for people calling him a cuck or her a slag. He never caught her looking at him either. They never discussed this. It was the natural thing to do.

They both stopped mentioning what had happened. Jean stopped asking for details, begging, openly fantasising about revenge. Claire stopped crying, apologising, explaining. Their lives settled into a strange parallel universe.

Alone in Claire’s flat, while her dad worked evening shifts, they sat on the couch eating crisps, drinking diluting juice and watching TV. On this particular afternoon, things felt normal again. They were tickling each other, squirming on the couch and creasing themselves.

They hugged, breathless. Jean told Claire he loved her. She said she loved him too. Jean opened his eyes as they kissed and he saw Claire looking back at him. They chuckled,

their pouted lips fighting to stay connected despite the laughter. It was good, zoomed in like that, focusing on those giant, joyfully crinkled eyes.

On the telly, there was an episode of *Jeremy Kyle*. A guy was telling the audience he knew his girlfriend was cheating on him with one of her mates. They brought the girlfriend out and the crowd booed and there was a fight.

‘I don’t fucking believe you alright? You’re always with him!’ the guy shouted.

‘It’s pure funny how they speak doon there, eh?’ Claire said, still out of breath, her voice quivering.

Jean didn’t say anything. Their bodies stiffened as Jeremy brought the woman’s friend onstage. This guy didn’t get booed and he had the cheek to give the girl a peck on the forehead before he sat down. The crowd went wild for that stunt.

‘She’s taking the piss, that yin,’ said Claire.

Jean got up to refill his juice. In the kitchen, he could see the familiar scene of Claire with that bastard flashing, replaying. He pictured revenge. He was bricking the guy’s skull open until it was all mush. It felt good. He shook his head and breathed deeply.

When he came back, Claire started making cute jokes, trying to make him laugh. A Lil Killuh video was on the telly now. Claire had switched it to a music channel.

‘What’s wrong, Jeany?’ Claire said, biting her fingernails. She had a habit of chewing her nails so much they bled. She had once torn an entire pinkie nail off. It took months for it to grow back, a gnarled version of its former self. Whenever he saw anybody chewing their nails, he felt a sudden anger.

There was an icy silence inside him. He shrugged and pretended to be lost in the music video. Lil Killuh was half-naked spraying champagne in a black-lit UV club surrounded by neon bikini girls. It looked pretty cool.

‘You could’ve got me some juice,’ she said, looking out the window.

‘What, you canny get up to fetch your own juice?’

Within minutes they were shouting at each other from opposite sides of the couch, arms folded. It was such a boring argument. They’d had it so many times. They often spent hours arguing about juice, about taking up too much space on the sofa, about finishing the last packet of crisps.

Sometimes Jean caught himself saying ridiculous things.

‘It’s not about the juice, Claire, it’s about the *principle* of the juice,’ he said.

Later on, they would laugh but in the moment those arguments were profound moral debates.

Claire started going out all the time. Jean would get scared when she went AWOL. If she didn't answer his texts, he would call her twenty times. When she finally answered, her voice would be robotic. He would ask her if she loved him, and she would say she did with the voice that kids used to tell their parents they'd had a good day at school. She shouted at him and told him to stop spying on her. He tried to stop asking but he couldn't help it. He couldn't think about anything else when she disappeared.

Claire, who was already older and more popular than Jean, would invite him to parties with adults, like college and uni students and radges who had left school years ago. He knew she invited him out of obligation, and he accepted out of obligation too – and to keep an eye on her. Claire would ignore him for most of the party, especially if he was just speaking to other boys. But whenever Jean met a girl who had good chat, Claire would stay close. She would butt into the conversation and interrogate the girl with blunt questions before interrupting her answers.

At one of the parties, a quiet girl once told Jean how Mary Queen of Scots and her cousin, Elizabeth, were Scottish and English feminist icons. Claire jumped in.

'I think you'll find that Mary was basically French and, actually, all she cared about was getting rich and taking Elizabeth's throne.'

'Yes, but what other choice did they have? They were products of their time,' the quiet girl said.

'And Elizabeth was pure killing herself with her mercury or lead make-up and then backstabbed her own cousin? Solidarity right enough. Democracy existed since the Greeks but they didn't have any time for that, did they?' Claire laughed. 'And what did either of them do for all they wee peasant women, eh? Nah, pal, they weren't *feminist icons* they were just boss bitches. Fair enough though, eh.'

During their debate, Jean stood there watching, feeling like he wasn't the person whose body was standing there as if he was a spirit invading a stranger's flesh.

After that party, Jean tried to break-up with Claire in the middle of a phone argument. He said he couldn't think straight. He didn't know what was going on. He needed a break.

'Oh my god. You think like a girl,' Claire said.

That nipped the break-up in the bud and later, they made plans to see each other.

It was as if they were shackled together by invisible chains. Why hadn't he just broken up with her? He knew the answer but couldn't think it. Somehow, he knew, like the instinct to breathe or blink, that it would be wrong. They both started drinking more at the weekends. When they saw each other on Mondays they listed all the drinks they'd had to see

whose list was longest. Their sex stopped working. Jean couldn't stop imagining it from an outside perspective like he was watching a video of himself. Claire didn't seem into it either and often they just stopped halfway through and argued instead.

During his final year of high school, whenever he argued with Claire or fought with his pals, he told himself to let it go. The present was only temporary and the future would reward him for his patience. He knew he had a strong mind and that he could defend himself against all those negative thoughts. He was like Yoda or Obi-Wan Kenobi. He could hack it. There was no need to cause more fuss or drama. Instead, he looked forward and dreamed of escape.

As a bleak joke to himself, he had counted down the days. He had etched tally marks in his maths jotter like on the walls of cartoon prison cells and found that every time he opened the jotter, he added another line.

Now, he was out of that prison. He was finally out in the real world.

After a day of drinking with Aaron and Stacy at the pool bar, Stacy asked Jean to help her carry some flyers back from one of the internet cafés. She seemed to briefly forgive him and she spoke about her ex, whom she'd broken up with a couple weeks before. It was a crazy coincidence.

'Good on you for not assuming Aaron and I are together,' she said, with a brief smile. 'Sometimes it's like, *hello*, male-female friendships are normal, *welcome to the future*.'

When they returned to the hostel, Stacy went to her room to sleep. Aaron and Jean sat chatting on the rooftop. Jean couldn't pay attention to anything Aaron said. His mind was buzzing with images of hanging out with Aaron and Stacy, wondering what they would get up to now they were friends. They smoked together in the evening darkness on adjacent couches. The embers of their cigarettes floated like the distant lights of ships or planes until they both fell asleep.

Chapter 7

The next week was lit. Every day they hit up the old town and were half-cut by noon. They hung at the old city wall and the river when the sun was high and they roamed through the alleys from bar to bar when it was dark. The days blended together like the frozen cocktails they had before lunch.

They went to the spiritual sites to begin drinking. Watched the tour groups and listened to the stories about the gods represented by ornate carvings and sculptures never retaining any information. Sat on the ancient steps of temples, the stone worn from stepping tourists like a pebble smoothed by the ocean. Cracked jokes and told boozy stories and Aaron laughed a lot. Couldn't remember what was said, words automatically coming out like they'd been bottled and shaken, waiting to fizz and spray out. Sometimes, waking up, it was impossible to remember what had been so funny.

There were some things he did remember.

In the *Λ e s t h e t i c* bars, decked out with glowing blue and pink fairy lights, Aaron taught Jean how to rile hippies by saying that libertarianism and unregulated commercial tourism were the only answers to third world underdevelopment, whatever *that* meant. He just had to keep repeating that phrase while ignoring their longwinded arguments and then, like magic, they lost it. Aaron would join in, first pretending to be on the hippy's side then gradually pretending to be convinced by Jean's detached refrain.

'Wait a second there, chap,' Aaron would say. 'Holy smokes – he's right. Think about it: libertarianism and unregulated commercial tourism *are* the only way.'

The hippy would realise they were trolling and would slide away with a red face. Aaron would gasp as he dried the corners of his eyes. Jean, laughing breathlessly, would stumble and hold onto Aaron's arm, both of them spinning around each other as if performing a sky-diving manoeuvre.

'I can't help but feel for them you know, Billy-Jean. They're a bit much but they're really invested. Do you know how much effort dreadlocks are for straight-haired people?'

He saw Stacy sporadically. Sometimes she would join them for day drinking and other times she flyer'd all day. She never got as close to him as she had when they danced that first day and he was more careful in front of her.

He barely felt any guilt about the fading image of Claire in her bare feet or the beer bottle smashing like a bursting firework across the kerb. He rarely thought about what the guys were up to in Magaluf.

Once in a while, Aaron disappeared for work meetings. He would usually announce his departure with less than an hour's notice and would reappear later as if he had never left. Jean had asked Aaron what his job was once but Aaron didn't want to talk about it. Whenever Aaron mentioned anything about his job, Jean didn't understand, as if Aaron were speaking in code.

Jean spent those solo afternoons tanning on the unshaded part of the rooftop. He would take a cold shower and lie on the hot concrete, waiting for the sun to dry out and darken his skin before flipping onto his front. His routine was meticulous. He imagined that it was his profession. He was some sort of craftsman, a tanner perhaps (lol, good one), making leather of his own skin. He nurtured it and hydrated it so it didn't crack but he was also tough with it, relishing the feeling of being bombarded by photons and UV rays. He probably looked like he was in a cult, worshipping the ferocious whip of the sun on his back. There was a profound spiritual feeling to having a burnt face, the tingling sensitivity of melting cheeks. His skin looked rough, alive, dynamic.

One time, Aaron saw him baking on the concrete and said, 'Haven't you heard, only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun?'

He didn't know what it meant but it sounded cool.

Sometimes, Stacy joined him up on the rooftop to do yoga. Other times she sunbathed too, dressing down to a bikini top with torn jean shorts (she called it her white trash aesthetic) and smoking with her eyes invisible behind her sunglasses. They would lie side by side in silence, Jean unable to conjure up something funny or interesting to say while he was sober.

Back in the shade of his musty room he would inspect the blinding hairs on his arms and face, his darkening skin, eyes and teeth brightening, the light and shade playing upon him in new ways.

He'd always been proud of his tan. Back in high school, his friends would look on jealously. They would poke his skin and say, 'Mate, you're not white, you're *black*.' He often got called black in this way after long summers spent roasting in France at his grandparents' house. People in school also said he and his friends were black because they listened to rap. When people called him black because of his tan, it felt like a compliment. But when people called him black for listening to rap, it seemed to be an insult. It was weird because he had never really met any black people until now.

Now he had a black friend. Not that it mattered, eh. But. Wasn't it cool? Unfortunately, Aaron didn't talk about rap but he did know a lot about music and he introduced Jean to Elliot Smith and Jeff Buckley as well as Frankie Knuckles and Larry

Levan. ‘Don’t forget,’ Aaron once drunkenly said, ‘black people invented blues, jazz, rock, house *and* techno.’

The world was growing and opening and he was learning so much every day. It was *so cool*.

Aaron also had a fancy camera. It had a long name with a lot of numbers. It was incapable of taking a bad photo. It was the kind of camera Jean wished he could own though Aaron usually left it lying around like an empty crisp packet. When Aaron was there and the sun was high and the midday drunkenness became dizzying, flicking through Aaron’s photos felt like digital aircon. They were also clues into Aaron’s secret life. The photos captured moments that he had never witnessed in the real world. They allowed him to see through other people’s eyes. He could travel the world simply by watching and imagining, filling in the gaps himself. He knew a lot of the photos by heart now.

He usually skipped through some photographs of red-shirted protesters on the street, some soldiers standing around looking bored, then rural farm land, a random village, clouds and a city from a plane.

Then there was one of a young woman sitting alone in front of a bar, holding a pool cue, her face suspended in the deep glowing red haze. It was evening. A cool one. Her legs were bare but pressed together to preserve warmth. The edge of the photo was grainy where the evening darkness oozed in. But the small face in the pinkish-red light was solid HD. The tiny wrinkles of her chin were traced by shadows. Her lips were pursed with boredom. She held the pool cue with both hands, her shoulders crushing in on themselves to pull the body in tight. The ‘same same’ slogan on her t-shirt was warped across her chest. Jean often wondered if she knew she was captured in this photo and whether he himself was captured in any photos or videos that a complete stranger could be watching right this second.

Jean would skip through skyscrapers, street parties, people in suits, and people of all sorts of ethnicities throwing peace signs.

He would stop in that bare room with slightly off-coloured white walls. In the middle was a table with young Asian women sitting around on plastic stools. They were eating green curry and rice while chatting. One of them pointed to a pile of paper on the corner of the table and was holding a phone. Another had green hair and was hunched over a laptop. Next to the pile of paper was a bowl full of condoms. Jean thought he recognized the woman with the phone as the one holding the pool cue in the earlier photo.

The next photo showed the same woman standing up in the same room and seemingly telling a story to the other women.

Jean once clicked far ahead and saw a picture of a topless white man grinning in a messy bedroom. Jean turned the camera off, assuming he had stumbled upon a forgotten secret, his heart pumping like he had just stolen something or stepped into a room he hadn't been invited into. He wanted to go back and see more but he didn't want to get caught spying.

Jean and Aaron's nights often finished back on the rooftop in the early morning. They would sink back on the ragged couches under the washed-out pink sky. It was only in the early mornings and evenings that the roof smelled like honey from the hanging spiky white flowers. During the day, the air was thick and gravelly with pollution that itched the back of the throat. In the evening, the green smell of plant life spread through the alleys, seeming to fall down from the sky with the cool air, as if it were reminding people that life was meant to be lived at night. When morning finally came there was a light warm breeze sweet with pollen and the addictive citrusy tang of moped gasoline from the early risers. It was better than twisting alone in his unwashed clothes and bedsheets.

Now that he had Aaron, he was safe. He could just let go and empty his mind. Aaron always knew where they were and where they were going and he always delivered them back to the rooftop. Sometimes, as they dozed off in the early morning, Aaron would monologue half asleep. Often, Jean couldn't even hear Aaron's voice from the ringing in his ears and the bass pumping in his stomach. But Aaron would mumble on to no-one in particular, sometimes either about legalising drugs and prostitution or complaining to someone called Tyler who was not there. He would finally drift off, his shirt still crisp and neat, his cigarette a crooked tower of ash.

Chapter 8

Lads Lads Lads!!! buzzed. It was backed up with voice notes.

‘E-one-eleven, you better get yersel an E-one-eleven!’

The chants were loud and distorted on his phone’s speaker.

‘E-H-I-C, get it oot if you bev like me!’

It was the chant they’d invented on a school skiing trip to France. It was dedicated to the EU health insurance cards used in case of hospitalisation, which was exactly what happened on that trip after DD downed a litre of vodka as a bet.

He scrolled through the group chat. There were two weeks’ worth of messages. Mostly the boys taking the piss out each other during pre-drinks. Other times, they were tracking down blackouts, reporting who was puking or shagging, and sending photos of each other asleep with cocks and swastikas graffitied on their cheeks. Every few days there would be a message targeted to Jean.

Stevo: Jean the mong hows it doin, this place is aff its nut bruh

DD: Shagaluf bitch! It’s lit!

Pete: Dear Jean, today the turquoise sea lapped my toes as I pondered the meaning of existence – are we really so different you and I?

Stevo: Here, long jean silver pete shagged a munter so we tea bagged the bastart

Dick pic.

DD: Who the fuk is that? 😂

Pete: Fuck yis all

Greg: Guilty. Jeano regrettin no comin to Maga yet?

Jean took a deep breath. He had hesitated to check the chat in case they were having more fun than him. He was sitting on the rooftop by himself. Heavy rain was clanging against the corrugated iron shelter above him. Aaron was at work and Stacy was pouring pints at the bar. He was bored. But he wasn’t feeling real fomo tbh. With time and distance, he had gotten some perspective.

The truth was they’d never been friends. It was obvious when you studied the evidence. You could see in old photos from when they were twelve that they were a bunch of mismatched weirdos who’d found each other as a contract of self-preservation rather than genuine friendship. Greg was tall, wearing tight-fitting shirts with his hair gelled up, usually in the middle with his arms around the boys on either side of him. DD was just a smaller

shittier version of Greg. Stevo had baggy jeans and wore a black t-shirt with *Lost Prophets* or *Brand New* on the front, his hair poking out at weird angles like spiders' legs. Jean was off on the side, wearing the plainest imaginable clothing, furrowing his eyebrows and holding an arm out wide as if he was about to square go. Pete was the chubby one dressed in sports gear, kneeling at the front with a goofy smile and open arms. Over the years they'd kind of blended into each other, all the wee bits of individuality fading out.

Pete was his oldest friend. He had introduced Jean to Pokemon when they were wee and Jean had written the lyrics to the opening theme for him as a present. Jean had highlighted two lines from the songs: *I will travel across the land searching far and wide* and *Oh, you're my best friend*. Now Jean realised how stupid it all was. How could something so flimsy be the basis of a real friendship?

That was over now. Jean was free. He was an adult. Turning eighteen soon. He had new friends and he would make more after the summer when he moved to Glasgow. He was going to go to new places, places better than Magaluf. He was going to meet people who could talk about politics and philosophy.

He was fine. So, knowing fully that he was better than his mates, doing better things, he clicked on the unopened videos the lads had sent on Snapchat.

It's a dark, loud bar with flashing red lights. Greg's holding the phone on himself. He's topless. His muscles are pumped like he's just finished bench pressing. There's a caption across the screen: *first night in maga with the mad shagas* 🍷🔪. A Lil Killuh song is blasting. Industrial bass and squeaky synths. Stevo is screaming along to the words, *'I'll play you like a muthafuckin Xbox. I ain't from this planet, bitch, I am from the next rock.'* Then all the lads jump with their arms around each other, all of them taps off. *'I just fucked a bitch, uh, these followers is sheep. Every time I count em man I start to fall asleep. Wanna know who I is, who I be. I'm all of you, bitch, I'm everybody.'*

Skipped to the next video.

This time the bar is brighter. DD's face comes close to the camera, bright pink and distorted by the closeness. 'Here, Jeano,' he whispers, like a child trying to catch Santa on Christmas Eve, 'watch this ya cunt.' There are bras hanging from beams over the top of the bar. There's a crowd of people. There are six girls in radiant neon hot pants and boob tubes lined up in front of a bar counter, upon which sits a tray full of shots. Everyone chants, *'One, two, three.'* The girls down the shots and when they finish, they pull their tops up and flash, jumping up and down with big smiles as everyone cheers, *'Wooooo—'*

Aww, *mate*. He felt sick. Fuck's sake. They looked like they were having a lot of fun. He'd thought Magaluf was more of a sausage fest where beta lads struggled. He hadn't realised people were stripping and flashing in public and shagging all over the shop. It really was Pleasure Island like *Pinocchio*. Had he made the wrong choice in coming here by himself? He'd known deep down that he shouldn't have opened the videos. He'd known it, right? He didn't have anything to send back either. What was he going to send: a video of Aaron sleeping? Stacy telling him off for trying to film her? Plus, it was pissing it down. What kind of holiday was this?

What good was it fantasising about walking through busy alleys, holding hands with Stacy and waving at café owners and backpackers? What use was it hoping that one day he would grow dreadlocks and wear those *cool* baggy elephant trousers and tell stories about jungle trekking and scuba diving? He needed to get his shit together. He had two choices: he could stay here doing nothing, waiting for life to happen and possibly never kiss or shag anyone else ever again. Or he could *make* life happen – he could, what was it? *Carpe diem*. Wasn't that the whole point of this trip?

He jumped out the couch, slipped on the flip-flops and ran downstairs and out into the rain. *Man*, the rain in Scotland was bad but this was something else. The water was lukewarm and pelted against the skin like BB gun pellets. Ran through the alleys – empty apart from a couple hikers in plastic yellow ponchos.

Arrived at the pool bar drenched and invigorated, imagining Stacy bored and lighting up with the arrival of a guest. Instead, he saw Aaron and Stacy standing a metre apart, arms gesturing briskly. They didn't see him right away and he noticed that they were arguing. Stacy folded her arms and turned away and Aaron shook his head. When they noticed him, they adjusted their postures but refused to make eye contact with each other.

'What's up?' he said.

Stacy opened her mouth but Aaron got in first and said, 'Nothing.'

Stacy shot a look at Aaron. 'Basically, I'm getting bored of this place. I think I'll be leaving tomorrow,' she said. Without looking at either of them she walked into the little office behind the bar, closing the door behind her.

'She's joking right?' Jean said to Aaron, trying to hide his disappointment.

'It's nothing,' Aaron repeated.

'Is she being serious?'

'Probably.'

Jean stood next to Aaron, leaning against a pool table, staring out at the pouring rain as streams of water surged along the concrete in the alley. He thought back to the last week, searching for why Stacy would suddenly leave but he couldn't think of reason.

'Why's it raining so much?' Jean asked. His t-shirt was sticking to his skin and his feet were slippery against his flip-flops.

'Pardon? Oh. It's rainy season. All the sun we've had – it's anomalous. There have been droughts all over the region spoiling crop yields. It's terrible.'

'Rainy season?'

Aaron nodded.

'Probably should've checked that before coming here on holiday, eh?'

Aaron laughed. He seemed to hold back his laughter, closing his mouth and laughing through his nose. He didn't do this when he was drunk.

After a moment, Aaron said, 'Do your parents know where you are?'

'Aye. But I don't like to think about them.'

'Neither do I,' Aaron laughed.

'Feels contradictory, but I prefer to forget them. They take away your independence, your individuality.'

'You're more analytical than you like to admit,' Aaron said.

Jean felt himself blushing.

'I recognise that in you,' Aaron said. 'Us analytical types have to be careful, however. It's important for us to read the world correctly. Misreading the world can have disastrous consequences.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know,' Aaron said. 'I'm probably just blabbing.'

'Aaron,' Jean tried again. 'Is Stacy actually leaving? Why would she leave just like that?'

Aaron sighed. 'Jean, I don't know all the things people say about me but I know they talk. I know that Stacy talks. I hope you don't believe everything she says. If you haven't noticed, we're not exactly on the best terms.'

Jean looked up at him. He wanted to ask why he was friends with Stacy in the first place but assumed he would get another vague answer. Aaron closed his eyes. Jean studied Aaron's face and saw the two thin scars on his temples. They were darker than the rest of his skin and hollow as if the skin had been scooped out. Those scars were badass. What kind of accident could have created those exact scars?

A few backpackers walked by, staring at Jean and Aaron. People stared at them often. Tourists and locals alike. Sometimes, he felt famous, realising that he was on the other side of the invisible wall that had isolated him a week and a half ago when he had first laid eyes upon Aaron and Stacy. That day, he had felt like a ghost and they had been the only living things in the world. It felt good to know that now he had the life he had previously fantasised about. Other times, he felt a queasiness and wondered if there was something he didn't know. Had the staring people seen or heard something that Jean himself wasn't aware of? It was the same thing he had felt during his years with Claire, when people discussed rumours behind their backs while he thought he was happy. Sometimes, when he saw people staring, he felt humiliated for no reason. Why? He had his friends and his fantasies. Why wasn't he that happy person he had pictured? It was like there was a cable that was supposed to connect him to the world but that cable had snapped.

He realised he had to do something about Stacy or everything would fall apart. He walked over to the room where Stacy was hiding and knocked. There was a muffled response and he opened the door. Stacy was sitting curled up on an old office chair flicking through her phone. She glanced up at him and said nothing. She was wearing a loose crop top and colourful patchwork trousers that she had once said were from Peru. She was biting her lip and her eyes were watchful.

'Stacy,' he whispered. 'Are you okay?'

She shrugged. 'I'm fine.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing.'

He stood there watching her. If Stacy left, the holiday was over. She knew so much. She had been to places like Alaska, Mexico, Zambia, Australia. She talked about her road trip in a VW van from Melbourne to Brisbane like it was a visit to the local supermarket. When she mentioned Bali, she said they had *hopped* over for a quick surf and some shrooms.

He considered going closer to her and putting a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. Whatever Aaron had said had shaken her.

'Is there anything I can do?'

She said nothing.

'Is there anything that I can do *for you*?', he tried again.

She turned and looked at him. 'You want to do something for me?'

'Uh, sure.'

She thought for a few seconds then spun off her office chair and approached him. She no longer looked as helpless as when she was curled up on the chair. Her back was straight. Her eyes glinted.

‘There’s a party I want to go to. Aaron won’t take me. He’s got a problem with me. But if you ask Aaron, he’ll say yes. He likes you.’

She was close to him now. Her hand gently grazed his forearm.

‘What party?’

‘It’s a famous underground party. It doesn’t have a name. People call it the global house party. It’s organised by this retired Japanese man who calls himself Satoshi, like the bitcoin guy. You only get invited if you know him. Aaron’s friends with him. It’s the only way for us to get in.’

‘If we go to the party, are you going to stay?’

Stacy laughed. ‘You want me to stay?’

‘Of course.’

‘Okay. Then I will.’ She smiled.

Jean was silent. She was so close to him that he could smell the clove in her breath. For a second he thought she was going to kiss him.

‘Will you ask him?’ she said. ‘It would be great if you did. Once we’re there, we don’t have to stay with him. We can do our own thing.’ She squeezed his forearm.

He nodded. He could feel the heat of her skin.

She looked around. ‘So, could you ask him, like, now?’

‘Oh. Yeah. Right.’

He turned round and went back to the bar. Aaron was standing in the same place. His head was tilted forward and his eyes were closed as if he were sleeping while standing up. His body was hunched. Jean took a breath and put on a smile.

Chapter 9

The house was lit up from the outside like a museum. From the bumpy road it looked grand and its Instagrammability seemed promising. The mopeds grunted along the dark path, dodging pot-holes, coconut shells and palm leaves, arriving at a large overgrown garden with dusty classic cars parked under a semi-collapsed bamboo shelter. Everything was slightly crooked as if the house were abandoned.

Convincing Aaron to bring them had not taken long, just as Stacy had predicted. At first, Aaron had refused, saying that he didn't want to get mixed up in all of it. But when Jean had asked what that meant, Aaron had dodged the question and just repeated that it was a bad idea. When Aaron had relented, Stacy had screamed and jumped up and down like in American films before hugging Jean.

'Oh my god, you don't know how lucky you are,' Stacy had said.

'Why me? Aren't you lucky too?'

'Put it this way: the kind of people that go to this place don't usually travel with a *suitcase*,' she had said, twisting her lips as if the word left a sour taste.

Now, Stacy held his arm as they walked up to the door. He hoped nobody would answer so the moment could last longer. His skin felt thick, tight and numb, as if he were about to shed it. Stacy was happy. He was one step closer to getting some good photos and videos. He looked over and saw that Aaron was fidgeting.

The door creaked open and they entered. A bald man dressed like a bouncer gave Aaron a nod. The entrance hall was bright and busy. It had wooden flooring and a high, chandeliered ceiling. The walls were lined with antique drawers and tables, upon which sat bottles of wine, whisky and beer. In the middle, a crowd of people conversed in different languages. A group of Asian people spoke French together with various Chinese, French, Belgian and English accents. Some German-looking guys with snapbacks and Wu-Tang t-shirts spoke an Asian language punctuated with broken English to some French-looking hippy girls. They all looked so pleased with themselves.

The bass of all the songs playing around the house pulsed through the walls and floorboards forming a low discordant drone in the hall. Whenever a door opened, the song playing inside would briefly drown out the hum of the house before snapping shut.

Aaron led them through endless busy corridors, pointing at different rooms. 'This is the metal room,' he said, opening the door briefly and flooding the corridor with guitar riffs and growls. It was *My Curse* by Killswitch Engage. A person in a *Dragon Force* t-shirt was

headbanging. Jean hopped in and jumped around, hoping that he looked carefree and crazy to Stacy. There was a flash and just as he had hoped, he saw that Aaron had brought his camera and was snapping a photo.

To Jean's delight, the photoshoot continued in the other rooms.

'This is a relaxation room,' Aaron said pointing out the soft pink lighting, red Moroccan fabric draping from the ceiling, and some *Enya* oozing out a vinyl record player. Jean and Stacy sprawled out on the beanbags and hammocks and Aaron took photos.

Jean hoped the pink lighting would give an otherworldly quality to the trickling water fountain in the corner and pictured himself and Stacy one day reminiscing over it.

Aaron showed them another room filled with plants, ivy crawling up the inside walls, and some Jesus lookalikes playing guitars, singing what sounded like Bob Dylan songs in Russian. There was a room with a paddling pool and some ripped guys and bikini girls dancing to Asian trap music under black lights.

Aaron handed the camera to a Japanese-American girl and she took photos of Jean, Stacy and Aaron, saying, 'yes, yes, that's right, yas queen, *work it*,' and Jean felt like he was in a behind-the-scenes music video shoot. All he could see was the flash of the camera but he could imagine the piercing whiteness of their teeth as they grinned, the neon pop of the bikinis and sunglasses, the plastic purple palm trees in the background. As the camera flashed and the three of them laughed together, he looked forward to the pride and nostalgia he would feel when posting the photos and, in a weird way, he began to feel all those things now as he imagined himself looking back on this moment from a future perspective.

Then there was a dimly-lit room with a colourful Indian carpet and people sitting in a circle, smoking joints and reciting poetry. There was another room with classical Chinese music, people lying on futons and reading, with a rocky water-feature in the corner. Every time they took another photo with Aaron's camera, Jean thought about how great the photographs would all look together with their different colour schemes and vibes, a mosaic of fun that he would stick up both on his bedroom and Facebook walls for everyone to see.

At one point they crossed an Asian man with grey hair sprouting out from below a beret. Aaron shook hands with him slowly and introduced him as Satoshi, the owner of the house. Satoshi put his hand in his pocket, thanked them for coming and spoke for a long time about how important guests were and how welcome they were. Jean barely listened. He just wanted to get to the next room.

Eventually, they settled in a Woodstock-themed room which had real mud, people tripping on acid and Jimmy Hendrix wailing through the speakers. The room was dark and

gave the impression of being outside at dusk. Jean, Stacy and Aaron shared a joint and played cards, laughing and giggling.

Aaron held out his hand and passed the joint to Jean. Aaron's hand was like marble. There was grounded strength carved into the dry, rough skin around those rocky knuckles. He had probably risen from the earth with those rugged hands. Born a man.

Jean measured his own arm next to Aaron's. In this particular light they were almost the same colour. Proud of that. Aaron was a little more purple. Jean a little pinker.

Aaron looked sleepy, his eyelids drooping and his head nodding.

Stacy was agitated. 'Did you secretly have a whole joint to yourself or something?'

Aaron gave a sleepy laugh and shook his head, 'No, no. I'll be right as rain in a second.' He left the room and returned a few minutes later wide awake.

The card game continued.

Stacy turned to Jean. 'So, kid, where else are you travelling while you're here? Like, why'd you come in the first place?'

Jean shrugged as he threw two threes and an ace face down on the pile. 'Just wanted a wee holiday, eh,' he said. And then, 'Three eights.'

'Bullshit,' said Aaron.

Jean picked up the pile and started again from the beginning. The game continued smoothly. He shed most of his new cards.

'Yeah but why here? Why alone?' said Stacy.

'I don't know,' he said. He threw down a jack, three, six and queen with two tens neatly placed on the top. He tried to think of something that was close to the truth without having to talk about Claire and the lads. He said, 'Maybe it was to prove myself.'

Stacy narrowed her eyes and snorted. 'What, like an initiation?'

'Yeah, maybe. I don't want to go to jail or join the army. The only other thing you can do is travel.'

'What did you play?' said Aaron.

'Oh, that was two tens.'

Aaron studied Jean's face but said nothing.

'That was *not* two tens,' said Stacy.

'Call it then, I dare you,' said Jean.

'Bullshit,' she said.

He picked up the top two cards. 'Look,' he said, holding up the cards to Stacy's face, 'two tens.'

Stacy picked up the pile and didn't seem to notice the other cards he'd snuck in.

'I'm not sure you really want an initiation,' said Aaron. 'There are some places where they will cut off half your penis with a rusty knife in the name of becoming a man.'

'But where else do you plan to go?' said Stacy.

Jean shrugged.

'You need to explore, kid! Why would you come all this way just to party? Have you seen the jungle yet? The beaches? This is a spiritual place. You need to connect with something deeper.'

'You mean like documentary stuff? I'm not really into elephants and markets. It all seems fake, you know? This kind of stuff feels more real than the jungle.'

Stacy scoffed.

'Not everyone requires a Grand Tour of Asia to find themselves, Stacy,' said Aaron. 'Some people just need rest and recreation. Wanderlust isn't the virtue it's always made out to be.'

'Key word for you there, Aaron, innit? *Lust*,' Stacy said.

'What are you implying?' said Aaron, flinching.

'Just your primary purpose of travel.'

Aaron shook his head and gave a drawn-out sigh. He dropped his last two cards on the pile. 'You know what? I no longer have time for this. Two queens,' he said and headed for the door. Stacy rolled her eyes.

'Bullshit,' Jean said, just to keep him from leaving. But Aaron walked away, closing the door behind him.

Jean looked at Stacy. She was giving the door the evils.

'Shall we go and check out another room then?' Stacy said quickly, turning her head back to Jean with a snap, sounding chirpy as if nothing had happened.

Jean nodded. Before following Stacy out into the hallway, he checked the last two cards Aaron had played. Two queens.

They found a quiet room with sand covering the floor. There were tall palm trees leaning as if to avoid hitting the ceiling and there was an ocean and horizon drawn on the wall. A little corrugated iron shack sat at the far end with a man sitting behind a bar counter stocked with drinks.

'As-salamu alaykum, brother. What will it be?'

Jean ordered two rum and cokes.

‘That will be one thousand five hundred CFA,’ the man said, holding out his hand.

‘I don’t – what? Do you accept anything else?’

‘Just slap my hand,’ the man said.

Jean gently slapped the man’s hand.

‘You’re welcome,’ he put the invisible money in a till.

Jean and Stacy sat in an old rowing boat installed with a table. There was a real beach vibe. The lack of mosquitoes and cold breeze were a bonus compared to a genuine beach. Jean looked up and saw millions of glow-in-the-dark plastic stars glued to the ceiling.

‘Should we go find Aaron after this?’ he said.

Stacy shook her head. ‘No way. I’m done with him. There’s a lot you don’t know about Aaron. *I* think he’s beyond redemption. It took me a while to see it.’

‘What did he do?’

‘What *didn’t* he do?’ said Stacy. ‘First of all, he’s *stingy* AF. And then there’s his whole *Uber for hoes* project. He’s *losing* it. Everyone says it.’

‘Uber for hoes? What?’

‘He works with *prostitutes*,’ Stacy sighed. She hunched and seemed downhearted. ‘He’s only here for the sexual exploitation of women. People call me a SWERF, but *I know* what he’s doing. Haven’t you heard all the rumours?’

‘But how do you *know*?’

‘I just know.’

He pursed his lips.

‘He’s a sinking ship,’ Stacy continued. ‘I’ve seen it before. People come here and get sucked in,’ Stacy twirled her index finger, ‘like a whirlpool. That’s why there are retreats and rehabs everywhere. He’s in trouble and he’s nothing *but* trouble. If he owes you anything, now’s the time to collect. Save the treasure from the wreckage as they say.’

Trying to make sense of everything Stacy was saying, he said, ‘But shouldn’t we find him? If he’s in trouble?’

Stacy shook her head.

‘Why not?’

‘I just can’t.’

‘But you said he’s in trouble. Is there something else?’

‘Stop asking me questions,’ her voice trembled.

‘Why can’t you tell me what’s happening?’

‘Because you can’t help him! What can you do? It’s not your place to help an old man. He’s an adult. An independent adult with his own life and his own past. He’s already got his millions. What are *you* going to do? You can’t change him. He’s fully formed. He’ll be like this forever, that’s how adults are.’

‘Can’t we –’

‘Jean. What are you – seventeen? He could be your daddy. He’s not your friend. He doesn’t know anything about you. You don’t know anything about him. You’re just a blank canvas for him to paint his lost youth on. He’s using you. Understand?’

‘Why are you saying this?’

‘Because it’s true. He’s using you to pretend he’s young. To turn back time. It’s a mid-life crisis thing. You should know better, knowing everything people say about him. He acts nice but you can’t trust him, you can’t change him or help him. So just let it go. *Please.*’

They sipped their drinks quietly, looking at the sand and the glistening waves on the wall.

‘Can we change the subject?’ said Stacy. ‘This room *so* looks like Koh Phangnan. Except without the litter...’

Jean stayed quiet. Nothing was as it appeared. His friendship with Aaron had ended before it had even started. He couldn’t stay friends with someone so problematic and controversial. Especially if he was controversial in a *bad*, unpopular way. That explained all the weird stares. He couldn’t *believe* Aaron was a fraud. He had seemed so kind and respectful.

On the bright side, at least he now had Stacy all to himself. That was the silver lining. Maybe she would take him down to the islands and show him how to buy weed and scuba dive.

She looked to him now as if to confirm that they would move on from the topic.

He nodded.

‘Great,’ she said. Without hesitation, she pulled a bag from her bikini top and emptied out some white powder onto the table.

He tried not to stare as she rolled up a note, chopped up the powder, dragged it into a line and sniffed. He sat feeling heavy like his body was a nuisance, invading precious space. Stacy turned around and gave him an up and down, sizing him up.

‘Do you want some coke then?’

‘Yeah, of course.’

He'd never done cocaine before. It was one of those drugs he associated with movies. It was a hypothetical drug that sounded dangerous and important unlike weed and booze.

Stacy handed over the rolled-up note. He hesitated and looked at the line. 'Maybe I can do that thing where you don't sniff it?'

'Gummy it?'

'Yeah, gummy it.'

'It's the same shit either way.'

'Yeah, but.' He was still as Stacy observed him.

'Literally the same biochemical process. It's still going to bind to the dopamine transporter, blocking your synapse.'

'What?'

'Never mind.'

Jean stayed quiet. Stacy sighed and gestured. He dipped his finger into the line and rubbed it on his gums. It stung. He drank the rum to wash away the sharp, bitter taste.

'My teeth are going numb. Is that normal?'

'Yeah boy, means it's good stuff.'

'I never knew I could feel my teeth until now that I can't feel them.'

Stacy laughed and shook her head, 'You're actually sort of cute when you're not being an awkward weirdo.'

They looked at each other in silence for a while. As energy spread through his chest, expanding, both their smiles stretched wide, and he knew, strangely, that she was feeling exactly the same thing. They were both leaning in towards each other, elbows resting on knees. Grins dilating and jaws giddy. Stacy's face was closing in. Her mouth swelled and her teeth glittered the way camera lenses distorted faces with close-ups like in Azealia Banks's *212* video or *Amateur Allure*. Stacy gave a low, quiet laugh and kissed Jean on the lips. There was a sharp tingle that zipped through his body. Her lips were soft and moist. Stacy leaned back and laughed. He didn't know what to do next so he asked her about travelling to fill the silence.

Stacy talked adrenaline – jungle treks in Taman Negara with poisonous insects and leeches, climbing with calloused fingers and falling from cliffs at Lan Ha Bay. Jean's brain surged like a wave, surf sparking off as momentum grew. His heart thumped out of control. He wasn't sure how quickly he was supposed to breathe. But mate: he felt fucking good. He could feel Stacy's kiss still with him. He'd made it, bro.

'Right,' said Stacy, getting up. 'Shall we go explore?'

Time was a hard thing to hold on to. The house was expansive and natural light was blocked out by shutters in every room. There was no phone or data reception in the house. With Aaron and his camera gone, there was no way of documenting or live-streaming the cool rooms. Jean's phone died and Stacy's followed soon after. Stacy wanted to see every single room but after what felt like hours, they barely made a dent.

Stacy had a lot of coke. The coke made it easier to drink. The drink made the coke better. Hours passed, maybe a whole day. It was hard to say. Never felt hungry even with an empty stomach. With a beer and occasional lines of coke, everything was lucid and sparkling. Like an elastic band that could stretch forever. Occasionally there was some rest on a beanbag or hammock but there were always newer, louder rooms as crowds flowed deeper into the house.

'This shit is so great,' he said, tipping more coke onto a table. 'Why is it even illegal?'

Stacy burst out laughing.

Started doing lines instead of gummying. Liked the drippy sting in the sinuses. Stacy kept saying, 'You're a coke aficionado.' Cool and slick like that. Nodded a lot and enjoyed the feel of tongue on lips and teeth.

'Oh my god, Jean,' Stacy laughed. 'Take it easy, you're gurning the fuck out.'

Discovered some strange rooms. Like the beach with plastic stars and invisible money, the rooms had themes and people playing roles in them. Same as those weird plays where the audience were actually the actors. There were rooms where partygoers became DJs or where drinkers became bar tenders.

He was having so much fun he didn't even care about proving how much fun he was having – the memories were enough. He imagined his friends asking how his summer had been and shrugging, saying, 'Ah, *you know*, it was alright.' But he would know – he would know how great it had been. They would ask for details and he would drip feed it, like it wasn't a big deal. Because now he was an *aficionado*, motherfucker.

They never bumped into Aaron. That's how big the house was. They met some Australians in the ocean room who relayed a story they had heard about a guy called Aaron who had been seen wandering the corridors in a tearful rage. They also met a couple from Beijing, who had recently witnessed a cybergothic DJ set by a man called Aaron in the EBM room. The man from Beijing excitedly said that the set had kicked-off with *Roller Mobster* by Carpenter Brut. They heard more stories as they squeezed through the cramped, sweaty

rooms, the rumours growing distorted. Aaron seemed to always be in more than one place at once, a blurry figure who couldn't be physically located. Aaron's friendship with Satoshi apparently granted him access to special rooms. When Stacy heard this, she said it sounded dodgy. She was agitated and pushed them to the next room.

Opened the door. It was in a quiet corridor and the sign simply read, 'Darkness.'

No idea what day or time it was. Had asked someone earlier and they had said it was Wednesday. Wasn't sure how long ago this had taken place nor what the date had been at the time. Without further context, Wednesday didn't mean much.

Stacy held his arm as they entered the room. It was pitch black. He was more aware of his body aching, his skin drying out. He heard birds tweeting, creaking, improvising song, and monkeys whooping and shrieking. There was the growling rumble of frogs or toads and the patter and skoosh of rain and running water. His heart was pounding. He felt that uneasy take-off feeling. Coming up.

They had both taken a few bumps from a key. He had also just popped his first ever pill with Stacy. They'd swallowed at the same time half an hour ago, looking into each other's eyes like they were undertaking a secret pact. She had sourced the pill from fuck knows where because he got paranoid about what if Stacy abandoned him now that Aaron was gone. Stacy had said that he just needed a pick-me-up and that ecstasy would make him calm and happy again.

He stepped forward in the darkness and heard the sounds of water. He knelt down and touched the ground. It was wet.

'What the fuck is going on in here?' whispered Stacy.

'No idea.'

'Shall we turn back?' She was barely audible.

'No. Not yet.'

It was dark and humid. It smelled like a forest, like growth and decay. The monkeys shrieked in the distance. Water dripped. It was like being lost inside a disused mossy pipe.

He crept forward and gasped as he felt something wet and cold brush past. He reached out and touched. It was a plant. A fern or a palm tree. He heard water gurgling and sloshing. Then a whooshing noise overhead, like a plane or helicopter. Jean thought he saw a dark blue rippling light but couldn't tell if his eyes were playing tricks on him in the darkness.

Stacy grabbed his arm suddenly and he froze. 'I think I see something,' she whispered in his ear. Her breath tickled his skin.

There was a silhouette rising a couple metres ahead. Jean could feel his heartbeat in his throat and temples. He was dizzy.

‘Kurtz?’ said a gravelly American voice.

Stacy screamed and Jean dropped to the floor, pulling Stacy down with him.

‘Who is that?’ Jean called.

‘Who is *that*? Kurtz is that you?’

‘Who the fuck are you?’ he said, helpless in the darkness, watching the dark shadow rising towards them.

‘I’m Captain Willard, who the fuck are you?’

‘Jean. Jean König. What’s going on?’

‘Oh shit. A fucking kraut-frog. Just my luck,’ said Willard. ‘Well, you better get in. We’re in the asshole of the world now. Charlie’s in the bush around us. We need to head up the river and find Kurtz.’

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him forward and he bumped into damp wood. Stacy screamed again and then laughed.

‘What the fuck is going on,’ she hushed to herself.

Jean realised Willard was pulling him into a boat. He clambered up and pulled Stacy up behind him. He crouched uselessly on the boat afraid of falling off into the invisible vacuum. He thought he could see Willard in front of him but then Willard patted his back from behind and ushered him to a seat. His mind was playing tricks on him. A motor rumbled and the boat rocked from side to side.

A bright red light shot up behind them and everything lit up for a second. They were in a long boat, surrounded by trees. Willard was crouched at the front of the boat, holding a gun. Jean couldn’t see the walls or the ceiling. Another flare shot up, casting moving shadows of plants like long spindly hands and claws and Stacy screamed again and Jean saw there was another man in the boat, holding the steering wheel and Jean screamed too.

‘Who the fuck is that?’ Jean shouted in the returning darkness.

‘I’m Marlow,’ said the man.

‘You scared the shit out of me!’ Stacy shouted.

The men said nothing and for a while they rocked in the sounds of gurgling water and birds sounding like sirens. Red flares and random white flashes shone intermittently and the shapes and colours of everything around them seemed to change continuously. Jean heard a click and saw that Marlow was fiddling with an old radio. *Satisfaction* by The Rolling Stones started to play.

Jean tried to ignore his growing nausea. Probably just fake sea sickness from the rocking of the boat.

‘Hey, don’t I get a gun?’ he asked.

‘You ever shot a gun?’ Willard said in his gruff voice.

‘No.’

‘Then fuck no you’re not getting a gun.’

‘I’m coming up so hard,’ Stacy whispered, caressing his arm as if they were a couple with throwaway PDA like holding hands and resting heads on shoulders. ‘I’m having so much fun. Are you feeling it?’

‘Yes,’ Jean lied. His stomach churned and his throat quivered. Saliva rose into his mouth. He felt like he was in quicksand or falling in thick jelly. His eyes felt like they were being pushed deep into his skull.

Willard started speaking about his life. He told them about his divorce, about his addiction to the jungle. If he left the jungle, he fantasised about blowing his brains out. When he returned, his life regained significance.

‘Aye,’ said Marlow. ‘They were all shadows to me when I left the jungle. I was sure they could not possibly know the things I knew.’

The nausea was becoming unbearable. He wondered how hard it would be to reach the exit in the dark. It was hard to imagine that beyond the door was a giant party. Perhaps in this giant house there was a room with a Magaluf bar crowded with sunburnt lads jumping up and down, scoping the next pull. Maybe Greg and Pete were ordering drinks, watching the talent, strategizing how to get into a group of girls. Maybe Claire was there too, creatine-inflated lads with sharp jawlines and sculpted eyebrows buying her drinks.

‘How about you?’ said Marlow, ‘How did you find yourselves in the jungle?’

He tried to speak but his stomach twitched.

‘I’m just on my third gap year —’ Stacy started to say as Jean jumped off the side of the boat.

He was going to boke, man. He slipped and hit the ground as he ran through the plants. He scrambled onto his feet and grasped at the air, searching for a wall or a door.

‘Hey!’ Willard shouted. ‘Where you going you crazy motherfucker? You’re going to get yourself killed.’

‘Jean! What the fuck?’ shouted Stacy.

Jean doubled over and threw up on the ground. It made a splattering sound on the wooden floor. Marlow sighed.

‘Aw fuck,’ Willard said, his voice turned soft, the roughness gone. ‘Joe, I think he just hurled. Let me go check on him.’

But Jean ran. He tripped over a bucket of water and picked it up and continued to run. He hit a wall and patted frantically until he reached a handle and raced out into the corridor. He only stopped every few seconds to heave. The people he passed as he rushed gave him convoluted instructions to the outside, but he couldn’t find the way out. Eventually someone grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to a door where he stumbled down some steps into what must have been a back or side garden.

Jean ran to the closest bush and threw up again, doubling down and falling to his knees. He looked up and around and saw it was night-time. He was still in the jungle. For a second, he worried he had been led back into the same room but behind him he could see the house lit from the outside like a castle. He was surprised to see the palms and to feel the evening heat. He had somehow forgotten that he was actually in a tropical country. His stomach sent a wave through his body. He threw up again.

Chapter 10

It was like the sudden drop of a rollercoaster. His eyes ached and his stomach shuddered. His knees trembled and sweat dripped into his eyes. Every five minutes he thought it might be over, just a passing nausea interrupting his night, and then his head felt like it was shrinking, his body like it was being tossed down a helter-skelter, and he would heave again.

He sat there in the bushes, shivering and slapping mosquitoes off his arms. Why had Aaron taken him to this place just to abandon him? Where was Stacy? Did she care whether he died or not? What was he going to do here while his body disintegrated?

The sharp taste stomach acid in his mouth. He had also thrown up on prom night all those weeks ago. He had been so nervous about hanging out with his friends following their argument about Magaluf that he'd downed too much vodka at pre-drinks and had done a tactical chunder before even getting on the bus to town. Greg had thought it hilarious and had slapped Jean on the back, grabbing his shoulders and shaking them.

'Yer a top lad,' he said.

As they hopped off the bus on Princes Street and walked towards the hotel venue, a Chinese tourist stopped them and asked if he could take a snap of them dressed in their kilts next to a bagpiper with the castle in the background. They all lined up, arms around each other. The evening summer sun glowed against the sandstone of the posh buildings.

'Should we lift our kilts and show him our boobies?' mumbled DD.

They laughed as the tourist put his thumbs up and took photos. They all shook his hand afterwards and wished him a good trip.

Greg winked and said, 'Xie xie.'

The man laughed in surprise. 'Ah, Mandarin! Very good! Xie xie. Ha ha.'

The prom was in a fancy George Street hotel that had a door man and a grand entry hall. Dinner was served on large, heated plates making the food look tiny. The girls' dresses were bright and shiny. Jean couldn't tell if they were actually fancy or just pretending to be, the way diamonds in jewellery shop windows looked too sparkly.

The boys drank wine and reminisced as if they'd graduated years ago. Jean could barely breathe under all the layers of rented fabric. There was a weird buzz in his throat like a fly or a moth was trapped in there.

His phone started buzzing too.

Claire: U going to that afterparty later? X

Claire: You going to reply?

Claire: Is respect not a thing anymore?

Claire: Suit yourself. I'll be at the party. We need to talk before you go.

They hadn't spoken since their break-up by text a few days earlier. He hadn't planned on doing it that way. He had simply texted her to say that – unbeknownst to his friends – he was cancelling his Magaluf flights and rebooking his trip to Asia. She had asked him when they would see each other, and he had realised they would spend the whole summer apart. 'Might as well end it now then?' she had written. He knew that she was being sarcastic. He had responded with a shrugging emoji.

For the rest of prom night, as he got drunk enough to convince himself that he was having a good time, Claire's texts kept coming.

Claire: I'm drnk

Claire: Can't wait to see you

Claire: When you off again?

Claire: Fuck you ya

Claire: cheeky wee

Claire: cutie pie

After the wistful hugs with all the people whom he hadn't spoken to since the age of nine, the lads left for the party.

He saw Claire as soon as he entered the house. She stood in the hall wearing a low-cut silver dress that hugged her body, accentuating her curves. She was leaning against a hard guy from his year, Gordon, who gave Jean a smirking nod. She had the eyelashes and hair-extensions on – she looked great.

'Holy shit,' said Stacy. 'I've never seen this happen before. Are you okay?'

Jean was crumpled on the ground, hyperventilating and sweating.

'I don't know. I keep thinking it's over. Then it happens all over again,' he said. 'Do you think it's an allergic reaction? Am I going to die?'

Stacy shook her head and patted him on the back. It was still dark. He was feeling itchy from the plants and bugs.

'Where's Aaron? Why did he ditch me?'

'Don't be silly.'

'If I die, will you call my mum and tell her I'm sorry?'

Stacy stroked his back again, 'You're fine. Once it's all out your system it will stop. I promise.'

But soon he was dry-heaving. He spat and groaned, trying to control his face while water ran from his eyes. Stacy went to fetch him water but he couldn't keep it in his stomach for long.

'Stacy. How long has it been? How long have I been like this?'

'Hm.'

'How long?'

'Two hours. But we'd been on a bender for almost two days so, proportionally...'

'Fuck. I knew it. This is how I die. I'm gonna die of poisoning. Or I'll starve because I can't digest anything. I'm gonna die in the fucking jungle.'

Stacy laughed uneasily.

He crawled deeper into the bushes. He felt bad for Stacy and hoped she wasn't bored or disgusted. She probably wouldn't kiss him again. He was both sleepy and alert. His eyes were glass.

Stacy took her glowing phone out. She must have charged it before finding him.

'Don't,' he said.

'What?'

'Don't film me. Please. Don't post this.'

This was how it would happen. He would go unconscious. Next thing, people would be watching viral videos of him. He would become the next Scumbag Steve.

'What are you talking about? Why would I post *this*?'

He crawled deeper into the bushes and shooed her away, 'Leave me alone. I'm fine. I need space.'

Stacy shook her head and left.

In the quiet darkness he focused on every breath, each one a small victory.

And he hadn't even stayed at the party that long in the end. They left the party when a fight broke out. Even Greg and DD were glad to go. The rades were calling their pals for back-up while others called the police.

As he and his mates walked to the bus stop, Claire came up behind him. She was already crying. She told him not to leave. Asked him to take her home.

Greg, Pete, Stevo and DD stood awkwardly in the shadows, watching and muttering to each other. He and Claire stood under a lamppost, the spotlight shining down as he avoided her questions.

'If I'm never seeing you again, can't we just talk?' she sniffed.

He shrugged. 'I really need to go. The boys are waiting.'

‘But, but –’ her face creased. Her cheeks quivered. A sob momentarily blocked her voice. ‘Why? Can’t we just talk?’

He was paralysed. Anything he could say had been said a million times before by himself and infinite other people around the world. Anything he did right now, any action or speech, would be so *obvious*, forced. He shrugged.

Behind him, something smashed. Greg and DD had thrown their bottles into the middle of the road. Shards of glass skidding across the cement.

‘Yo. We’re heading,’ said Greg.

‘I’m coming,’ shouted Jean. ‘One second.’

‘Alright but hurry up,’ said DD.

Jean looked back at Claire. She was sniffing less now, drying her eyes. He nodded and said, ‘See you later.’

He turned and walked away. Without thinking, he smashed his own beer bottle and it exploded like a firework of glass on the pavement.

He joined the group and pressed for them to walk but Greg didn’t move. He was watching Claire.

‘She’s not leaving,’ said Pete. ‘You should stay. Check she’s okay.’

‘Fuck that,’ said Jean. ‘Let’s go.’

As they started to walk, they heard a gasp from behind. Claire was trying to run after Jean in her heels. She’d gone over her ankle. She pulled her shoes off and ran towards them.

‘Fuck,’ Jean muttered. ‘Can we speed up?’

For a few steps they took big strides. But even in her bare feet, Claire caught up with them. Jean stopped and the boys continued on to keep their distance then stopped.

‘Don’t you care about me?’ Claire said.

‘Of course, I do,’ he said, looking down.

Claire grabbed her left wrist with her right hand, but he saw. Shallow scars scabbing over. He remembered punching himself in the face while looking in the mirror when nobody was home after school. Testing how hard he could punch without bruising. It was cringe how they were turning out to be such clichés. He didn’t want to turn his life into a soap or teen drama.

‘I’ve been struggling,’ she gulped, ‘with suicidal ideation.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Been talking to the Samaritans. That’s what they call it.’

‘You sure you don’t want stay?’ Pete called.

‘Aye, just a second,’ Jean said.

‘It’s best you look after her, mate,’ DD called. ‘Look at her feet, eh.’

Jean looked down and saw that Claire had walked through the broken glass in her bare feet. There were bloody footprints behind her.

‘It’s okay,’ Claire said, ‘I can barely feel it.’

He watched the blood forming a shallow puddle at her feet. It wasn’t *a lot* of blood. Not more than you’d get from a nosebleed. But still.

‘Don’t you care if I live or die?’

Pete and DD came over, their eyes avoiding the blood.

‘Hi Claire,’ said Pete.

‘Hi Pete,’ said Claire.

‘Look, mate,’ DD said to Jean. ‘We think you should stay, eh. Make sure she’s alright. Tell us how you get on, aye?’

Jean couldn’t look up from Claire’s bloody feet. DD had talked shit about Claire for years – only now *seeing the consequences* did he give a shite.

Jean just wanted to let things be. They just needed to move on with their lives. All these years he’d been forced to act in this film that everyone else was writing. Claire had surely turned up unannounced like this *on purpose*, while DD was trying to *force* the world into a crescendo. It was staged.

Pete and DD turned and left.

Jean watched Claire. She stared blankly at nothing in particular. Lines of mascara ran down her face. She was still holding her wrist. The crowd from the party approached and Claire shifted self-consciously.

‘Walk me home,’ she murmured.

He sighed and looked at a detached house with solar lamps in its manicured front lawn, a path leading to the back garden. Back when they were twelve years old, DD, Greg and Jean went garden hopping in the evenings. They had snuck into gardens over walls and fences, exploring the private worlds of strangers. Some of the houses had much larger gardens than they could have imagined. They were the sizes of small football pitches, with ponds and water features. They would raid these gardens for treasures, stealing gnomes and furniture. Sometimes, someone would spot and chase them. But people rarely followed them into other gardens.

The only paths away from Claire were towards the bus-stop, to which she would no-doubt follow him, or back towards the party, where he would have to face the judgement of

the crowd. He could already picture Siobhan calling him a wanker in front of everyone. But the side path of the house with the solar lamps was there, waiting for him to run through.

He ducked away into the back garden of the house. Claire's calls became distant quicker than expected. He climbed up a wooden compost bin and onto a shed to jump over the hedge into the next garden. He navigated a street's worth of gardens before finding an empty alleyway. He dusted himself off, prying leaves and twigs from his kilt, and walked home alone, trying to ignore this unforeseen blip, planning the next stage of his life.

Chapter 11

Jean and Stacy were sitting side by side in the morning sun when they saw Aaron lumbering across the courtyard. Jean sprang up and watched him. Even from a distance, Jean saw that Aaron's stubble had grown. He walked with a hunch. His long limbs appeared insect-like to Jean. Aaron's hand came to his mouth like he was yawning. There was a small white piece of plastic in his hand.

Jean had vomited for eight hours. He'd eventually fallen asleep in the bushes and had awoken covered in insect bites. Stacy had brought him a bowl of rice. Soon he managed to refill his stomach. It was only after they'd sat down in the sun and talked about how to return to the hostel that he remembered everything. He was hit first with the guilt and then with the anger. Aaron had ditched him. The boys had ditched him. Stacy would probably ditch him too.

Stacy held his hand. 'Leave it, Jean.'

'Just a couple minutes. I need to speak to him.'

Jogged across the courtyard, guts groaning, preparing to take a stand for the first time. Aaron noticed and shook his head.

'Now's not the time, Jean,' he said.

'No, you need to listen –'

'I said not now.' Aaron's voice was gruffer. His eyes were bloodshot and narrow, his face blank, set like plastic. Aaron rubbed his face. He wiped down his shirt and his jeans as if he were scrubbing some invisible substance that only he saw. 'I mean it. Please fuck off and leave me alone.'

Without another word, Aaron opened a door into the house and entered without closing it behind him.

Stood frozen, barely breathing. Before the door could close, he stopped it with his foot. Waited a few seconds. Inside, the corridor was cool and dim. The sweat on his forehead cooled. Aaron turned left at the end of the hallway. He hadn't noticed. There were worn rugs on the tiled floor and Jean made sure to step on them to stay quiet. Unlike the main house they'd explored, this extension seemed modern. All the doors looked like those in a hotel.

Crept along the hallway and around the corner in time to see Aaron leaning his head against a door and shivering. Stopped and watched, hiding behind the wall. Aaron entered the room and shut the door behind him.

Walked to the door and made a fist, ready to knock. Heard shuffling inside the room. Had never confronted someone before, really. Even with Magaluf it had been a coward's way out. The idea of facing someone, of actually standing your ground, seemed insane. How could you be so confident of being right that you were willing to fight for it?

Fists shaking now. There was no doubt here. Aaron had fucked him over. He'd lied. He was dodgy. And when Jean had needed him most, Aaron was nowhere.

Took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Silence.

Knocked again.

Nothing.

Slowly turned the handle of the door. Pushed it. The door opened.

The room was small and dark. Stood still, breathing as quietly as possible while the eyes adjusted.

There was a clean, untouched single bed but Aaron was lying on the floor on a plastic rug.

A song played quietly from a hidden speaker. It sounded like a lo-fi Asian accordion playing a jittery rhythm. First time hearing local music. It sounded like a new beginning. Black and white turning to colour.

Aaron groaned. He was a foetal ball. A stray beam of sunlight caught the slithering smoke from an ash tray. Aaron's watch glowed dark like the sun on a polluted afternoon.

A woman sang on the speaker now. Sang in forlorn sighs. Her voice became jittery too, like a machine gun. It was sad but there was a sensual moaning quality to it. Time felt slower. Everything was gilded in place. Something in the music and distant tweeting of birds reminded of those mornings on the rooftop of the hostel. Remembered the bright light, baking heat and that syrupy scent of flowers, like honey drizzling down the nose. How naïve back then. Grown up so much these past few weeks.

Aaron's breaths were shallow and quick. Off tempo with the music. The voice of the singer was youthful, childlike. Couldn't understand what it meant but it sounded like a plaintive song. She was bored of the rural life, searching for greater excitement, looking for real men.

Watched Aaron sleeping. Suddenly imagined punching him in the face while he slept. For a long time, there had been this strange violence. Strange because there was no anger. Frustration sure, but never *getting* angry – not the way parents did or like when radges went

psycho in school. Always this threat of violence in the air. Often imagined beating the shit out of someone or getting beat up.

Aaron murmured something incomprehensible in his sleep. He looked possessed. Sometimes his eyelids fluttered, revealing the whites of his eyes. Some saliva in the corner of his mouth. Thought of waking him up but stayed still and looked around the room.

There, in the corner, was Aaron's camera. Crept over and held it. All the photographs were in the memory card. But the bulk of the camera, the power and weight of the lens, felt good in the hands.

Stood and watched Aaron a little longer. Wondered what was going on in his head. Crazy how you thought you knew people and then they revealed themselves. Just like his mates. Like Claire. This was an important life lesson. This was one of those epiphanies. Would look back on this one day in the future and think: that was when you finally learned that you can only trust yourself. Putting yourself first wasn't selfish; it was survival. *That* sounded cool AF.

The music suddenly blasted with trumpets as if introducing a king. Aaron was immobile but the music risked waking him. Kept the camera and left.

Part 3

Amadou

Chapter 12

A man coughed behind Amadou – yes, he felt like Amadou this morning, he always did in airports – as he skim-read his emails, thumb darting about the screen, forwarding delegable emails and saving any that required more than a one-sentence response. Perhaps it was time for Emily, his personal assistant, to triage his emails. The man behind coughed again. Amadou looked up and realised that the queue had moved. Eyes back on the screen, he shuffled forward, barely able to stand straight, avoiding sudden movements that could flare-up his back. How was it possible to receive one-hundred emails between 9pm and 7am every day?

‘Watch it.’

His suitcase bumped into the man in front. Again, he looked up. A man with a charcoal-grey slim-fitted suit with matching gelled hair looked back, expressionless.

‘I beg your pardon,’ Amadou said.

‘It’s okay,’ the man said, softening.

As the queue continued, his reading slowed, and his head began to spin.

In moments of disorientation, particularly in airports and other places of mass transit, Amadou Fall often perused his own life as if it were a curriculum vitae mangled in a paper shredder. He would attempt to piece the scraps together, reading them aloud in his mind, mapping his life out to locate himself and to project the path ahead.

From the onset this was a troublesome task. The beginning of life was a perennial blur. The boundary between presence and absence fluctuated with a slow pulse. Images of a young boy collecting alms and singing door to door; rice, sugar and peanuts. The warm smell of mother’s neck, small chin cradled behind her collar bone, arms enveloped around the child’s body. Were they memories or reconstructed projections? He still did not know why he had been sent away or when he had become disconnected from his own name.

An email from the Rise Union appeared on his screen. Preeda enquiring about arrival times and hotels. He typed the response, sent it, read it over again, wondered how she would perceive his emails. He looked at his email signature. *Dr Amadou Fall, Director, i:SEE, London*, and a link to the website. He tapped. A staff profile appeared. A photograph of a smiling man, emanating confidence, broad shoulders, hands clasped with calm authority. Sunshine cast a sleek sheen on his suit, an ironed tie with popping greens and oranges, accentuating the colours of the plants behind. It was like accidentally seeing himself in the

mirror. He knew that the man in the photograph and the spirit residing in this stiff shuffling body were the same. Yet, it seemed intuitive to Amadou that he was not this man.

Now he noticed it. The lingering sense from last night's recurring nightmare. He had dreamt that he was roaming the empty hallways of Grant High School. The lockers and motivational posters lining the brick walls exactly as he remembered. The waxed linoleum floor casting warped reflections of flickering light. At first, he assumed he was here to give a pep talk to the students but when he arrived at the school office, the clerk wore an expression of disappointment on her face, the corners of her lips turned downwards, jowls tensed.

'Oh, no. You're late,' she said, in her Midwestern accent. She pointed. 'Go.'

He followed her pallid finger and found a classroom full of shadows hunched over their tables. He sat down in an empty chair, feeling overgrown, and looked at the paper on the desk. It was an undefined exam. He knew he had to sit it. He knew he was here due to a bureaucratic oversight that meant he had never officially graduated high school. They would take away everything he had worked for if he did not pass this exam. But he couldn't understand the questions. They were an incomprehensible mix of chemistry, history and algebra.

'There's been a mistake,' he said, half-raising his hand.

'Shhht.' A teacher, also a shadow, held a finger to their lips.

He had no choice but to attempt the exam despite certain failure. He would have to resign from his job, hand back his university diplomas.

This nightmare always left him with a creeping sense of fraudulence. At least he had remembered the dream. It *was* just a dream. He had finished high school. He would not have to go back. He could keep his life as it was.

Amadou finished his emails and put his phone away. He closed his eyes, exhaled. His shoulders were hunched and tensed against his neck. His foot tapped. His jaw clenched.

His back had ached for how long now? He couldn't remember a time when he had not felt pins and needles in his fingertips. When had his life, previously so dynamic, become so disintegrated, somnambulant? He could not, in this current moment, find answers by psychoanalytically searching his early life. But the present yielded no answers either. He would have to try again later. He was always searching for retrospective missteps and miscalculations.

He stepped forward to the luggage check-in, noticing now in his sweaty fist the crumpled piece of paper upon which was scribbled his alleged quantified worth. He deserved the back pain and dizziness. It was his responsibility.

The check-in steward was a brown man with an east London accent. His nametag identified him as Dez. Sometimes, when a check-in steward was white, Amadou felt an insalubrious sense of triumph rising his chest, especially when he saw the micro-expressions shift in their cheeks and eyes as they noticed his air miles and Oneworld alliance membership tier. But the residue of these encounters was always guilt. These stewards made less than a quarter of his annual salary at best, not counting his shares and annual compound interest from savings.

‘That’s everything checked-in, Dr Fall. On behalf of Cathay Pacific, I wish you a wonderful flight. Your lounge is after security on the first floor.’

‘Thank you, Dez,’ Amadou said, smiling.

As he passed through security and watched as his bags were searched, Amadou wished he had a diplomatic passport like Charlie, his old friend from Oxford. Charlie had acquired a diplomatic passport through his father. He had been known at Wadham for telling salacious stories of the illicit uses of his passport as a globe-trotting teen; passing through security without any interference would have sufficed for Amadou.

He approached the lounge with rigid steps, dragging his suitcase as a post-surgery patient would drag their drip, hobbling barefoot in a hospital gown. With each step his back throbbed. Usually, it was the lower back that haunted and tormented him; he would dig his fist into the muscle, searching the source of pain. He dreamed that somewhere in there a kernel of agony could be ground away, pulverised out of existence. He had begged many massage therapists to squeeze out his pain to no avail. Today, however, the rest of his back throbbed too. There were ropes of tender flesh lashed to his body, from his hips to the back of his skull, pulling him down, like the tentacles of a giant octopus heaving him into the sea. He was certain that soon something would give, that his bones were about to crack under pressure. He was only capable of standing here because of the medication.

He had done this to himself. That very morning, as he had finished packing, having taken utmost care to wake and prepare in dead silence and darkness, Tyler, who seemed to detect Amadou through a sixth sense, had ambushed him.

‘How long will you be away this time?’ Tyler said.

‘Two weeks. Longer if the work requires it.’

‘So, a month?’

Amadou sighed and forced a smile, ‘Two and a half weeks, maximum.’

‘You said we would talk today but you snuck out of bed.’

‘I didn’t sneak. You looked so peaceful – and handsome – I couldn’t wake you.’

Tyler snubbed the olive branch, recognising it as disingenuous, and walked over to the mock-vintage Ariete espresso machine that he had bought from his favourite café when it went bankrupt. Amadou didn't like the coffee machine. It reminded him of large American fridges that capitalised on 1950s nostalgia.

Tyler sighed and swallowed his ARV pills with a glass of water. Their relationship had been fraught in the fortnight since Amadou had forgotten his own birthday. The coffee machine hissed and Tyler sighed again. Amadou saw that he was preparing a speech that would diplomatically remind Amadou of his unwillingness to communicate and the detrimental effects of avoidance. Amadou, quick and quiet, grabbed his trainers and changed into his jogging clothes so that by the time Tyler turned, inhaling to unleash his wisdom, Amadou casually announced that he was going for a morning jog as if he had not read all the silent signals passing between them. This officiated the scripted minutes of their morning conversation as having ended with a compliment from Amadou returned with silence from Tyler. By the time Amadou would return from his jog, enough time would have passed for Amadou to stick to this line and use it as justification for avoiding the conversation by passing the blame of silence onto Tyler, who would be justifiably infuriated but unable to convincingly argue his interpretation of events.

But the jog did him no good. It behoved him to break a sweat (as evidence) and with every thud of his feet a seismic ripple of pain careered through his knees, along his IT bands and into his coccyx, which acted as a distribution centre of agony, sending the pain along his spine and through each muscle fibre of his back. And yet, this seemed to him preferable to an honest conversation with his partner of ten years. He could have been sitting down on the futon he had bought on his last trip to Thailand, receiving a back massage, sipping a double espresso (made from Tyler's home-roasted coffee beans supplied by a farmers' cooperative in Columbia) while listening to András Schiff's 2012 rendition of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. Instead, he was out in the morning mist of Stradella Road, running from Herne Hill to Brixton, imagining the peaceful notes of Bach's composition where there was only the slap of his feet on the concrete. When Amadou had returned home, there was no argument. Tyler was sitting on a yoga matt and meditating in the study. He did not stir but he had left a scribbled note on the dining table. A note with few words and many numbers.

Amadou boarded the plane. He was less irate about the search at the security gates after having taken a strong pain killer in the lounge. The sleepy warmth of the pill kneaded into his muscles. He unbuttoned and removed his suit jacket to avoid creases, lay back in his pod, ordered a glass of wine and opened the note.

CO₂e – LDN-BKK: 1000kg. BKK-LDN: 1000kg. Moped hire, 1 month: 250kg. Food: 300kg. Sum=2540kg CO₂e. Annual mean per-capita CO₂e of Bangladesh: 440kg.

Love notes of the twenty-first century, ladies and gentlemen. Amadou laughed to himself as the plane made its mechanical noises.

With each passing year, Tyler's spirits seemed to sink as if he were alone on the precipice upon which Western civilization was supposedly poised. Tyler was convinced a medieval renaissance was imminent and that the only way to avoid a return to the dark ages was to feel dismay towards every Lilliputian issue affecting the planet. The unsolicited carbon receipt was expected – Tyler was a professional environmentalist. But Amadou had also previously received descriptions and explanations of working conditions within the supply chains of the clothes, food and electronics he purchased as well as the estimated age and salary of workers.

Pair of socks – nine-year-old Bangladeshi child, \$2/day max, no paid leave or health insurance (imagine!), regular injuries from sewing machine, poor ventilation and fumigation > delivered and shipped by local traders, \$3-4 a day, traffic accidents not uncommon > London service staff, insecure contracts, £9/hr max, unpredictable rotas, will likely never own a home.

But Amadou could not disparage Tyler for the very qualities that he had found attractive when they had first met – no matter how tedious. After all, it was an unspoken agreement, in his mind at least, that Amadou outsourced his own moral outrage to Tyler, while Tyler had bequeathed his financial responsibilities to Amadou. It wasn't that Amadou did not care. He simply did not have the time to personally involve himself with all the social issues of humanity. He had work to do. And while Amadou was absorbed in his specific slice of struggle, Tyler wrote pithy polemics and expatiated on everything else.

Tyler was a wanderer and fantasiser; stifled by his administrative desk-job at a sterile environmental NGO. Amadou was a box-checker and to-do list maker; highly sought after for his expertise as the director of his own social enterprise. It had always been like this: Amadou focused on the future, using modelling and statistics to predict how the image of the imminent would sharpen from the fog; Tyler stuck in the past, still bemoaning the disappointing consequences of the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord. Was this the source of the heavy silence between them? The divergence of their paths since they had met at Oxford? Was this difference at the root of Amadou's inability to communicate despite his yearning to do so?

No. He had to go closer. Find the granularity.

He had thought he had been turning thirty-seven. He had missed his own birthday party. Tyler had not complained and had organised a smaller affair the following week to compensate. It was only when Amadou saw the balloons and the cake that he had noticed he was not thirty-seven but thirty-nine. Two years lost in a second.

Was he losing his mind? Was this early onset dementia? Alzheimer's? He could not remember his past and now he was forgetting his own age?

No. Surely not. He was simply busy. Time passed quickly for busy people. It was no more complex than this.

The jets fired up. Confusion. His first time on an airplane at the age of eight came back to him with high-definition clarity.

The sound of the engines louder than anything he had ever heard. Louder than baaba's snores. He did not know why neene e baaba had sent him away. It didn't make sense.

Then the cold of New Jersey. The air biting his ears and his cheeks. He would shiver for days, his jaw exhausted from chattering teeth. Why was he in this cold country full of toubabs?

Uncle Pape, a man he had never met before, collected him from the airport in white men's clothes – one of the few times he had seen an African man other than his father in trousers.

Uncle Pape shouted something when they arrived in the cold, small house. A child and a woman appeared. His cousin, Ben, whom he mistook at first for a dark-skinned white boy, and his white Aunt Michelle. Aunt Michelle kneeled down and said something. It was the closest he had been to a white woman. They all spoke and looked at Amadou with strange smiles. They spoke English and Amadou only heard foreign garbled sounds

Amadou cried every night for weeks. He asked for his neene e baaba every night until one night he simply stopped.

Amadou enrolled at Richard Stockton Elementary School after spending the autumn and winter quickly learning his second colonial language. He would join the third grade. Before his first day, Uncle Pape made Amadou rehearse the pledge of allegiance.

On his first day of school, his classmates, all toubabs, spent the morning bouncing their hands on his skull. One of the children had said his hair looked like springs and suddenly he was ambushed by hands cascading onto his head. After school, he told Auntie Shell through gritted teeth and tears that he would fight the children. When Auntie Shell told Uncle Pape he shook his head and told Ben and Amadou to sit down. Uncle Pape told

Amadou and Ben that they were not allowed to behave like the white children. Life in America, life in the West, would not be like life in Senegal. Here, Amadou was different. Amadou was not allowed to copy his white friends. Mistakes would not be easily forgiven. Did he understand this? No second chances. Then Uncle Pape studied Amadou for a moment, stroking his chin. Amadou's name was a problem. It was too foreign. From another world. Amadou's new English name, Uncle Pape announced, would be Aaron.

Now, thirty-one years later, the plane taxied to the runway. These memories were not the beginning, but they were as good a beginning as he could find. He would need to discover the gaps between to understand how he had arrived here in this moment, with the aching back, tingling hand and foggy brain.

Amadou knew he had been a disappointing partner to Tyler in previous months and that Tyler's patience was wearing thin. He needed to be better. He needed to understand himself before their relationship became unsalvageable.

Presently, a glass of wine was placed in his hand and the pilot introduced herself and welcomed the executive Gold tier Oneworld members, thanking Amadou and his peers for their continued custom. Swirling his glass and noting the wine's bouquet, he tried once again to peruse his unabridged mental CV for the moment he had become lost and disconnected to himself.

Daraa Diop, Keur Massar. Koranic student, litany singer, alms collector.

Richard Stockton Elementary and Middle School. New Jersey. Flute. Chess club.

Grant High School. Illinois. Commencement speaker. Extracurricular international baccalaureate. Video store clerk. Bassist, Anger United.

Wadham College, Oxford. 1st Class Honours in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Free Nelson Mandela singer at Bops. Charlie's friend.

O City city. Associate. Researcher in emerging markets and derivatives. Trader of souls. Pre-dot com bubble burst.

Wadham College, Oxford, again. MSc and PhD in Global Health.

i:SEE, Founding Director and Lead Research Consultant.

Sometimes, read back to himself, it sounded like an obituary, detailing his linear trajectory towards certain death. He could imagine his funeral and the uncomfortable silence between the compartmentalised individuals who had known him.

Everybody wanted to go to paradise but nobody was willing to die to get there. Yet he had once traded in death. He had tallied their life expectancies and projected profit from their

compounded risk. He – who agonised about his standing in the world and his accrued merit, who amateurly analysed his past for answers to questions that perturbed his present – had betted against the lives of humans, reducing souls and spirits to commas and formulas.

This life could not fit on a limitless LinkedIn scroll, let alone two sides A4 paper. It could not boil down to a comprehensible identifiable whole, let alone an executive summary.

Amadou did not look out of the window. He closed his eyes. The pain killer was stronger than he had predicted. Had he taken an extra one without realising? His eyelids felt weighted. The drone of the aircraft soothed him. Before falling asleep, he briefly considered how many war zones, famines, and totalitarian states he would fly over on his way to Thailand.

Chapter 13

[Four chapters cut where Aaron – once no longer in a plane and remembering his childhood he self-identifies as Aaron – schmoozes with pharma people, reflects on being raised in the US and getting into Oxford University and goes to Chiang Mai to work with a sex workers' union and meets Jean.]

Chapter 17

The eyes of the buddha looked drunk. The giant gilded body towered above the visitors of the temple, one hand resting on his knee, the other palm facing upwards. The visitors took their photos while the buddha looked indifferently out at the horizon. When Aaron drank at the temples, he enjoyed the warped sense of having shrunk, imagining the large buddhas to be human-sized.

‘D’you want another?’ asked Jean, crushing his empty can.

‘Look out,’ Aaron murmured.

One of the monks walked past, his hands behind his back, head bowed. He noticed Aaron and Jean, frozen with guilt while hiding their drinks, and smiled at them. Aaron and Jean waved. The monk walked away.

‘That was close,’ said Jean.

Jean was a mop-headed Scottish boy who had come to Thailand for the beaches and had ended up in the mountainous inland area of Chiang Mai. The previous week, as Aaron and Stacy had walked back to the hostel from O’Donnell’s (the once-Irish pub now a modern pool bar) Aaron had noticed a boy following them.

‘Is that kid following us or have I gone paranoid?’ Stacy said.

‘Probably just lost,’ Aaron said.

Over the following days, however, Aaron had noticed the boy hanging around the rooftop by himself. Seeing the bewilderment on his face, Aaron had felt sympathy for the boy. Pride had welled in Aaron’s chest on his behalf, when Jean finally introduced himself. Upon their first meeting, Stacy had tried to appear intimidating and worldly, putting on an awkward belly-dancing performance. But Jean had been visibly mesmerised. Aaron had felt a sudden inexplicable pang of sadness, seeing how the scariest moment of a straight British man’s life was having to dance sober in public. Adolescents adopted a habit of appearing unimpressed by everything to be perceived as mature, which often continued as an instinctual

habit in adults. Stacy was like this. Jean, however, seemed to have bypassed this conceit. He reacted to new experiences with wide-eyed wonder.

It was clear Stacy was frustrated at the change in their friendship. Before Jean's arrival, Aaron and Stacy had spent entire days together smoking on the rooftop. However, Aaron much preferred Jean's laconic attitude. Stacy's growing familiarity with Aaron had encouraged her to see him less as wise uncle and more as friend and financier. Knowing her to be intelligent and driven, Aaron had switched to a banter repertoire, jokingly portraying Stacy as a lost dreamy type living off her privilege and beauty. She never took the bait when he joked about her manufactured aimlessness, but she did get sour when her class was mentioned. In exchange, she nagged him with politically incorrect criticisms regarding his profession, comments that had started ironically before growing more serious, which he ignored. Their friendship was so steeped in irony that he wondered if anyone understood why they were friends at all. The dynamic was only half-charade and tension grew between them. Stacy marketed herself as a global citizen but was unaware of cultures beyond the expat community. Her keen eye for perceiving intoxication in people's faces meant that she frequently asked him for drugs. Whenever he refused, she would speak to Chakrii or others from the pool bar, who assumed Aaron would pay them later. All of this went unnoticed by Jean, who simply didn't engage with what he didn't understand.

Aaron checked the time on his phone (one of his watches had gone missing recently).

'I need to go to work,' Aaron said.

'Now?'

'Yes, I have a meeting.'

Aaron saw that he had messages from Tyler. He did not read the messages but checked their joint account and saw that he had forgotten to transfer his monthly mortgage payment from his current account. Tyler would have spent the last few days on the phone to the bank, explaining that he was not the breadwinner of the house. Aaron moved the money and closed his phone. Jean watched him sceptically as he got up, his back slightly more relaxed than usual, either due to the alcohol or painkillers.

'Don't worry,' Aaron laughed, 'I'll be back later.'

He met Preeda at the Rise Union headquarters. She ushered him into a van, which set off immediately. The van lurched, juddering and bucking over potholes, knocking his brain against his skull, worsening his hangover. Stacked rice paddies stretched on either side of the road. Preeda was in the passenger's seat speaking to the driver, while Aaron was in the back with a Thai development worker called David and a white American boy called Greg, whose

father worked for UNOPS and had found him an internship with Preeda. Greg asked David what his real name was.

‘My name is David,’ he replied, smiling.

‘No, dude, I mean your *real* name,’ Greg said.

‘Oh. Ritthirong.’

‘Ri-what?’

‘Ritthirong.’

‘Hm. David is easier,’ said Greg, laughing.

The unseasonal sun bore down on them and sent waves of heat through the open windows. If Aaron were only able to spray some mineral water on his face his stomach would perhaps settle.

After days of having her messages forwarded to his colleagues, Preeda had eventually found Aaron and insisted he join her to visit a rural village, the home of many sex workers who migrated to Bangkok and Pattaya. Aaron had agreed, deciding this was his final professional commitment for the foreseeable future. Sometimes he felt vertigo from abandoning his work. He would let the feeling peak – that falling sensation with the crash that never came – and soon it felt like floating.

‘If you stayed longer, I would take you to Isan,’ Preeda said over her shoulder, ‘but this is similar.’

She wanted Aaron to meet the women who were considering leaving their villages and those who had returned, some of them with a farang husband.

‘The farang in Pattaya are crazy. But the farang in this village are *very* crazy.’

‘Why very crazy?’ asked Aaron.

‘Ohhh,’ Preeda laughed, ‘you will see.’

The van rumbled to a halt on the edge of a dirt track surrounded by bush. Teak and bodhi trees mingled with palm bushes and bamboo. Tangle humid vegetation. Aaron inhaled the smell of greenery. Preeda gathered everyone round and the driver spoke in Thai.

Preeda translated, ‘Anand, our driver, is our guide. He was born here. He says be careful. Wear boots. Snakes can bite your foot.’

Aaron nodded and tucked his jeans into his boots.

‘I don’t have boots,’ Greg, the white boy, said flatly. ‘Nobody said to bring boots, man. I’ve only got my Havaianas.’ Greg pointed to his dusty feet.

Aaron watched as Preeda, Anand and David discussed in Thai, pointing at Greg's feet then at their own boots. Anand shook his head. David sighed and shrugged. Preeda said something softly to David.

'What are you talking about?' Greg said.

'It's okay,' Preeda said, 'you can have David's boots.'

Greg folded his arms as David unlaced his boots.

'Is that necessary?' said Aaron. 'Don't we *need* David? He's the poverty and migration expert.'

'It's okay,' said Preeda.

'Hey, man, I want to see the village too,' said Greg.

'It's okay, really, it's okay,' said David, handing Greg his boots.

The short walk to the village was silent. A woman in a black t-shirt covered in glittering sequins greeted them upon arrival. Preeda introduced her as Tiffany, their community liaison officer. They began their home visits.

Most of the houses were built from wood. Some were on stilts while others resembled large garden sheds. In each of the wooden houses, the process was the same: they sat on the floor, Preeda retrieved some cans of Coca-Cola from her backpack, the women drank and talked, Preeda translated, Aaron took notes, Greg fidgeted. The younger women, those contemplating leaving their village, said they struggled to feed their children, they were in debt. They knew they could make money in the tourist areas. Some of the women who had returned from Pattaya and Bangkok said they had managed to send money to their families while they worked. But they had missed their children too much. Some women had saved a little bit of money while others had returned empty handed. Most of the women asked for David and were surprised and uncomfortable to find he was not with the group. These two farang were strangers; they knew David well.

In one of the concrete houses, a woman told them that she and her farang husband had fallen in love. He had offered to build a house for her family. At first, she was happy. She managed to raise her children with full stomachs. She sent them to school and university. Now, the husband had less money. He had never learnt Thai. He spent all his time with his farang friends.

A middle-aged woman, who had worked in Pattaya in the late nineties, sighed and wondered why a strong country like Thailand still had poverty.

Preeda nodded and explained to Aaron, 'We are the only country in Asia not invaded by farang. Thailand was always free.'

Aaron smiled. Chakrii had once explained how the Thai people were originally from southwestern China and had fled violence from the Qin dynasty, eventually establishing a kingdom that became Thailand. He explained that it was an unspoken shame that Thailand had given up some land to the French as a deal to remain an independent buffer-zone between British and French colonies. Like many other countries, Thailand had diplomatically played various superpowers against each other to carve its place in a hostile world.

Once they had met the last villagers, Preeda led them past a shack made of corrugated iron and wood surrounded by a fence.

‘Shanty houses aren’t common in rural areas, are they?’ Aaron said.

Preeda laughed and pointed at a wooden sign, half hidden foliage, hand-painted with the words, *Gentlemen’s Club*. Aaron looked at Preeda. She giggled and put her finger to her lips before pointing like she was spying a rare animal surfacing from the bush. Far behind the shack, on the edge of the forest, were three middle-aged white men dressed in pink tutus. One of the men had a grey beard and wore a wizard’s hat. He held a shining staff that appeared to be made of taped-up aluminium beer cans. The other two men stood fifteen metres apart, also holding shiny beer staffs. They pointed their staffs at each other. The man in the wizard hat lifted his hand and the two men charged, jousting with their beer staffs-turned-lances. Both men struck each other square in the chest and fell with a thump. The wizard shouted, ‘Victory!’ and the men rolled around, howling with laughter.

In the van, David answered Aaron’s questions about debt rates amongst the villagers. David explained that the nature of his work forced him to operate on a local level while debt and poverty operated on a global scale that he could not solve locally.

‘No education workshop or money from Bill Gates, even billions of dollars, can fix this,’ he sighed.

Aaron thought about Preeda’s app; it used the natural adaptivity of people rather than enforcing top-down measures, which usually ignored the complexity of the system in which they intervened. But, unless the app functioned globally, wouldn’t sex workers, or any workers for that matter, always be at the mercy of global finance? Aaron had learnt long ago not to underestimate the torrential power of money, which could pour so inexorably that it appeared natural and inevitable.

Aaron had worked at the investment bank for three years when Edward came to him for help. Aaron sat in the crowded front office, a newly promoted Associate. The other analysts in his row suddenly leant forward and started typing harder or speaking louder and Aaron

knew Edward was approaching. Now a Managing Director, Edward had supported Aaron and Charlie during their time at the firm. Indeed, many of Aaron's peers often pointed out that Aaron's face was on the recruitment brochure.

He felt Edward's hand on his shoulder. He was aware of the tension in the shoulders of his colleagues on either side of him.

'Aaron, what do you know about viaticals?'

'Viatical settlements,' Aaron said, turning to face Edward. 'It's an emerging market based on the purchasing of life insurance policies of people at risk of dying of AIDS-related complications. Traders cash in on the surplus of purchased life insurance policies when the original policyholder passes away.'

'Spot on,' Edward said. 'I would usually ask this of a Vice President, but I would like *you* to do some research into Viatical Settlements. In a fortnight, bring me a report on the market, the competition, costs and opportunities. We may invest if it proves viable.'

Aaron ignored the bitter looks he received when Edward left and spent the following two weeks working round the clock, reading reports, making calls to traders, analysts and HIV patients. He brought the report to Edward, proofed and bound.

'What are your thoughts?' Edward asked, leaning back in his chair.

'My thoughts?'

'Yes,' Edward said. 'I'll read the report but, while it's fresh in your mind, what do *you* think?'

'Some experts predict that the advent of antiretrovirals means the viaticals market will decline. However, there is an untapped opportunity to expand viaticals beyond HIV. There's no reason why viaticals can't apply to aggressive cancers or late-stage liver disease. As long we have a model that can calculate, with reliable accuracy, morbidity rates and payoffs of life insurance policies, a diverse portfolio of life settlements would be a reliable revenue stream with high potential for growth. Guaranteed pay-outs, high returns, and freedom from equity market volatility. In other words: everybody dies.'

'Hm. Pity about the medication,' said Edward. 'Can such a model be developed?'

'We'd have to work with medical experts to ascertain which conditions reliably produce morbidity. It could be a simple model.'

'Excellent. I leave it to you then.'

By next quarter, Aaron was leading a team of analysts tasked with buying life insurance policies from people in need of money and willing to forfeit their pay-outs. Aaron

maintained a professional veneer with his subordinates but, between themselves and within earshot, they bragged about their trades.

John, a Cambridge man, often slammed his phone and hooted, mimicking Wall Street flicks. ‘Minimum hundred-k on this one.’

Arthur, another analyst, would chip in, tallying his trade on the leader board. ‘Got someone desperate for some quick cash selling their four-hundred-k policy for thirty.’

Aaron tried to ignore these performances. After a day’s work he was often numb and exhausted, his body tensed and alert from the bigotry of his analysts. During particularly prolific weeks, he told himself that these Oxbridge graduates were products of their environment, unaware of the power of their words. He would catch himself and wonder if he was only building a case in their defence to build one in his own.

When Charlie discovered what Aaron was working on, he was silent. Charlie’s time at the bank had borne him less fruit. He was regularly late for work, often arguing with his family. One day, Charlie announced he was leaving the job to travel the world. With Charlie’s departure, Aaron’s days became harder to tolerate and excuse. He fantasised about returning to Oxford. He wanted to learn Public Health and start his own research consultancy. He even had a name: *I:SEE – Interventions based on science, evidence and effectiveness*. But how could he go back to living on scholarships and savings after working in the city? Many fantasised of such opportunity; was he really willing to risk financial security for an uncertain dream? He tried to ignore the pull of his desires, hunched himself into the computer screen, a dull ache setting into his spine.

Chapter 18

‘Bullshit,’ said Stacy.

Aaron’s eyelids were heavy. His head nodded forward. Too many painkillers. Or too much beer. Either way, he excused himself, found a quiet room and took a line of the cocaine Satoshi had given him. He sat in silence and waited until his heartbeat accelerated and his mind felt light and alert.

Stacy quizzed him about where he’d been when he returned. He ignored her and focused on the card game. Stacy then turned to Jean and grilled him about his reasons for travel. Her nervous energy was inseparable from her desire to be perceived as an adult without yet having lived the trials of young adulthood. Her behaviour had changed since Jean’s arrival. She was now dedicated to playing the unattainable femme fatale, which sadly appealed to Jean. Aaron knew he was becoming redundant to the trio. It was silly for a man his age to spend time with these youths. People stared – more than usual for simply seeing a black man in Asia.

When Stacy referred to the Rise Union’s app as Uber for hoes, he felt the final sting of betrayal and intentional misunderstanding and he left.

What was fascinating regarding the fighting of tears was that it required considerable effort to control the face muscles, the blinking of eyes, the contortions of the throat. All more painful than the act of crying itself. It could be concluded that it was not for the physical or mental benefits that one withheld tears but for the appearance of social normalcy. It was not for his own benefit but for the benefit of others.

[Section that leads up to Aaron’s impending breakdown cut.]

He found some cocaine.

He was sweating.

He had an argument with a stranger.

His head was spinning.

He took a pain killer.

He got lost.

He spoke to Tyler on the phone, unsure of what was being said.

He awoke on a beanbag. He had no idea what time it was.

His body was papier-mâché. What was it Steve Biko had said? *Black man you are on your own!*

He heaved himself from the beanbag, legs trembling, pain shooting from his spine. He took another pain killer and walked into the hall just as a short cleaning woman appeared, collecting empty bottles and cups. None of the people drinking on the floor noticed her. For them, this place was a fantasy, an ersatz replica of bohemian squat life for those born after the regulation and sanitization since the late 90s.

He'd made a mistake coming here. His only desire was to return to London, take a long holiday, and drink coffee with Tyler.

He pressed the call button.

Tyler answered, 'Yes?'

Aaron was outside now. The morning sun blinded him. He stumbled through the garden towards the room Satoshi had reserved for him.

'I don't know what happened.'

'I told you last night that I left the keys on the kitchen counter with your mail. The plants are watered. We can talk when you're back if that's what you want.'

An icy current ran through his stomach as if a precious vase was on the verge of toppling. 'I don't understand.'

'What don't you understand?'

'You can't do this. It's too sudden.'

'Believe me, there's nothing sudden about this. This has been ongoing for years.'

'These things need to be discussed.'

Tyler's voice trembled but he maintained a stiff, regimented voice, 'I have tried to discuss this with you many times.'

'It was on my agenda. We can talk now. I'm free now.'

Tyler sighed.

Aaron closed his eyes and felt the bubbling currents coursing through his body. It was like he was falling and rising simultaneously – like careering up a skyscraper in an elevator. He was too hungover and fragile to feel the sorrow though he knew he had to express what he would feel later. He leant with exhaustion against the wall of the giant house.

'I've been thinking about the fun we had together in Oxford after you left the city,' Tyler said. 'How everything felt light and free. I've been hoping for a while that this feeling might return. When I try to bring those feelings back only to find nothing there, I feel sad. What do you think?'

Aaron remembered a rushed morning, searching the study for a USB stick, Tyler cross-legged on the floor doing Prāṇāyāma breathing. 'Do yoga with me, it could help your

back,’ Tyler had said. Aaron had replied, ‘I feel uncomfortable with the impulse to assume the only solutions to the human condition can be found in Asian cultures.’ Tyler had only wanted to help him.

Yet, Aaron found himself now saying, ‘I think nostalgia returns the wonderful memories and leaves the bad ones in the periphery.’

‘I didn’t ask you to analyse *my* thoughts, I asked what *you* thought,’ Tyler said with dismay.

‘And I told you what I thought.’

‘I want to know how you *feel*.’

Unable to stop himself, Aaron said, ‘In that case you should have asked me how I felt, not what I thought.’

‘Why do you *do* this?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Look, none of this is forever. I need this now. When you return, we can talk if you want.’

‘Fine.’

‘Is that all you’re going to say?’

Aaron was silent.

‘Okay then. Take care.’

The phone beeped.

He was dizzy.

He remembered how he had stayed silent before Charlie’s departure too.

[Flashback cut where we find out Charlie has died of pneumonia and Aaron is quitting his job at the bank.]

The world spun as he walked through the courtyard of Satoshi’s.

Aaron had always assumed his life story was too good to be true, that it was the post-racial fever dream of the multicultural West. When he’d seen his photograph on the investment bank’s recruitment brochure, he’d felt his life was a white liberal fantasy, the triumph of the individual. He’d always wondered if Charlie’s friendship was a new iteration of his father’s philanthropy. He’d been called a charity case more than once. He’d been called oreo and coconut. He’d been called everything under the sun.

He walked towards his room.

The pain medication wasn't working. How many had he taken? Two pills this hour? How many last night? 40 mg each? Or was it 80 mg? Was the limit 200 mg or 300 mg? He had thrown away the box, keeping only the white plastic and aluminium blister pack. But he'd been taking these long enough. He'd developed tolerance. He took another pill.

They were all coming back, the memories that didn't fit in his model, the model of his life he'd constructed to navigate the system.

He had never let himself be angry. Now he was angry.

Angry at Janet for attempting to blackmail him. Angry at Uncle Pape for not speaking Pulaar at home. Angry at his parents for never explaining why he'd been sent to America. Angry at Tyler for growing up comfortably in his country of origin. Angry at Charlie for dying.

He was stopped in his tracks by Jean, a bewildered look on his face.

'Please fuck off and leave me alone,' he heard himself saying.

Even in his anger he still said please. It angered him more.

Now he knew. Tyler had not tolerated him for his comfortable house, his income. Tyler would no-doubt have to return to his mother's house aged thirty-nine. It was a pyrrhic victory: Aaron had proof that Tyler loved him because Tyler had left.

He pushed the door open with his body. He lowered himself to the mattress, crawling to prostrate himself.

The room was sultry. The windows hadn't been opened for days. He wished he was on the hostel rooftop, the cool breezes like the dry season evenings in Senegal when neene brought him to the rooftop because it was too hot to sleep.

He sunk into the mattress. He didn't know it was possible to sink so deeply.

The languid, maundering breeze. His mother's skin, warm yet refreshing. He, Amadou, curled in her embrace, his back nestled into her expanding and contracting chest. The adventure of sleeping on the rooftop, away from his baaba, a vagabond conspiratorial closeness with neene.

He was sinking. Deep under water.

There'd been a time when he was invincible. Selling the Shoreditch property for an unthinkable profit. Buying a bigger home on the edge of Brixton, always a step ahead of gentrification. Trips to the Cotswolds and Cornwall. Cream teas with Tyler by the sea. Swimming in deep waters, holding each other, their goose-bumped bodies creating warmth in cold water. The holiday in Rome, the entire weekend making love and drinking champagne in bubble baths, forgetting to see the sights, the soapy taste of Tyler's neck.

Tyler had encouraged him when he had doubted starting his own organisation. Tyler had helped with the strategy: gaining high-profile consultancies by writing incisive but subtle reports for Archie's contacts, catching the attention of big donors and dedicated NGOs. He'd quickly won some large contracts and consultancies. Tyler had supported with the logistics of starting a non-profit. And he'd done it out of love.

There was movement in the room. Aaron's mouth was dry. He tried to reach out for water but he couldn't move his arm. He'd sunk too deep. Was this sleep paralysis or something else? The air was warm and thick like cooling lava.

He noticed the music. It was a CD on loop somewhere in the room. He recognised the song as *Isan Lam Plearn* by Angkanang Kunchai. Chakrii had told him about it. Thai folk music written partly for cultural export in the 1960s. The song was about a young woman longing to leave the countryside to find a lover.

He noticed the irony now, paralysed on his mattress, that he had attempted to analyse and manage everything in his surroundings when there were so many components that he could not influence. His accent for one. Despite his practice listening to the BBC at Oxford, he'd only achieved the semblance of an English accent. He hadn't mastered the pain in his back. Even in his work he'd tried to understand humans through complex models, lived experience and local knowledge to undermine the rigid numerical methods and intuitive perspectives of so many development workers. But humans were inherently unpredictable, they resisted expectations almost out of principle. He should have known this.

Tyler had once said that oppressors belonged to their subjects. Aaron had not listened to this argument, assuming it was an obscure platitude. But he now saw it was true. British, American and French culture belonged to everyone; nothing was theirs. They had forced their languages, customs and cultures onto others, so it was rightfully the possession of all those it had touched. Were his thoughts making sense or was he too drowsy? No, he felt the knowledge in his belly. The instinct of power was to grow into a monolith, to become as big as possible. But big was fragile. Was he making sense?

Big is fragile. Big empires collapse. Big bodies disintegrate.

The bedroom door was ajar. There was a silhouette. A looming shadow, standing, watching.

He had lost touch with Uncle Pape, Auntie Shell and Ben. Ben had called him a freak but Pape and Shell were proud of him, always sending Christmas cards and sometimes a letter for Eid.

It was death, come to get him for his sins and impurity. Death was sinking him down to hell. Lá iláha illallah... No, his heart wasn't in it. Nothing could save him.

In the kaleidoscopic whirlpool of colours in the darkness, he saw an umbrella. An umbrella fighting against the elements, attempting to protect against the inexorable force of weather. A red umbrella. The symbol of sex workers; protection and visibility, nothing about us without us. The Legal and General umbrella; the shelter of insurance. What else could an umbrella mean? What else could it be used for?

He remembered the large wingspan of the vultures that soared over Dakar. He had attempted to shelter himself with his career and money – what good had it done him? What did it matter now he was sinking deeper, abandoned, waiting for the vultures to pick at his remains?

Tyler had told him recently that he'd become the type of person who looked over people's shoulders, always looking for someone more important to speak to.

Something pushed him towards deep sleep and blended with his drive to stay awake for all eternity. Various invisible forces pulling him apart.

When you sold your soul, you always sold it for nothing.

[Part 4, where Suzie meets Jean while volunteering in Senegal, cut.]

香港

Autumn 2015 – Summer 2016

She wasn't a bird in a cage. A bird in a cage, when
the cage is opened, can still fly away. She was a bird
embroidered onto a screen.

- Eileen Chang

I'm on the pursuit of happiness, and I know
Everything that shine ain't always gonna be gold
Hey, I'll be fine once I get it
I'll be good

- Kid Cudi

Part 5

Angel

Chapter 28

The soya milk sprayed from Fish's mouth and splashed onto Angel's face. The lukewarm milk dripped from her goggles and ran off her chin.

Angel had really waited for this her entire life.

She had dreamed all summer. She had entertained fantasies of a scholarly bohemian life; of discovering antique bookshops that smelled of pine wood; of sitting in a circle of friends amongst the tall palms, banyan trees and hanging vines before the ornate façade of the oldest building at the university; of drinking wine and discussing Greek philosophy and modernist literature (Marcus Aurelius and Virginia Woolf were her favourite); of going to rooftop concerts with other misfits, discussing their love for My Little Airport and Eileen Chang.

But now these fantasies dissolved in the splash of soya milk. She watched Fish purse her lips with puffed cheeks like she was blowing a milky kiss. She pictured mama at her age singing with a group of red-scarved youths in the back of a truck.

Last night, when she had arrived at Pok Fu Lam halls, she had sat and stared at the empty bed two feet away from her own, wondering what books her roommate would bring. This morning, Fish had arrived, unpacking a folder of posters (Pikachu riding a Bulbasaur, *Death Note*, *One Piece*, baby Justin Bieber, and 花樣年華 (what Angel had thought was *In the Mood for Love* but was actually a K-Pop album, *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life* by BTS)). Fish had then laid out her Hello Kitty alarm clock next to her Hello Kitty pillow and had babbled about looking forward to orientation. Meanwhile, Angel, sitting on her bed with knees curled up to her chest, had observed as her dreams of an understated bedroom were crushed.

She should not have been surprised by such disappointments. After all, she was the cursed witch. Or the bloodthirsty vampire (depending on who you asked).

From her first day in elementary school the other children had refused to play with her. She coped by hiding and reading fantasy and sci-fi stories during playtime. There was only one game that the other children played with her: she would chase them and they'd run, screaming that the witch was after them. She'd thought it was like a game of tag; if she caught someone, they'd become the witch. But this never happened, no matter how much she chased. Finally, she caught a boy, grabbing his arm so hard that he cried. When he showed his arm to the teacher it was blotched with bruises.

Following this incident, her parents had moved her to a new school. They agreed that, thanks to a partial scholarship, they would put her in international school. Life was quiet and uneventful for five years until, at thirteen, Carley and Natalie invited Angel into their squad.

Carley and Natalie toyed with her. They invited her to excursions then cancelled them last minute so that she regularly found herself in strange places, alone and confused. They would reminisce about parties or holidays as if she'd been there and would laugh with mock-shameful delight when they pretended to realise that they hadn't invited her. They told Angel that she could be pretty if she tried harder and gave her makeovers, always making a show at how disappointed they were about the results, as if no intervention could overcome her ugliness. It was just the plot of *Mean Girls* but meaner, if you could believe it.

It was like that for six years. Angel never told her parents. She had already failed to produce a successful daughter for them in elementary school.

In the penultimate year of school, Carley's parents left her the entire house in Happy Valley for her seventeenth birthday party. For the party, Angel wore a simple open-back Louis Vuitton cocktail dress. (The dress gifted from Carley after she'd tricked Angel into going on a five-hour hike by herself, promising she was always just round the next bend, while Carley had really been drinking cocktails in Soho the whole time.)

Carley and Natalie both had Bottega Vaneta dresses from Milan. Carley was tall and dark (her mother was American, her father Italian) and had the long figure of a runway model. Her father worked in fashion. Natalie (French father, Swedish mother) was blonde, voluptuous and dreamed of being an influencer. (She had ten thousand Instagram followers by the time she was sixteen.)

Carley's cousin, Paulo, who'd flown in from NYU for the party and whom everyone had expected to fall for Natalie, spent the night flirting with Angel. Paulo convinced Angel to sneak into Carley's mother's bedroom. Soon after the party, Carley found out and the squad expelled Angel. They called her a bloodsucking whore and Natalie posted the intimate, embellished details to her thousands of followers. Some of the boys at school made *Twilight* memes with Angel's face photoshopped over Bella's. (It was stupid because Angel had only read *Twilight* once and she'd hated it. She much preferred *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.) Angel spent the final year of school embracing her status as a bookish nerd, returning to her elementary school self.

When she had received her HKU acceptance letter, mama and dad seemed to finally look at her with fearless pride. She would be an HKU student. Dad would brag to his colleagues.

She dreamt all summer. When the induction materials arrived in the mail, the glossy smiles of students flicking past her on every page made her giddy with anticipation.

That morning, as orientation boot camp began, the sixteenth-floor Tiger cubs were lined up and given nicknames. The students running orientation, who insisted on being called sans (神) or gods, walked along the line-up of freshers like drill sergeants, asking questions that would serve to reveal a shameful insecurity.

Fish (real name: Priscilla) was overweight so they named her after her least favourite food; Ken (real name: Gordon) had played with Barbies as a child. For Angel's nickname there was a debate between 魔鬼 and 女鬼, settling on the lesser of two evils: Mogwai (original, right?).

It was this same morning that she discovered that the university itself was not the centre of a student's identity. Only one's halls and major mattered. She would not be Angel, the dreamy book-addicted student who happened to study Business; she would be Angel, Business Management major. She would not be Angel, proud student of a top Asian university; she would be Angel, Lee Hysan Hall resident. Her new prospective self had already seemed severely circumscribed before she learnt that within this building that she'd called home for one lonely night – your floor number was key. She was now – whether she liked it or not – a sixteenth-floor Tiger, Lee Hysan Hall hockey champions, arch rivals of the twelfth-floor Sharks and allies of the fourth-floor Dragons.

After the nicknaming ceremony, the day had continued with star jumps, awkward games and mean taunts. Then the sans had split the floor in two, sending one half to crawl on all fours like dogs in the corridor. Angel was kept in the common room. When the sans handed out goggles and rainbow-coloured sheets of plastic, revealing that the next game involved a milk fight, Angel had laughed, assuming it was a joke. She had expected the Tiger cubs to resist such idiocy. But no-one had protested and neither had she.

Now, as the white liquid dripped from her goggles, Angel prepared to spit her own milk at Fish. Through the patches of transparency, Angel saw the very same activity being repeated between the others, soya milk of all colours and flavours being spat back and forth while the sans yelped a confusing mix of insults and encouragement. Angel waited for the milk to clear from her goggles to get a good aim. She hated that she was being forced into this. Within her there was a tingling pressure drop, an impending sense of freefall. She couldn't stop herself picturing Carley and Natalie drinking champagne in Paris or sunbathing in Phuket or whatever they were doing right now.

A nervous-looking white boy peered into the common room before disappearing. Angel imagined herself from his perspective; a pink Saran-wrapped alien with big blue eyes discharging milk. Plus, there were the dogs barking in the hallway. And they had the audacity to call this ‘Orientation Camp’.

Fish flinched and scrunched her face up as Angel sipped the milk.

This was the beginning of her real life. She could forget everything that had preceded. This was the one that counted. This was her chance to fit in. To have real friends. She just had to do what she was told.

The image of mama as a young woman in the back of the truck returned. Mama was on a dirt road surrounded by hills and trees, singing with a group of youths with red scarves around their necks. This scene was an invention. Mama had never spoken of her adolescence or of the years leading up to her arrival in Hong Kong.

Angel had once been punished as a child for humming a tune that mama often sang. Angel had cried and it was dad who told her about the song of the Young Pioneers:

我们是共产主义接班人。

We are the heirs of communism. We inherit the glorious tradition of revolutionary predecessors.

Sometimes, dad had explained, mama hummed it accidentally despite herself.

Mama was seventeen years old when she was sent to the countryside. She spent three years working on a farm with other young people from the city. Then, mama somehow made the long journey from Sichuan province to Hong Kong, crossing from the communist mainland into the British Empire.

This was the only information dad had provided. Angel had filled the gaps with both research and fantasy. She read the scar-literature about children sent to Inner Mongolia, who carried manure to the fields all day. She pictured mama being sent from the city, singing the songs, joyful and innocent, unaware of the years of toil ahead. She pictured mama unable to sleep at night, planning her migration to Hong Kong.

It was only a few years ago that Angel had discovered, while searching her parents’ bedroom, mama’s little red book with letters bundled between the pages. Through these letters she learnt that before Hong Kong, before dad, before her twentieth birthday, mama had married a farmer.

Was this why mama had toiled in the fields? Was this why dad had left the racism of England? So that Angel could be mocked by the gods and follow instructions like an obedient

soldier? But how could mama and dad continue to love her, after everything, if she didn't at least try orientation? Could she continue running away from every obstacle, never confronting the challenges and struggles that she faced?

Angel hosed Fish with a stream of chocolate milk. Her hands shook as if her body were trying to break free from an invisible exoskeleton. As the tiny droplets splashed on Fish's face, Fish's eyes blinked beneath her goggles and Angel turned and ran into the corridor, tripping over a barking dog-person as she went.

She ran to the communal bathroom. She locked herself in a cubicle (the Hollywood trope she'd least expected to enact as an HKU student). She sat on the toilet and tore from her arms and legs the translucent plastic that made her look like a lumpy elephant woman. She struggled with one last kick of her foot, tearing off the final piece of mangled, milky skin and added it to the pile that looked like an alien creature. All that was left were her DGAF clothes; straight-legged black trousers, converse shoes, a plain grey hoody.

Sighing and sniffing, Angel pulled out her phone and opened Instagram. Carley's was private even though she had 8,782 followers. Angel pressed follow. Within seconds her follow request was accepted by Carley. It was like communicating through sign language in the dark. They hadn't interacted for a year but Carley had now seen that Angel had requested to follow. Carley, wherever she was, had seen Angel's name, remembered, then accepted. But no message, no further action to complement this basic administrative procedure. No mention that Angel had unfollowed and blocked a year ago.

She scrolled through Carley's page. Her last photograph was a week old. She was standing on a balcony looking out at the sparkling Eiffel Tower. She wore a white summer dress, translucent enough to show the curvature of her body and her dark underwear but not so transparent as to *seem* transparent. Carley had always known how to find (in her own words) the border between edgy and crass. In her hand was a glass of red wine. The caption read: *Paris, tu es comme ce verre de vin. Tu me saouls, mais je t'aime quand même.*

Angel put the phone away and left the bathroom. The elevators were in the same corridor as the dogs so she took the stairs. The stairway had gravelled concrete walls painted a faded beigey-yellow. The concrete steps were bare and the green handrails flaked with rust. She took her time walking down the stairs. Her only choices were Queen Mary Hospital cafeteria across the highway with the old shuffling patients or the 7-Eleven, getting bitten by mosquitoes. This limbo stairway was welcome. She wished she could walk down these stairs forever.

At the twelfth floor another girl flapped through the doors and walked down the stairs ahead of her. They looked at each other for a second with no recognition before the girl looked away and slumped down the stairs, her head in her phone. She didn't seem local. Or else she was a weird kind of local like Angel, dressed in straight-legged jeans with dishevelled hair and no make-up save a dash of eyeliner. Probably ABC or mainland, though with that bronzed skin she could have been Thai. But what did it matter? She knew she didn't have the confidence to speak to this other outcast.

They walked two metres apart in silence.

At the fifth floor, the girl suddenly looked up and caught Angel's gaze.

'Hey,' the girl said.

'Hey,' said Angel.

'What's your name?' The girl spoke an Americanised English with a noticeable Chinese accent.

'Angel and you?'

'Wow, Angel.' She giggled. 'Cool name. Where are you from?'

'Here. Tsuen Wan. And you?'

'Oh.' The girl didn't hide her disappointment. 'Why aren't you doing *orientation*?' She said *orientation* with the joy of a child saying a swear-word. The same way she had repeated Angel's name, she giggled and swung and elongated the syllables at the end of the word to feel its exoticness and difference.

'I don't want to spit milk,' said Angel.

'Spit milk?' The girl giggled again. 'My floor is flooding. They're splashing everywhere. They're crazy.'

'Flooding?'

'Yeah, look.' She pointed up and Angel saw water dripping down from above. 'That's floor twelve – the *Sharks*.'

Angel laughed. They were still facing each other from across the stairs, frozen in mid-step. Angel walked over and they descended the stairs together.

The girl gave her English name. Erica. She was from Shenyang in north-eastern China but her family had moved to Guangzhou ten years ago. She'd recently returned from a year abroad in California. She had a laugh that burst from nowhere followed by a quiet seriousness.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Erica gave an awkward wave. 'Okay, are you going to 7-Eleven?'

‘Uh, yes.’ Angel walked towards the shop, expecting Erica to join.

‘Okay, I’m going to Wan Chai to party.’ Erica did a goofy hip shake like that old gif of the dancing baby. ‘Bye!’

‘Wait,’ Angel said, before Erica could leave. ‘*You’re going out?*’

She had never been to Wan Chai. She knew what happened there. Carley and the squad had gone regularly but Angel’s parents had never allowed her to go – not that she’d ever been invited.

‘Yeah, man.’ Erica raised her eyebrows and shrugged. ‘All the new exchange students are going out. They party *hard*.’

She couldn’t get over the way Erica spoke like a cheesy 80s Hollywood American with that musical accent. The cringe was enticing.

‘Can I join?’ Angel asked.

Chapter 29

Within seconds of their arrival to Wan Chai, a gwai lou wearing an unbuttoned floral shirt and a bucket hat jumped onto the front of a taxi, shrieking with his hands in the air like a chimpanzee. Some people on the street cheered while the taxi driver shouted. As the boy climbed down and entered the back of the taxi, he vomited on himself and his friends crowded round, handing the driver wads of cash, begging he take their friend home. People of all ages and races hovered around the various watering holes (an all-you-can-drink bar and an Irish pub), stumbling across the road without a hint of having ever been taught to look both ways. Cars emergency-broke every two seconds to avoid crushing the priceless (but probably insured) body of an expat kid or foreigner. The partygoers sat in clusters on the concrete bolsters and shrubs that split Lockhart Road in two, their limbs dangling onto the path of the traffic. Some took selfies, some pushed each other and shrieked, while others kissed or flirted. On the sidewalk, bored Filipino and Indonesian women sat on stools in front of red and purple curtains and empty bars, saying hello to every white man that passed. On the corner, the 7-Eleven bustled with people buying alcohol, snacks, condoms. It was a jungle, a wildlife reserve for party people, everyone and everything flowing and bubbling, culminating in a ritual involving standing up and dancing on elevated surfaces. Everyone climbed. Climbed tables, trees, stools, cars, bins, and danced, blind drunk, on the precipice. How did they avoid breaking their necks? What was this connection with being drunk and wanting to climb things?

The squad had often reminisced on Mondays about dancing on tables at Carnegies, three-way kisses in the street, slumber parties at Happy Valley or the Peak in plush houses with fridges stocked with hangover cures, lazy Sundays binge-watching feel-good movies. She had never been invited. She had decided that Wan Chai and Lan Kwai Fong were not meant for her, that the stories were fomo bait, over-exaggerations for the sole purpose of torturing her. But here she was, feeling the breath blocked in her throat.

On the 46x to Wan Chai, the top deck had been crowded with drunk exchange students from around the world. It was chaos. Nobody seemed capable of staying still for more than a second. She had briefly shared a seat with Erica, who had shouted ‘It’s time to party, bitches!’ before swapping places with a white Australian called Jake.

‘Bitches be crazy,’ said Jake, shaking his head with wonder. ‘You been to Wan Chai before?’

‘Uh, no,’ Angel said.

‘Oh, you’re gonna love it,’ Jake smiled. ‘You from California too?’

Just as Angel was about to answer, he swapped places with a French girl.

‘I can’t believe the bus costs six dollars,’ the girl said.

She introduced herself as Philo, short for Philomela. She had a French accent that sounded like she was playing a prank. Philo wanted to limit her spending to a hundred Hong Kong dollars a day and she was upset that the cheapest meal in the Pok Fu Lam canteens was twenty-five. Angel didn’t know what to say. She listened as Philo did her financial planning aloud until a Scottish-sounding girl with red lipstick and hoop-earrings sat in front of them.

The Scottish girl was called Suzie. She wore a black short-sleeved tea dress with Dr. Martens. She looked Spanish but said she was half-Pakistani.

‘So, what’s the *real* Hong Kong like?’ Suzie said. ‘I mean, the stuff that exchange students never see?’

‘I don’t know,’ Angel said. ‘One of my favourite local writers, Dung Kai-cheung, says Hong Kong is a fiction.’

Suzie laughed. ‘Sounds about right.’

Suzie said she’d come to Hong Kong because a friend who had grown up here had recommended it. She was lucky, she said, because her boyfriend had also come. He was doing an exchange at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

‘I’ve never had a boyfriend,’ Angel said. She realised, as soon as she spoke, that it sounded desperate.

Suzie shrugged.

‘I wish I was a lesbian,’ Angel blurted to fill the silence, surprised again with her honesty before wondering whether she was being honest or saying what she expected herself to say; other than Paulo, most of the cruelty she had experienced had come from girls.

‘I’m bi and I still fell for this one,’ Suzie said, shaking her head and holding her phone. Her boyfriend was white with messy hair. He had one of those classic handsomely rugged faces that she associated with English gentlemen.

Now, in the anarchy of Wan Chai, Erica, who had also met and instantly befriended Suzie, was dragging Angel into Carnegies.

The shuddering sound system was playing summer hits. The lights were low. The floor was sticky. The air was sticky too. She couldn’t take a step without being crushed by someone else. The sweaty skin of strangers kept sliding against her arms. She wasn’t sure what was supposed to be so fun about this, tbh. The guys in the group looked up at the people dancing on tables and over their shoulders with squared torsos as if they were bodyguards.

The girls bobbed their heads and yelled into each other's ears with nervous anticipation. Jake nudged Angel and pointed up to the girls dancing on tables, 'Bitches be *crazy*.' Angel nodded and cranked a smile. Then something clicked as if there were some sort of clubbing incubation period; the girls began to dance and the guys started shuffling.

The saving grace of this place was that it was too crowded to see each other's bodies let alone their own. It wasn't really dancing so much as wriggling around and trying to keep balance to a mass swaying rhythm.

She didn't feel like dancing. The music wasn't good. But the exoskeleton helped. It was there when she needed to feign happiness when she wanted to disappear. She had first imagined the exoskeleton after reading *Journey to the Centre of The Earth* and picturing large prehistoric insects at the bottom of the sea. The exoskeleton had been there for her whenever she was unable to get out of bed or to go to school. It was intimately familiar, yet she barely understood this invisible structure. Who controlled it? Was it alive? Was it organic but dead, like a shell? Was it a human-made piece of monster-nature like Californium? Or was it like a prosthetic arm or lab meat? It was always there to help her. Now, it helped her smile and laugh. It lifted her feet and dragged them side to side. It shook her waist gently but firmly.

She looked around and saw that Suzie was dancing freely. She was laughing, having a real *hoot*, with Erica, who was indeed dancing like the oogachaka baby. A young man, who must have been Suzie's boyfriend, kissed Suzie on the cheek, and waved at Angel when she was pointed out. He joined a vibrating circle of guys, doing that white thing where it's a dance-off but it's terrible 'ironic' dancing.

A bassy song came on and all the white guys went crazy. It was a new Lil Killuh song with vapid lyrics and a heavy beat. *I'm a king, I'm a boss, I'm a king. I like my bitches callipygian, riches yes I'm getting 'em, milly or a billy, got you snitches acting silly huh? I'm a king, I'm a boss, I'm a king.*

A topless gwai lou spread his arms like he was opening a curtain and an empty space magically appeared as everyone in the group laughed. They all seemed to know him and to understand what was happening. As soon as the empty space was big enough, the whole gang of boys and a few girls – Suzie included – jumped in.

It was a mosh-pit. The gwai lou jumped towards her. He did some bizarre dance moves that weren't particularly cool but that did show the intricacy of his body, the rippling ribs, the bouncing pecs, the tensing fibres of the shoulders. It was like a wave under his skin. His face wasn't as brash as she'd first thought either, he had delicate cheekbones and eyeliner framing

his eyes. Angel worried he was going to bring her into the circle and that she'd have to dance with this crazy boy in front of everyone she had just met but he turned and danced with another boy, making him do a dainty twirl before dancing with Suzie and then Erica. Finally, he jumped back into the circle with his gang of topless guys. Everyone pushed each other around with big grins until security came and pushed them all out onto the street. Suzie shrugged and walked out. Angel followed.

They were squeezed outside in the smoking area. Erica socialised like it was her job. (Where did these infinite reserves of energy to be a unique individual for every stranger come from? Could it be used to power the Victoria Harbour skyline?) Erica conducted croaky conversations while borrowing puffs from cigarettes, swigs from bottles and sips from cocktails. There were so many frayed voices, distorted from days of incessant shouting. The topless gwai lou (no longer topless) walked over and asked Erica for a puff of the cigarette she was currently borrowing. Angel couldn't hear their conversation over the noise, but Erica was laughing out of control. Fully dressed and civilised, doused in the reddish glow of the outdoor lighting, this boy now seemed like a different creature. After a few minutes he looked at Angel and approached her.

'Hey, I'm Chad,' he said, 'Chad *Elmington*'.

Oh no. He *looked* like a *Chad*.

'Hi,' she said. And when it became clear that he wouldn't speak until she introduced herself, she added, 'I'm Angel. I'm thinking of changing it though.'

'Angel? I bet people use your name as an excuse to flirt with you all the time. But I would rather ask you: what is the quality you most value in yourself?'

'Woah,' she said, laughing and trying to catch eyes with Suzie, 'that's a little, you know, heavy.'

She expected him to be embarrassed at his cringe question. He simply puffed his cigarette and watched her until she had to look down.

'We don't have much time on this planet,' he said. 'Might as well make it count.'

'Well, what about you? Why don't you tell me?'

'Okay,' and, *se-ri-ous-ly*, without a hint of irony, he said, 'my intelligence.' He gave a slow pensive nod (eyes closed!) and bit his lip.

'Are you even a student?' Angel said, frostiness turned up full.

'A *student*?'

'I mean —'

‘I’m in the buying and selling racket,’ he said. He ran his hand through his hair with a look of self-satisfaction. ‘Currencies, stocks. Buy low, sell high. *The old mantra*. Real money, honey. Anyway, all I know is lei hou leng ah.’ He spoke in a comically over-emphasised accent.

She snorted. She couldn’t believe this was a real person.

He started laughing. This laughter didn’t match his measured pretentiousness, it was childishly innocent and trickled like a stream.

‘What? Why are you laughing?’ Was there something in her hair or stuck in her teeth?

‘I’m joking,’ he said.

‘Joking about what?’

‘I lied. I’m sorry.’ He hid his eyes in parodic shame. ‘My name isn’t Chad Elmington. I was just messing around. I’m not a douche, just a bit of a dick at *worst*.’

‘Oh my *god*.’

‘What did you think of Chad?’

‘Why did you do that? I was about to leave.’

The boy laughed.

‘I was about to jump into a taxi and go home. Chad was ruining my night!’

‘I’m *so* sorry,’ he said, laying a hand on his heart.

‘Why didn’t you pick a nicer alter-ego?’

‘Well, Angel, since you ask – here’s the problem. If I pretend to be someone who’s better than I am, then you’ll be disappointed when I reveal myself. This way, at least, you’re pleasantly surprised.’

He cared what she thought of him. This was what he was saying. She stayed silent. He was a stranger. But it was like they had met before and talking about a mutual friend.

‘So, what *is* the quality you most value in yourself?’ Angel asked, feigning suspicion.

‘Whoah. That’s a lame-ass question there, Angel. Poor chat.’

‘Oh my god!’ She hit him playfully on the arm without thinking about it.

He pulled a book from his bag and handed it to her. *Gender Trouble*.

‘I’ve been thinking about performativity, how we become ourselves by acting. I don’t want to be Chad – but I’d like to know what it’s like to be him. I’d like to know what it’s like to be everyone. I like the idea of undoing gender so we can all be free. It’s like ego death in Tibetan Buddhism. Destroying ourselves to be reborn. Have you read Butler?’

She nodded, then, worried she’d be discovered, shook her head.

‘Keep the book. You can borrow it.’

‘You don’t even know me.’

‘You’re friends with Erica, right?’

‘I suppose.’

‘There you go.’

She watched him. A moment ago, she’d thought she knew him better than he knew himself. Now, he was inscrutable. She saw intelligence in his eyes. His eyeliner brought out a feminine beauty but something, his confidence perhaps, made him handsome rather than beautiful.

‘I don’t know your real name,’ she said.

‘I’m Jean,’ he said. He pronounced it the French way, like *genre* without the *r*.

‘I’m going to have to see some identification,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘How can I trust you? What if Jean’s another character you’ve made up?’ She held out her hand, palm upwards.

‘He *is* made up. That’s what I’m saying.’

‘I don’t mean philosophically. I mean *officially*.’

He handed over his wallet.

She felt his gaze upon her as she looked through his ID cards. Jean König. Three years older than her. She liked the feeling of holding his identity, watching his miniature portrait, while he watched her. She held on a little longer. As soon as she handed his wallet back, he would no-doubt get bored and leave to find another girl to flirt with.

‘Angel, we’re going back in.’ It was Suzie, holding hands with her boyfriend.

She already had friends who fetched her, who didn’t want to leave her behind. How did this happen?

‘Hey Suz,’ Jean said. ‘John, mate. You good?’

Suzie’s boyfriend, John, nodded casually.

‘Hi Jean,’ Suzie said. She pronounced his name differently, so that it rhymed with *seen*.

Angel looked at Jean, who smiled at her. He knew everyone.

‘Right, you,’ Suzie said, tense. ‘Let’s get back in.’

Suzie pulled her away by the hand. Angel looked over her shoulder. Jean smiled but didn’t move. He nodded his goodbye.

‘I have your book!’ she shouted over the crowd.

‘Can I find you on Facebook or Insta?’

‘Yes,’ she called.

As she was swallowed by the bar, she realised she'd forgotten his surname and that he did not know hers; she wondered if she'd see him again.

Chapter 30

[Chapter where Maggie meets Jean for the first time and struggles with school cut.]

Chapter 31

She ducked and weaved through the crowded streets. Central was like a big game of dodgeball. People came rushing from all sides. She noticed men glancing at her bare legs, some lingering more than others. It was bright and sunny. The daylight was striking after days of watching Netflix. Colourful lines and dots overlaid the real world. She climbed the escalators towards the footbridge that led to the IFC and walked past the helpers congregated on the floor with their flattened cardboard boxes and home-cooked lunches.

Jean sat at a table on the IFC mall rooftop. He was drinking GLACÉAU Vitamin Water and eating a custard bun that he'd clearly purchased at 7-Eleven but the waiters did not bother him. He was dressed in a white t-shirt, grey chinos and fake converse. He noticed her sooner than she'd hoped. She felt him watching her through his knock-off Ray-Bans. As she walked towards him, her legs felt as if she had suddenly forgotten how to walk normally. When she arrived at his table, she sat down with a relief, wondering why he was smiling.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Damn. Hello to you too,' he laughed.

She couldn't see his eyes through his sunglasses. She wanted to know where he was looking. He smiled and sipped his drink. She grabbed her phone and scrolled aimlessly through Instagram, half watching him. He looked around and up at the sky. Erica and Suzie were in Sai Kung eating fresh fish. Carley was in Nice, sunbathing. Natalie was doing summer school in Oxford.

'What are we doing?' she said.

'What can you show me?'

'What do you want to see?'

'I don't know. Tourist traps and cheap restaurants?' he smirked.

She never knew if he was being serious. Everything he said seemed to mean many things at once or to be completely open to interpretation.

'What did you do on sunny weekends before the summer?' he asked.

Avoided Carley and Natalie and wished for time to move faster. 'Locals usually go to malls but westerners don't like to spend warm days indoors.'

They agreed to take the Star Ferry across to Tsim Sha Tsui. They walked through the IFC footbridge again.

‘What’s with all the women?’ Jean asked.

‘What?’

‘All the women,’ he pointed, ‘sitting on the cardboard.’

She watched the helpers sitting in groups along the footbridge. A group of women played a card game while one of them napped, her head resting on a player’s lap.

‘Oh, it’s helpers.’

‘Helpers?’

‘Maids, servants, nannies.’

‘Why are they here though? Are they homeless?’

Angel laughed, ‘No, this is what they do Sundays. It’s their day off.’

‘But why are they here on cardboards and not doing...normal stuff?’

The questions frustrated her. ‘Because they’re live-in servants. Their homes are their work. On their day off, they leave home.’

‘That’s absolutely mental,’ he said, looking down at the helpers.

‘It happens every Sunday. They call it cardboard city.’

‘What language is that? It’s not Chinese.’

‘Tagalog. They’re from the Philippines. Some are from Indonesia, Thailand. Mostly the Philippines.’

‘Did you have one?’

She bristled. ‘For a year, yes. But we didn’t need it. We had a helper who came once a week. She was mainland.’

‘That’s crazy. Only extremely rich people have maids in the UK. Even a weekly cleaner’s pretty posh.’

‘I know. It’s different here.’

He looked at her and smiled. ‘I like your phone cover.’

Her cover was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* themed, with the main characters looking into the distance with serious faces.

‘Is that why your name is Angel? Because of the vampire guy?’

Angel nodded. ‘That’s why I kept it. I’m thinking of changing it though.’

‘That’s cool.’

She sighed, ‘Most people at my school had live-in servants. An old friend, Carley, was practically raised by hers. She treated the maid like her mother. It was so strange.’

They arrived at the port and boarded the ferry. The water was green opal and the IFC and ICC reflected the blue sky. Jean put away his Vitamin Water and pulled an Asahi from his rucksack. He offered her a beer – she refused. (It was the middle of the day!)

Angel reached into her backpack and took the book he'd given her. She handed him the book.

'Did you read it?' he asked.

'No. I don't have time to read anything not on my course now. Besides, I'm not really into feminism.'

His eyebrows raised above his sunglasses. 'You joking?'

'No.'

Carley and Natalie both had 'feminist' written in their bios. Their mothers were feminists too. Carley called her mom a 'bad bitch' for being the first female CEO of her company. Natalie regularly storied herself complaining about boys judging her appearance just because she posted all-but-nude photos. 'I'm not doing it for boys,' she'd say, 'I'm doing it because it's empowering. I'm empowering myself, okay?' *Empowering herself in relation to what?*

'But *everyone* is a feminist these days,' Jean said. 'Haven't you heard of a little someone called Beyoncé?'

She shrugged.

'It doesn't mean hating men, y'know. That's a common misconception. It means equality of the sexes.'

'I know that. I like earlier feminists. I just don't feel a connection to popular feminism and I don't believe that men and women are the same.'

His face elongated with surprise. 'But all human beings are the same! There's no difference between me and you.'

She laughed. 'How can you believe that? Women have babies, men don't. Women want love, men want sex.'

'Okay, firstly,' he said, 'your definition of women isn't very trans inclusive. Secondly, women want sex just as much as men, they've just been taught to ignore it.'

'You really think that?'

'Yes! I don't blame women. Porn has fucked all our brains up. Most women must have terrible sex. That's why men should be feminists.'

Angel laughed. She'd never spoken about sex so openly before. 'What about love?'

'Oh, I don't believe in love.'

Now it was Angel's turn to be surprised. 'You don't *believe* in love?'

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘It’s a construct designed to control us; an impossible dream.’

‘But what’s the point in life without love?’

He laughed and took a sip of beer. ‘I don’t think life has any point.’

‘Then how do you know how to live? How d’you live a good life?’

‘I don’t believe in morality,’ he shrugged.

‘You don’t believe in good or bad?’ she said in disbelief.

‘Nope.’

‘How do you judge the terrible things people do? What about mass killing? How do you judge Mao causing millions to starve? Or the CIA murdering all the Indonesian communists?’

Jean hummed. ‘I would say genocide is done in poor taste. It’s bad aesthetics.’

‘But is it wrong?’

‘Wrong or right don’t exist. Only beautiful and ugly. Genocide is ugly. You’re beautiful,’ he said, matter-of-factly. ‘Simple.’

He smiled and looked away, blushing.

She didn’t know what to say. She watched him from the corner of her eye until she realised she was holding her breath. She inhaled deeply and got up as the ferry docked.

They went to the Circle K and Jean bought four big bottles of Asahi, put two in his bag and handed one to Angel. They went to Kowloon Park and watched the silent pink flamingos. They watched some local kids having a breakdancing competition.

As the hours passed, she waited for him to declare boredom but he never did. He spoke about Timothy Leary and ego death. He said he wanted to reconcile Nietzsche’s eternal return with the Buddhist karmic cycle despite being philosophical opposites. He wanted to unite peace and suffering. He spoke so quickly that just as she began to understand, he would switch topic and the conversation would take a new direction. When he asked her questions about herself, she worried her answers were dull but he nodded along enthusiastically as she told him about life in Hong Kong, trapped between British colonialism and the mainland.

They walked north towards Mong Kok as night fell. The bright lights created a perpetual sunset out of red and yellow LEDs. They ate street food on Tung Choi Street. She laughed as Jean tried intestines and drank bitter medicinal tea. They finished his beers and she bought more. Soon they were tipsy. They ate at Café de Coral (Jean’s choice).

As they finished dinner, Jean’s nose bled but he said it happened all the time and wiped it with a napkin. He suggested they finish the night at XXX in Sheung Wan and was surprised

she'd never heard of it. He had this way of making her feel like an alien in the only city she knew.

XXX was a basement hidden on an unassuming street. They walked down into a haze of glowing lights and ambient, reverberant music. Images of Faye Wong, Gong Li, Tony Leung and Zhang Ziyi from Wong Kar-wai's film, *2046* were projected upon the bare concrete walls.

Vaporwave was a strange music to dance to. Angel had discovered it late, in Time Out rather than the subreddits where it had spawned. Suburban Gen-Z American teens with cyberpunk fantasies of Asia made it by slowing 80s pop music. It was funny that this retro aesthetic music had finally introduced her to the canto-pop she'd always mocked. Now she was appropriating her own culture.

Tonight, a local DJ evidently felt the same; he played samples of Roman Tam and a slowed George Michael cover by Anita Mui. The stretched and skewed images of glittery androgynous concert performances by Leslie Cheung were projected through the smoke onto the wall. Angel danced slower than Tai Chi. The few others in the club looked like zombies made of stitched shadows, swaying slowly in the purple smoke. Anita Mui's broken-hearted voice sang, *I'm never gonna dance again*.

Both drunk, they returned to the street to smoke. Jean's handsome eyes swallowed her up and he leaned towards her. She thought he was going to kiss her but instead he said, 'Have you heard of Tiresias?'

She shook her head.

'He's a blind prophet in Greek mythology. The gods transformed him into a woman for seven years then transformed her back into a man. He was blind but could see the future. He was neither a god nor human. He could speak to the dead while he was living and spoke to the living once dead.'

'Cool,' she said.

'Do you want to kiss me?' he said.

She was so surprised by this line of questioning that she barely understood her own answer: 'If you're asking, we both know it means you don't have to ask.'

Jean looked confused. She grabbed his neck and their teeth bumped as she kissed him too hard. But they found their rhythm and it became one of those fantasy kisses where she couldn't tell where her mouth ended and his began. It was like her whole body was inside his mouth, inside him, like her brain had momentarily found a home in the space where her lips became his. It was nothing like Paulo's invasive-tongue-kiss at Carley's party. She knew it

was cliché but there was a floating tingling sensation and she forgot where she was. When it was over, they both laughed in embarrassment. Jean glanced over his shoulder like he was checking if he'd been observed. Only now could she taste the tobacco.

They took a taxi to Pok Fu Lam together. She leant on his shoulder, feeling safe. The tension in her body had gone; tonight she'd finally sleep more than three hours. They parted ways and went to their respective halls. As she arrived in her bedroom, she could still taste him.

Chapter 32

Wan Chai Wednesdays. Ladies' night. Club 7-Eleven. This was her life now.

Not sipping wine with the Edwardian-Baroque background of Hong Kong University. Not joining a theatre group and performing at the Fringe Club. Not film screenings at the Broadway Cinematheque in Yau Ma Tei.

Angel looked through the crowds. She spotted Jean across the road, speaking to Philo. He looked up as if sensing her and waved.

It was a fresh, early November evening. The days when she'd first met Erica, Suzie, John and Jean seemed like the distant past. Angel wore blue jeans and a leather jacket but Suzie, who was used to the cold, wore boots, leggings and a t-shirt, all black. Angel glanced over to Jean as he crossed the road, smiling as usual.

'Great,' Suzie said. 'Here comes the poster child of fuckbois.'

Erica laughed.

Angel tensed. 'What do you mean?'

'Nothing. Just how he is, eh.'

'I don't know. Maybe he's different now,' Angel said.

Suzie gave her a look.

Angel hadn't told Suzie that she'd been seeing Jean over the past month. Suzie rarely spoke about Jean save for these little jabs – but she couldn't have known, since Jean hadn't told anyone either. They weren't keeping it a secret; they simply didn't need to share their private lives with the world.

Jean was a throbbing sugar-rush headache. He'd taken her for a picnic to Chung Hom Kok beach and she'd sat between his legs as he taught her to play the ukulele. (It sounded saccharine but it was actually really lovely.) They'd cycled around Cheung Chau. Mostly, they talked. Sometimes, usually towards the end of a date, they'd kiss on a quiet wooded path or an emptying beach. She waited for him to go further but he never did. He only ever caressed her neck, below and behind her ear, sending warm unfurling blossoms into her stomach.

He had invited her to his room. She'd seen the sprawling mosaic of photographs and postcards on his wall, a world welded and stitched together out of fragments from around the globe. The pictures had been arranged so that the road from a photograph of Scotland led into a street on a postcard of Hong Kong – winding paths through an impossible city. There was a photograph of a young, pale Jean and other white boys dressed in kilts, holding bottles of

beer and vodka. There were photographs of a darker Jean with a black man and a white woman: they smiled and laughed in a room with popping neon colours in the background; Jean gazed admiringly at the black man as they sat on a pool table, smoking. The photos reminded her of the superstition that photographs stole souls. There were entire lives and stories captured in these moments, frozen in time to be displayed, remembered and relived. She did this too with her Instagram; she lived the lives of Carley and Natalie whenever she dove into their feeds. She looked at the backgrounds of Jean's photos, the Asian and black people smudged and blurred; amorphous faces and bodies transported around the world in Jean's suitcase.

Then she saw a photo of Jean on a sandy road, in a group of black people, with his arm around Suzie. Angel had pretended not to see it. In that photo they smiled like good friends or something more. She wondered why neither of them had mentioned this trip.

At that moment, Jean had said, 'I've always felt like an alien accidentally born on Earth, trying not to be discovered. I find myself observing people and thinking, okay, this is how you human – you behave like this or that.'

She'd felt seen. They'd kissed. She had remembered how at Carley's Paulo had said, *You're so petite I could bench-press you*. Jean was so gentle in comparison.

And still Jean didn't try to sleep with her. She worried that she'd misunderstood – they were only friends, he couldn't and wouldn't be attracted to her. There was a knotted rope inside her that was twisting and twisting.

She'd heard vague rumours about Jean. He was a player, a fuckboi, as Suzie said. She had seen him flirting with girls, always surrounded by friends, known by everybody. She couldn't reconcile these two people; the one she heard stories about and the other who confessed his feelings in private. She too had been gossiped about. Jean was simply popular. People liked to speak about him. He was misunderstood. She knew that it was better to trust what you saw than what you heard.

In between these dates, she'd spent time with Suzie and Erica. They had introduced her to street parties at LKF, to Mr Wong's, where you could eat and drink infinitely for fifty Hong Kong dollars. They'd gone to flat parties in Sai Ying Poon and Sheung Wan with international students from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Russia and Ghana. She had visited home once, lying to dad and mama that she had achieved As in her mid-terms when in reality she had barely scraped Cs. Mama had insisted on perusing Etsy for a Burberry clutch as a type of lai si. But thankfully dad had said it was inappropriate and instead they'd gone for a walk and

to dinner at Discovery Park, surrounded by palm trees in the giant indoor mall. She worried about what her parents would think when they eventually discovered her failure at university.

Now, in the crowded streets of Wan Chai, Jean walked up and asked if she wanted to dance. He nodded to Suzie and Erica, gave Angel a playful shove on her shoulder.

‘So?’ Jean said.

She nodded.

Suzie raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

‘Let us go then, you and I,’ he said.

When they danced, he held her tight. He twirled her. He switched between serious, tender dancing and goofy, ironic dancing. At the end of a song he ran across the room and slid on his knees to her, holding her hips and looking up to her like he was Patrick Swayze. People around them watched and she saw that he knew it and liked it.

They went outside and kissed in an alleyway. Stepping back, out of breath, he said, ‘So, how are you, anyway?’

She shrugged. ‘Okay.’

‘Don’t give me that bullshit. Talk to me.’

‘I *am* okay...apart from the fact that my brain has stopped working and my parents will disown me when they see I’m flunking. And apart from the fact that I don’t belong here, or anywhere – I’m okay.’

She talked and he listened. She told him everything as they walked through the quieter streets away from the bars. She told him about dad and mama, how she’d always been a good student but was now failing. She told him about the mysteries of mama’s life. Jean listened and nodded. She didn’t tell him about Carley.

They circled back to the same alley. Jean took out a bag of white powder.

‘You’ve got to stop letting guilt control your life,’ he said.

‘It’s hard.’

He pulled a book from his bag. *On the Genealogy of Morals* by Friedrich Nietzsche. He dug out some powder with a key and sniffed it.

‘The thing is, right,’ he said. ‘Our culture – western, global culture – valorises guilt and suffering. Nietzsche explains it all. We think life is bad because of suffering but we try to atone for that by suffering more. Suffering both condemns and justifies life.’

He stepped towards her, eyes open and excited. ‘Life is fundamentally *good*. No matter what. We must be intoxicated by it, flow through it joyfully. God spites us because we are

imperfect and then asks us to bear the suffering to become immortal. He *made* us imperfect so *fuck him*.'

She didn't know what to say.

He laughed and shook his head. 'You're wondering what any of this has to do with you.'

She laughed.

'You can't condemn yourself to suffering and guilt just because your parents suffered. Everyone has suffering in their ancestry. My dad was abandoned by *his* dad. My grandparents grew up in Nazi-occupied territory. We don't owe our ancestors anything. We must embrace our own suffering, move through it. We *don't* have to hold onto the suffering of others. The whole world is people walking around pretending they're not suffering and alone while thinking they deserve it. That's the human tragedy at its core.'

She nodded. It made sense. She was holding onto mama's suffering as something to explain, justify and condemn her own life.

He took another sniff of powder.

She nodded to the key. 'Do you feel, like, amazing now?'

'Aye,' he said, surprised. 'Pretty fucking amazing like.'

Her phone buzzed. A text from Suzie.

'Suzie and John are getting dim sum,' she said.

'Fuckin *John*. Well, I'd ask you back to mine but they don't let people of the opposite sex into halls at night.'

'Oh. I'd forgotten.'

'Yeah, it's pretty heteronormative.' He held her waist, kissed her neck. 'But I wish we could spend the night together. If only it weren't forbidden.'

'I can't believe it's not allowed.'

'It's taboo. They don't want us to be together.'

They laughed.

'Unless?' he said.

Chapter 33

[Chapter cut where Jean and Maggie hook up for the first time. Jean turns out to be sweet with Maggie and Maggie feels happy but the next morning he tells her he doesn't believe in monogamy and doesn't want to be in a relationship.]

Chapter 34

The yachts appeared as white slashes across the sapphire and seafoam canvas of the lagoon. All around was blue sky and the dense greenery of the forest. The sand of Long Ke Wan beach, an hour's walk away down the hill, shone piercing white under the midday sun.

It was an unseasonably warm January afternoon. They had hiked from Pak Tam Chung, along High Island Reservoir, and were finally in sight of their destination.

Ahead, Suhani and John walked together on the narrow path. Behind, Erica and Philomela talked about how all the celebrities were dying. Angel walked beside Jean and Jonathan.

Jonathan was a new addition to the group. Like Jean, Jonathan had a French parent. He was from London and had lived in Hong Kong five years. He spoke fluent Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Korean as well as English, French and German. He did Kung Fu. His dream was to become a pan-Asian consultant, a job that neither she nor Jean had ever heard of.

Jean was enamoured with Jonathan. He wanted to know his entire life story and as they walked. He kept suggesting they grab a beer the following week. But Jonathan, Angel noticed, was giving short answers to the questions and kept redirecting questions to her. She would answer and then Jean would ask Jonathan another question, so that the conversation always moved forward and never bounced back.

'Nei zyu hai bin dou?' Jonathan asked.

'What does that mean?' Jean asked.

'Where do you live,' Angel said. 'Pok Fu Lam but I'm from Tsuen Wan.'

'Is his Cantonese good?' Jean asked.

'Very impressive,' Angel said.

'Wow,' Jean said.

Jonathan spoke more in Cantonese and Jean interrupted again in English but eventually he fell back and joined Erica and Philomela.

'Ngo ho m ho ji zoi gin lei,' Jonathan said quietly, smiling.

Angel could feel herself blushing. Jean had asked Jonathan if they could hang out after the hiking trip; now she knew that Jonathan had only been thinking about asking her the same thing.

She looked over her shoulder at Jean. He was leaning in close to Erica with his usual smirk and she was belly laughing. Then he put his arm around Philomela and said something to her and she laughed also. She'd heard more stories about Jean's womanising over the last months, though nobody ever seemed to know specifics, which, in her opinion, were the only thing that mattered. Whenever she saw Jean speaking to a girl, she pictured them fucking. But *she* was free too. They had *agreed* upon this.

'Hai lei ho ji,' Angel said.

'Great,' Jonathan said.

Why did she feel guilty? She could hear Carley's voice in her head calling her a blood-sucking whore. How had she survived such savagery? But Jean was right. Why should she feel guilty for being liberated?

After their first time together, when they had agreed to keep things open, she had not seen Jean for two weeks. She had wanted to see him but knew that texting him would make him feel she was chasing. So she said nothing. After a long radio silence, he messaged her and asked her to dinner. She responded two days later. After a week of slow texting they went to a sushi restaurant in a mall. At dinner, he behaved as if nothing had changed, like three weeks of distance after a romantic night was normal. Maybe it was.

At the dinner, they'd sat beside another couple – a white man and local woman. By chance, Angel and the woman went to the washroom at the same time. The woman was dressed in a slim-fitting black dress and had a Mickey Mouse gold bracelet, which she recognised from the Chow Tai Fook shop windows. The woman looked at Angel in the mirror. In contrast to this well-dressed woman, Angel looked squalid. The man that the woman had been with was older, dressed in a slick suit.

'Nei zung m zung ji sik joeng coeng gaa?' the woman said, giggling.

Angel felt exposed as if the mirror gave the woman x-ray vision. 'What?'

'Oh! Sorry la,' the woman said. 'I thought you were local. Enjoy your meal.'

Western sausage. She hadn't thought about this phrase for a long time. She didn't consider herself as someone who ate Western sausage but now it was simply a fact.

When she returned to the dinner table, Jean looked uncomfortable. She suspected that the man had been gossiping with Jean. He insisted nothing was wrong.

After that dinner they'd seen each other sporadically. They wouldn't speak for days at a time then Jean would message her a lyric or send her a YouTube link to a Jordan Peterson *Maps of Meaning* lecture. One time he didn't reply to her for two weeks and when she bumped into him drunk in LKF, he said, 'Sorry, my phone ran out of battery.' When they saw each other in public he acted like a platonic friend. He was often wired on cocaine, talking loud and fast. He spoke in quotes and memes. When she asked him why his friends always said, 'Fuck bitches get money,' he replied, 'You wanna be my main squeeze baby, dontcha?' At the end of party nights, he sometimes disappeared. She wondered if maybe that's just what gwai lous did: ghosted.

When they were alone, he made jokes, saying, 'If I could stay in Hong Kong, I'd ask you to be my girlfriend. You basically already are.' He would talk about how sadness, depression and suffering were inevitable and that you had to go *through* them. Once you were in, you couldn't go back or around, you had to go *through*. Change was the only truth. He had changed so many times into different people, he said. He was always changing into something better.

In December, she had gone on holiday with John and Suhani. John didn't like the word *holiday*, to him it was a *trip*, a *journey*. He was a *traveller*. A holiday was a week in France. A holiday was for tourists. He'd been in Thailand and Cambodia two weeks by the time Suhani and Angel joined him in Bangkok. They then spent another week and a half in the north of Thailand and Laos.

John had grown a beard since Christmas. All the other guys in their hostels had grown beards too. They seemed to believe it was a token of uniqueness, a signal that they were different. It separated them from the fresh-faced teens who didn't hide that they were here to *drink buckets* and *bang Asians*. The stupid thing was that John suited his beard. It matched his messy dirty-blond curls. Suhani was enamoured and told John never to shave it again.

For her part, Suhani had decided she no longer wanted to be called Suzie. She had gone to Pakistan before Thailand to visit family. She'd felt a connection that she hadn't experienced before. She'd met so many aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours who treated her like family and spoke with a familiarity that no-one, not even parents, seemed to display in Scotland. They'd called her by her original name, Suhani, all week, and now she had decided she wanted to keep this name. She said that if she was culturally Scottish and planning to live in Scotland, the least she could do was keep her name.

The first few nights, they had many deep conversations and she was happy. Suhani spoke sincerely while John cracked jokes. At one point, John spoke about how he'd been bullied in high school, how it had taken him a long time to stop being a bully to others himself.

'Hurt people hurt people,' Suhani said, meaningfully.

John laughed, 'Ah, yes. Buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo.'

They flew to Vang Vieng, went tubing – basically bikini babes spraying each other with water from a hose, mud wrestling and flirting with Australian meatheads while everyone else was zonked on happy shakes, watching *Friends*. John loved it. Suhani was too smitten to roll her eyes. Then they flew to Chiang Mai, via Bangkok, which made Suhani feel guilty because of the environment, and they spent a week exploring farms and jungles around the city, interspersed with a few cooking classes, yoga workshops and nights out. The whole time, Angel storied her trip, trying to live her best life. But John and Suhani seemed so happy together that she couldn't help thinking of Jean. He'd gone to Vietnam by himself and was probably enjoying the freedom he held so dearly. Angel tried dancing with some backpacker dudes at clubs in Chiang Mai but the idea of being an *Asian chick* haphazardly laid and labelled in someone's travel blog made her nauseous, though she did share a brief kiss with a Columbian man with beautiful dark curls who was about to get on the bus back to Bangkok in the middle of the night.

They spent one last night in Bangkok before returning to Hong Kong. John insisted they go to the night markets. He bought some baggy trousers with elephants and geometric patterns and some earthy Thai fisherman pants. (Suhani had already bought herself some elephant trousers in Chiang Mai). Angel, prepared with emphasised ironic corniness, bought some friendship bracelets for the three of them (and an extra for Jean, just in case).

'Who's the fourth one for?' Suhani had asked.

'I think you know.'

Suhani had sighed, 'I'm sorry I call him a fuckboi.'

Angel hadn't managed to ask her what had happened between them. Instead, she had said, 'I think he's changed. He's talked about it. He knows himself.'

Suhani had narrowed her eyes, 'I hope you're right.'

Now, in Hong Kong on the warm January afternoon, they arrived at Long Ke Wan. The evening passed in a joyful rush. They swam in the clear waters as the sun set. They cooked food on a campfire. They told stories and laughed in a circle. The whole time Jean acted like she didn't exist. After everyone went to their tents to sleep, he snuck over. He was quiet and

wouldn't say what was wrong. Until it all came out. Soon, they were arguing in hushed tones, hoping not to be heard by the others.

'But you were flirting with him,' Jean hissed.

'We were *speaking*.'

'You want to fuck him, it's obvious. It's fine, I just want to know.'

He was the one who wanted to fuck Jonathan. *That's* what was obvious.

'I don't know why we're arguing. You wanted this,' she said.

'Yes, it would be even worse otherwise. This way we're free to do what we want,' he said. He was speaking loudly. She was sure Suhani could hear.

'Can we stop? I swear I'm not interested in Jonathan,' she whispered.

'Why wouldn't you be? He's perfect. He speaks English, French and Cantonese better than me. He has a fucking black belt in Kung Fu.'

'I don't care,' she sighed.

He kissed her and she was briefly happy they were no longer arguing. He pulled her down onto the ground and kissed her more and soon they were having sex. There was no foreplay this time. He put the condom on, thrust hard and fast. She wasn't wet enough. She started to worry she'd have to ask him to stop then she worried more that he would not stop if asked. He came very quickly and then it was over. He was quiet.

In the darkness his skin was jaundiced. Beads of sweat ran down his temples. He sat beside her in silence for a while. The tent was open at the front and a soft breeze came through. She could see the waves, dark like oil, licking the sand and the lights of boats, planes or satellites above the invisible horizon.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

He crawled out of the tent and left.

Everything was still. She thought of Carley and Paulo and her parents. She wondered if they were awake, whether they ever thought of her. She wondered if mutual thoughts from across the world crossed paths as they travelled. She imagined her parents watching television, eyelids descending like automatic shutters, bodies sleepwalking to bed, unaware how badly their daughter had failed them. If they found out, they'd stare blankly, they would study her as like a strange product in a market before deciding that they did not need it. They would be ambivalent. What use was a daughter who cost all this money and couldn't bring home results?

Her phone lit up the tent. Carley was in Morocco. She was standing on a colourful square in ethnic garb not so different from the clothes that John and Suhani had bought in Thailand.

In another pic she was on the same square doing a cartwheel. She knew she should put her phone away and sleep. But she couldn't. She watched the story. Carley was singing on a colourful rooftop with a beautiful man who played the guitar. She was performing for a quiet, swaying audience, smoking in the sunset. Carley's hair was wavy, wind-swept. She had no make-up on, her freckles and sleepy-happy eyes were visible and distinct. How dare she? How dare she suddenly become free and happy? How dare she suddenly abandon the rules and standards she'd set and enforced with cold stares and iron thumbs? She wasn't wearing a single brand, all her clothes were multicoloured, loose, cheap. She looked happy. She looked so fucking happy.

Chapter 35

When Kylie Jenner said that 2016 would be the year of realising stuff, Angel had scoffed. But now she knew the Kardashians were prophets.

The last episode of *My So-Called Life* ended and she closed her laptop. It was 1pm and she was in bed. She stared out the window, watching students catch the bus to campus. Like ants busy living their little lives. Her stomach grumbled. She lugged herself out of bed, made some ramen in the communal kitchen and returned to bed. She hadn't changed clothes or showered in days. She searched for other high school series with high ratings on *Rotten Tomatoes*. She searched for the first episode of *Daria* on YouTube and pressed play.

She was getting used to her new life on the precipice, like a gwai lou in Wan Chai. Her new life in a red minibus, a brick on the accelerator, a stick wedged into the steering wheel to keep it straight, herself in the front passenger seat watching the giant digital numbers on the speedometer rising, rising, and at the end of the tunnel, still far away, but shooting towards her like the ground as you fall from a building, a brick wall.

She was free. Her exoskeleton that had helped her throughout her life had disintegrated. She didn't give a fuck. Like someone had injected her with DGAF serum. She'd lived her life with zero chill. How could she have stressed so much about grades? How could she have worried about her parents? About friends? About betrayal?

It turned out that the less you cared, the more people liked you. Coolness responded to reverse psychology. Wasn't it fun? It turned out that if you didn't go to class, no one noticed! Wasn't it great? No one cared; the lecturers didn't know you. What did they care? Her parents had stopped texting her. She'd only had to ignore them for three weeks. That was it. They didn't care anymore either. See? No one else cared. Why should she be the only one to care? Life was much easier now that everyone was on the same page.

Jean was wrong – you didn't go through suffering; you followed its current. He had focused so much on Buddhism that he had overlooked Daoism. He had lost *the Way*.

Now, life was simple. She had adapted to the rhythm of the world, fitting her life into the cracks between everyone else's. She woke at seven am when Fish's alarm clock launched into *Ma City* by BTS. Then Angel would fall back asleep until sleep was impossible. She would watch *Buffy* until she was hungry, whereupon she would wander to the canteen in her pyjamas (the way Carley had taught her Americans did), spending the rest of the night on Netflix. It was a good life. She tried not to think about how it would all end in May when term ended and her parents would learn of her failure.

What she didn't understand was why people worried about her. The only time she worried was when she had that dream where she crawled through the trampled bodies in the stampede. Suhani would take a moment each day to beg Angel to figure her life out. When this happened, she found that the best way to end the conversation was to agree. This usually bought her some time and then all she had to do was promise a little harder.

Once you gave up on it, life was a doddle. The trick was to really give up because if you suddenly started caring, it was unbearable.

Chapter 36

[Final chapter of Maggie's section cut, where Maggie is dragged to a Human Geography lecture and learns about the history of Hong Kong immigration policy that allowed Chinese refugees access to Hong Kong residency for a limited period of time in 70s and 80s.]

Part 6

Jean

Chapter 37

You wouldn't recognise him if you'd known him in high school. He swaggered along Pok Fu Lam Road topless with his t-shirt scrunched in his fist. The sky grew lighter in the east but he could still see stars in the west. Sweat dripped down his face. It was a muggy July morning. His chest was heaving. Body tingling. It was the beginning of his last day in Hong Kong. Tomorrow morning, he was flying home.

If you'd known that wee boy, Jeany König, fae just off the Lanark Road, way back, you wouldn't think this was the same lad now, would you?

He had seen the world. The rest was victory laps.

The rules and social codes that dictated who he should be had dissolved. The world had burnt and crumbled, its metallic structure had risen through the ashes, foundations laid bare. Impossible was nothing.

You should have seen him reading Marx. You should have seen him reading Sontag and Baudrillard aloud at house parties and smoking areas. He had been divine. O Youth! The strength of it, the faith of it, the imagination of it!

He had understood life's algorithm. He had returned from Africa last year with new wisdom. Nothing was real until you'd seen a kid with no shoes begging for water. You hadn't seen what he'd seen. Nothing was new in this world. People were too fucked to be saved.

He looked out at the morning mist and saw where the sea melted into the horizon. Hong Kong at sunrise: mate.

He was a local now. He was trying to live artistically, poetically, *experimentally*. He was freeing his mind. Nothing was shocking.

(Why was he nervous though?) But look how far he'd come!

Even on quiet mornings Hong Kong was like the set of *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Enter the Void*.

He climbed the steps towards the student halls and barged through the doors. His dizziness kicked in as he gave a nod to the sleepy receptionist. He walked to the lift all schlep-shouldered and wood-footed, his face starting to feel heavy on his skull. The buzz of booze and cocaína was tempering into a low frizzle and his ears started ringing. Nausea curdled in his stomach.

He stared at himself in the one empty spot of reflective plastic that wasn't covered in posters all in Chinese apart from the odd line of translation in English. One poster had a pixelated picture of people running on grass, playing some unknown sport in the absence of a

ball or Frisbee or racetrack line, and all the writing was in big bright traditional Chinese characters except from one line in English that said, ‘all welcome!’

He burped and felt a rumble in his belly. (Why was he nervous though?) The comedown was upon him. The bad thoughts knocking on his noggin again.

He had to get up in a few hours for his doctor’s appointment. His willy had been burning for weeks. He assumed he had either chlamydia or gonorrhoea but he was increasingly certain he was in the final stages of AIDS or brain cancer.

He reached the ninth floor and strolled routinely to the communal toilets. Thankfully nobody was up. He folded his shirt and placed it beneath his knees like Gustavo Fring, took a breath and stuck his fingers down his throat. Didn’t even heave. He had a weak gag reflex (bare jokes fam) and he had to wiggle his fingers and tug at his tongue. Finally, a wee heave wriggled through his body. (This was going to escalate quickly, just you watch.) He almost had his entire fist in his mouth when finally a neon jet gushed from his throat. His body folded and his hands clutched the toilet bowl like he was riding a jet-ski.

The boke ended and he was exhausted and dizzy.

Jesus. Here we are Jeany-boy, here we fucking go. Let’s hope the cleaner doesn’t catch us. Look at you. Pure gagging on your fingers, tongue having an epi. Last night’s kebab and this morning’s MacDonald’s.

The sting of acid in the nose. The chemical layer of juice saturating the tongue. The bog hauffin. The state of you, Jeany, pal. Praying on your knees at the porcelain altar. Bow your head in shame, mate. Nowt tae be proud of. Look at your mingin insides floating. But bog poetry wilny save you.

He limped to his borrowed bedroom. He was a real couch surfer now. Kicked out of his old student accommodation – slumming it on the kindness of strangers. Jacob was in Singapore and had let Jean stay in his room for free. Wilson, the local roommate, gave him a nod and went back to his film, plugging in his earphones (good lad).

Jean grabbed three packs of noodles from a drawer, went to the communal kitchen and chugged two pints of water while cooking. He added cold water to the freshly boiled noodles, slurped the whole bowl down in forty-two seconds flat then waited for the brief nausea to pass. He wanted to go out with a bang tonight. He had to kill the hangover in its tracks.

Back in his room, he took three paracetamols and undressed. He had a stamp collection up both of his wrists and forearms. Already he didn’t recognise some of the earlier smudged blotches. This was about a week’s worth of club stamps.

He slipped into bed. The sun was shining bright already.

He'd been in Hong Kong for over nine months now and what did he have to show for it?

A million photos of sunsets he'd never look at again.

Hours of videos of fireworks.

Three sort-of ex-girlfriends who refused to talk to him and would never admit to having gone out with him.

(He'd become the kind of guy that girls were embarrassed to have slept with.)

A bunch of friends whom he'd never see again.

Probably an STI.

Most likely HIV. Liver disease. Brain cancer.

He was sure he'd been gravely ill for months now. He got stabbing pains in his gut. His eyes felt like cracked glass. He got buzzing noises in his ears. His willy burnt every day. He hadn't got checked for over a year and he hadn't exactly been overly careful. He sometimes felt like he couldn't breathe and he knew that people with AIDS often died of pneumonia. His immune system was shite and all: he was always getting colds, mouth ulcers, weird twitches. He spent a week per month on some variety of Lemsip.

He tried to put all that aside. In a few hours, he would go to his check-up. He would find out which of his many ailments would kill him first. Super gonorrhoea? Lung cancer?

His brain was mush. His dizziness now a falling feeling. He was sinking deeper into his flimsy mattress. The flashing colours inside his clenched eyelids danced and formed geometric shapes, insects and faces.

He hoped he wasn't going to get sleep paralysis again. He couldn't handle that old dark man draped in shadows standing there in the corner just watching him.

He needed sleep. After the clinic, he was meeting John for beer and pizza. Then they were going to send him off with a bang.

He closed his eyes and tried to drift off but the sinking feeling wasn't going away. Contorted faces made up of brain pixels danced around his eyelids. Long chins and maniac smiles. Troll faces. Floating around and laughing.

He had this weird feeling keeping him up. This weird feeling like his life was a lie. He didn't know what it meant but it made sense. His life was a lie that needed to be corrected. He had to erase the lie.

Jesus. What was he thinking? Just leave that there and don't think about it. Move on.

Life is a lie.

Just the booze. The fucking coke talking.

Life is a lie.

Shut up. It's just the collective comedown. The coke and MD. You've not slept in like what three days? Get some sleep.

Why do you do this to yourself?

No, you idiot, don't get into that. Sleep.

Maybe you need to, like, talk to someone.

What? Who are you even talking to, you freak? Lol. This is weird, man. Get to sleep, you've literally lost the plot.

What if this is sleep? What if this is as good as it gets? What if you've broken your brain and you'll never disappear again? The wires, those brain nerves, them frickin synapses – they're all tangled up, sparking in some leaky room with a blinking neon tube. What if you're stuck with yourself forever?

He was tail-spinning, mate. Deep in the guts of the comedown. In the pit of despair. He just had to get through it. There were images of death, murder, torture, rape, all flashing through his brain. He had to ignore it and disappear into sleep.

He couldn't shake the thought that some humans actually died of murder, torture, genocide. Real human beings just like him, living their last moments in terror.

You're so royally fucked up, mate. You have problems. Real fucking problems. Honestly, if anyone could hear this right now, they'd lock you up.

Aye but no one *can* hear me, eh? It's just me and you here, buddy. Scream as loud as you want. We're locked in together.

Let's just try and sleep, please. Please. I'm begging you.

A bird chirped somewhere in the distance.

Chapter 38

[Chapter cut where Jean gets an STI and liver function check and reflects on his early and problematic induction into sexuality. He will get his results tomorrow morning. He is convinced he is going to die and wants his last night in Hong Kong to be wild.]

Chapter 39

There was a whole day to get through before he could truly start going hard out here in these streets. The world was bursting with tiny dots. He couldn't tell if his vision had always been this grainy or if it was part of his unravelling. It was as if there was a layer of interference between his vision and the real world.

His mind overflowed with images of himself dying. He couldn't walk down a road without imagining a bus skidding onto the pavement and crushing his legs. He couldn't smoke a cigarette without imagining it being stubbed out in his eye. However it happened, he knew he would die alone. His head felt light but at least the tingling in his body was subsiding as he drank the Tsing Tao.

He sat on a bench in Hong Kong Park and watched elderly locals moving in synchronous slow motion, fighting invisible demons with their Tai Chi. There were eight of them now, practicing under the shade of a tree, faces neutral, movements slow but smooth. The smell of jasmine and earth rose as the sun heated the ground and greenery of the park.

Soon, he would die. He knew it. He was already mourning all the lives he had never lived. Every minute that passed he imagined an alternate reality where he'd chosen to commit to one life. He was always looking back at his hypothetical past from an imaginary future.

The one where he worked for JP Morgan and rented a flat that twinkled high in the dark sky from far out into the ocean. A girlfriend whom he referred to as his partner with an exquisite taste in fashion beyond his comprehension. They would sleep, draped in cashmere bathrobes and silk nightwear and be awoken by the sun rising over the horizon.

The one where he had never left Senegal and had started a commune in Ziguinchor with Aminata. Living in a stripped-down concrete box in the jungle, introducing tourists to the rainforest and local culture to subsidise their community engagement space. Becoming the old toubab that all the locals accepted as their own. Attending mosque when every call to

prayer echoed through the baobabs. Speaking fluent Wolof and Pulaar. Never returning to Europe. Not even bothering to teach his children English.

The one where he stayed in Glasgow, started to DJ and became a mini-celebrity in the art-school scene. Dealing ket and eccies on the side. Getting skinny and pale. Ploughing through year after year of skin-headed nose-ringed purple-lipped black-nailed feminist installation artists.

The one where he abandoned his past and worked on a farm in Thailand. Growing his hair and beard, wearing loose earth-coloured rags. Transforming into a yogi and a Buddhist monk. Becoming the old farang all the locals accept as their own. Dropping acid and reading from the Theravāda Pali scriptures.

The one where he never left the suburbs. Got a job in insurance and had himself a wee Scottish family with a bonnie lass by the name of Claire from down the road. Pale chubby bairns. Five o'clock dinner at her grannies every Thursday. Fish and chips and half pizza suppers.

The one where he stayed here and reconciled with Angel. Teaching in a kindergarten. Learning Cantonese. Growing a family in a house on Lamma Island. Taking the ferry to work and picking up the kids from school on his bike, riding through the greenery, stopping for a quick swim in the sea before frying up some noodles for dinner. Becoming the old gwai lou all the locals accept as their own. Watching the sun set from the balcony in the evenings, clinking glasses of bak jau and laughing at their turbulent youth from the perspective of settled wisdom.

He knew, however, that soon he'd be too sick to function. His days would end in hospital, his final thoughts something mundane like the itch of bed sores.

He started to wonder if perhaps he had already died and the reason life seemed like one big hallucination was because the final DMT rush was replaying his life in real time with some simulation glitches.

He wondered if he would die before making it home to the quiet world of Lanark Road. If he would ever walk through the fertile lushness of the dell. The woods which had once been the path of smuggled goods to help the Queen's Men, who were fighting a civil war across Edinburgh to put that fine young French lass, a fellow exile, Mary Queen of Scots back on the throne (it cam wi' a lass and it will gang wi' a lass!). Those woods, two hundred years later, were also traversed by the Young Pretender himself, aye, that other European exile, oor Bonnie Prince Charlie, who came fae Italy and then France tae the Highlands and marched through the suburbs to claim Edinburgh as the Young Chevalier before escaping Culloden for

a life of luxury in Rome and Florence. Would *he* ever return or was he doomed to disappear in exile?

Now, he was scrolling through Instagram. He saw photos of himself in Hong Kong with friends he'd never see again. He saw himself happy on deserted beaches, with beautiful people and aesthetic filters giving the photos an other-worldly aura. He wished he had a life like that.

One of the Tai Chi elders gestured and he realised he'd been staring at her. She was gesturing as if beckoning him. He looked around. There was nobody else she could be gesturing to. Perhaps it was just a Tai Chi move? Now she was walking towards him, gesturing for him to join. She gave him a smile, speaking in Cantonese that he didn't comprehend.

'Sorry, I don't understand,' he said.

But she took his arm and walked him to the group. The other old people laughed. She kept speaking to him. When he copied her movements well, she said, 'Hou ah, hou ah.'

'Awch, I'm not good at this,' he said.

She ignored him and showed him how to make the large slow circle with his hands and step forward and back.

'I'm drunk,' he said.

But she spoke in a strict voice that somehow also encouraged, though perhaps he just needed to believe this to not feel completely assaulted.

There was a fresh breeze. As he copied her movements, the locals paid less attention to him, returning to their own practices. His heart steadied. The precise steps and circles created a trance. He could taste the sweet, polluted air of the garden and road fumes.

Time passed and eventually the lady spoke. It was clear the session was over. He thanked her with an 'm goi saai' and a silly little bow. The sun was setting. All the warm colours slowly cooled and faded.

He passed the Bank of China and saw the IFC in the distance as the nightly light show began. He took Queens Road Central, passing the HSBC headquarters. The traffic was heavy and the sky shrunk as the buildings grew taller and the street narrower. He watched the lights and lasers flashing in the sky and thought of the people watching the island from Kowloon. It was hard to imagine that once upon a time humans had only known small fires and stars. There was something about seeing the sky lit up artificially that gave him a whiff of possibility and opportunity. It was an unnatural feeling, numbing all responsibilities, elevating decadence and dirt. He liked that. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. The lights revealed

something you'd be ashamed of during the day. Everything was hazy and enhanced like a VSCO filter. The world was suddenly attainable, ownable, purchasable. Eyes changed colour. Heartbeats accelerated. Bone structures reshaped. The streets were calling him, demanding his attention, time and money and he was going to oblige.

He took the mid-levels escalator to Soho and saw John sitting by a window in Paisano's Pizzeria. John waved through the window.

John was a posh boy with a chip on his shoulder. He'd gone to a private school until his parents went bankrupt and forced him into normal school. According to Suzie, John had found being normal incredibly difficult. Jean had heard girls gushing over John, how he had the look of a true gentleman but he was just another well-nourished posh boy with his ears and nose fucked from playing rugby as a kid. Where was the charm?

John had gone through a transformation in the last year. When they'd met in first year, John had been a boisterous oi oi top lad. Nights out it was all sponcing, fives, and tell her. Jean remembered drinking at the GU and John describing in explicit detail his first fuck with Suzie.

After Jean had returned from Senegal, John had become a flaccid nice guy. He had become woke. Started sharing infographics about abuse, racism and sexism on his Instagram. He wasn't angry that Jean had slept with Suzie. John had mentioned it once, at the beginning of the year, laughing at how messy sex and love were. Without waiting for an apology, John had told Jean he was forgiven and changed the subject. The only explanation was that Suzie had told John how bad the sex was.

Jean had fancied Suzie the moment he'd seen her in his first seminar. She dressed and spoke like an adult, pulling off lipstick and jewellery in a way that seemed almost foreign in its casual maturity. John, Jean and Suzie had started hanging out after class in first year. When it was just the boys, Jean and John talked about Suzie. Jean had asked her out first. They'd gone on a casual date to Queen Margaret Union for a pint. She did the talking while he tried to listen but spent the entire time wondering if and when he should try to kiss her. In the end, he'd been a wimp and as he waved goodbye a few feet from the entrance of her flat she'd given him this mischievous smile and put her middle finger up. At that moment he had thought she was the coolest person in the world. Then, with some sneaky posh-boy magic, John had transformed into her boyfriend. It was as if they'd always been together. Suddenly, they were holding hands and kissing in public. Jean couldn't understand how John had turned it around with Suzie, becoming so comfortable so quickly. He saw that with other friends too; they'd pull a random girl at the union one night and be holding hands in lectures a week later.

When he finally got the edge on Suzie in Senegal, he was a changed man. He saw that Suzie was jealous of his flirtation with Aminata and his connection with the locals. Aminata would talk to him about real things. She was frustrated about all the young men risking their lives, taking leaky boats up the Atlantic towards the Canaries. She knew people who had drowned this way and none who had made it there without a visa and a plane ticket. She wasn't interested in Europe, she always said. She wanted to stay in Senegal with her family. When Jean had joked that he would marry her and bring her to Europe, she gave him a serious look and shook her head.

The night he had slept with Suzie was his most outrageous sexual stunt of all time. When he had walked back to the hostel with Aminata and Suzie, he had pretended to go to his room. Aminata snuck him into her bedroom soon after and they'd had slow, intense sex. He had used his last condom with Aminata. As soon as the sex was over, Aminata pushed him out of her room with a coquettish grin and he took a shower in the communal bathroom. Then, full of gusto, with nothing to lose, he tried Suzie. He had fantasised about sex with Suzie for years. He wanted to give her all the pleasure he could. But he was nervous, afraid of going down on her, scared that she'd know he cared. From the beginning, he knew he'd be premature, afraid of his own body and his hypocritical guilt for lying to both Aminata and Suzie. He'd felt angry at Suzie for not saying what she wanted, for letting him fail so badly by himself. All he felt for the few seconds they were fucking was anger and embarrassment. Then he came. At that moment he'd felt completely alone, forced to face his own inadequacy and misery. It was only during sex that he was forced to look at himself and see the truth like this. He knew his body didn't belong in the world, sticking out like an awkward cosmic elbow. He pulled out and lay next to Suzie trying not to show he could see her disappointment. He had wanted to apologise but that would surely have been worse, right? She already knew how pathetic he was.

He had ruined his only chance with Suzie and she had stayed with John. He was no doubt a better shag. Or maybe it was the therapy. Suzie had told him in Senegal about John realising that being bullied had fucked his head up. He'd been seeing a therapist for months now and apparently, he'd seen a therapist in his teens too. (Who had that much to talk about?) Now he thought he was the woke saviour of the world because he had talked about his problems and become mentally healthy or something.

Looking at him now through the window, John looked all peace and confidence. But Jean swore he could see that smugness hidden beneath.

'Sorry, mate, I was hungry,' John said, when Jean entered the pizzeria.

‘It’s fine. I’m late as fuck, sorry,’ said Jean.

John half got up with a pizza crust in his hand and they hugged. Jean ordered four huge slices and brought back two Tsing-Taos from the fridge.

‘Yes, lad,’ said John. ‘So, what’s up? Can’t believe it’s your last night in HK. Have all your HKU mates gone?’

‘We had a going away do for one last night. Guy. He was the last to go back to Muricah, eh.’

‘How was it?’

‘Not great. We fell out. Turned out he was a Trump guy. First time I’ve unfriended someone because of politics.’

‘You fell out over Trump? They’ll *never* let him be president, man.’

‘Anyway, I called him a Nazi and he called me a snowflake. Then we had a play fight that went too far.’

‘Were you a Bernie bro or a Hillary guy?’

‘Suzie was for Bernie, wasn’t she?’

‘Suhani. Yeah, she’s for Corbyn too. I don’t understand. Why would anyone want another white man as President or Prime Minister?’

Jean stirred. He hated white people too. But John’s virtue signalling irked him. ‘I honestly don’t give a fuck. My big bro’s voting for Brexit because he lost his job. Don’t want to think about any of it.’

John started talking about how he loved the European Union and Jean did an exaggerated yawn, which John either ignored or didn’t notice. He talked about his and Suhani’s disagreements. How she expected that his experience of bankruptcy should make him more sympathetic to the poor. (Nobody ever mentioned that his parents had got rich again after the recession.) He explained that he was anti-socialist precisely because he *did* care about the poor.

‘Look man, I don’t follow this shit,’ Jean said. ‘I don’t read the news. I’m down for a revolution but honestly I don’t think anything is ever going to change so I’m happy just to watch it all burn.’

John laughed.

The pizzeria was in an expat area, full of crisp-shirted American, English and French people who had finished work, carb-loading for a night out.

The pizza was settling his stomach. His body was vibrating in time with the seconds he was counting down to the text confirming his diagnosis. He stuffed the pizza down faster

hoping it would pack out his insides and fix the buzzing. The radio was playing mid-noughties music that reminded him of his teens; burning stuff in the woods and stealing bottles of beer.

‘What you doing this summer?’ asked Jean, not really caring.

‘I’m doing an internship at a literary journal in London. I’m so ready to do something real for a change.’

‘Unpaid, aye?’

John frowned. ‘It’s a big deal just getting a foot in the door.’

‘Literature is a dead art form,’ said Jean.

John scoffed, ‘Why?’

‘Because it can’t go viral. Novels are just meme graveyards.’

John sipped his beer unable to pretend he didn’t care. Jean enjoyed seeing him riled up.

‘All media begins with language,’ John said, matter-of-factly.

‘You just can’t admit you love boring novels about people standing in rooms talking about who’s going to marry who. You can’t handle *real* art, with soul, coming straight from the heart, unfiltered. You have to justify how boring you are.’

‘The problem with your theory of life and art,’ John said, slowly, ‘is that you want to skip ahead and overturn all the formalities and social rituals that make us human. You want to rebel against social behaviours, forbid lads of their patter, pry parents of their superiority, rob girls of the chase. Your brand of iconoclasm isn’t the fun kind.’

‘You know, I reckon I have at least two novels in me,’ said Jean, switching it up. John wasn’t taking the bait; he was keeping the conversation reasonable and intellectual. ‘But I canny be arsed to write them. You should interview me. I’ve seen shit.’

‘Oh god, Jean’s big sucky fucky adventures. *The Fucky Sucky Sagas*. I don’t think anyone wants to read that.’

There we go. Like old times. Back in first and second year, when they met up for beers, their conversations had consisted almost entirely of quipping the edgiest shit. In the last year, he had stopped taking part but Jean knew that John couldn’t resist their trollish aphorism battles.

‘You’re wrong,’ said Jean. ‘My penis is a metaphor for how the world can be a beautiful thing that still fucks you every day.’

‘It’s also the reason you lose friends quicker than you make them.’

‘I’m only human. Hitler was a vegetarian and Gandhi supported apartheid.’

‘I don’t believe in human rights. Who is the UN to tell me what a human is and how I qualify as one? I’m a fucking cyborg unicorn.’

They were riffing now. This was John Mackenzie, ladies and gentlemen, coming out to play.

Jean said, ‘I’m looking forward to the day Trump declares World War Three on TikTok. With the basic bitch Coachella-wreath face filter on.’

‘Okay, that’s enough,’ John said.

‘Come on. We’re just getting started.’

‘This doesn’t lead anywhere wholesome.’

‘We’re on a quest, dude.’

‘Of course, all vagrants think they’re on a quest. At least at first.’

John pulled out his phone, putting a full stop on the conversation. He frowned and bit his thumb as he scrolled – as if he was solving a maths problem.

‘Uh, dude,’ John said, not looking up, still frowning. ‘About tonight. There’s a problem.’

‘Oh man, what is it?’ He thought of his blood in a vial, being watched under a microscope by a scientist, whose face fell as he saw the signs of fatal liver failure floating around.

‘Hm.’

‘Tell me, man.’ As Jean said this, he felt this rushing nostalgia.

‘Oh, *tune*,’ said John.

Jean sighed. It was *Mr Brightside* by The Killers on the speakers.

‘That is such a classic opening riff, man,’ said John, biting his bottom lip and playing air guitar. The fact that Suzie, so cool and unfazed by the world, had chosen *this guy* as her boyfriend boggled his mind.

Jean fucking *hated* this song, man. That riff meant drama. The way those high intro notes chimed like bells of doom, like a sped-up twisted wedding march. It reminded him of sitting on the couch trying to forget. Interruptions, eye rolls and arguments.

It had been Claire’s ringtone back in the day. She must have been one of the last people to switch from having a song ringtone to just having her phone indefinitely on vibrate. She was like that, popular but sentimental. If she hadn’t been pretty, she would have been a massive geek. That fucking *ringtone*. Fuck The Killers for writing a song with such deceptively optimistic opening lyrics and such a depressing chorus set to a catchy tune. Did they have any idea how many heads they’d fucked with? Song came out in 2004 and Claire sticks it on her phone in 2010 just to mess with him.

This was in the lead up to all the chaos, before he'd found out the truth. For weeks, he'd been oblivious. Claire, one day, suddenly changed. She stopped laughing or cuddling. Didn't want to be touched. Jean would ask her what was wrong. Claire would dodge questions and cry for no apparent reason. Then her phone went off and she'd spend twenty minutes whispering in the hall, Jean craning his neck to hear, Claire saying, 'wait a sec' and going into her bedroom. No explanations. At the time he thought she was going off him and consulting her friends on the best course of action. For weeks, whenever he tried to get with her, she turned away and said, 'not now' and they'd lie on their sides, Jean spooning Claire, caressing her shoulders as silent tears rolled from her eyes.

Now, in Paisano's, Hong Kong, John was still playing the air guitar, Brandon Flowers was singing, *and she's touching his chest now*. Jean remembered the times Claire had cried on him, how her mascara stained his white t-shirts and he didn't care. He just wanted to be there for her, to know why she was crying. But his Mum would scold him for staining his t-shirts and ask what Claire was crying about so often. Jean said he didn't know yet and his Mum found a solution to the t-shirt problem. Jean began only wearing black t-shirts to Claire's so that she could cry all over him. Sometimes, when she was crying, he felt concerned love booming in his chest as he took tiny gasps of air, trying not to lift her head up or down too quickly with his breath, hoping to be a stable cushion for her head. It felt like drowning calmly. Losing control and accepting it.

Then her phone would go off. Claire would sigh and say, 'ugghh' and wait, perhaps hoping the phone would stop. But the song played on, the worst ringtone possible during this ordeal, and he had to listen to lyrics he was sick of relating to. She was probably numb to the song now, the way ringtones made you stop hearing a melody after the hundredth time, the way a song slowly turned into a twitch, muscle memory, all meaning lost. Often, she would wait until *I just can't look it's killing me and taking control*. She'd pick up. And off she went, whispering, closing door after door behind her until she was on the other side of her flat, returning later like nothing had happened.

He remembered the last time he saw her. The *real* last time he saw her. He often imagined it to be that time he ran away from her before flying off to Thailand. But they had bumped into each other a few years later in Glasgow. He hadn't recognised her. It was Claire who called his name out inquisitively, tentatively.

She looked like a woman, an adult woman. She no longer had that teenage make-up or hair dye. Her dark hair was long and flowing, neatly brushed down her back. Her nails were

unbitten. She was wearing a fancy cream-coloured coat and one of those woolly berets. Her eyes seemed gentle.

‘Wow, Jean.’ She pronounced his name the French way instead of the way everyone had pronounced it in high school. ‘It’s great to see you.’

Jean was frozen in mid-step, still awestruck. No idea how to act or speak. She had taken the register of polite distance, like he was a shopkeeper, so he returned with the same, avoiding the bantering nostalgic voice he used for childhood friends. He was embarrassingly aware that he was copying people in films when two characters met by chance after a long time.

‘Claire,’ he said. ‘You’re looking well.’

Claire laughed, no awkwardness in her voice. ‘Well, you know. I got my life sorted, didn’t I?’

Jean raised his eyebrows.

‘Oh, I’m sure you heard. Turned out I wasn’t made for Biology in Aberdeen. I took a year out. Went to therapy instead. Studied psychology. I’m training to be a therapist now. It changed my life.’

Jean had not heard. He had blocked her on every possible platform. After the mess that had happened in high school was over, all his friends had acted like they’d forgotten. Everyone was always acting like they had forgotten. How come everyone was always forgetting? How could you forget?

Claire looked him up and down and Jean was suddenly aware of how dishevelled he looked. He was hungover, walking home from an afterparty. His clothes were creased. His hair was puffed and spiky.

‘I have to go,’ Claire said, suddenly. ‘I don’t live here by the way. I’m in Liverpool now. But – I just wanted to say. When you do therapy, you have to forgive people and let go, you know? And I could never get in touch with you. But I wanted to say, I forgive you. And I really hope you find peace and love in this world.’

Jean’s head spun. He was baffled by hearing Claire speak so directly and openly after so many years. He was caught off guard when she waved and walked away. Only later did he wish he had asked her what *she* was forgiving *him* for.

Now, John was looking down with concern at the phone again.

‘John, what’s going on?’ Jean snapped. Anything to distract him from those stupid memories.

John was biting his thumb again. Jean had the creeping sensation that his past was coming back to haunt him.

John looked up. His face seemed uncertain and calculating, like he was preparing a lie. 'Well, you know how Angel dropped out of uni a couple months ago?'

'Uh, yeah,' Jean lied. He hadn't spoken to Angel properly since that time they hooked up on the beach, when they had argued about Jonathan. There had only been a couple empty messages since then. He couldn't help himself asking, 'What's she doing now?'

'She moved back in with her parents. It all happened in a day. Suhani took her to this lecture, hoping to pique her interests and that night she left halls. She realised she was unhappy. She's restarting with a different course next year.'

Jean's stomach swirled.

'Anyway,' John said, still looking perplexed, 'it's her birthday tonight. Suzie – Suhani is organising a surprise gathering in LKF.'

'Well, that's fucking fantastic.'

'To be fair, you literally told me two days ago that you're leaving. My fault, really. I'd completely forgotten Suhani was organising this until she reminded me.'

Jean dumped his face into his hands, breathed into his moist flesh.

'It's okay, I think,' John said. 'I can get people to meet up for your goodbye first, then some of us will go surprise Angel. But we might have to move on quite early, like around nine-ish.' John said this, biting his lip with overemphasised concern. He just wanted to be let off the hook. Never mind that it was already 8pm.

Jean nodded. John went back to his phone.

'I suppose it goes without saying. But Suhani is asking me to tell you not to come find Angel tonight,' John mumbled.

Jean ignored him.

The night he had met Angel felt like another life. He had pretended to be someone else to amuse her and had given her his copy of his borrowed Judith Butler, which he'd barely read, having mostly skimmed the Wikipedia entry for the book.

He forgot about Angel for weeks until one night, walking home drunk, as he always seemed to be doing, he saw a photo of her on Suzie's Instagram. Without thinking too much into it he Googled 'I want you' and found a song by The Beatles and another by Bob Dylan and he sent her the opening lyrics to the Dylan song. That secured him a date.

The date went terribly. It was Filipino day and they walked through cardboard city on their way to the harbour. Something about seeing the domestic helpers sitting on the ground,

no real home other than their place of work, unsettled him. He was hungover, coming down from a coke bender, nursing his brain on vitamin water. Angel had arrived, all confidence and belligerence. He saw she regretted being there immediately. He tried to woo her by talking about philosophy and showing her that he was a modern, woke, feminist man. After he had a drink, thinking it would make things smoother, he had to work even harder to keep it together. He humiliated himself when his nose bled in the restaurant. He spent an awkward ten minutes looking for tissues, dripping bright red blood on the pristine floors. Angel was always on her phone, seemed bored and uninterested in him. He was dizzy, maybe from the alcohol or from the fumes from Shenzhen. When they reached Sheung Wan he was slowly sobering up. Kissing her was a last-ditch attempt at saving the day and he was surprised when she let him do it. He realised, as they were kissing, that in the last few years, he had only kissed people while he was wasted at parties or clubs. This was his first half-sober kiss since high school. The sun set. He got that bluesy twilight feeling. He felt his heart sinking and his lungs buzzing. He felt exposed and at risk, looking over his shoulder. In his room, that night, he had sat on his bed, looking out the open window, AC off, letting the hot humid air and the mosquitoes in, trying to reach that strange sinking feeling of being alone yet somehow connected.

The part of the year that followed was a blur. He was pushing his limits every night. Felt like he was achieving some sort of greatness that only he could comprehend. Another night in Wan Chai came along and Angel joined him in the alleyway. In the alleyway he felt at home, safe.

Angel watched him sniff the coke he'd stolen from John. Her eyes opened with that innocent wonder of people who don't do drugs. He felt pure para. Sick and dirty.

'Do you feel, like, amazing now?' she asked.

She seemed curious and excited for him. Her question was full of hope. He felt like shit.

'Yeah,' he said, forcing a smile. 'Pretty fucking amazing.'

Next thing, they were in the dingy sex hotel. Afterwards, they snuggled. He weirdly didn't feel depressed and disgusted with himself the way he usually did. He had this strange feeling like he was safe and comfortable. He almost forgot himself. It was scary. It was like he wasn't himself, sinking into the universe, inseparable from it, losing his grip on reality or consciousness. With Suzie he'd felt alone, depressed, superfluous. Now, he felt exposed. His body was vulnerable and fragile; he was a prisoner inside it.

Things were relatively smooth for a while. He had told her that he wasn't looking for monogamy. Sometimes, he felt guilty. One night, Angel slinked her arm through his absent-

mindedly and he wondered why he didn't ask her to be his girlfriend. With her arm slinked through his like that, he felt special, like he was worth holding on to.

But what could he say? Humans were not designed to be monogamous. He often wished he could put Angel's brain into another body. When he eyed the women on the street, when he sometimes followed them, for a couple blocks just to savour the form, studying the shape of their bodies, he wanted to make love to them but for them to be Angel. He wanted to fuck every woman's body but for it to be Angel's brain every time. Tell her. Ha. Aye, tell all that to Angel right enough.

Then things got difficult. Angel was changing. She seemed desperate and distant at the same time. He and Angel had gone for a meal at a fancy restaurant in a mall. When Angel had said they were going to the mall he had assumed it was fast food so he'd dressed in his usual fake-Adidas shoes and a crumpled plain T-shirt. He didn't have any nice clothes anyway. Angel turned up in an expensive black dress and disappointed eyes. She ordered all the food and went to the washroom, as she called it. It was only once out of earshot that the white guy at the adjacent table whispered to him.

'Hey,' he said, leaning over secretively, like the Hollywood caricature of drug dealer but wearing a crisp shirt and a tie. 'You like Asian chicks too huh?'

'Um.'

'They're a rollercoaster, right? Fucking love 'em.' He smiled like they were sharing dirty secrets. Jean glanced around, checking who else could hear and how – depending on the witnesses – he should respond. But nobody was eavesdropping. It was the two of them. 'So fiery and yet so *submissive*, you know? Man, I've got the *yellow fever* real bad, brother.'

Jean felt like he'd been caught doing something perverted. He was seized by the urge to whisper through gritted teeth, 'What are you *doing, man*? You'll blow our cover. You're saying the quiet part loud. Pretend to be *normal* for god's sake, man!'

'Hm. Yeah...' Jean said instead, with a half-assed smile that he hoped conveyed a desire not to make things awkward but also not to continue the conversation.

'Oh, here they come – our two Asian beauties,' whispered the guy, with a sleazy-ass wink.

Jean tried to move on and recommence the evening but Angel had noticed a dynamic. For the rest of the meal she asked about what the man had said and Jean repeated that it was nothing.

A few weeks later, on a hike, he got so jealous that he was ashamed. He had met this amazing man called Jonathan who had lived in Asia for years.

‘You just don’t know it until you’re here, do you?’ Jonathan said.

Jean ate his words up. Jonathan had so much wisdom.

‘There are all these people in Europe,’ Jonathan continued. ‘They think they’re where the action is. They think Europe is the centre of the world. You don’t know until you’re in Asia, until you’ve seen how nothing stops, how quickly things change. Buildings burst from the ground. *Everyone* is busy. Until then, you don’t know *this* is the future. Right here. China, Japan, Korea, Singapore.’

Jonathan Dupont was a friend of John’s. He was a polyglot, Kungfu fighter, mountain climber, doctor, traveller. He talked quietly, knowing people listened when he spoke. He had a stern face and an endless reservoir of knowledge.

‘The west is over,’ Jonathan said. ‘Anyone who doesn’t see that isn’t looking. We’ve known for decades that the geopolitical centre of gravity is shifting east. The 2008 financial crisis only finalised it. People struggle just to get a job in Europe. Asia is the new land of opportunity. China pulled eight-hundred-million people out of poverty. That’s never been done anywhere else. We know China owns America’s debt. We know China’s buying up Asia, creating the most extensive trading network ever known. China owns Piraeus Harbour so China’s new silk road ends in Greece. If that isn’t symbolic of European decline, I don’t know what is. Some know it’s time to jump ship. My friends have moved to New Zealand or Dubai. But it’s best to get integrated now rather than wait for the inevitable.’

Jean knew he would never measure up to Jonathan. There were some people who were better than you at everything, superior in every way. Nothing you could do about it. Jonathan told Jean a story about how he’d been jumped after earning his black belt in Kung Fu. He had broken the arms of his assailants and made it to his friend’s birthday party without having to get changed.

Eventually Jonathan grew understandably bored of Jean and focused on Angel. Jonathan slowed down to match his pace with hers. If Jonathan was going to steal Angel from him, he deserved her. She deserved someone like Jonathan too, he knew that. The path was narrow. Jean couldn’t walk beside them. He was stuck in front as they talked. He heard Angel laughing and could tell as she spoke that she was smiling in a way she never smiled with him.

‘Wow,’ she said, with delighted surprise. ‘English people never learn Cantonese. You sound like a real local!’

For the rest of the evening, he couldn’t bring himself to approach Angel. He acted like she wasn’t there. He wanted to make her feel as invisible as she’d made him feel. When everyone went to their tents, he lay by himself staring into the darkness trying to let go.

Nobody belonged to anyone. Nobody could be expected to stick around. He had to remember this. To let himself get attached would be a problem of his own making. He pictured Jonathan sneaking into Angel's tent and told himself to let it happen. Let things take their natural course. But before he knew it, he was crawling to Angel's tent. He saw that she was alone. Even as he accused her of wanting to fuck Jonathan, he was angry with himself. He knew he had no place saying anything – but the accusations poured out. As they fucked, he felt terrible. He wanted to merge with her body, to always be close, to always know what she was thinking. But nobody could ever know what someone else was thinking.

Chapter 40

And you don't stop. You rock, you rock and you don't stop like Coke La Rock on the block when it gets hot.

Ooh ya fucker. Fuckin ooft, ken? John had a gram, eh. They'd just taken a few keys behind some dumpsters, under some scaffolding on the way to LKF. He was aff it.

They had stopped at another bar and drank some wine and now he had just bought a wee bottle of whisky from Circle K. They passed it back and forth, washing down the fresh chemical sting dripping in the back of the throat.

Jeany-boy was ratarsed. Yeah boii. Bwah. He was finna ball all night, mayne. He was feeling dank. Feeling poetic. Faded, bruh. Tidy lassies with big bundas. Shorties looking fine. The block was hot, mochie. Riffing off the world. He was Rabbie. He was auld Rabbie Burns peeping the peng galdem, ken what I mean. Geein it laldy on these hoes. He wanted to pop bottles. *He wanted to roll on dubs. He wanted to rock Prada.* Jeany-boy wanted to finesse these biatches.

Jeany-boy. Shit. He was having a proper *Stan* moment, like in the Eminem song.

Jeany-boy: it was the nickname Claire had given him. No-one else called him that. She had called him that the first time they'd spoken. He was thirteen and looked it. She was fifteen but looked older. He could see the lace of her bra through her t-shirt. They had bumped into each other in the park while Jean was on his way to play in the woods with his friends.

'Here, you in my school?' she had asked.

He'd been almost too shy to answer.

'Aye, I thought so,' she laughed. 'I told my friends you were hot. They said you're too wee to be hot, that you're only cute.'

Nah, okay, *fuck this*. He wasn't about to go down memory lane like that. Stay in the moment, pal.

They were both aff their nuts, mate. Gliding along the street. John was yabbering about how Jean always stole his coke.

'It's who I am, man,' Jean said. 'I'm the lovable asshole.'

John spasmed from a big gulp of whisky. 'Maybe you're just using everybody's good faith and patience.'

'Nah,' Jean said, taking another sniff, right out in public, before John snatched back the baggie. 'I think people get a kick out of living vicariously through me. Listen, I know this is

crazy; but I think I have a *skill*, a talent, for living my best life. It's like living poetry, living performance art.'

John laughed.

'I'm serious. Think about it. Everybody wants to be selfish. Everybody wants to throw caution to the wind and give up their responsibilities. They just don't have the stomach for the collateral. I provide that service. I'm the sacrificial lamb. That's why people like me. I'm a postmodern jester, an everyday rock star.'

John laughed again. 'Well, for my part, I only tolerate your coke-theft because I buy it when I'm high and need someone to share it with. You're not so much a rock star to me as an irresponsible sponsor.'

They stopped in a dark nook along the alleyway that skirted the top of the Lan Kwai Fong amphitheatre. The trees and scaffolding around the amphitheatre cast shadows from the streetlights. Jean took the baggie back from John's hand.

'One last bump,' Jean said, before turning back and asking, 'You want some?'

'Wow, you're really offering me my own coke?'

'Yeah.'

'Alright.'

They stood in silence listening to the omnipresent dripping from the aircons and moist bamboo. He smelled the hot trash and vegetation rising from the park and the bars beyond it. He listened to the footsteps scuffing against the concrete, the pulverised and blended accents full of hype.

They walked down the steps and found Suzie and a handful of people that Jean recognised but had never spoken to. John walked over to Suzie and kissed her on the cheek. Jean stood slightly apart from the group. A couple people gave him a nod. Others were engrossed in a conversation and didn't notice him.

Yelps and shouts from the main streets of LKF echoed behind. His last bump was buzzing through his teeth. Eyes wide. Jaws clenched. All he could do was stand while the others continued with their boring political conversations. How could Jeany-boy be so bored while so high?

Fuck's sake. What was happening? He couldn't stop thinking about Claire ever since that stupid Killer's song. He would have preferred a madeleine.

She used to wind him up. She had other pet names for him. Not just Jeany-boy. Jeany-poo, Levi's Jeans, Jean-Paul Gautier. She would sing *Genie in a Bottle* by Christina Aguilera. His brain almost exploded the first time she jumped off the couch and started singing. *If you*

wanna be with me. She did the dance, moving her hips and belly like in the video. *Baby there's a price to pay*. She knew how to dance like a proper woman. In his eyes, she was so sexy that it scared him. She would try and make him dance but he would stand stiff, trying to look normal, too terrified to dance but not wanting her to think she was embarrassing. He had no idea how to behave. Sometimes he *would* pretend she was embarrassing, or he would laugh at her, because it made him feel less like a loser next to this gorgeous person. He saw himself in the mirror, this weird kid with badly waxed hair, ill-fitting torn jeans. And yet, somehow, she seemed to fancy him.

Get your mind right, Jeany-boy. You've no idea where this is taking you.

John was sitting on the ground leaning against a step between Suzie's legs. He was breathing deeply with his eyes closed. Suzie ran her fingers through his hair, squeezed his shoulders. Jean was standing in front of Suzie and John, slightly removed from John's friends, but Suzie made no eye contact with Jean. She massaged John, kissed his ears and he gave a high chuckle.

There was a lull in the conversation. Jean realised he was still staring at John and Suzie. John was sprawled out like someone who'd just injected heroin. Is that what tender caresses from a loved one felt like? Suzie was clearly charmed by his full surrender to her hands. She laughed as he moaned with pleasure. The others in the group laughed too. They didn't seem to mind the absolute cringe of their pda.

John received all this love and sympathy just because he talked about social justice shit, about his mental health and how he'd been bullied. He talked about *working on himself, self-care* and even said things like *radical self-love*. All this because his posh English parents had briefly gone bankrupt in 2008 and he had to enrol in a *normal school* like *everyone else*. His parents had some marital issues *like everyone else*. He'd got a bit bullied *like everyone else*. Just because he couldn't hack it, it made him better? Is that how it was? Because high school hadn't exactly been a walk in the park for Jeany-boy either, mind you. (Fuck's sake.) But you didn't see *him* complaining.

It's not like he'd been bullied or anything. Nothing that severe. And Jean was lucky too because a few radges in his area liked him for some reason. They gave him a pass, maybe just because they didn't go to the same school.

Mind Bevs? Gary Bevan. He had fuck off scars up his arms from fighting with bottles and barbed wire, and one on his forehead where he'd been fuckoed with a knuckle duster. Bevs always stopped for a chat with Jean on the road. He was a good guy if he liked you. But one day Jean heard that Bevs had been at Jean's school with his posse, just looking for fights.

Bevs and his pals caught Fat Andy, who'd just been walking home. Bevs smacked Fat Andy a bunch of times, so the story went. Andy knew it was best to tap out. Just Bevs was frightening let alone his whole posse. But even after he surrendered and sat on the pavement begging, they made him shove a barbie doll leg from the gutter between his arse cheeks and they took a photo of it. For weeks people talked and laughed about it.

Aye, compared to Fat Andy, Jean was lucky. But there were some radges who didn't like him, boys who saw Jean trying to be invisible and didn't allow it.

Gordon. Just thinking his name was difficult. Gordon had sent a guy to hospital and broken another guy's leg with an *actual* baseball bat. His pals would throw stuff at him, like apple cores, stones or half-empty Pot Noodles. They'd tell him to get tae Germany. They'd call him a refugee as an insult. Gordon's fists were the size of Jean's dad's and he liked to push them slowly into Jean's face to psyche him out. Whenever Gordon saw him, Jean found himself begging for mercy as his friends walked silently with their heads down or speeding up ahead, acting like it wasn't happening. Almost every day for a year, Gordon threatened him and punched him until he eventually got bored and found someone else.

One time, Gordon pinned Jean up against the wall and held his fist up against his jaw. When that happened, Jean didn't fight back. He didn't wince or anything, just went kind of limp, like he was bored.

Gordon said, 'I'm gonna get my cousin to fuckin stab you.'

Jean didn't know who Gordon's cousin was or if he even had a cousin but he didn't want to seem weak. He said, in a bored drony voice, like he was buying shoes with his mum at the shopping centre, 'Why don't *you* just stab me?'

Gordon pushed him against the wall again, hard, with a disgusted look on his face. 'Give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you now, you cheese-eating surrender monkey schnitzel-sucking Nazi.'

Jean said nothing.

Gordon pulled a blue ballpoint pen from his pocket. 'Right, you asked for it, gayboy.'

Gordon held Jean in place before he could move and stabbed him hard with the pen into his thigh. Jean screamed and Gordon slapped him and bolted. Jean had to throw the trousers away, torn and soaked with blood. He told his mum he'd got stuck climbing a wire fence. Even now, he still had the blue ink stain where he'd been stabbed.

High school hadn't exactly been a walk in the park for Jean either. He had hated every minute of it. He was glad to be on the other side of the world from that hole. Aye, right

enough, high school hadn't been a walk in the park. But Jean didn't fucking *go on* about it, know what I mean?

Now Jeany-boy was feeling zonked. Like a plane taking off in a typhoon. Ken that feeling when you've not slept for days and you're still recovering from a tidal wave of hangovers? His fists were clenched. He tried to figure out if it was the order in which he'd drunk the wine glasses that was messing with him. What was the rhyme? Was it *red before white and you're alright* or was it *rouge puis blanc et tout fout le camp*?

Suzie got up. Went off to the public toilets with a friend. John was still sitting on the ground, leaning against the steps, eyes closed.

Jean was bored of standing there ignored on his last night in Hong Kong. He kicked a small pebble on the ground and it landed on John's chest. John opened his eyes for a second then closed them again. Jean wondered if he could kick another pebble and have it land near John's belly. He found another pebble, a slightly bigger one, and kicked it.

'Hey, dude,' said John, eyes closed, relaxed from his massage. 'Do you mind?'

Jean stood still. He saw a couple of John's friends watching him. He ignored them. He found a bottle cap and kicked it. The bottle cap sailed through the air and gently bounced against John's cheek.

'Score,' Jean said.

'Dude, come on. Do you mind?' John said, still calm and high, chuckling.

Jean walked up to John and stood over him, watching him. He could see John's friends watching uncomfortably in his peripheral vision.

John opened his eyes and frowned. 'What are you doing, man?'

Jean picked up the first stone he had kicked and threw it back at John's chest, harder. 'Just practicing my aim.'

Jean realised that more people in the group were watching in silence. Bold enough to conspicuously give their attention but not bold enough to step in.

John gently pushed Jean away. He pressed his forearm against Jean's thigh.

'Why the fuck you pushing me?' Jean said.

'Are you joking, mate? What do you expect?' John said. He threw a shaky laugh into his voice.

'What you on, ya fuckin radge?' Jean said, stepping up to John again and looking down at him.

'Why are you speaking like that, man? Calm down a bit, yeah? Here, sit down.'

‘Don’t tell me to fucking calm down. You don’t say *calm down* to someone if you’re actually trying to calm them down.’

John got up cautiously and stepped back. He bent back down to pick up his beer but Jean kicked it over before he could reach it. The beer spilled and fizzed as the glass clinked along the concrete.

In the corner of his eye, Jean could see one of John’s friends slowly getting up to intervene. There were a few other groups of people dotted around the amphitheatre, some of whom had turned around when Jean kicked the bottle. He could see everything; his senses were on fucking fire.

‘Why are you doing this?’ John said. His eyes were glassy, almost teary, like he was on the verge of tears.

Jean was silent then said, ‘Why the fuck are *you* doing this?’

John laughed but looked at him uncertainly. ‘You’re being ridiculous. You’re winding me up.’ Jean saw that John was giving him the option to pretend it was all a joke.

‘Come on ya wee lad, let’s go. Square go, ya fanny,’ Jean said, pushing John again. He knew that John would fight back. He had too much pride not to. He *wanted* to get stuck in. He was just protecting his precious image.

‘Jean, please don’t do this. It’s absurd,’ John said. His voice was breaking a bit now. Was he going to cry or was he faking it?

Just as Jean lunged at John, there was a shout behind him. Suddenly, there were arms everywhere, pulling Jean back, pushing in front of John. The shout had come from Suzie, who was right up in Jean’s face now.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you? He doesn’t want to fight you and you’re lucky, you absolute wanker,’ she said.

Another guy, some bland Canadian, gently pushed Jean’s shoulder and told him to go for a walk. Jean resisted. He looked at John through the group of people who were all stroking him and giving him sympathy. John sniffled and said he was fine. Jean imagined pushing through and starting a brawl. He saw himself breaking a couple jaws and then getting grabbed and kerb-stomped by John, crawling around, picking his teeth up in a pool of blood while everyone watched in shock.

John didn’t look back at Jean. Suzie turned to hug John and didn’t look back either. A couple more North Americans and Scandinavians stood around looking like bodyguards on their first shift, waiting for Jean to leave.

‘Just go, man,’ one of them said.

Chapter 41

What you lookin at you fuckin cunt? I'll fucking stab you, mate. *Make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.* Dinny hink a wilny chib ye, ya bawbag.

Jean weaved through the crowd. International kids were grinding and screaming in the middle of the road. The bass from the bars pumped out into the streets. The lights were so bright it looked like daytime. You could smell the saccharine stench of booze from the gutters.

Let your fucking nuts hang, homie. Tables or nables, eh? Tae balls or nay balls, eh? Fuckin. Scotland is my city, bro. I'm really out in these streets, bruh. We really out here, homie. Pussio. T'ar ta geule à la récré, mec. Me cherches pas.

Jean was the fuckin lizard king. Slithering his way down the street and taking a left on Stanley Street. He was a golden god.

The girls were out in full force tonight, man. A wave of them, soaring and fizzling for the night to come. Praise the human who invented booty shorts, may he or she be blessed by the grace of God, Allah and Vishnu. Here it is, unexpurgated, ladies, come and get it. *Hoes mad, hoes mad, hoes mad. I pull up in that old jag. Hold fast.*

Lan Kwai Fong was popping tonight. Jean took another left on Pottinger Street and prayed his dick could get as big as the Eiffel tower. *So I can fuck the world for seventy-two hours. What hath night to do with sleep?* No idea where he was going with this, just following a scent. Yes, there was a scent that he had picked up and he was letting his body take control. So drunk it felt like his face was falling out the front of his face. It didn't make sense but that's how it felt.

Was he going in circles? He had already walked back up the slabbed part of Pottinger Street and had cut left along Wyndham Street to get back to Lang Kwai Fong.

Can't, wont, don't stop, rockin to the rhythm, we came to get down like Grandmaster Flash we came to get smashed.

What now? The night was still young – it could still be salvaged. Tinder girls? 7-Eleven chicks? Old hook-ups? Shirley?

He remembered that he had his test results coming in a few hours. Should he be trying to hook up with girls if he had super gonorrhoea or syphilis? Should he be worrying about any of it if he was going to die of liver failure anyway?

No, he had to keep moving forward. It was his last night; he had to get every last fresh drop out of it. Should he just have just committed to Angel and told her he loved when the

impulse had come? Should he have just told her about his insecurities the way John had done with Suzie? No. Fuck John, man. Fuck Suzie. Fuck Claire. *Never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep.*

And we can't stop (woah). And we won't stop (woah).

He ducked into an alleyway and took a few more bumps of coke. This was good. He was having a good time. He needed time to be alone with his thoughts anyway. He had lots to think about. He was a thinking man. Because, yes, he *had* understood life's algorithm. That's right.

He knew everything. He was his most evolved form now. He had an endless list of things he knew that he had to keep repeating and remembering. Because he had read. He had read and read and cracked the code. Whatever hadn't worked out in Scotland, Thailand, Senegal; now it was working out. He had been reading the Greeks, Germans and French; Marcus Aurelius, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Sartre. He had read the Chinese and Indians; Confucius, Vyasa, Buddha, Lao Tzu. And don't forget the Americans; Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Bukowski.

He knew everything. He knew about Susan Sontag, Maya Angelou, Hélène Cixous, Mary Shelley, Arundhati Roy, and Virginia Woolf. He had eyed up the girls in his feminism class. Sex was leaking from him. He couldn't control it; they fucking loved it.

He knew everything. He knew about girls and boys, Madonnas and Whores, coy fish and Tinder bitches, sadbois and fuckbois.

He knew everything. He knew that his worldly chagrin was not personal; it was institutional, global. His inherited Christian morals and guilt were an oppressive mind-control system. He hadn't done anything right or wrong, and no-one had ever wronged him. There was no moral truth.

He knew everything. He knew that power and energy were not something to be tamed or repressed but to be ridden, surfed and subsumed. He knew everything came back, everything returned to haunt you, that's what eternal return of the same was, right? *This Self is never born, nor does it die. This Ancient One is unborn, eternal, everlasting.* There was no heaven or hell; there were just the reverberations of all your actions through space forever. *Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass will always be reversed and will ever run out again.* So live life to the fullest. Carpe the fucking diem, man. YOLO, except – not? Right! Time was a circle and you had to embrace the loop of life. Embrace the loop of life.

He knew everything. Life was one long drawn-out crisis. Life was a fucking dance that some people mistook for a seizure, ken? You can quote Jeany-boy here on that. Life was a

crashing wave that you could either drown in or surf on, you know what I'm mothafuckin sayin? He was going to surf on straight through that crashing wave and he was going to live his life on the surface of bubbles, floating on the cosmic energy of the universe. He was going to dance and float through it all. He wasn't going to fall through the psychoanalytical trapdoor. Life was too fucking complicated, too chaotic, too amorphous for some old human to analyse and fix you. No, you had to take that radical honesty out of the therapy cage and out into the streets. Sing your truth to the world, brothers and sisters! Amen! He had to be *unapologetically himself*. Losing friends or getting a few bruises was the price you had to pay to *cut the toxicity out of your life*. Radical positivity and optimism. *Good vibes only*. History will absolve you. You had to wear your soul nailed onto your chest for all to see.

He was experiencing epiphanies every other damn second. He was a bottomless well of wisdom. He had learnt that life was both a game and a work of art beyond good and evil. He had learnt that existence was illusory. That people were fickle and gravitated towards confidence rather than substance. That physical pleasure and euphoria were the purest feelings. That emotions, goodness, and respect were fleeting and boring concepts. That women just wanted to feel visible and heard and that men just wanted to be men. That nothing mattered. That you should always swipe right nmw. That being kind was less meaningful than being interesting. That it was better to be bad than boring. That everyone chased their own projections of happiness and you didn't have to take responsibility for not fitting into their mould. That humans were animals and expecting any sort of reliability or compassion was foolish and that if you were stupid enough to think more than that of humans then you deserved to be finessed. That if you had a dick and you called yourself a man you were supposed to fucking use it. That if you had drink you were supposed to fucking down it. That if you had money you were supposed to fucking spend it. That humans were literally either pawns or kings and you had to pick a side right the fuck now. That to be a king you had to act like a fucking king. That the world was fucked since before you were born so to be on the right side of history you had to help burn it down. That love was beyond good and evil; the devil had his own way of loving. That you could flân through the daily phantasmagoria of the streets overflowing with love and still be number one to yourself. That happiness wasn't something you sought; it was something you stumbled upon. That pain was part of life. That sorrow should be embraced. That life was violence; birth was violence; sex was violence. That you couldn't trust anyone. That the best way to find satisfaction was to pull that thread of desire no matter what it was or how long.

Every day he was giving it his all. Giving *what* his *what*? Life, man. He was giving *life* his *life*. It was both comic and tragic. He was putting all his overflowing energy into just *being*. It was raw nuclear energy that couldn't be controlled or captured for any other purpose but just being there, talking to people, interacting, laughing, and fucking. That's all it was. It was a silent form of jazz. It was a living drum solo. It was art that couldn't be experienced by anyone but himself. It was *important work*. If only it could be his job. If only he could get a salary to do this and to be considered a professional. It was a terrible waste. He wished he could live forever, possessing the lives of mortals around the globe, experience every single life that ever lived, retrospective immortality, to experience all of humanity, all of life, the entire universe, from start to finish.

That's what he was trying to do. He was trying to consume experiences. He had paid his way across the world. But it wasn't enough. He wanted more than experience. He wanted to *be other people*. He didn't want to see Senegal; he wanted to know what it was to be a street kid. He didn't want to see Hong Kong; he wanted to be Angel. He hadn't wanted to see Thailand; he'd wanted to be Aaron. He wanted to float around the world as a ghost invading the minds of others, sitting behind their eyes, reading their stories straight from the source, he wanted to *see what they saw*. But he couldn't do that. So, he imagined it. He tried to imagine how they saw him too, often externalising his own experiences, viewing them as a mirror through which to study himself.

Yes! Life truly was a mystery, brother, and Jean was here to experience every last smithereen of it.

He was wading through the crowd now. When boys looked at him, he fucking stared them down until they looked away. When girls looked at him, he softened his eyes and gave them the up and down, watched them see him watching them. He was in beast mode. He wasn't afraid anymore. He wasn't shy anymore. He had managed to piece together the perfect personality for himself. He had nailed feigned confidence (which all confidence, of course, was).

Can't stop, addicted to the shindig.

These *girls*, man. Enough bullshit, bro.

He saw a cute girl in a short skirt standing by herself outside the 7-Eleven. She was smoking and staring into space. She had olive-toned skin and slightly curly hair but he couldn't tell what race she was or where she might be from. Maybe she had a bit of a Spanish vibe. Maybe she reminded him a little of Claire. He remembered texting Claire when he was almost thirteen, planning to meet up. She had kept asking him how far he had been and he

kept dodging the question. They had needed to find a place that was out of sight from parents and friends. They had needed to find a secret, hidden place. Fuck it.

He looked at the girl standing outside the 7-Eleven.

‘Alright, doll face, can I get one of those?’ he said.

Sometimes, he had to give a girl a pet name right away so that they knew what was up. They needed to feel the strength of his ego. It was like the way that guy in *Sex and the City* called the main lassie ‘kid’. Some girls fucking loved that shit.

She looked at him, expressionless. Without a word she handed him a cigarette and looked away. He pulled out his lighter and took a drag. The nicotine hit fast. The entire fucking world span round his head.

‘You having a good one? I’m not going to lie to you. You are probably the most attractive human being on this street.’

She frowned and gave him a look. She looked round over her shoulder into the 7-Eleven.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ Maybe her English wasn’t so great.

A girl carrying a bag of bottles came out of the shop and rushed towards the cute girl.

‘Oh my god, hurry up. Let’s get out of here,’ the cute girl said.

The girl with the shopping bag stopped and looked at Jean with disgust in her eyes. ‘Ew. Go away.’

‘Eh, wait. I’m just making friendly conversation here, petal.’ He was realising now how much he was slurring. It’s like his tongue had decided to sign off early.

‘*Bad* man, that’s a *bad* man, shoo. *Ew*. Off, *shoo*. Go away,’ the girl said, flicking her hand at him as if he was a dog or a fly.

The cute girl burst out laughing and together they laughed at him before walking away down the street.

That nicotine had tipped him over the edge, man. His stomach was rumbling.

What the fuck was up with those girls? Nae need in that, like. He felt like a useless ape just standing there as they walked off and laughed.

He was back on Queen’s Street hailing taxis. The night was a dud, man. He had run out of coke. He was going to go and get a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow morning, he would get his text and find out how he was dying. He would fly back to Scotland and then he would die.

He hailed down a taxi and started trying to explain where he lived in his broken Cantonese. The taxi driver seemed confused. Jean could hear himself speaking even though he wasn’t quite in control.

‘Doh. Something doh. Or loh? You know loh? Doh?’

The taxi driver was shaking his head helplessly. Clearly wanted to get away but Jean was leaning in the window in the sort of way that meant the guy was stuck with him for now.

‘Dude!’ Some bro with curly hair and board shorts was calling him from across the street. ‘That literally means road. You’re just saying road road road.’

‘Eh, listen ya cunt, if you’re just finna judge from afar you can jog on pal, or come over here and fuckin help a lost soul, eh? Can’t ya see I’m tryin?’

‘Fuck. Okay dude, my bad,’ the bro was walking over. He seemed like a good lad. ‘Where you going?’

‘Something doh loh, man. Were you not just listening? Jesus.’

‘Come on, my dude,’ the guy was sympathetically patting Jean on the shoulder now and Jean suddenly wanted to hug the guy. ‘Give me a landmark or something. Think.’

‘The hospital. There’s a hospital and a giant graveyard. Huh. I’ve never thought about the proximity of them two before.’

‘Queen Mary Hospital? Pok Fu Lam?’

The taxi driver nodded.

‘That’s the fucking ticket!’ Jean said and pointed at the taxi driver. ‘This guy gets it!’

Jean burrowed his way into the taxi. He rolled down the window and looked at the stranger who had helped him. He had pale skin and an American accent. His board shorts had floral patterns on them and he was wearing a white shirt with a silver sheen. He looked like those rich guys who had zero sense of style and spent all their money on bad but expensive clothes.

‘Don’t give any change to the homeless tonight, pal. You’ve already done your good deed of the day.’

‘Ha. Yeah okay, good night, man.’ When the bro spoke, his jaw wiggled ever so slightly from side to side.

The driver put the taxi in gear but Jean realised something and asked him to stop.

Jean looked back out the window and called, ‘Here, mate. What’s your name?’

‘Oh, it’s Jonah.’

‘Jonah, mate, are you gurning a wee bit there?’

Jonah laughed. His jaw was wonkier now that he was laughing. ‘Yeah, man. You get high?’

‘Yes, siree, I do. What you on?’

‘Molly, bro.’

Jean hopped out of the taxi. He held his hand out to Jonah and they shook hands, laughing. The night wasn't over yet.

Chapter 42

He fuckin loves you, by the way. And you and you and you. And even you, yes, you. Even if you don't love him back. Even if you don't *like* him back. That's fine. Jean loved everyone unconditionally.

That guitar riff, man. That chord progression. He had never let himself enjoy it before. You know how that is, right? When something's been such a cliché your whole life that you've never let yourself feel it. You can't possibly let yourself feel something so obvious, it would be in such *poor taste*. Drun drun drun-drun-drun-drun.

Everyone around was feeling it, getting ready to let those feels in. Jean and Jonah had their arms around each other's shoulders, nodding and smiling at each other. Drun drun drun-drun-drun-drun. Drunk people of all cultures and nationalities had crowded round this cheesy-ass busker on the corner of Queens Street and D'Aguilar Street with his lame-ass fedora and his cliché-ass acoustic guitar because they wanted to feel that holy late capitalist communion vibe, man.

Jean looked around and saw that he was already in heaven, in nirvana. He was already a buddha, yes, born, as all humans were, with buddha nature, with the capacity to unhinge the karmic cycle. Everyone around him had their buddha hearts and spirits in full shine. Jean was a lotus flower, man. He was fucking sparkling. Fucking twinkling like a star. He was made of stardust. He was – oh shit: here it came, hands up, come on, everyone, pointing to the sky, here we fuckin go, ready to belt it out: *Today is gonna be the day* (that's it, everyone together now, fuckin lalady) *that they're gonna throw it back to you*. Ooft, mate. Tingles and shivers, eh?

Where was John at? Where was Suzie? Where was Angel now? He had to grab them all and hug them together and tell them he loved them. He had to tell them he was sorry and that he loved them more than anything. He had to call his family and apologise and forgive them for all the bad advice and bad examples and thank them for all the love and support. He needed to let it all out. Ooft. Here it came. *There are many things that I* (literally fuckin screaming this one out, mate, had his arms around other people's shoulders and shit, some people had tears in their eyes, man) *would like to say to you but I don't know how*. (Och fuck it, keep it going.) *Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me*.

Jesus, how had he never let himself enjoy this song before? Were clichés so scary that you couldn't just enjoy life anymore? Is that what internet culture and consumerism had done

to us? Where was John? Jean had some important shit to confess to him, to let him in on, he needed to reveal his human side, his deepest darkest secrets. Where was the cunt?

He loved them all, mate. He loved you, you and you too. He wasn't even afraid of death anymore. If he had liver cancer or AIDS or a brain tumour or anything, he could accept it now. He was ready to die. Whatever the blood tests revealed in the next few hours was of no concern. Fear had gone. Love was all. Love was what made the universe possible. We were all children of love, corrupted only accidentally, trying to find our way back to the big open arms of unity, peace and love.

Okay, cards on the table. He was gurning the fuck out. The molly was hitting hard. (As if you hadn't already guessed!) And now he was someone else, a happier person. Swaying side to side in the secular church of outdated indie covers. John wasn't answering his phone. Neither was Suzie. Nor Angel, though she had left his message on read. She was out there somewhere, receiving his signals.

Can't stop (can't stop), can't stop the beat. Won't stop (won't stop), won't stop the beat.

The Oasis song was over. Jean tugged Jonah and they started walking.

'Where are we going?' Jonah asked.

Jonah was still in high school. He was one of those third culture kids. The kids of rich expat families living in Hong Kong. His dad had recently been sent over to work for Goldman Sachs. Jonah had found his way enough to buy drugs but not to make friends.

'We're going on an adventure, laddy,' Jean said.

They walked westward along Queens Street. He was humming a tune to himself but he wasn't sure what it was. Mm—hm-hm-hmm—hm-hm-hmmm—hm-hm-hmmmm. They passed by a group of unattainable fashionable local girls. They looked rich. They didn't notice Jean, seemingly existing in a superimposed world that he just floated through, filtered out.

'I love the lights here,' Jonah said, deep in his molly daze, pointing to some buildings in the distance.

'Apparently, the reason cities shimmer is because of AC/DC currents. The electricity changes direction, surging one way then another really quickly. Up close we can't see it; we can't tell it's happening. But with distance, from afar, looking at lights like this, it makes it look like this unrecognisable flicker. Like heat waves in a desert or something. I've got no idea if it's true but I like the idea.'

Jonah nodded, still staring.

Jean started humming his tune out loud. 'Jonah, do you recognize this?'

‘I don’t know. Is it Scottish?’

‘Of course. That’s it!’

It was *The Skye Boat Song*. He started to sing it out loud. People looked at him like he was a crazy man just for singing. *Speed bonnie boat like a bird on the wing*. People were making space for him on the pavement, afraid of getting too close. Jonah didn’t seem to care. He tried to sing along. *Onwards the sailors cry*.

They turned off Queens Street and onto Argyle Street, hit by the smell of the train station and fish and chips. He turned up Buchanan Street, past all the fancy shops and left onto the end of Sauchiehall Street, where a couple of gypsy men were playing with a fiddle and an accordion. Memories now of late-night walks home from Subby. Hotboxing John’s room with Suzie. Climbing up onto a rickety chair and stretching a condom over the fire alarm. Going home and watching YouTube videos until 5am on dour Glasgow winter mornings. Dancing with strangers at Nice’n’Sleazy, coming home to a messy kitchen and an empty fridge and going back out into the sleet to find that one kebab place still open at 4am. Drinking stubbies on endless summer days in Kelvingrove Park. There was no grass anywhere in the world like Scottish grass. Even the English didn’t have lawns as soft. *Carry the lad that’s born to be king*.

He turned off the main road and down towards Hamo 4, past the mosque, wading through the sand, followed by a small group of children, everyone still staring at him as he sang. *Over the sea to Skye*. The smell of palm trees, sea breeze, burning wood and roasting sand. Those secret mornings exercising on the beach with Faraz and all the other local men. Joining that group they saw every morning, stripping down, wrestling in the sand and always losing. Then eating baguette for breakfast and watching the cockroaches spasming and dying on the floor. *Loud the winds cry, loud the waves roar, thunderclaps rend the air*.

The Marabout explaining to them about the talibés going blind. Jean unable to comprehend anything aside from that they were to take them to hospital. Then regret. Self-congratulation for coming in the first place and then disgust at his selfishness. Spending more of his evenings on the rooftop with Aminata, Ousmane, Khadi, Cheikh and all the others and, one night, speaking in hushed voices about slavery and how all the strongest and bravest men were taken away and everybody turning to him and saying, ‘Jean, tu nous a blessé’ and Ousmane repeating it in English for good measure. ‘Jean, you hurt us.’ Knowing they were right and that he deserved it. And his antimalarials giving him nightmares that he was trapped in a concrete cube with no walls or windows. And Jean starting to hate white people and their parasitic habits, their cultures of theft and appropriation, their inability to come up with

anything original. Realising that he had no true family and no true friends and was condemned to wander the Earth endlessly. Deciding to live only in the present. The past did not exist. The future did not exist. Only in existence were these sandy roads around him and the goats tied to their posts. Wondering if he had invented Aaron. Whether Aaron existed only in his mind and memories to justify his guilt and to bring him here. *Baffled our foes stand by the shore. Follow they will not dare.*

Now, he turned the corner round the Clinique Roi Baudoin and he was crossing the river and passing the North Gate Jazz Co-op and winding through the sois and alleys.

‘Where the hell are we?’ asked Jonah.

‘Shh. We’re almost there,’ Jean said.

Many’s the lad fought on that day, well the claymore could wield. Sunbathing and pining for Stacy. Feeling free in his flip-flops and tank tops. The humidity and anarchy of his bedroom those first few days. Hanging out with adults for the first time. Going to the house party with Aaron. That strange party with all the different rooms, themes and cultures and that moment he ran outside and couldn’t tell if he was still in the house or not. Was he perhaps even now still in that house? Falling for the racist rumours that Aaron was some sort of criminal. Such a child not to realise that Stacy was trolling. So immature not to realise that Aaron was having some sort of breakdown. Googling him and finding Dr Amadou Aaron Fall on a defunct development website and all traces of him – LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, anything – gone. Aaron disappearing and Jean stuck with this camera he had stolen, for what? *When the night came silently lay dead on Culloden’s field.*

No time to think about it, they had reached the south gate and were crossing the river and walking up the Lanark Road. There was Greg, DD, Stevo and Pete, looking guilty and avoiding eye contact. The strange country suburbs, sprawling in the land between Glasgow and Edinburgh. But that’s not where he was going. He was going down to the dell.

Burned are our homes, exile and death scatter the loyal men. Him and Claire arranging their first real meeting. Back at the very beginning. He had just turned thirteen and she was fifteen. He was scared and rushed. He played down in the dell as a boy and knew all the nooks and crannies. There were obvious places, bushes hidden by dense canopy. But he didn’t want to bump into the boys. So, they went to the abandoned warehouse and offices. Nobody went there anymore because there was nothing left to burn or smash or steal. But the hole in the fence was still there and they crept through to the damp, moss-covered, bare-bricked room with the flaking soggy door. She held him round the waist and he held her there

too, leaning back, afraid to take up too much of her personal space even though their pubic bones were nuzzled together. She looked at him with wide eyes and they kissed.

‘So,’ Claire said with a smile, ‘how far have you been?’

‘I’ve, like, kissed a girl on holiday once.’

‘On holiday, aye?’ she laughed.

‘Yeah, really, two summers ago,’ he lied.

Claire was smiling anyway. Her hair was almost black in the darkness of the warehouse. Her skin, by contrast, had lost its olive tone and looked pale and white. ‘Well, how far do you *want* to go?’

His hands were sweating buckets. He wiped them on his jeans as slyly as possible. She was leaning against the wall and she unzipped her jacket. She was wearing a low-cut pink pyjama-style top that had a Hello Kitty logo on it, with her pink bow and mouthless face.

She wasn’t wearing a bra and she saw him notice. ‘Easy access,’ she said.

He had no idea what to fucking do. He angled his hand awkwardly, sliding beneath her shirt and lay his hand on her breast, unsure what to do next.

‘It’s cold,’ she said, gasping a little.

‘Sorry.’

‘No, I like it.’

Before long they were all over each other. He was kissing her chest and she was licking his neck. His fingers felt useless wedged into her jeans and his nails were dirty from moving logs and decaying wood from the warehouse entry. She unbuttoned his trousers and gave him a dry handy. He could barely keep it up, he was so scared, and he was afraid of coming in front of her, so he lied and said it would take a while for him to get there and that they should finish it next time. But she was in a hurry and she pulled her pants down. The sex was sore and dry. They’d both forgotten to bring condoms. His legs were shaking as he tried to slowly move his pelvis, realising he should have practiced the motions.

That was the beginning of their relationship. Over time, it got smoother and better. They saw each other every chance they could. She taught him how to finger her and lick her. The sex always scared him but he enjoyed the gentle caressing snuggles that followed. Afterwards, when they just lay around like there was nothing left in the world for them to do, she would tell him over and over again how amazing he was and how nice his body was and how lucky she was. That was nice because nobody ever said things like that.

And three years later, things suddenly changed. It was the end of the penultimate year of high school just before Claire’s eighteenth birthday. He went over to her house. She opened

the door without saying anything and she didn't speak for the whole evening. She just stared blankly at the television and he was sure she was falling out of love with him or getting bored of him. Over the following days she grew more silent, then irritable and then, one day, after he had asked if she was okay, she snapped and shouted at him and started crying. She hugged him and cried into his chest, her whole body shaking.

'What's wrong? You have to speak to me,' he said.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know what's going on. I'm scared.'

The following week, while he was playing football in the park with the boys, DD asked, 'How's everything going with you and Claire?'

DD and Greg never spoke about Claire unless they were passing on rumours they had heard. He was used to them wanting to cause drama so he didn't tell them about the crying.

'Fine, aye. Why?'

'No reason.'

Claire kept crying and skipping class and people started looking funny at Jean at school. Claire didn't come to school for that whole week.

He did some Googling and realised that maybe she was suffering from depression. It made sense. People were always looking for some drama, looking to blame people for their problems.

Then Claire's mum came to school.

It was the first time that Jean saw Claire's mum. He had just arrived through the school entrance and followed everyone's stares to the open corridor that led to the Headteacher's office. Claire's mum was a paler, blonder version of Claire and she frowned at all the gawping children. She had her arm around Claire's shoulders as Claire cried. The Headteacher was trying to console her too. Claire looked back but didn't make eye contact with him as they entered the Headteacher's office.

He stood there wondering what was going on. Perhaps they needed a special form or agreement to let Claire manage her depression and her schoolwork. While he stood alone, feeling the looks of others on him, Pete came over, looking nervous.

'So, you know now?' he said.

'Know what?'

'About the evidence.'

'Fuck's sake, what are you on about? Why is everyone being so secretive?'

But even then, Pete wouldn't say. He made Jean wait the whole day and they met in the park that evening. They sat on the swings in the dark while Pete gave a long preamble about how he liked Claire and he didn't mean to disrespect her.

'She told me not to tell you until she had sorted it. Greg and DD said we should tell you right away but Claire begged us for just a week so she could try and sort it and be the one to tell you. But she's still not told you.'

'Fucking hell, man. Just tell me.'

'We've all seen it.'

'Seen what?'

'The evidence. The cheating.'

'What did you actually see? I'm sick of these made-up stories.'

'It's not a story, mate. There's a video.'

Pete's eyes were heavy with sadness. Jean's first thought was to accuse him of lying but he looked like he was going to cry. He'd never seen any of his friends like that. Jean tried to say something, but his throat was dry and he coughed. The first thing he felt after that was embarrassment. His face going red, probably visible even in the dark. His heart was stuck in his throat. He was lightheaded.

'Do you have it on your phone?'

'No, of course not, mate.'

'You're a fucking liar.'

'I'm not mate, I'm serious.'

'But you've seen it.'

Pete was silent.

It was like Jean had been kicked in the stomach. His legs were tingling and light. He knew he would be unable to get up or walk so he swung on the swing, trying to act normal, like he'd known all along but also like it was obviously a lie.

'I need to see it to believe it,' he finally said. 'Otherwise, it's too obvious that you're lying.'

He was still hoping that he could prove Pete wrong. Anything to show that it was Pete's fault, that he was the one who was causing all the problems.

Pete pulled out his phone.

'What are you doing?' Jean asked.

'I'm asking Greg and DD if they have it.'

Jean waited and watched. Pete's blue head floated in the darkness of the park. The metal groan of the swings rising and falling. It was a strange limbo space – it felt like all life had paused now just for him to find out the truth.

Pete handed him the phone.

'Who sent it to you?'

'DD.'

Jean took the phone. He watched the video once, then twice, then a third time.

'I'm so sorry, mate.'

'Fuck you.'

'I wanted Claire to tell you herself.'

'Send it to me.'

'What?'

'Send me the fucking video. Now.'

Pete sent him the video and Jean walked straight to Claire's. It was a five-minute walk and he seemed to glide along the whole way, the world around him dark and still. It was as if by finding out the truth he had passed into another dimension.

She opened the door blankly as usual and he told her that he knew. Her thick brown head of hair was dishevelled. She was in her fluffy baby blue bathrobe. She pretended she didn't know what he was talking about. Her face stayed blank but as he got more frustrated, concern appeared on her face.

'Why is there a video?'

'How do you know there's a video?'

'I've seen it!'

'How fucking dare you? It's not yours to watch!'

'Everyone else has seen it.'

'But it's not yours to watch. I can't believe you would do that to me.'

'Do that to *you*? You literally *fucked* another guy.'

Her eyes flared. Her cheeks were red. Something snapped in Jean and he couldn't fight with her. Perhaps it was that the argument felt rehearsed like something straight out of a Hollywood film. Perhaps it was the fact he had always assumed that it was impossible for Claire to really love him.

Claire's face was contorted. She was trying to stay neutral and angry but her mouth was twitching and her eyes were watery.

'Why is there a video? Who is he? Why did you do it?' Jean whispered.

‘I didn’t make the video.’

‘How did you not?’ Jean said, keeping his voice quiet.

‘*He* did.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I was drunk. We both were. He did it secretly. He *tricked* me.’

She looked over her shoulder. The sounds of Claire’s parents arguing in the kitchen were audible from the doorway where Jean still stood outside. Claire grabbed some flats and stepped outside still in her bathrobe. She put her keys in her pocket and walked away. Jean followed.

They walked across the road and into the forest. It got darker until the only sounds were their feet on the concrete and the jingle of her keys in her pocket. She started speaking in a distant voice that seemed disconnected to her body. Her tone was flat and matter-of-fact.

She had been texting a boxer from a posh school who had got her number from a friend. He had insisted he just wanted to hang out, to be friends. She ignored him for weeks but eventually, after an argument with her dad, and a promise from the boy that they were just going to watch a film in his big living room, with surround sound and a giant couch, she went. He kept offering her wine and then gin and tonics. Somehow, they ended up in his bedroom. She wasn’t so drunk that she didn’t remember it all but she was drunk enough that she couldn’t think clearly. The moment it was over she had regretted it. He had suddenly lost interest and she felt used and guilty. All she could think about was how this would break Jean’s heart and ruin their relationship. The next morning, she woke up and it hit her. She had planned to tell him. Of course, she had. She just needed a few days to plan it. Then her friends messaged her and told her that there were rumours that a video of her was being shared in a couple private schools in town. She found out her own story from someone else, just like all the others. Within a week it had spread back to their own school. She tried to ignore it, hoping people would lose interest but before long Pete had messaged her asking if Jean knew. Greg and DD messaged her and told her to tell the truth. But she was so caught up in everything. The school wanted Claire to tell the police. They were pressuring her every day to say who the boy was. But she didn’t want to go to the police. She just wanted it to go away. Then this morning, the Headteacher had called Claire’s mum because her dad didn’t know what to do and felt uncomfortable with the whole thing and they had told her that by now it would be impossible to track down every video and erase them.

‘But you have to go to the police,’ Jean said.

‘It’s too much hassle,’ she sighed. ‘I’ve had to go to the police before and it lasts for ever and they ask you so many questions. They treat you like you’re lying and then you have to go to court. They just make things worse and then they probably won’t even charge him after everything.’

‘Can’t the police do anything?’

‘All they can do right now is make sure it doesn’t end up on websites.’ Then she said, even quieter, ‘It’s technically child porn. I’m not eighteen yet.’

‘Please go to the police,’ Jean said. *‘Please.’*

‘These things fizzle out eventually. You’ll see. In a couple months, there’ll be something else. There always is. But I suppose that doesn’t change anything between us. You’re still going to break up with me.’

But he didn’t. He went home. The next day he couldn’t get out of bed. He spent a week hiding at home. He hated her. He hated her and he felt sorry for her. He hated her and he loved her. He hated her for making him compete with boys who were already men. He hated her for all the made-up stories he’d had to ignore for years. He hated her for hating herself, for not taking care of herself. He hated her for making him hate himself for blaming her. But she was still Claire. He loved her goofy laugh that so few people ever heard, the one she hid from her friends at school. In public she had this subdued, almost deep laugh, that was guarded and pointed but, in the house, when it was just the two of them and the couch and the TV, she laughed so hard that she would cry and run out of breath.

Then he came out of hiding and that parallel universe, the one that had opened the night he found out, was still around him. The same world but different. People rarely spoke about it. He and Claire avoided each other in public. Greg and DD would tell him to break up with her.

For a few weeks he continued begging her to go to the police. But she was right. It did fizzle out and soon she didn’t want to think or talk about it anymore. Soon they stopped talking about it all together.

Somewhere along the line, the story changed in his head. As Claire lost control that year, he started to blame her more. He grew angrier at her. He tried to pin the blame on the guy but he didn’t know who it was or where he was and Claire was right there.

The entire time he kept the video on his phone. He didn’t delete it until the flight to Thailand took off.

‘That’s crazy,’ Jonah said.

They were sitting down on the concrete, their feet dangling above the water at Kennedy Town harbour. It was a fitting place for the moment, with its dilapidation and that feeling of an empty warehouse. Moss, algae, soggy wood, rust. They sat watching the waves rolling and swaying just below them. The sky was the disappointing cool pale blue that signifies the arrival of morning and the end of the night. Jean's jaws and temples were throbbing. The high of the molly was slowly wearing off.

'Didn't you want to take revenge on the guy?'

'I did.' Jean shook his head. 'I had all these plots. I planned them out meticulously. How I would find out where he lived. How I would follow him home from school. Then I would bring a baseball bat one day and break his back. Maybe beat him enough to paralyse him but not enough to kill him. I would have a bag of spare clothes ready in a nearby wood. I'd get changed, burn the clothes, toss the bat in the river. I would have bought a ticket for a film at an old cinema with no CCTV beforehand so that I had an alibi. I would go back to the cinema and watch the rest of the film. I had other plans where I set his house on fire and killed his family. Never did, obviously.'

'Wow.'

'You know that feeling when you've left your phone at home or lost it somewhere and you're trying to go about your day, just tolerating the phone's absence? But you keep forgetting you've lost it so you habitually check your pockets, searching for it without even thinking, and then you realise it's not there. It's gone. But you forget again and remember again all day, all week. You're continually reminded that you don't have it. You relive the disappointment over and over again. That's what heartbreak feels like.'

'And what happened to her?'

'She went to therapy. She forgave me. I know what that means now.' He sighed and threw a piece of broken concrete into the water. 'All this time I thought it was just my pain. But it was hers first.'

He had forgotten it all. Until today in the pizzeria he had forgotten all the crying. Until he had taken the molly tonight, he had forgotten about the video. It was Claire's pain first. It had hurt him the way it hurt to see your mum cry because your dad wasn't a good husband. It hurt the way it hurt seeing your older brother get beat up and become hateful. He had seen her suffer and he had suffered too. He had seen someone he loved fall apart, and she took a piece of him with her. He was collateral damage, scarred by shrapnel. He had passed into that other dimension, the dark grey-blue dimension where everything was still and you realised that there was no order in this world. It was a world where men could harm the woman you loved

and get away with it and be celebrated. A world where you realised that you could act like that too and be celebrated. A world where men and women would like you for being selfish and cold. So you acted selfish, you treated people around you as if they were disposable, as disposable as she had felt, as disposable as you had felt, and for some reason they stuck by you. Every time you were selfish, without knowing, it made you think of her, of her pain, of her pain that was ignored, the pain she was punished for and you kept hurting others as if it was going to somehow balance things out, or protect you, or justify the pain. And you blamed her for her pain and blamed yourself for being hurt. You saw what strength was, or what you thought it to be. You tried to escape that new dimension and tried to create a new world where you could be a new person as if nothing from the first world had been real, as if it had only existed in that other dimension, as if it had been a first draft that could be scrapped. It was her pain first and instead of sharing it, you stole it and hid it. You transformed it into something unrecognizable so that you could hide the trace, the crumb trail back to its point of origin. This allowed you to believe that there had never been any suffering, that she had never been hurt, that you had never been hurt and that you were the victim of a minor betrayal rather than the onlooker, the collateral, of an act of violence. You made her the culprit thinking it would protect you rather than haunt you. And here you are facing yourself after all the years of movement.

He had that vertiginous shake going through his body. It felt like he'd just jumped out of a moving car or off a building. He'd wanted to tell his story, the exonerating story, the one which made him human, the one that made him forgivable, surely, to John or Angel but neither of them had acquiesced and instead he'd told it to Jonah, a complete stranger.

And now he was glad he had not told it to John or Angel because it was too much to say out loud, what he had just said. The whiplash of the memory was still pranging through him like a smashed gong or a kicked shinbone. It was better off reverberating in the ether and through a random stranger who would no-doubt forget the whole thing in a matter of days.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. What time was it? The sun was quite high in the sky now. Probably seven or eight maybe even nine in the morning. His flight home was in two hours.

He could see before opening the message that it was from the doctor. It was his death sentence come to get him. Just in time now that his confession, his story had been passed on, to the ether, to a fellow human. He would probably have to pick up some medicine, go to some sort of group where people talked about how difficult it was to slowly die.

Jean and Jonah parted ways quick and curt. Jonah tried to hug him but Jean went for the fist bump. Jean walked up the hill towards Bonham Road. Hong Kong was already wide awake. The old people were doing Tai Chi and eating their congee. The shops were all open. The drills were ringing, signalling the beginning of the workday, pounding the concrete as hard as Jean's own brain pounded his skull. The cranes were lifting and rotating; the buildings were inexorably rising. The boats arrived at the port and unloaded goods which would be exchanged for other goods which would then be shipped back out to another corner of the world. The club and bar workers and cleaners were going home to end their nocturnal shifts. The bankers and analysts and financiers had probably already been trading and analysing for hours, probably also high on coke and other substances. The logistics and coordination bureaucrats were managing and monitoring the shipping lanes and delivery schedules, while the air traffic controllers were orchestrating the landing and leaving of planes, and the immigration controllers monitored the entering and exiting of people through their ports, airports, and land borders, while the coast guard patrolled the seas and islands. He knew, because of something Angel had told him about her parents' occupations in logistics, that even the tunnels of Hong Kong required teams to manage the flow of cars and buses and trucks and to manage the flow of breathable air through giant fans and air-conditioning systems. And in the same manner, air currents and ocean currents swept across the world, sharing and moderating the exchange of heat and pressure and organisms, maintaining connections between the North Pole and the equator, the tropics to the sub-tropics and to the temperate zones. And in this way, through the spinning of the planet on its own axis and the orbiting of the moon and the typhoons of Hong Kong and the miserable rain of Glasgow and the dryness of Dakar and the hot tropical wetness of Chiang Mai, Jean's own trajectory was connected and he felt his own smudged and fading insignificance like a particle of sand or dust being tossed around the planet by the winds used for trade and conquest, the same heat and varying climate that pushed his earliest ancestors to leave Africa in search of more food in the middle east. He still hadn't checked his phone but now he thought of the other invisible web in which everyone was tangled, the invisible pulsing of information, scrambled ones and zeroes catapulted across the planet at the speed of light, information surpassing the collective memory of humankind stored somewhere in a loud room in the desserts of America, floating from person to person. It was a nice fuzzy feeling, zooming out like this, remembering the incomprehensible systems that pushed and pulled everyone like puppets or abacus beads or pheromones, pushing and pulling across the world, across space and time, overlapping, recycling, inverting, subverting, transecting, transporting, interconnecting, transmuting.

He was ready to die.

He opened the phone and the message. He took a deep breath.

The message began: Please find your test results below. As some of your results have returned positive, you must schedule another appointment at your earliest convenience.

His eyes felt like they didn't belong in his head, like he'd made some sort of mistake and put them in the wrong place and that's why they hurt so much. His skin felt like sandpaper. It felt like somebody had wrapped his body in plastic. Like there was something between him and everything else. He looked down.

And there it was.

Liver Function: Normal

Syphilis: Negative

Gonorrhoea: Negative

Chlamydia: Positive

HIV: Negative

Well then.

That wasn't so bad was it? Chlamydia? What, you just popped a couple antibiotics or something like that? Nothing. He'd have to call up some people and warn them, sure. But what a nice problem to have.

Fuck's sake, man, he'd really thought he was gonna die there, d'you remember that? He was all pure like, *ready to die* and that shit. What an idiot, man.

Of course, he wasn't in the clear yet, he still had to get his brain and lungs checked and all sorts of other things hiding round the corner, waiting to kill him. But for now, mate. Tata, eh. It was time to get the fuckin engine running. Time to start again. Time to get a wee 'bama, a wee Boroca, on the go, with some vitamin water, ibuprofen and some fucking Portuguese egg tarts, mate. Then maybe some Dim Sum from that wee place everyone goes to nearby. Then maybe a wee trip to town or maybe a wee swim or something. Crack open a couple cans soon enough. *Yet ere the sword cool in the sheath, Scotland will rise again!*

Fuck the flight. He would rebook it. He hadn't done his last night properly anyway. He had to do another take. It was time to fuckin celebrate, mate.

He had this new song stuck in his head. *La la la la la*. It was one of those old euro trance pop songs. It was a good yin. A good wee soundtrack. *The kisses of the sun were sweet, I didn't blink, I let it in my eyes like an exotic dream*. Mate, you could imagine the credits rolling with him, like, in the background, and him pure walking into the distance as the sun rose. *The radio playing songs that I have never heard, I don't know what to say. La la la la*

la, it goes around the world. The closing soundtrack being a half-ironic cheesy pop song made sense. A light-hearted ending to a heavy night. *La la la la la, it's all around the world.* Aye, mate. Credits rolling. Him walking into the sunset. It was perfect.

Epilogue

And where is Aaron? Is he Aaron now or is he Amadou? When he is Amadou, does Aaron disappear? And vice versa? Is he finally resting? Working? Somewhere in between? There is light growing inside him. A warm current flows between his heart and his mind.

Memories and distractions float from the darkness.

Baaba worked in the colonial regime until independence. In a nationalistic fervour, he sent Amadou to the local koranic school where he begged for alms and preached his litanies to learn of humility and God. He can still feel the cracks in the soles of his feet and the ear-pinching from the Marabout. Hot mornings walking in rags from door to door with an empty cup of rice. But he had never felt as connected to the world as when he chanted religious songs with the other talibés. Perhaps Amadou's mother quoted Senghor, saying that independence did not mean turning one's back from all history, that schooling which did not focus solely on the spiritual had its merits. Amadou's mother would have admonished his father to remember his days in Paris, to grasp the freedom that had supposedly come from learning philosophy amidst the wider alienation of living in the world of whites, the world of colonisers. Perhaps she convinced him that Amadou too should have this supposed opportunity to grow away from home.

No, surely that did not make sense. He would never know the truth. Why not simply have sent him to the European school in Dakar? Was it to grant him access to the wider world? Was it to acquire him global citizenship status through the American green card? To prevent him from being locked in the same country the rest of his life? Was it that many of their own friends and colleagues, more opulent than themselves, had opted to send their children to boarding school in Europe?

Memories and distractions. The rhythm of breath centres the mind.

What interests him are the moments when he is able to observe his thoughts, recognising them as they appear, solidify and dissipate. Watching the thoughts passing before him like objects floating along a river as he watches from the banks, just as the monks said. In these moments, as he observes his own thoughts, he wonders: who is observing them? If he, as he has always assumed, is a sum of the network of his thoughts, emotions and physical feelings, then who is this person observing these phenomena? Is this also Aaron, is it Amadou or someone else? What *is* the distraction between the thoughts and the observer? And who is it that narrates the thoughts as they come to be? Are the thoughts themselves already in words or is it the observer of the thoughts that translates the thoughts into words?

Where *is* he? Where *is* his voice? Where is his original self before he was born? as the Monk has previously asked with joyful laughter.

He opens his eyes then closes them. The imprint of green and gold light staining his retinas.

Yes. He is still in his secluded retreat. Sitting cross-legged in the half-lotus pose meditating in the shade of a tree. The cicadas and crickets screeching in the heat of the noon day sun.

It has been six years since he almost overdosed. Thankfully, Satoshi discovered him and called for the emergency naloxone to be brought immediately. He spent a few days in a Thai hospital before returning to London. Tyler listened to his story and to his plans; he would rent, then sell, the house and go back to a meditative retreat somewhere in Thailand. He had always avoided the lure of yoga and meditation, the potentially false promises of peace, but he wanted Tyler to join him. They have been returning to this isolated monastery, living and meditating with monks and other wandering souls every year since. It's an imperfect solution, hiding from the world – but one day he hopes to find a way to help others without destroying himself. Dr Amadou Aaron Fall left his job, took an early retirement and deleted all of his social media. (His last post on Facebook, 'I'm going to my resting place,' confused some of his friends it seems, and Tyler had received confused messages worrying that Aaron had died.)

He inhales and feels the fresh air on the tip of his nose and entering his lungs.

It took work, time and a lot of pain to win Tyler back. When you've spent your whole life treating friendships and love as a form of social protection and status it is difficult to go back to seeing friendship and love as something beyond securing your own position and elevation. He had to learn to love from scratch. He had to learn to let go of progress and growth and productivity. Every day is a struggle to accept the present moment, to allow time to stretch itself around him.

He is learning to grow roots. He had always thought roots meant restriction. He had believed that restlessness and detachment preceded liberty and autonomy. His aspiration had been to float around the world, to soar freely unconstrained and unbound. But he has learnt that there is freedom in roots. Roots mean freedom. Because choice can only exist contextually and what does freedom mean without community, without love, without the ground?

He is stretching time. Stretching his lungs. Stretching his mind.

Beneath the ground there are roots and beneath all anger there is sorrow. Beneath the anger, sorrow hides, neglected and shameful. I cannot jump from anger to happiness. I have to go beneath the anger, to greet the sorrow, accept it and find peace. Only through embracing sorrow and peace will I find happiness. I know this now. And I wish that the benefits of my learning be shared with all sentient beings so that they too may find their sorrow, their peace and maybe even their happiness.

Jean stares out of the scratched tube window into the darkness of the tunnel. He is on his way to meet Angel for the first time since Hong Kong. He is a ghost man returning into her life. *Gwai Lou*. He thinks of Tiresias and his power to travel through time and bodies.

The tube screeches to a halt. The obstacle course of life is all around him. He is stationary, going nowhere. He feels the train twist under his feet and the door moves forward to swallow him. The stairs descend in rhythm with his feet until the tube spits him out and the surface world of London falls down to him. He walks along the treadmill of the concrete pavement, the entire world rolling like a hamster wheel, and sees that he is the first to arrive at their meeting point. He wonders if she will recognise him.

An incomplete rite of passage? Liminal White British Masculinities in Hong Kong

Introduction

The historical global movement of white men was core to creating western ideals of white masculinities that still exist today (Painter, 2010). As globalisation restructures patterns of migration and tourism, the mobilities of white men continue to replicate and change white masculinities in shifting contexts. The growing field of research on mobilities and gender has produced relatively few studies on white masculinities and mobilities (Wojnicka and Pustulka, 2017) yet this is a key topic as mobilities have always been formative practices for young white western men (Grabowski et al, 2017). The study of contemporary masculinities and their evolution over time is key to understanding practices of gender. By studying white British masculinities and mobilities we can gain an understanding of how harmful (self destructive, aggressive, insensitive) patterns of attitude and behaviour develop and about the potential for these to improve (becoming more reflective, caring, engaged) over time. In this thesis, I argue, through research conducted with then-young men who spent sojourns in Hong Kong, that a key element of contemporary white male British identity is created via rites of passage abroad, which are rooted in a neo-colonial conquest narrative yet challenged by contemporary social justice movements and increasing awareness of decolonial thought. I argue further that memories of these mobilities stay rooted as part of young men's life stories and sense of self but that the effects of the journey (becoming integrated into an international lifestyle and a sense of 'elite' status) are delayed as a result of the incomplete structure of this anticipated rite of passage.

This study consists of two chapters structured according to the rite of passage framework.

Chapter one explores the separation and liminal stages of participants' sojourns. It covers how participants anticipated their time abroad, what they sought from the experience, how they felt and behaved upon arrival and how they spent their time in Hong Kong. This chapter probes how fantasies, practices and disruption of participants' time in Hong Kong shaped their experiences, ideologies and identities.

Chapter two examines the under-researched practices of homecoming from temporary migrations. It explores their anticipations of how their lives would change upon returning home, the expected change within themselves, and the reality of returning home in the short

and long term. This chapter explores the practices and performances of return; the nostalgia, regrets, opportunities, and disappointments, and their impact on the lives and identities of participants upon return to Britain.

Background

Temporary mobilities are crucial formative practices and ‘rites of passage’ for understanding white masculinities (Grabowski et al, 2017). White men transform as they move through cultures and power dynamics, highlighting tensions and contradictions that can teach us about masculine subjectivities. In Thailand, white male migrants perform “neo-colonial imaginaries about what it means to be ‘white men’” while barriers to work and communication challenge their privilege (Maher and Lafferty, 2014). In Hong Kong, tensions exist between “expatriate” work practices and the increasing irrelevance of whiteness in local society (Leonard, 2010). Likewise, white men in relationships with domestic workers in Hong Kong experience financial power alongside alienation and emotional vulnerability (Wo, 2018). Current research problematises the “presumed normativity” of male mobilities (Wojnicka and Pustulka, 2017) and indicates that white men in the global south are caught between discourses and practices of neo-colonial privilege and alienated exclusion.

There is a solid foundation of research on white men in East and Southeast Asia that focuses predominantly on older white male migrants and the ways in which their identities are shaped through practices of work, leisure and relationships. Beyond the colonial and institutional legacies and structures that shape the lives of white male migrants in Hong Kong, white masculinities are practiced and performed in the activities and conditions of day-to-day life. As Knowles argues, “whiteness is *made* in the power geometries of...global migration: made in the ways in which people operate, move through, and in the terms on which they occupy, and use *space*” (2005: 90).

White masculinities are thus made through practices and conditions involving the tensions between an alienated minority status and neo/colonial privilege. Knowles (2005) shows that these expatriates are outsiders who do not speak Cantonese and yet navigate their daily lives thanks to the large number of Hong Kong people who speak English. As outsiders, older and wealthier western migrants do not have access to or interest in large parts of the city due to language barriers and cultural exclusion, but they do have access to clubs and neighbourhoods that cater to all their needs. They know many Hong Kong, Chinese and Asian

people but those relationships are mostly limited to that of colleagues, domestic workers and service staff (Knowles, 2005: 98).

Similarly, minority status and privilege both influence leisure practices outside of work; white men are both able to ignore social etiquette as outsiders while benefitting from being exoticized and elevated by some local residents, such as in their sex lives. One of Leonard's participants, a gay white British man, described such experiences, showing that these behaviours exist beyond heterosexual masculinities also. Leonard highlights these internal tensions as the conflict between the "hard work and responsibility" ethics of corporate expatriates and the "hedonistic privileges of the colonial lifestyle" (2010: 351).

While many wealthy western men in Hong Kong may benefit from intersectional power and privilege, these are experienced and enacted within different contexts, both relationally and temporally. The sexuality and racialisation of white masculinities are made, embodied and practiced, as described in Farrer's research on Shanghai, in spaces known as "ethnosexual contact zones" (2010: 70). Farrer argues that white men take advantage of their racial privilege as a way to integrate into Chinese society but that this is "partly motivated by a lack of social and cultural capital to integrate into Chinese society in other ways" (2010: 90).

Research finds that racial and economic privilege for many white men in East and South East Asia is something that diffuses over time. Maher and Lafferty show that initially, white masculinities are performed through the role of the "player" or "provider" in order to embody a neo-colonial ideal of the "real white man" but that over time these roles lose their saliency (2014: 428-436). Similarly, in her research on relationships between white male expatriates and south-east Asian domestic workers in Hong Kong, Wo shows how, as a symbol of wealth, whiteness both initiates and strains relationships by marking white men "as targets for migrant women seeking financial opportunity" (2018: x).

White masculinities are also made in the affective and embodied experiences of social isolation. Wo reflexively highlights the difficulty of conducting research from a postcolonial and feminist perspective in Hong Kong when faced with expatriates who "publicly cry and lament about unreciprocated emotional investment from migrant female partners" (2018: x). In Shanghai, the same racialised sexual capital used to initiate interracial sexual relationships obstructs white men from befriending Chinese men. Farrer dubs "foreign masculinity as both empowering and marginalizing, a kind of 'alien sexual capital' that was simultaneously exploitable but estranged" (2010: 90). Thompson et al point out that older male westerners often yearn for a sense of belonging "after living long, unsettled, often lonely lives" and that they see their Thai village home as where "they expect to remain, to die in their old age, and

to be cremated according to local Buddhist custom” (2016: 61). This isolation is also practiced as a form of social policing; Maher and Lafferty show that long-term white male migrants mock their peers who attempt to integrate into the local culture or spend too much time with their wives (2014: 439).

The existing research, reviewed above, focuses on older, long-term migrants who often ascribe to orthodox masculinities but lays fertile ground for further study. There is currently no research on the experiences of younger men who are more likely to return from Asia and have different susceptibilities and responses to neo-colonial imaginaries, alternative masculinities and political upheaval. This thesis builds on existing research, using a case study based on journeys in/to Hong Kong. As a transitional place where neo-colonial imaginaries, Chinese influence and political resistance mix together, Hong Kong is a key location for understanding the re-making of white masculinities.

Research Methods

The qualitative research methods used in this study involved conducting semi-structured life history interviews (Connell, 2005) with young white British men (ages 18-30) during and after a stay in Hong Kong. The interviews were analysed using Nvivo thematic coding. The thesis draws from de/postcolonial, gender and race/whiteness theories, viewing masculinities as non-reified, relational and intersectional (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The existing research on the topic bridges sociological and anthropological methods, focusing on life-history interviews, participant observation and ethnography. This research was approved by the Social Sciences & Arts Cross-Schools Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) (Ethical review application number: ER/LP397/1). Participants names have been anonymised. Below, I detail the rationale for participant selection, research methods and case study location.

Participants

The participants of this study, university-educated, young (aged 20-30) white British men from working class to upper middle-class backgrounds, engaged in temporary migrations for the purpose of career advancement, personal growth, and social status. They are not fleeing desperation in the sense of many south-north migrations, which Werbner describes as “transnationals” and “translocals”, many of whom “contend with incredible social and economic hardships, and they draw on culturally constituted resources of sociality and mutual

aid for survival” (2000: 11). But neither do they easily fit in with Werbner’s definition of “cosmopolitans” who “are multilingual gourmet tasters who travel among global cultures, savouring cultural differences as they flit with consummate ease between social worlds” (Ibid). It can be argued that these participants are becoming-cosmopolitans, cosmopolitans in the making via such journeys, seeking to accelerate their ascent into a worldly, comfortable lifestyle. None of the participants spoke fluent Cantonese or Mandarin, with the majority learning very basic pragmatic phrases for buying food and navigating local transport. However, they all expressed a desire to explore more smoothly through language.

These participants also differ from the expatriates of Knowles’ and Leonard’s research through generational difference. While the research participants in Knowles’ and Leonard’s work had experienced pre-handover colonial Hong Kong and had relatively fixed views of what masculinity meant, the participants of this study have grown up in an age of rapidly spreading social justice discourse and the awareness of a vast array of subcultures through increased connectivity via the internet and social media. These young men are aware of the travel cliches and racist associations that can influence their experiences of Hong Kong. Such ideas were important to participants as interviews were conducted at the height of the BLM movement and the Hong Kong democracy protests in 2020. They are in a unique situation in that they have the privilege and opportunity to engage in such north-south, west-east mobilities, while being aware, to different degrees, that they risk recreating neo-colonial patterns of behaviour and having to contend with the legacies that their predecessors have left behind.

In this sense, the white masculinities practiced and performed by these participants, as the white masculinities of Knowles’ research, are relational, intersectional and contextual. The context here has changed as both global migration patterns, local demographics and political and cultural relations have significantly shifted in Hong Kong and in East Asia more widely. White masculinities in general and indeed the white masculinities of contemporary young white British men are created through these liminal experiences in a changing context.

All my participants in this project chose Hong Kong, at least in part, because of the perceived benefit to their career prospects, education, personal development, and financial advantage. While four of the five total participants went to Hong Kong for a study abroad at Hong Kong University, three of the five total participants did internships and worked for money. Two of the participants studied then stayed for an internship before returning home. Further, the participants’ experiences were based on two different timelines: 3 of the participants stayed in Hong Kong in 2011-12, while 2 of the participants were in Hong Kong 2019-20. This was as a result of the snowball sampling method used but also allowed for an

insight in the different experiences arising out of the relatively calm period in 2010-12 compared to the major upheaval and disruption during the democracy protests in Hong Kong.

The participants were in Hong Kong to work and study across disciplines and sector such as business, journalism and politics. The two interns worked in policy and law.

Participants were recruited through word of mouth, existing networks and snowball sampling. For interviews conducted while participants were abroad or in a distant part of the UK, skype was used, while others were interviewed in person. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on life-histories and asking about experiences, feelings and memories regarding their time up until choosing to go to Hong Kong, being in Hong Kong and returning.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a key location for both my research and general research on migration as, more than other postcolonial spaces, its recent transition of power means the neo-colonial imaginaries of Westerners are contested by a strong opposing cultural influence from China (Leonard, 2010: 341). Further, ongoing challenges between Hong Kong's colonial past and its full incorporation into the People's Republic of China, alongside a desire for self-government, have created large protest movements that for years opened several possibilities of how Hong Kong's future could develop. This creates fertile ground for intercultural political and social education for visitors. Hong Kong is also a complex social environment with alternative masculinities and cross-cultural learning opportunities that can challenge hegemonic masculinities. As a commercial hub, it is a popular destination for formative mobilities such as internships and study exchanges.

In terms of local practices of masculinity, Hong Kong's multicultural society has many influences on how masculinities are practiced, including the influence from many waves of migration from mainland China and significant Filipino, Indonesian and European diasporic communities. The majority culture, and the one most researched in this context, is the local Hong Kong Chinese culture, with ethnic Chinese people representing 95% of the population of Hong Kong. The major findings in the literature on local Hong Kong Chinese masculinities include the importance of family, local discourse and cultures of work, and the geopolitical context of Hong Kong in shaping male subjectivities (Ho and Jackson, 2018; Wong and Yau, 2016; Rochelle, 2014).

The particular geopolitical history of Hong Kong has had a major influence on local masculinities when compared to the parallel histories of Taiwan and mainland China (Wong

and Yau, 2016). The principal difference is rooted in Hong Kong being both shielded from some of the outcomes of Chinese Communist rule while also being subjugated to British colonial rule.

An obvious effect of British colonial rule is the influence of a variety of western norms and masculinities to the ethnic Chinese population. Rochelle argues that men “growing up in the time of Hong Kong as a British colony” partially “adopted” elements of western hegemonic masculinity (2014: 3). As a safe haven for refugees and migrants from China, there are also unresolved “political traumas” subsumed within Hong Kong’s local masculinities; “turbulent political events” such as Tiananmen Square and the Cultural Revolution are active in the minds of men, when discussing their masculinity (Ho and Jackson, 2018: 23).

Wong and Yau point out another influence on Hong Kong masculinities: the shift to a “consumption-based market society” was a deliberate tactic by the British colonial government to distract Hong Kong people from the competing “Chinese nationalisms” that were particularly threatening to the British (2016: 231). This free-market consumption culture is what underpins the practices of work and wealth aggregation in local masculinities, while Hong Kong’s wealth and status as a global city is also responsible for the influx of domestic workers of the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, which impacts both local family dynamics (Ibid: 239) and the expatriate masculinities highlighted by Wo (2018).

Limitations

There are three possible limitations to this study.

Firstly, the fact that the participants were in Hong Kong across two different timelines and therefore experienced two different versions of Hong Kong can indeed risk confounding the findings. On one hand, as a longitudinal study, it gives a greater insight into Western migrations to Hong Kong over time; on the other hand, it may be that there are thematic differences between participants’ stories that are specifically down to this timeline difference. However, I dealt with this by factoring it into my analysis – simply being conscious of the different perceptions of Hong Kong that would arise from these different contexts. Further, there is clear benefit to having a comparative element of how participants’ experiences differed over time. Of course, one group has had longer to reflect upon their time in Hong Kong, while the other group had only returned within a year of being interviewed. Again, I deal with this difference simply by being conscious of this fact during analysis. It is also important to note that, the ‘Overton window’ and the ideological norms, especially amongst mobile and educate

elites, 2020 was far more progressive in terms of awareness of racism and colonialism than in 2010 – so while older participants have had longer to reflect on their time in Hong Kong, the younger ones already had the benefit of societal reflection and were far more aware of the tropes and issues regarding young white men in Hong Kong and Asia than their older counterparts had during their time in Hong Kong.

Though the goal of this research is to look at a specific demographic, there is a possible limitation regarding the homogeneity of the participants. The specificity of choosing young white British men on a sojourn in Hong Kong was to avoid confounding factors and understand a specific historical lineage. For example, because Hong Kong was British colony, it was possible that Britishness was key to their behaviour in Hong Kong compared to, say, German or French men. However, this means analysing similarities between the simple act of sojourning as a young person – by allowing for different nationalities, races, genders, destinations – was not possible. The limitation, then, is simply that the study wasn't larger, which is unavoidable due to travel, funding and time restriction. A larger study will be needed to find out how young people globally experience exchanges and internships as a rite of passage and how this affects their sense of identity. My results do indicate that even if behaviours of different groups of young sojourning people on exchanges and internships have many similarities across cultures, the way in which these white British men narrativized their own experiences to themselves was unique to their Britishness and the demographic selection of participants was therefore a useful methodological decision.

Though not specifically a limitation – an important aspect of the study worth addressing is the use of the rite of passage framework. There has been debate over whether gap years, exchange years and internships qualify as rites of passage specifically because they lack a formalised reincorporation phase that is standardised (King, 2011 and Grabowski et al, 2017). While some returnees may have institutions that consciously organise 'welcome back' events or families that organise a welcome home party, these are not standardised rituals. One could posit that the mere act of return through an airport, which is a standardised procedure, or of being greeted by one's family and sitting down to recount one's experiences, would serve as unconscious rituals that the majority of sojourners will experience. However, I believe the rite of passage framework is key because the missing formalised reintegration phase explains the deflation and depression that follows many young people's experience and is indeed a form of unmitigated reverse culture shock. Participants return from their liminal phase expecting to grow and change and instead return with little recognition of this expectation and often have to adjust, at least temporarily, to their old life without further support, even if later, they may

move abroad again. The key here is that participants expected a rite of passage – they mentioned anticipating a change in themselves and continued to view their time abroad as a turning point in their lives. Finally, in Van Gennep’s original formulation of the rite of passage, it was acknowledged that “in some specific instances” a particular phase is “not always equally important or equally elaborated” (1961: 11).

Chapter 1: Rites of passage and liminal white masculinities

Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of young white British men in the anticipation, arrival and sojourn stage of their expected rite of passage in Hong Kong.

Sojourns overseas, such as educational exchanges and interning, volunteering or working abroad, are an experience common across the globe, with commonality across nationalities, races and genders. Sojourns abroad for young people have been also identified as a global phenomenon of neoliberal ‘identity work’ and professional distinction (Yoon, 2014: 2016). However, as these neoliberal practices have their roots in traditions such as the grand tour (Grabowski, 2017) and colonial expeditions (Smith and Laurie, 2011), many of these ideas are still pervasive amongst western sojourners. Although many of the emotions, behaviours and experiences of these young men overlap significantly with their counterparts from other backgrounds (e.g. rowdy behaviour in party districts, a need to collect and catalogue experiences to be showcased upon return), this chapter establishes that many elements of their internalised narrative and memory of the sojourn is experienced through a distinctly neo-colonial frontier masculinity lens. Specifically, I argue that these young men retold and remembered their experiences as including acts of: ‘playing conquest’, perceived risk-taking, and going native. Detailed throughout the rest of the chapter, these key behaviours and interpretations show that despite the growing mainstream awareness of movements such as Decolonise/Decolonial agendas, Black Lives Matter and the Hong Kong democratic protests, young British men experience their time in Hong Kong with conflicting feelings of pride and shame.

Indeed, despite the neo-colonial associations of the journeys these young men make to postcolonial Hong Kong, this journey is conducted in a state of self-awareness, and the young men often feel a sense of embarrassment and guilt at their behaviours. These privileged mobilities highlight a shift in postcolonial mobilities when compared to previous studies on whiteness and masculinity in Hong Kong (Leonard, 2010 and Knowles, 2005), where young men have to navigate between their opportunities to enact and participate in such neo-colonial narratives while feeling emotionally uncomfortable with their own behaviours.

This possibly highlights the beginning of a shift in the way that privileged youth mobilities are practiced in postcolonial spaces and signals a potential opening for new

frameworks of understanding spaces of exchange, internship and volunteering, potentially towards an equal footed solidarity-based framework as opposed to an extractive and consumer-oriented journey.

Separation and Anticipation

Both Leonard (2010) and Knowles (2005) root the white male migrant experience in empire and the subsequent shift in power relations since Hong Kong's 1997 postcolonial transition. Historically, white (British) men came to Hong Kong to work for the colonial administration or trade and finance industries, with access to the luxuries that continue to be offered as part of a declining culture of expatriate 'packages' including subsidised, high-quality housing; school tuition for children; and live-in domestic help. Knowles highlights that for her research participants, empire's presence continues to be felt in the ability to continue finding high quality work despite not speaking Cantonese even though top tier jobs are reserved for Chinese nationals, "There is still a (closing) space marked out in which colonial privilege is reconfigured" (2005: 105). However, Leonard's argument that "the interplay between global, national and local discourses of race and gender" is unsettling colonial work-power relations for privileged work migrants (2010: 341) captures the changing identities and practices of migrants and expatriates in Asia (Farrer and Yeoh, 2018).

More recently, Hong Kong has still been known both as an expatriate haven (a *BBC* article from 2016 titled 'An expat's dream post, but opportunities are drying up' highlights this perfectly) and as a site of hedonistic excess for wealthy global male elites (a *Vice* article from 2014 called, 'Cocaine, Parties, and Prostitution: The Life of Hong Kong's Young, Wealthy British Expats' showcases this well).

However, research participants expressed that they did not have a clear image regarding what they expected Hong Kong to be like as a place. Some of the participants had stumbled upon Hong Kong as a destination as the opportunity arose, while others simply had an impression of Hong Kong as a sprawling city. "I think that I probably didn't have a very clear picture and I just expected it to be completely crazy. Lots of skyscrapers," says Chris, who also planned to travel across Mainland China before his exchange in Hong Kong. Two participants, who had briefly visited Hong Kong in the past, also did not know what to expect:

I couldn't really visualise what my time there would be like, apart from just the huge buildings and chaotic scenes around me. I couldn't really

think, visualise or even imagine what life in Hong Kong would be like, even though I had been to Hong Kong when I was fourteen years old. – Stephen, 2019

Charlie, who had also previously visited Hong Kong in his teenage years, said that when he pictured Hong Kong, he imagined, “malls” and “shops with big brands”.

As indicated in the above descriptions of “crazy” and “chaotic”, one key expectation was that of difference. Sometimes this was expressed through terms of misplaced expectations for Hong Kong to be like under-developed countries:

It’s Asia, you know. You can’t get much further from the UK in terms of culture. Completely different culture. All these crazy Asian countries. Lots of places to travel...It was the less safe choice; it was the riskier choice. I expected it to be really dirty and overpopulated and that was probably it. – Chris, 2011

Phil also described his feeling of difference when he was selecting Hong Kong over America as his destination for a student exchange, “it was gonna be like an *experience*, like obviously America is different but you kinda know what you’re getting into but with Hong Kong it’s like, *what the fuck?*” Similarly, Stephen, who had also previously been considering America, changed his mind, in part, because of the sense of difference, “why not just put Hong Kong because that would be a lot more different and I would probably get a much richer experience out of it, more unique experience”.

It is clear here that it is not a consciously known neo-colonial discourse of Hong Kong as a destination for Westerners that attracted them. Indeed, a sense of a beaten track and that Hong Kong is an expatriate and financial elite destination would have undermined the sense of ‘going into the unknown’ and adventure that was central to choosing Hong Kong. This differs to Leonard’s discussion of British workers in Hong Kong, which foregrounds the known financial gains and ‘symbolic power’ associated with expatriate positions that draws her participants to Hong Kong (2010: 341).

In contrast to the lack of narrative or cultural awareness of what Hong Kong often means to foreigners, there was a definite social-status and long-term material motivation for going to Hong Kong.

The high ranking and international reputation of Hong Kong University was a clear motivational factor. Several participants, by doing an exchange to HKU, were able to go to a university that was higher ranking than their home institution. This highlights also the contradictory perspective of Asia as both a place of chaos and adventure, and as a place of opportunity and growth. Charlie “chose HK deliberately because...there was also the factor that it would be the University of Hong Kong. Of all the options, that was the best ranked.” Phil chose Hong Kong partly because “it was the best university on the list”.

Tom, in Hong Kong in 2019, went to Hong Kong explicitly for career development:

If I think about why I actually went...It was to develop myself as a professional, to become smarter, to be around people who are really clued in and super interesting and basically to steal some of them, the most interesting parts of them.

Charlie had ambitions of becoming “well-travelled”, while, in the run up to Hong Kong, and guiding his decision, Chris says, “I guess I was testing my limits. And just seeing where it would take me. For the fun. But yeah, also for myself. Because, I guess I was learning a lot about myself.”

Stephen describes changing his mind from America after realising that, financially, he “couldn’t afford it”, knowing that Hong Kong would be within his price range. Phil chose Hong Kong “because it seemed a lot cheaper” and had always anticipated working in Hong Kong during his stay because he “needed money”. As someone who had grown up “working class” and had never experienced much of a sense of financial surplus, Charlie saw the financial benefit of Hong Kong:

I didn’t have extra tuition fees while I was there, I was paying my normal UK tuition fees, which was before tuition fees went up. I got my maintenance grants and I got an extra maintenance grant because I was studying abroad. The accommodation was so cheap. Hong Kong is notoriously expensive but I think I paid 300 or 400 pounds for the entire term. I had loads and loads of money. – Charlie 2011

It is clear then, that although not having consciously chosen Hong Kong based on its international reputation for expatriate and British colonial luxury, material gains were a major

anticipated motivation for the trip, with a sense of extractive and future benefit for self and career.

If these participants were not aware of the colonial and neo-colonial legacy of western migration to Hong Kong for material gain, then why is the ambition and desire for material gain so central to their journey? One uniting factor was a sense of past failure. Participants sought out options for working abroad to rectify these self-identified failures and then found in Hong Kong both the possibility of “excellence” and adventure.

Charlie recounts:

I had an enormous chip on my shoulder in my first year at university because I fucked up my A-levels and didn't get into my first choice of uni...I myself having underperformed and I set myself three goals which were to get into a good and excellent master's programme, to get a first-class honours, and to study abroad. – Charlie, 2011

Chris was “determined” to follow in the footsteps of his sister and study at Oxford University only to be rejected twice, which pushed him to go on a gap year, eventually leading to his interest in travel and a year abroad. Phil, who, though identifying as white and British, moved overseas to live with one of his parents in his late teens, felt like a failure because he “had an identity crisis early on. People expected me to speak the local language because I had a local surname. They pushed me back a year, I finished school a year late. Then I was like fuck it I want to join the army.”

Participants either implicitly or explicitly viewed their time in Hong Kong as part of an opportunity to redeem past failure and practice a redemptive masculinity that allows a sense of strength, adventure and boldness in contrast to past failure. An opportunity to test oneself and prove oneself. These were men who felt uncomfortable in their home countries and societies, due to a combination of past self-identified failure, not identifying with orthodox masculinities, or not having a complete sense of cultural belonging in the UK. There was thus a desire to prove themselves elsewhere, to explore and leave their home behind. Despite being mostly-middle-class white men, these young men, who left Britain as a self-assigned rite of passage, did not feel dominant, powerful or at home in their place of origin. However, as people of relative privilege, with the opportunity to attend higher education, they were presented with the opportunity to test themselves elsewhere.

Participants who came to Hong Kong in the lead up to or during the protests had to keep updated with the volatile situation. However, while simply checking that they would be able to land and reside in Hong Kong, the protests also formed a possible exit due to general nervousness about the trip. Stephen said, “Part of me was a little bit relieved, thinking, I don’t have to go to Hong Kong because of the protests and I can stay home.” In this sense, the protests themselves didn’t necessarily increase the interest in the specifics of what was happening in Hong Kong in advance of arrival. The main lens through which it was understood was whether or not it was possible to go.

This particular form of rite of passage, then, seems to be predicated upon a specific wilful ignorance, the sense of abstract difference and uniqueness of Hong Kong, without any specific knowledge of the place, based entirely on a lack of knowledge and vague neo-colonial imaginaries of ‘the east’ or ‘Asia’ as a place of chaos and adventure. For this type of journey, which centres the individual, and is based on a sense of personal growth and testing the limits of one’s ability to live and thrive independently, the exotic unknown of Hong Kong is precisely a condition for this trip, both Phil and Stephen highlighting that compared to America, and other more ‘western’ destinations, Hong Kong would be more different – a difference only possible based on lack of prior knowledge. In this sense, the rite of passage in Hong Kong and other postcolonial space is different to one in a country such as America, Australia or even France or Germany, as the vague associations of exoticness without any understanding of the local culture is a key component allowing the narrative of exploration and testing to occur. It is impossible to say how much neo-colonial unconsciousness and imaginaries prefigured such understandings and relationships with Hong Kong, though all participants were aware of Hong Kong’s proximity to Southeast Asia and the attractions for tourism and travel in the region.

Hong Kong is a common destination for career upgrades, luxurious expatriate lifestyles, internships, and exchanges. It is known for commerce, trade and money and as a place where ‘east meets west’. Yet, without an overt knowledge of Hong Kong as such a place, these men were drawn into an association with Hong Kong due to its presence on exchange and internship lists, a material reality resulting from its colonial and commercial history. Without a clear understanding of that history before their arrival, these men nonetheless had ambitions which were entirely fitting into Hong Kong’s discourse as a place for catapulting or enhancing the lives and prospects of westerners.

In this sense we can see the relationship between these young men, their identity and their mobilities through the lens in which Rachel Vincent describes the combination of the “work of feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial theorists to break down humanistic

notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’” allowing an understanding of “‘the mutually constitutive relationships that exist between bodies and places’ , offering new perspectives on the complexity and interconnectivity of contemporary life” (Vincent, 2014: 370). Discourses of white masculinity, the exotic east, the frontier, material opportunities for career and financial benefit, are all embedded and coded within the associations, assumptions and imaginaries of this specific rite of passage. Hong Kong, as a place that is replicated abroad through connections, associations and opportunities also shapes identities without the awareness and knowledge of participants, there is a relationship with a space developed without being physically present, but reaching out through adverts, academic and internship opportunities. The desire for career and material advancement is not a motivation unique to British men or to western sojourners – but the ignorance of imperial history and perspective of Hong Kong as a “wild” and unknown place to seek adventure is rooted in neo-colonial assumptions and fantasies. As we shall see, as self-awareness grows over time, the participants became more conscious of their relationship to space, place and history within this context. Neo-colonial fantasies of growth and adventure do not simply exist in the mind but must be acted out and practiced in space.

Arrival

The arrival to Hong Kong featured both as a confirmation in the moment of the fantasies and hopes for difference while also, in retrospect, creating a sense of embarrassment for perceiving Hong Kong through such a lens.

I thought of myself as this intrepid traveller. And arriving in Hong Kong I remember there being a little Buddha statue in the back of the taxi...it was like...this was the start of my *Asian* [laughing] *adventure*. And in reality, I’ve been in taxis in London where people have little statues and buddhas...So I arrived and I remember being very proud of myself being there. – Charlie, 2011

Similarly, Phil described his arrival in Hong Kong as like “landing on another planet. Just everything was so different and so new.”

Stephen, who had been to Hong Kong previously in his teens was both surprised by difference and lack thereof.

When I arrived at first I was a bit tense because I had no idea how much the protests were actually impacting the city and I was pleasantly surprised by how calm everything was...I also remember thinking, because I'd been to China a couple times...that I was going to stick out a lot, that...on the streets people would be looking at me because I was a westerner, which was definitely the case in Shanghai and a lot of places in China that I'd been. But I remember being surprised and feeling a bit stupid for thinking in Hong Kong it would be the same thing. Most parts of the city still overwhelmed me and in the first week or so I hesitated to speak to anyone who looked Chinese because I didn't know if it was okay to speak English, I didn't know how good English was, if I could just walk up to a random shop and start to speak English. I didn't speak much to locals for the first little while. – Stephen, 2019

Stephen both anticipated and experienced difference and berated himself for expecting that same difference. The phrasing of not knowing “if it was okay to speak English” also highlights a shift from expecting difference for the sake of experience to suddenly realising one's status as an outsider and not wanting to offend or bother locals to the extent of racially profiling people to avoid embarrassment. Similarly, Charlie said, “I look back a bit and feel a bit of cringe” regarding the way he perceived and talked about the local culture.

It is upon arrival – as Charlie said, “the beginning of the adventure” – that the liminal phase of the rite of passage begins. The sense of difference and exoticness fulfils the anticipated difference; challenges are expected; all participants discussed the difficulty of settling in during their first week, the overwhelming amount of admin and paperwork, getting used to the geography and busyness of the city. These are key challenges, which, as we shall see, form a key component of the liminal stage of this rite of passage. However, as we have briefly touched on above – the sense of embarrassment and cringe that the participants feel regarding their perceptions and experiences, undermine the rite of passage and pose a complication regarding the narrative of the journey that the participants recount to themselves and to others.

Liminal Challenges

The liminal mobilities of young white British men in Hong Kong, whether spent interning or studying, involve similar patterns of behaviour and experience, fitting into their narratives of testing oneself, proving oneself and growing personally or professionally. I argue that all participants experienced and practiced: ‘playing conquest’, perceived risk-taking, and going native. Playing conquest refers to engaging with the local geographies in a way that is perceived of as claiming that space as one’s own or making it one’s own. Perceived risk-taking refers to risky activities that allow participants to feel they have tested their own limits or challenged themselves. Going native refers to feeling one has become accepted within the locality while also separating oneself from other foreigners within the space. These experiences occur in a variety of specific ways and initially involve a sense of pride, freedom and coolness but are also either retrospectively or in the moment met with embarrassment, regret and guilt. As we shall see, these typically neo-colonial processes of engagement with Hong Kong are constantly undermined by the participants’ self-awareness and realisation that their behaviour and attitudes fall into tropes or that they cannot centre their own journey as key to their narrative of growth in Hong Kong. There is a key contradiction here; while on the one hand the 2011 participants and 2019 participants have been influenced by discourses of anti-racism and decoloniality in their interpretation of their experiences, they have nonetheless recreated neo-colonial patterns of behaviour involving playing conquest, perceived risk-taking and going native, which in turn causes frustration when they realise the processes of their actions.

Playing conquest

As Knowles argues, whiteness and masculinities are “made in the ways in which people operate, move through, and in the terms on which they occupy, and use space” (2005: 90). The mobile white masculinities of young British men in Hong Kong are made in their interaction with space. Participants engaged in playing conquest behaviours and attitudes through partying, seeking new experiences and through local relationships.

All participants were aware and had some experience of the Hong Kong party districts. Amongst international groups in Hong Kong, Lan Kwai Fong and Wan Chai are the two primary places for foreigners to drink and revel. One particular international subculture in Hong Kong is ‘Club 7-Eleven’, which refers to buying drinks at the popular convenience store and drinking in the streets. All participants were aware of this culture and had participated in it. Charlie described this drinking culture:

We went to Lan Kwai Fong and Wan Chai, we drank on the streets a lot, we loved the fact that you could drink in public spaces compared to home. I remember we would sit in the rooftop garden at IFC mall and drink at those free tables. We would just buy cans from 7-Eleven and drink there. We'd be surrounded by logos of big international banks like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan. I think we felt like we owned the place despite the fact that we were drinking £1 beers [laughs] in a public park essentially. Which, if we'd been doing that in the UK we would not in any way have felt powerful. Then we would go to dim sum, to a local space and we drunk white people would walk up hammered and we would grab things and move around and be noisy and we just felt very entitled to that space and I regret that. I feel a bit embarrassed about it now. – Charlie, 2011

This description chimed with descriptions by other participants of the older generation. Phil, Chris and Charlie all highlighted a particular sense of freedom and ownership that meant they could do whatever they wanted compared to being the UK.

In contrast, Stephen did not feel this same freedom, partly out of a reluctance to fulfil stereotypes about British people. "I'm conscious of it is because, coming from the UK, you're very conscious of the 'Brits abroad' stereotype, and it doesn't just apply to being in Asia. When you go to Spain or Greece it's the same." However, when it came to exploring Hong Kong and searching for new experiences by joining protests, Stephen was aware of the urge to capitalise on the social status that can come along with being involved in a protest movement. Though this can occur in any setting, the very act of joining a protest movement in Hong Kong as a foreigner, was especially a source of potential pride.

I felt kind of cool. But I wasn't sure if I felt pride for the right reasons, was it because I felt cool going to the protest, like 'yeah I was there I was in it', or was I proud because I'd participated with a cause. One of my friends took a picture of me at the protest and it's a cool picture and I thought I looked pretty cool and my first thought was 'oh my god I have to post that on Instagram' and then I thought for a moment and I was like fuck, that is probably the wrong thing to do. I guess that was the constant battle I was having with myself, even when I knew what I

was doing and I believed in it I had this other thought that was ‘don’t be too proud of yourself, you’re not that badass, it’s not something you should feel that good about just because you’re a white person joining in.’ – Stephen, 2019

Stephen also acknowledges that he had not previously engaged in protests before Hong Kong and that the novelty and unavoidability are partly what drew him, alongside a genuine desire to express solidarity with the cause of Hong Kong people. Tom, who was also in Hong Kong during the protests, similarly referred to his own extractive relationship to the protests recounting a story of going out to photograph the protests, witnessing a violent interaction during the protests, and thinking about how it would make a good photograph. However, Tom also expressed a sense of fear of encroaching on the space of Hong Kong people by joining the protests. We see here the beginning of the contradictions of this rite of passage; a desire to fulfil extractive behaviours that can provide a sense of conquest and achievement, perhaps receiving a certain reward or token, but simultaneously feeling a self-awareness of such urges, and fighting to avoid fulfilling them.

Another element at play is the importance of social media as a tool for narrativizing one’s experience. In 2011 participants, participants showcased their adventures through Facebook photo albums and posts, in 2019 the same is done through Instagram posts and stories. These platforms allow for the participants to document their clout and sense of pride and achievement, broadcasting their story to a real audience. Interestingly, social media is not just a tool but a way of seeing, even when images are not broadcast, participants view their experience from the perspective of their potential audience. This understanding is in line with both Yoon’s (2014) argument on exchanges as neo-liberal “identity work” and my own argument that for these young British men, this is an opportunity to enact a rite of passage based in a sense of conquest and adventure with neo-colonial roots.

In a similar vein to Stephen and Tom’s explorations in protest, Chris described his year in Hong Kong as that of being a “Yes Man” (a reference to a Jim Carrey film where the protagonist agrees to take any challenge or opportunity that comes his way), “Even if you get nothing out of it, you’ve had the experience. I feel like experience was a big word in my mind back then. Doing everything for the experience, you know? Trying to rack them up.” Charlie took this extractive relationship to another level when he described his old fantasies of being a colonial administrator:

I'd walk past the governor's mansion think (like, obviously colonialism was bad and our empire was bad, but) how cool it would be to have been a British official in Hong Kong. I know how problematic it is and how awkward it is but I would have loved to have done that job. I guess as you get older, you become more intellectually aware...we joke about becoming 'woke', and as I am more 'woke' now, I do start to re-evaluate how naïve and arrogant I was. I just felt superior, not in a racial sense, not in a cultural sense, I personally felt like I could have been a good colonial governor and I would have done it right [laughs] I know it's bad, I know it's bad.

– Charlie, 2011

Even Stephen, who was aware of British stereotypes of encroachment and space-taking, described his exploration of the city through language of conquest and rite of passage struggle: "I knew I had things to do and no one was going to give it to me and I had to go and seek it. By the end of it, I knew so many different districts, it allowed me to kind of own the city."

In other research on white masculinities in Hong Kong, Knowles point out the bodily and relational practices that reaffirm and shift white masculine subjectivities. Knowles (2005) highlights patrolling and surveillance as a gendered work practice undertaken by a research participant who works as a police officer on the Hong Kong border with mainland China. The vast majority of his colleagues being men, there are anecdotes of deeply problematic attitudes and violent behaviour towards mainland Chinese women being deported from Hong Kong. The practice of patrol, which proves to be a transferable skill that is equally useful to the new Chinese administration, is perceived as an embodied reaffirming performance of a form of hegemonic masculinity that claims space and territory first for the British colonial government and then for the Chinese communist government (Knowles, 2005: 100).

The white masculinities of the participants in this study do not have the same authoritative power as colonial or communist policemen, nor do they view Hong Kong or the world in general with the same assured sense of legitimacy. Rather, they have an imagined sense of power as part of the internal narratives of their rites of passage, which they then themselves undermine with a self-aware guilt, embarrassment, cringe and regret. The neo-colonial imaginary is a part of their experience and does cause them, in the case of the revellers who disturb locals in restaurants and in public, to offend and disrespect local Hong Kong

people but there is an internal conflict either during or following such events, causing the young men to reconsider their actions and attitudes.

Participants also engage in playing conquest behaviours regarding their relationships and interactions with locals. Participants were aware of trends of exotifying and objectifying East Asian women. Reference was also made to the feminisation and exotification of East Asian men. Phil sheepishly said, “I guess they call it yellow fever, right? I definitely had that.” Describing how he could meet and dance with girls in clubs, Phil continued:

Looking back, it's kind of embarrassing. If I drink a lot it just translates to a lot of fucking energy and I just dance it off. If I see a video of those times, I was unaware of how fucking wild I was, how much space I was taking. – Phil, 2011

Despite Phil's objectification and exotification of East Asian women, in his mid-twenties he married a Korean woman and briefly settled in South Korea. With resonances to the work of Maher and Lafferty (2014), detailing the long-term declining privilege of white westerners who relocate to Thailand to live with their Thai wives, Phil, became more self-aware and self-critical of his actions over time while having to find a way to make sense of a life created in a context of his earlier neo-colonial fantasies and racist perspectives.

Charlie, in his relationship with his classmates at university, describes how he would use some of his peers' difficulty with the English language to dominate them in seminars.

I joked about this in the past and it's stupid because it was a dickish thing to have done. But for people for whom English was not their first language and struggled to articulate things and it hadn't landed, I would reiterate what they said and I would not give them praise for it. I would benefit from the fact that English was my first language and had a great command of it. – Charlie, 2011

Through both leisure-seeking party behaviours, exploration of the city, and in interactions with locals, the participants exhibited playing conquest behaviours and/or attitudes for which they sooner or later felt guilty. Both during their rite of passage and after it, they lived in a double consciousness, aware of the feelings of pride and success regarding conquest, and, sometimes nostalgically and sheepishly, sometimes genuinely, they also feel

uncomfortable with their relationship to Hong Kong, local people and East Asian residents in general. This confirms other theories of masculinity and tourism/mobilities, regarding the white male tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) and fantasies of power and domination; “their imperialistic zeal for exploration and appropriation may be temporarily rewarded but is likely, in time, to be frustrated” (Huggan, 2001: p.208). The key difference between this research and earlier theories is that while neo-colonial fantasies are still foundational to this rite of passage for young men, they exist in a shifting context in which strategies of exploration take on new guises, such as by joining a protest, and need to keep up with the times by acknowledging some problematic elements in line with mainstream ideologies that have become common amongst young people in the age of BLM and antiracist protest.

Perceived risk-taking

Taking risks and overcoming one’s own limitations is a key part of the testing aspects of rites of passages. These behaviours and attitudes are exhibited in coming to Hong Kong in the first place, then through trying new activities and further risking one’s own health and life through extreme activities.

As previously discussed, the premise of the rite of passage is that Hong Kong be conceptualised as relatively unknown, as being a journey to a periphery or edge. The conceptualisation of Hong Kong as a dangerous or risky option fits with Connell’s description of frontier masculinity. “Loss of control at the frontier is a recurring theme in the history of empires, and is closely connected to the making masculine exemplars” (2005, p.187). Participants discussed Hong Kong as being the “risky” option, the more “unknown” location to visit. Further, their daily lives were perceived as being risky. For participants in Hong Kong before the protests, these risks were minimal, mostly imaginary, and based in things like acclimatisation to a new place, dealing with a new language and a new geography as well as small stuffy bedrooms. For the participants who attended during the protests, there was, justifiably, a sense of risk based on the volatility of the situation. Despite the more plausible possibility of risk during the protests, the participants who travelled to Hong Kong earlier had a similar perception of risk.

Hong Kong was like a playground; not like we can do anything we wanted but it was very safe and built in a way that you could have these kinds of adventures in the same way that a climbing frame might seem

huge. You could just feel like you were being a lot braver than you were. – Charlie, 2011

In retrospect, Charlie acknowledges that the perceived sense of risk was exaggerated but played as a game. He recalls feeling “impressive”, “powerful”, and “like kings of the world” but similarly realises how such self-perceptions were based on a false sense of intrepidity.

As well as simply going to Hong Kong as a destination, time was spent doing new activities. Chris described beginning dance classes, which he “would have never done back home.” Chris further explains his perspective of his actions:

The whole trip was like putting yourself out of your comfort zone every day. And doing everything you can... Putting yourself in situations where you don't know what's going to happen. Doing it all for the thrill if nothing else...Picking the risky route rather than the safe route. Because you'll be fine either way. But it'll just be a lot more fun picking the risky route. You'll develop a lot more, I guess. You sort of find what you're good at, what your limits are, maybe. – Chris, 2011

Similarly, Phil started to do street performance and Stephen and Tom attended protests and pursued other new interests. Stephen describes the sense of risk at protests: “there was just a general fear because there were so many people and nearly-stampedes. And you know, police walking over the footbridges above the overpasses and that was kind of scary.” Tom described being hit with tear gas several times and witnessing an old man who disagreed with the protests having bricks thrown at him until “there was blood pouring from the back of his head.” While his attempt to help the man was partly a source of pride for Tom, it was clear that the sheer scale of events, the seriousness of the protesters and the danger made it difficult for Tom to centre his own daring within his narrative of the event as other participants did with their own risk-taking.

It's quite, I guess, traumatic, to see things like that. Then my girlfriend came to Hong Kong and I said we can't wander around anymore because I don't want you to get hit by teargas or caught in a stampede...But with teargas, some kids would just run up and pour water to diffuse it. That's a super noble thing to do, to put yourself in

the line of fire to protect people around you and that's really beautiful...It was times when I couldn't do anything to help or just looked down and walked away that I felt massively like an outsider...When I spoke about that traumatic experience, as someone who works in an NGO where you get people who literally had really traumatic experiences, I feel bad using the word traumatic, it's a very mild form for me. But it's something that's still relative, it affected me.

– Tom, 2019

While risk-taking was an important part of Tom's time in Hong Kong and part of the learning he wished to gain from his experience, the awareness of the movement and the risks taken by the locals put his own risk into perspective. This happened to the extent that he was even wary of acknowledging his own shock and trauma at risk of minimising the trauma of others. Here again is the contradiction between fulfilling actions connected to proving oneself during a rite of passage while simultaneously denying the true scale of the risk encountered and the extent of the effect of witnessing such violent scenes, in part, to avoid disrespecting the plight of Hong Kong people.

Finally, participants, also risked their health through unhealthy habits. Aside from the bodily risks that Tom experienced during the protests, other participants described drinking heavily and sleeping little.

It was absolutely disgusting the way we lived. Things we would eat. It was so salty and greasy. I smoked way more in Hong Kong because I knew no one. That anonymity was nice. I was unhealthy in that city and everyone I knew was unhealthy in that city. – Charlie, 2011

The heavy drinking was accentuated specifically due to phenomena such as 'club 7-Eleven', the existence of international party districts, such as Wan Chai and Lan Kwai Fong, and the importance of drinking as a form of social bonding in a transient social environment. While participants drank a lot and had some unhealthy habits back in the UK, they admitted that these habits became more extreme in Hong Kong.

Perceived risk-taking was a key element of the rite of passage for these young men. Some risks were more imaginary while others were more threatening. Risk-taking often allowed participants a sense of pride and of testing the limits of their courage even when there was a

certain awareness of safety. By contrast, when risks were heightened enough, the possibility of narrativizing one's own risk-taking as a test of self was undermined by an awareness of the greater reality of Hong Kong, interrupting the narrative needed to view this journey as a rite of passage to test oneself and grow.

Going native

In contrast to notions of risk-taking and conquest, there were also behaviours of attempted assimilation. Rather than claiming ownership through interaction with physical space or testing one's personal or bodily limits, this was testing of social ability and infiltrating local social spaces. The act of 'going native' relies on the outsider status, so that the individual may feel that they have been accepted or gained access to a space that is not usually open to outsiders. Such access is a point of pride at achieving a particular local authenticity. Aside from local culture, another point of social access is integration into international groups, which is also considered to be part of the Hong Kong local fabric. Acceptance into a perceivably cosmopolitan group of international globe-trotters fulfils the desire to be worldly and to find others who are engaging in a similar rite of passage. However, the act of going native and social integration cannot happen without an attempt to separate oneself from other groups that are perceived as the 'wrong type' of expat or migrant. This sense of separation allows participants to see their own mobility and rite of passage as more worthy than others in international groups.

In the cases of the pre-protest participants, Charlie, Phil and Chris, going native was practiced through leisure and hedonistic activities. These participants all admitted to having very few local friends and having a social group mostly comprised of other foreigners. However, they often found non-verbal means of limited integration. Phil's street performance, involving musical percussion improvisation, which he described as a form of enjoying the freedom away from the social constrictions he was used to in the UK, led him to be invited by a local school to provide workshops. Similarly, Chris's 'Yes Man' philosophy of trying new activities, led to a genuine interest in dance, leading to a long-term friendship with a local dance partner. Charlie went drinking with his local student hall residents and played drinking games with them. In all these examples, activities which were framed as risk-taking activities that they would not usually have engaged in so much at home, were also means of meeting locals. The irony that behaviours that they themselves perceived of as outside their own norms, not intended as a form of social integration, nevertheless led to such integration also serves to

highlight the over exaggeration of perceived risk and difference between locals and the participants. This also points to Farrer's "alien social capital" – that perceived difference and new behaviours, rather than necessarily enforcing outsider status can lead to more interaction and integration. Phil's perspective summed it up neatly:

I loved it, I loved that sense of, in public you can say and do, like act freely, because it's not your home, you're not kind of abiding by the social rules, social conduct, that is expected of you and is taught to you, distilled in you from your home country. I didn't really integrate with the locals there but they're interested...I don't know, it's like you're a rare fucking Pokémon or something. – Phil, 2011

Participants saw themselves as achieving local status through several means. Developing a habit or routine allowed participants to feel like regulars and insiders. Charlie highlights his regular presence at a Dim Sum restaurant where he made a friend who was "a weird guy. He was a pathological liar. His stories never made sense. But I enjoyed it and he was generous with his time and he would explain things to me and translate for me. He spoke good English."

Similarly, Tom discussed his routine as making him feel like less of an outsider:

When I arrived there, I felt like an outsider but that slowly begins to go, once you get a routine, so once I began to understand things and think, oh I live here, I live round the corner, I understand where to go, which train to get, what stop to get off at, I can order things and whatever and I didn't feel like I stuck out as much. I was quite proud of learning all these phrases but even in doing that, I was still noticed, ah you're learning the language, so they praise you for it and you are an outsider for sure and you're always reminded of that. – Tom, 2019

Tom's experience not only shows how daily life is lived with the futile hope of seamlessly integrating into society, of wishing to be considered a local but also of the dread of feeling like an outsider and of being reminded of that fact.

As opposed to the pre-protest participants, Tom and Stephen also both accessed local spaces through protest. However, both Tom and Stephen viewed their attraction to the protests

with a certain amount of suspicion. Stephen was aware of the going native trope and resisted the temptation to play it:

Like ‘playing Indian’ this concept of the white person coming into a native American community and like being, oh I’m Indian now, and like that’s almost how I felt in that sense of don’t be proud of it just because you’re an outsider who became one of them, be proud of it because it’s something you should be fighting for because it’s like solidarity. That’s why anytime I felt good about myself I also doubted myself. – Stephen, 2019

In all participants there was an equal sense of being an outsider, of foreignness and an awareness of racial difference. Language barriers, lack of local knowledge, lack of opportunities to make close local friends kept them mostly in international social bubbles. Yet, when it was possible to break through to local spaces and make local friends, this was a point of pride, which came with a sense of achievement, of discovering a perceived authentic local reality. Meanwhile, in some participants, there is an awareness that searching for a sense of local authenticity and integration is a neo-colonial trope based on the desire to ‘go native’. In retrospect, Charlie agrees:

At the time it felt like an amazing cultural experience. Now I’m not so sure. If I’m going on holiday now, I’m not actively looking for the “local culture”. I don’t mind if it’s a slightly stylized hyper version they make for tourists. I guess I felt at the time that we were digging deep into it. Obviously, we weren’t in the slightest. – Charlie, 2011

While going native through integration with local Hong Kong people and their spaces, it was also enacted through the much easier integration into international groups. Chris and Phil’s sense of belonging regarding international crowds was virtually identical:

I connected so well with all the other foreign students. The exchange students that decided to go to HK had that same part of their personality that wasn’t afraid to go from Europe to Asia. There’s just not a lot of people that are prepared to do that jump. It’s unfamiliar, the language

barrier and all that. I met a lot of like-minded people and that really impacted me. – Phil, 2011

Because everyone was same kind of personalities, I felt. Like everybody who went there had decided to go to fucking Hong Kong, you know? To live abroad. So, you know, it was like an extra dimension of comradeship. – Chris, 2011

In this sense, bonding with other international groups was based on a joint sense of adventure and daring. Relating back to the notions of adventure, conquest and risk-taking, it is clear that a community in such cases can form over a shared sense of undertaking a rite of passage together.

Integration in the international social bubbles was not simply the easier option, however. The ability to integrate into the circles was also a way of confirming the status of the worldly adventurer.

I always felt like I was the only one at the time who was nervous. While I loved the people I hung out with I was also intimidated by some of the people I met. I felt like they were all already worldly people and I was a bit of an imposter at times. I know that goes against some of the things I said before about feeling comfortable and powerful. – Charlie, 2011

The sense of ‘worldliness’ that confirms the success of the rite of passage is therefore not automatically earned or assumed. The integration into the international group, the confirmation of a group liminal experience, that this is not a singular activity or behaviour is a key part of the rite of passage and giving a sense to participants that their own journey and experience is authentic through its collectivity.

As discussed below, part of this is also the rejection of other foreigners, expats and tourists, in order to confirm the difference between the worthy and legitimate journeys and those unworthy ones. People who are easily able to navigate Hong Kong and discover new local areas would have more social status than someone who appears to be lost. The rite of passage has to be made legitimate through the exclusion of others who could be mistaken as part of the group.

For example, Tom describes the encounter with other white people in the streets of Hong Kong as a moment of seizing up similarities. “It’s really stupid, you walk past some white person and you’re like, hey, we’re both white [laughs] it’s weird to see another person there, you think, oh are you here for the same reason I’m here?” Tom goes on to describe his dislike for the word ‘Gwai Lou’, a Hong Kong term for white people, originally meant as a pejorative, which now has disputed connotations.

It literally means ghost man; I can understand the origins of it. But that being used today in order to say everything about me. If you say gwai lou you immediately get a very particular image of someone and it’s an image that is of someone who is ignorant of Hong Kong and who’s there perhaps for business more than anything, I think. But that’s not everyone at all. – Tom, 2019

Stephen similarly felt that a separation from a certain type of white person, or white people in general, gave value and authenticity to his experience. He discussed going to protest concerts with very few non-locals and how that was a more unique and meaningful experience, in part due to the absence of foreigners. He also describes joining protests and “walking past a group of white lads, having drinks, looking wide-eyed like, what are you doing there?” He felt “a strange almost-embarrassment, maybe even a resentfulness towards them.” He highlighted a sense of pride that he was more “woke about the whole situation” than other foreigners.

There’s an Instagram account called Chaos Hong Kong, and it makes fun of expat mentalities in Hong Kong and how they don’t give a fuck about the city. When I look at those memes, I very much feel like I’m outside of the expat community laughing at them as opposed to being part of that problem. – Stephen, 2019

Charlie, too, when reflecting on what he perceived to be his problematic behaviour in Hong Kong, deflected criticism to other foreigners. “Whatever problematic behaviour international students performed it paled in comparison to visiting western tourists and locally-based bankers and stuff like that, which we never really came into contact with.”

This need to deflect ridicule and criticism to other foreigners makes space to contrast their own experiences in a more legitimate and acceptable light. As they seek to be accepted

or perceived as more local than others, as more in tune with local culture and local social spaces, they also need to point out other white foreigners who do not have access to such spaces or who are perceived as more destructive and powerful than themselves. Achieving this, again creates a sense of pride which fits into the internal narrative of growing and testing at the frontier during the rite of passage.

This also fits into general theories of tourism being driven by “negation – by tourists’ plaintive need to dissociate themselves from other tourists...” (Huggan, 2001: p.179). But there are also other dynamics at play here. One is Coleman’s concept of cross-cultural refraction, where, by moving white masculinity into new contexts, they have to be practiced in different ways. Coleman describes how the ideologies, narratives and practices that remain hidden in one’s own culture can become visible and more overt in new cultural contexts. “Because the migrant man moves physically from one geocultural location to another, his narrative emphasizes in spatial and temporal, as well as social and political, terms the uneven history of his masculine subjectivity. His story delineates the continuous, though distorted, trajectory of a specific practice of manhood” (Coleman, 1998, p.7). In this sense, when participants view certain types of “bad” expat or foreigner, who are deserving of criticisms or ridicule, the younger migrants, more conscious of the value of social awareness in their social circles, need to make a difference between themselves and the less conscious foreigners. Both pre-protest and post-protest participants relied on a perceived “bad” equivalent migrant or expat to highlight their own changes within themselves and to distract from aspects of themselves they were ashamed of.

The relationships and sense of pride generated as a result of the practice of going native, as well as the rite of passage as a whole, are based in the fundamental functions of whiteness as identified by Dyer. “At the level of representation, whites remain, for all their transcending superiority, dependent on non-whites for their sense of self, just as they are materially in so many imperial and post-imperial, physical and domestic labour circumstances. Such dependency could form the basis of a bond, but has more often been a source of anxiety” (Dyer, 2002, p.24). This is a rite of passage that relies on otherness to define the participant in the same vein as Dyer’s whiteness defined in opposition to non-whiteness. However, this young contemporary form of white masculinity also relies on separating from other forms of whiteness to define itself. While the rite of passage is visibly collective as a result of the close-knit international communities that form, the distinguishing act, to separate from other types of white masculinity, allows the rite of passage to appear as an individualist endeavour. It

allows for narrative of conquest and risk-taking, as described earlier, to fit more clearly into a narrative of individual experience, overcoming, and growth.

Conclusion

In this chapter we saw how young western men who go to Hong Kong for specific medium-term activities such as work experience, graduate schemes and student exchanges, perceive and enact their time in Hong Kong as a rite of passage; a rite of passage that they have specifically sought out and anticipated. Their journeys involve a similar trajectory of anticipation, separation, liminality and reintegration. Their liminal stage involves behaviours and attitudes corresponding with notions of playing conquest; perceived risk-taking; and going native. These are built on neo-colonial imaginaries of Hong Kong as an exotic frontier, a risky unknown destination, where participants can adventure and test themselves while also integrating with locals and separating themselves from types of white masculinity that they do not wish to associate with. Moreover, either during the rite of passage or in retrospect, the participants are aware of their own problematic associations and fantasies, which destabilises their own narratives and aspirations for their time in Hong Kong. The desire to distance themselves from others in a similar situation further highlights their own discomfort with this rite of passage.

As a result, the rite of passage is an emotional journey that involves a genuine sense of pride, development and achievement. At the same time, they associate the experience with a sense of embarrassment and regret. The participants engage in a rite of passage in which they do not feel wholly comfortable and which requires a double consciousness to participate in. They are aware that some of their perspectives and associations with their liminal activities are problematic but they continue on with their own discomfort and try to navigate it.

Previous research on migrant West-East/North-South mobilities has highlighted the paradox of privilege and precarity that privileged migrants often experience. Western white male privilege allows access to certain spaces but can erode over time or lead to exclusion and alienation from the society. In the case of these younger temporary migrants, there is not enough time for their privilege to erode, yet they do experience certain forms of alienation and exclusion from the local society. However, in contrast to previous studies, this younger generation of mobile men, having experienced a growth in the popularity and acceptance of social justice movements such as BLM and the decolonisation agenda, are more critical of themselves and more uneasy with their own behaviour. In some cases, they can identify the

very neo-colonial tropes that they are replicating. This rite of passage shows a continuation of the 'crisis in white masculinities' where young men continue to seek advancement and personal growth through mobilities in the East, but are equally navigating a set of contradictions between their own ethical sensibilities and sense of social justice and the patterns of behaviours that they find themselves replicating and practicing.

Current models of overseas studies or internship are no longer tenable without explicit allusion to the problematic behaviours and activities that they recreate in international circles. As seen in the participants who attended Hong Kong during the protests, a possibility for a genuine solidarity-based exchange in intercultural learning can displace a more overtly exoticified experience. Further research on this topic could expand on these findings by comparing various student exchange and internship programmes to identify whether certain discourses, behaviours or attitudes are more encouraged through different marketing styles, locations or demographics.

Chapter 2: Return and Partial Reintegration

The sojourn in Hong Kong was undertaken by participants with a sense of pride and in anticipation of being able to re-tell the successes of the trip. This chapter focuses on the experience of returning home and the frustration that came from a delayed and prolonged reintegration. I argue that this is a delayed reintegration phase of a rite of passage and that the lack of a ritualised reintegration phase does not undermine the fact that participants expected a rite of passage and were aware of a lack of a conscious and ceremonial reintegration.

Success Abroad and Dreading Return

By the end of the sojourn participants felt they had met the challenges of the liminal stage. The elation of success meant that most participants did not want to leave at all.

Charlie unsuccessfully tried to switch his full-time degree to Hong Kong University in the hopes of staying in Hong Kong but secured a summer internship and was able to extend his sojourn. Similarly, Tom described his desire to stay just as he was beginning to feel he had achieved a sense of integration: “I felt like, ‘I don’t want to leave now that I’m beginning to get how things work’ – I was gaining freedom to get places because I knew the routes to get to certain areas and the hikes that I wanted to do.”

The desire to re-tell the success of the trip was ingrained into the day-to-day life in Hong Kong. As Charlie put it, “I lived my life in anecdotes.” Participants described the importance of photography and social media in capturing and broadcasting their experiences back home via written statements, videos and photo posts. These tokens of success were predicated on the themes discussed in the previous chapters, of adventure and sociability, which makes clear why some of the disappointments revolved around boredom. Despite having seen “chilling and violent” scenes during the protests, Stephen explained that the “hardest and worst parts” of his time in Hong Kong were “the lonely moments and the times when I had nothing to do and I would spend the whole weekend on my own.”

This highlights how – despite seeking similar experiences and participating in similar behaviours to other sojourners who are neither male, British or white – the expectations and experiences of these sojourns are inevitably shaped through distinctly neo-colonial and exoticist lenses. Huggan, summarising the debates on neo-colonialism, tourist gazes and exoticism in tourism, argues that the relentless needs to discover ‘uncontaminated’ spaces and

the need to avoid boredom at all costs, leaves tourists in a bind between their fantasies and reality:

Tourists are controlled by others even as they act out their fantasies of independence; they are vulnerable to exploitation even as they flaunt their purchasing power. Not least, they are self-involved even as they seek out the cultural other. And this other remains opaque because its opacity is needed – required, perhaps, for tourists’ in-state purpose of hiding themselves from themselves. (Huggan, 2001: p.208)

Similarly, participants were temporarily rewarded by their playing out of conquest, becoming local, and perceived risk-taking with a sense of success. But the lapse between the internal narrative/fantasy and the reality caused frustration when it came to validating these experiences back home. Upon returning, participants indeed wanted to share their experiences. Charlie recounts:

I must have been so annoying. I spent all my time when I got back talking about how great Hong Kong was, how great my life had been there, how impressive we’d been and how I wanted to go back. –
Charlie, 2011

Similarly, Chris recalled: “You go back and you do that that whole ‘I had all these wonderful experiences’ thing but nobody wants to know.”

Indeed, as a rite of passage, the liminal sojourn was always conceived with the return in mind. From the beginning of the trip, participants were anticipating the moment of return with hope of feelings of success and pride. Upon crossing the threshold back into their home country, participants wanted to extend the length of this feeling of pride, success and freedom but also looked forward to recounting their experiences to their friends and family. As we shall see, however, this return and reintegration stage of the rite of passage is interrupted and delayed, rife with disappointment and frustration. As Chris’s comments suggest, the feeling of pride and success upon return was met with general ambivalence from friends, failing to validate the sojourn. This is just the first of the frustrations experienced by the participants as they returned.

Emotional deflation and disappointment

The return to the UK was anticlimactic for the young sojourners. As mentioned above, participants envisioned a return where their experiences were validated by their community, friends and family. There was anticipation that their sense of achievement would be acknowledged through curiosity and awe. Instead, participants returned to their homes realising that many of their friends and family had simply continued living their own lives and that their own internal narratives regarding their sojourn were not central to the minds of others.

The emotional deflation and disappointment upon return was highlighted through shock that the world had progressed without them during their time away. While “Reverse Culture Shock” can explain much of the sense of disappointment experienced by returnees (Gaw, 1999), these frustrations are also clearly rooted in the sense of an interrupted rite of passage and the delegitimization of the fantasies played out abroad. Participants felt depressed and disappointed at the perceived mundanity of life in the UK; attempted to recreate the feelings they had experienced in Hong Kong; felt frustration that their own lifestyles and circumstances had not progressed materially and that their sense of independence and power dissipated upon returning home.

As Chris highlighted, he returned to find that his social world at home had moved on without him:

You go away for half a year and things have changed; friendships have developed. I felt a bit out of place when I came back. I missed Hong Kong a lot. I was trying to recreate all of the excitement but it just wasn't the same. – Chris 2011

Similarly, Charlie was trapped between missing his friends in Hong Kong and disappointment with his social life in the UK: “I hated coming back. I'd made good friends and I had a big fear of missing out, growing apart and seeing them do fun things. I didn't have many friends at home and I never put the effort in.” Though more research would be needed to confirm any hypotheses, it could be suggested that male returnees could have a more difficult time adjusting to the end of their sojourn due to the comparatively less emotional and confidential friendships and support networks available to men in contrast with women (Robinson et al, 2018).

Participants found themselves frustrated at the return to their prior living circumstances. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a sense of achievement, importance, freedom and pride had developed over the course of their liminal sojourn in Hong Kong. However, all participants returned to a life very similar to that which they had lived prior to departure. There was thus a conflict between the sense of imaginary success and the material reality that participants returned to. They were still young, still students or unemployed, still financially dependent.

As Tom recounts:

I guess I feel regret in terms of expectations – I expected a kind of more defined version of me at the end of this and I didn't get that. I still feel like I haven't come back with the ability to get the job I want – or I don't have the confidence to get it. I feel like I do need to do another internship or something. So, in terms of furthering my own career and what not, I feel let down. I do miss Hong Kong. – Tom, 2019

We see here a clear indication that participants expected their sojourn to be structured as a rite of passage with immediately different circumstance upon their return. A great source of disappointment was the delay in change upon return, which was internalised and perceived as either a personal failure or a negative reassessment of how they had spent their time in Hong Kong while simultaneously pining for the time they were there.

As such, the sense of failure and disappointment was heightened by a perception of mundanity in returning to their old lives and the boredom they experienced. Phil said, 'It was shit. Really shit. It was boring. I never got bored in Hong Kong.' Phil's sense of boredom and disillusion lasted beyond the end of his studies and into his life as a graduate professional, ultimately leading to his leaving the UK altogether, as will be discussed later. Stephen, similarly, had gone to Hong Kong partly out of boredom with his life at home and was frustrated at the fact he was returning to "exactly the same" circumstances that he had left behind. Charlie recounted how the boredom and depression affected his health: 'Back in the UK I didn't have the same distractions as I'd had in Hong Kong. I got pretty depressed - I felt like I was in the wrong place and I was really miserable and my weight sky-rocketed.'

One coping mechanism that developed in response to this was to try to attempt to relive the past and recreate familiar scenarios. All participants did this emotionally through reminiscing and missing their time in Hong Kong as well as imagining what they were missing out on. Participants also tried to maintain some of the activities they had tried in Hong Kong;

Chris tried to continue dancing and Phil tried to continue street performance but neither found it as satisfying as when they had been in Hong Kong. Tom found himself looking out for people who looked East Asian in the hopes of meeting someone from Hong Kong:

I guess this is basically a pretty racist thing here, but I would see someone, like at the gym or something, and I would think, *snap*, I think this person is Chinese, and so I'd eavesdrop a bit to see if they were speaking Cantonese and I would get excited because maybe I could chat with them, but I didn't want to be like, 'Hey, you're a foreigner!' So that was my way of reliving the love that I had for Hong Kong. – Tom 2019

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the general tensions of disappointment upon return and the self-awareness in Tom's account, shows the tension between the urge of the participants to romanticise their time abroad and the impending realisation that their experience was not, in their own esteem, as unique or as adventurous as they had first thought. As Charlie said, looking back at his time in Hong Kong, 'It was a childish adventure.'

Another key issue at play here is the surprisingly difficult process of reintegration into their lives at home and their persistent grip on perceiving their lives through the lens of their experiences in Hong Kong.

In the short term, even the realised fantasies of returning to Hong Kong did not necessarily fulfil expectations. Charlie, who had spent several months back in the UK after his exchange in Hong Kong, managed to return to Hong Kong for an internship but was also left disappointed:

Quite a lot of the students had left, I was no longer in halls and I was living in an incredibly expensive shithole. We were in the top floor, incredibly sweaty, no air conditioning for a while. It just did not go well. I was working so I didn't think it was fun. This was when the financial aspect does come into it. I did not feel powerful financially at this point. I was constantly worrying about running out of money. – Charlie 2011

Here we see that only six months later the circumstances and privileges that Charlie had experienced as a student in Hong Kong had disappeared and, left to his own devices outside

the institutional comfort of the university, he was unable to recreate his initial experience. Farrer asserts that western sojourners “may experience elements of white racial privilege in some spheres while remaining economically precarious and socially marginal in others” (2019: 14), elements of which are also highlighted in Maher and Lafferty, 2014 and Thompson et al, 2016. Charlie indeed found himself in a situation where he sought the imagined power of his tentative privilege while experiencing a dramatic shift in his material circumstances, forced to confront his own financial precarity. Having to work for a low salary during a summer internship and paying non-subsidised rent prices in Hong Kong, Charlie had much less freedom in terms of time and money. Nonetheless, upon his second return to the UK, he continued to idealise Hong Kong and reminisce about it.

As we shall see in the next section, these difficulties and disappointments led nevertheless to a longer-term desire to live abroad and a delayed but significant material and lifestyle benefit from the experiences in Hong Kong.

Trading Up on Experience and Improved Global Horizons

While the short-term upshot of returning from Hong Kong was a sense of emotional deflation, depression, disappointment and longing – in the long term, the lifestyles that the participants had yearned for came to fruition and they also revised the narrative of their experience. Participants’ ongoing interest in living abroad and travel combined with a fear and restlessness regarding staying home led the participants to seek a life elsewhere. Participants were either able to ‘trade up’ on their experience or engage in global geographic arbitrage by living abroad (Hayes, 2014). Part of the drive for this was the continued desire to be different from others and not to live a ‘normal’ life. While the participants looked back often with a sense of embarrassment or cringe at their time in Hong Kong, they framed it within a narrative of personal growth and rite of passage, explaining who they were today.

After graduating from university, Phil found himself to be miserable with his life and yearned to go back to Asia. He had originally planned to have his Korean girlfriend, whom he met in Hong Kong, join him in the UK. But after struggling to find happiness in the UK he instead decided to move to Korea.

I was getting a bit depressed doing the same shit, doing the commute. I was shattered. In the end I just quit on the spot. I was like, ‘Guys I’m really sorry but I can’t hack it. It’s not you guys but, mentally, I just

can't hack it. I don't know what it is.' After I quit my job, I was like, right I'm getting on a flight and off I went to Korea. I just loved the sense of social freedom in Hong Kong. It was massive for me because I've always kind of gone against the grain, I'm super liberal and don't really like conforming. So, Hong Kong completely changed the trajectory of my life. I can't see myself moving to Korea if I hadn't gone to Hong Kong. – Phill, 2011

Phil was not only pulled by this feeling of freedom, which he had felt in Hong Kong but also searching for an opportunity to start a business, which he was able to do in Korea. He was therefore able to enhance his career and lifestyle, while following a heartfelt desire for freedom and his relationship with his girlfriend, whom he went on to marry.

Similarly, Charlie explains, "I definitely traded on my experience in Hong Kong for a while. I did a Masters in Chinese politics, I wrote a thesis on it, it gave me the opportunity to speak to important people in Hong Kong." Charlie also described how the experience was useful for networking, since his career in international politics meant that he often met people who had done a similar exchange, "Hong Kong seems like a very common destination for a lot of these people." Charlie also highlights that it was thanks to the elite education at Hong Kong University that he was able to eventually study at Cambridge University, which opened more doors for his international career. Phil also reflects that his time in Hong Kong also introduced him to a large network of people from around the world who proved to be long-term friends whom he would visit and host in Asia. "I barely keep in touch with undergraduate friends from the UK but the ones I met in Hong Kong; those are the ones I'm still in contact with."

In contrast, while Chris was also able to gain financial benefit from living abroad following his time in Hong Kong – he confessed that staying abroad was a means for him to avoid having his life judged by the same standards as his peers.

Chris was guiltily aware of his own access to geographic arbitrage, as a result of moving to Cambodia later after his exchange: "I don't like to think about the fact that living costs are cheaper since it's just because I come from a wealthy country. I'm not comfortable with the fact that I'm living in a country where minimum wage is so low that everything is cheap. But the low cost of living is a big factor." Although Chris attributed his ability and confidence to live abroad as a result of his exchange in Hong Kong, therefore allowing him to benefit from the low cost of life in Southeast Asia, he believed there was a more psychological reason for his need to live abroad:

If I'm being completely frank and honest with myself about my reasons for not wanting to live in the UK, I would say that I probably have some sort of fear of failing in the same arena as everyone else. Maybe if I move to the UK and then you're on the same playing field as everyone else and you can be measured against somebody else. I feel like I have this kind of thing and I don't like the idea of going back there and having to confront things and having to grow up. I wonder if this sort of happened because I kept on travelling and stuff. I don't know if it's a bad thing, I try to keep an open mind as much as possible; I'm happy most of the time, you know? I do think it's probably not good that I really don't like the idea of going back and it's objectively a really stupid reason to still be out here living in Asia. I feel like Hong Kong and travelling in general definitely fed the desire to stay out here. You're doing your own thing and it has its own challenges that only you in your situation can really understand, so like, you can't really be compared to others – that's if I'm really going Freud on myself. – Chris, 2011

In this poignant moment of honesty, Chris revealed that it was not only a desire to improve material circumstances (through a lowering of living costs) or simply the desire to live “an unorthodox life”, as he phrased it, but also a fear that the successfulness – and implicitly, the meaningfulness – of his life could be judged by his friends, family, acquaintances and self according to the standards of life-journeys in the UK. The perceived freedom from social constraints experienced in Hong Kong and through subsequent travels taught him that he could live a simple life abroad and never be perceived as a failure in the eyes of his friends and family at home – though this very fear betrays an underlying assumption that this must be the case. Like Phil, then, Chris feared the possibility of a boring or mediocre life, a ‘normal life’, in the UK and believed he was better able to live the lifestyle he desired in a context where he was less likely to be judged. This adds a layer of nuance to the assumption that young men may undertake exchanges purely for the purpose of gaining social capital or increased social mobility – though these were clearly also factors for Chris, there was a genuine fear of a return to normal, a fear of a life unchanged, and a desire for extended liminality, which kept him abroad.

Regardless of the reasons for either living abroad or using their experiences as a route to material and career growth, participants viewed their temporary sojourns in Hong Kong as an integral part of their personal and professional growth, using it as a narrative experience that explained who they subsequently became.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, participants anticipated their sojourns with the return in mind, and also lived their lives abroad with the intent of creating memorable experiences as an active effort to embody discourses of self-improvement and growth promoted as part of the sojourn abroad experience (Yoon, 2014). It is no surprise therefore, that participants continued to view the experience as such following their sojourn. It is remarkable however, just how formulated a framework some participants had in their narrativization of their experience.

Stephen viewed his sojourn in Hong Kong as part of a series of increasingly challenging and difficult steps towards personal growth, forming a distinctly teleological narrative of his progress towards being an independent and mature adult. He retold the various steps of his life – moving to a university town in the UK to study, a semester abroad in the US – assessing them by difficulty.

I see it as difficulty steps. Hong Kong being the most difficult one. Because it's going from Durham, where like the main difficulty is you're out of high school making friends, then Texas, alright, you're not in fucking Europe anymore, like, here's a slightly different culture, like adapt. And then Hong Kong was the first big city and I'm a faceless person in a huge city that is going to go on and carry on regardless of what I do. And on top of that, the fact of a huge cultural change. I don't know – I felt more independent, and I felt more kind of like, I guess this is where I would use the term *free*: I can go anywhere I want, it's really easy to go anywhere I want and there's so much to do and I can just do it if I want to. But, you know, no-one's going to give it to me either, I've got to just do it. – Stephen, 2019

Charlie similarly viewed his time in Hong Kong retrospectively as key to his current identity and the subsequent growth in his personal life and career. He poked fun at his own previous ambitions and hopes, cringing at his perspectives on Hong Kong when he was a student. Yet, while he viewed his former naivety with a sense of embarrassment and avowed a

more “self-critical narrative” about his life, this did not preclude him from seeing Hong Kong as a key stage in his development.

Becoming well-travelled had a nice side effect, a bonus. Thinking about how small my world was in Manchester and how limited I felt then and how I’ve always felt like I was destined for bigger and better things, it was almost like I looked at my options and I chose the biggest and best and I’ve kind of done that with all of my choices...almost like accumulating the necessary experiences to be able to claim the status as, you know, an intellectual, an international man of, you know, maybe not mystery [laughs] but a man of the world. And obviously I haven’t decided all of this today, it must have come from somewhere, it must have been the last couple of years that I’ve become more self-critical about my narrative about my own life, and my own narrative about China, Asia, Hong Kong, travelling, the world. – Charlie, 2011

It is clear that Charlie simultaneously held the belief that it is embarrassing to hold so much esteem in the status that comes with travelling the world while knowing that the opportunities to live abroad did improve his life, firmly believing that it shaped his personal identity. It is indeed the very act of having travelled the world and lived abroad that allowed him to confidently critique his prior esteem in becoming well-travelled. As highlighted in the previous chapter, then, it is both the case that Charlie was embarrassed of his sojourn while viewing it as fundamental to his professional and personal life trajectory and the person he became.

Chris, who stayed abroad to live in Cambodia, thereby continuing the same trajectory established during his sojourn after a brief and disappointing return to the UK, has also centred Hong Kong as a key part of his life narrative. “The fact that I’m not career driven has come about because of Hong Kong and stuff. It wouldn’t have happened had I not done those things, the fact that I’m still living an unorthodox life.”

The lasting effects of the temporary sojourn in Hong Kong were thus that of a long-term launchpad, either allowing participants to improve their career prospects or to live abroad and benefit from the relative purchasing power in a poorer country. Though frustrations were caused in the short-term due to the mismatch between the perceived fanfare of returning from abroad and the dull reality of returning to the same life as before, in the long-term, material

realities caught up with their impression of independence, freedom and success. Some participants never reintegrated back into their previous lifestyles and instead integrated into a new international lifestyle.

Conclusion

Participants narrativized their sojourn in Hong Kong as an experience key to their sense of self, centring the importance of professional and personal growth. Though some scholars, such as Beames (2004) and King (2011) have argued that international exchanges and internships are not rites of passage because there is no formalised reintegration phase – I argue that the reintegration is simply delayed and frustrated or occurs through a longer term integration into a more elite, international world. Regardless, the rite of passage leads to a genuine transformation and recognition occurring over time. Though these sojourns are not precisely organised according to the formula identified by Van Gennep (his own admission that different phases may be de-emphasised notwithstanding), participants clearly perceive these experiences and narrativize them to themselves as such; they perceived and expected it to be a rite of passage. Furthermore, although it is clear that sojourners from different backgrounds (who are not male, British or white) or indeed sojourners taking part in south-north or east-west mobilities (as opposed to north-south or west-east) are known to experience similar journeys and experiences during their time abroad – I have highlighted that there are components of the experiences of the participants in this study that are rooted both in the neo-colonial and frontier masculinity discourses associated with rites of passage amongst western men. During the liminal phase of the rite of passage, participants tested themselves by playing conquest, undertaking perceived-risks and going native. During this time, they felt pride at their sense of achievement while also feeling embarrassed and ashamed both during and following their time abroad. The long-term impacts of the sojourn can be interpreted through a lens of geographic arbitrage (Hayes, 2014), as well as Prazeres's concept of distinction and social prestige (Prazeres, 2019) and Yoon's "neoliberal economy of experience" (2014). These studies show that across the world, an appeal to and experience of global mobility is often a necessary stepping-stone to becoming part of a cosmopolitan, global elite. These forces, global in nature, exist within the elites of most countries and therefore cross racial and gender boundaries. This does not, however, preclude that the experiences of these young men are situated within the discourses, experiences and associations of being in relation to post-imperial Britain, masculinity and whiteness. These sojourns are both experienced, remembered and narrativized

through the lens of neo-colonial imaginaries, through fantasies of conquest and going native as well as through the testing of masculinity on the perceived margins. Over time or with distance, the sojourners realised some of the patterns of their thought and included it within their narratives so that the testing of self sat uneasily alongside an awareness of exotification of their experience. What remains is the memory and legacy of a paradoxical rite of passage in an age of globalisation and increasing awareness of difference.

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Appendix 1 – Training and Learning During the PhD

Training and Learning During the PhD: A note on studying and writing during a pandemic

As part of my PhD, I did several trainings, jobs and practices that contributed to the final component. Below, I detail the activities that contributed to my PhD as well the conditions under which I wrote the thesis.

I started my PhD in 2018 and was able to enjoy one and a bit years of the pre-pandemic world before things went crazy. I did this PhD part-time, without the savings necessary to do a full six-year part-time PhD – but hoped that, having worked full-time for several years, my work-ethic would allow me to work efficiently enough to finish faster. I worked two and a half days a week for an environmental research project throughout my first three years of thesis and then two days a week in a student facing role for the rest. During this time, I met several financial obstacles, such as working on fixed-term contracts and running out of savings, but was supported by my employer, by the discretionary finance team at Sussex, and by my family.

In my first year, I launched Sussex University's first multimedia arts and literature magazine. I was the General Editor for two years before handing over to two other students. The magazine is now on its 4th annual edition. This experience helped me to refine my reading, editing, writing and team management skills. That same year I founded a writing group for postgraduate creative writing students so that we could provide critical feedback to each other throughout our studies. This group helped particularly with the first two parts of my novel. We met for three years until we had all finished our novels.

In my second year, after completing my AFHEA, I began teaching 'Gender Across Cultures' – an anthropology module for first- and second-year undergraduates. I have been teaching this class for three years running and it greatly contributed to my understanding and research for my thesis.

Half-way through my second year, the pandemic hit and from this I got RSI in my wrist; back, shoulder and neck pain that persist to this day; and burnout. During this year, I was also able to design and teach a creative writing module at BSMS, which, again, greatly contributed to my writing and thesis. During this time, I was also invited to join a selective New Writing South writing group, which has been a huge source of support and critical feedback towards my novel and other writings.

During my third year, my wife and I decided to try for a baby and are expecting our child in February 2022. This revelation in May 2021 gave me further need to finish my PhD so that I would be able to move on and be a present father for my new-born.

I loved working on my PhD and thesis. I did not rush it. And I hope you will agree that I made the most of my time as a doctoral student. But I did have to work hard and efficiently in a way that many full-time, funded students often do not have to: juggling, as I was, a regular part-time job, two teaching jobs and my studies, alongside two writing groups and my magazine work. In many ways, the pandemic forced me to slow down by limiting the number of things I could do – and yet I worked myself to burnout within the first two months of

lockdown. Despite the time and financial limitations, all the different activities, trainings and jobs contributed invaluablely to my writing.

Appendix 2 - Synopsis

Synopsis of *Floating Home*

The story is told from Aaron, Maggie, Suzie and Jean's points of view across three different times and places.

Jean (17), a French-Scottish student, runs away from the UK and his ex-girlfriend **Claire** for a hedonistic trip around the world. He wants to forget the traumatic events that led to Claire's suicide attempt. Jean flies to Southeast Asia alone for the summer and is enchanted by cool **Aaron**, who is a local celebrity amongst backpackers. Just as Jean feels like he has found his place in the world by overcoming his shyness and social awkwardness, he is told that Aaron exploits women and can't be trusted.

But Jean doesn't know that Aaron (39), born in Senegal and raised in the USA and UK, is working with a sex workers' union after they have requested his expertise to generate funding for an empowerment project. Aaron's only secret is that he is an international development CEO and workaholic but Jean, unaware of this, spreads nefarious rumours about him. When Aaron overdoses on his back-pain medication, Jean is not around to help him.

Returning home, Jean sees that Aaron's social media profiles have been deleted and believes him dead. At university, Jean's guilt leads him to sign up as a volunteer working with street children in Senegal. He works with fellow student **Suzie** (20), who is attracted to Jean's newfound confidence, which has grown from the belief that he is doing meaningful work. But Suzie soon realises that their volunteer trip is misconceived and doing more harm than good. When she tells Jean, he is once again disillusioned and becomes erratic and lost. He begins to starve himself and refuses medication for dysentery; he becomes gaunt and withered.

After recovering from his trip to Senegal, Jean then goes to Hong Kong and believes he has finally become the worldly man he always aspired to be. He begins a relationship with **Maggie** (18), who is looking forward to a new life at university after having been bullied in high school. Their tumultuous relationship leads Maggie to drop out of university. This resurfaces Jean's buried memory that Claire was in fact sexually assaulted in high school and that he had been unable to process it and support her. He realises that his hedonism was his unconscious and misguided attempt to escape his pain and guilt. While he has been running

away from his past, Claire has gone to therapy and plans to become a psychotherapist and support victims of assault and abuse.

Years later, Maggie reunites with Jean and sees that he has aged prematurely and has not learned or grown from his experience. Aaron, meanwhile, has recovered and recommenced his relationship with his ex-boyfriend after taking an early retirement.

Appendix 3: ‘Thesis Summary’

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

LOUIS PILARD

PhD in CREATIVE AND CRITICAL WRITING

FLOATING HOME AND ‘AN INCOMPLETE RITE OF PASSAGE? LIMINAL WHITE
BRITISH MASCULINITIES IN HONG KONG’ – A CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THESIS

This thesis explores the contemporary identities of young men and their experiences of sojourns in East Asia as an incomplete rite of passage. Due to the interweaved similarities and associations of travel, rites of passage and storytelling, the thesis uses novel writing (creative) and anthropological methods (critical) juxtaposed in open-ended dialogue, exploring the research topic through an affective journey (the novel) that is then empirically grounded and problematised (anthropological study).

The novel begins with a reunion between Maggie and Jean, three years after the implosion of their undefined relationship in Hong Kong. The story then returns to Jean’s late teens where he begins travelling the world in search of a rite of passage that will help him ‘grow wise, have epiphanies, get a tan, go on adventures and whatever else people did on their sixth-year holidays.’ The novel switches to other characters throughout the rest of the novel. Amadou, a burnt-out development worker, struggles to balance his career ambitions with his long-term relationship. Suzie (whose section has been cut from this thesis) is an idealistic ‘social justice warrior’ from Glasgow, and deals with the disappointing realisation that her attempts to change the world through volunteering abroad are more difficult than expected. Maggie, a Hong Kong local who was bullied at her international school, finds that leaving home for university is not the solution to confronting her trauma. Jean is a recurring character throughout these sections, seen through the eyes of the new characters. The novel finishes by returning to Jean as he slowly approaches his long hoped-for ‘epiphany’ in Hong Kong.

The critical section involves research with participants who visited Hong Kong for a medium-term internship or student exchange before (2010-2011) and during the Hong Kong Protests (2019). Despite visiting two very different Hong Kongs and having access to different spaces and to different activities, the processes through which they engaged with the local space, the way they narrativized and conceptualised their experiences maintained many similarities. I argue that this is because young western men who go to Hong Kong for specific medium-term activities such as work experience, graduate schemes and student exchanges, perceive and

enact their time in Hong Kong as a rite of passage; a rite of passage that they have specifically sought out and anticipated. Using Van Gennep's framework of rites of passage, their journeys involve a similar trajectory of anticipation, separation, liminality and reintegration. Due to the informal nature of the return or reintegration stage of the rite, I call it an incomplete or uncomfortable rite of passage. Their liminal stage involves behaviours and attitudes corresponding with notions of imagining themselves as conquerors; undertaking perceived risk by testing their limits; and 'going native'. These experiences are built on neo-colonial imaginaries of Hong Kong as an exotic frontier, a risky unknown destination, where participants can adventure and test themselves while also integrating with locals and separating themselves from types of white masculinity that they do not wish to associate with. At the same time, either during the rite of passage or in retrospect, the participants are aware of their own problematic associations and fantasies, which destabilises their own narratives and aspirations for their time in Hong Kong.

This study reveals new understandings of contemporary masculinities in motion and how new mainstream awareness around 'social justice' is transforming global masculine identities.