

# *Wildboarclough*

2019

Saturday 17 August



They were at their most together there, at their most together then. This he thought, or something like it, sitting in the field between the farmhouse and his neighbour's property. It had been a seventies summer, one of the hot ones, and in much the same spot as he now sat, he and his elder sister had perched on a black plastic silo, sharing a pair of binoculars to spy on the Carters. It was the perfect vantage; the ideal elevation to see into their garden, their trampoline and fishpond, their rockery and patio. They did not comment on what they saw, there were no arguments as to how long they could hold the binoculars. They just sat and watched, Nate's legs sticking to the plastic sheeting; his sister's heels beating the compacted grass beneath.

He remembered what they'd seen. What he'd seen at least. The father smoke-blown at a tiny Hibachi grill; the mother carrying a large bowl of salad; the shirtless boy and summer-dressed girl, sun-blond both, setting the table. Uncle Jim, Auntie Daph, Tommy and Tasha.

Busked by flies, they'd thought themselves secret agents, covert operatives watching the Carters conduct their foreign customs. Nate would have been about eight, so Anneka twelve or thirteen. Her in a brown dress, long hair like burned wheat, an elastic band on her wrist for luck; him with a scab on his knee, an imaginary island eroded through picking. He remembered this as he held the same pair of binoculars. The dress. The scab. The magnified garden, the magnified family. The coveting of Tommy's Dunlop tennis racquet.

How tall the silo had felt, how high, and it was not so high, just

that he was so small. Small then, and slight. Ha ha. To think that. So small and his father's voice so big, so hoarse and so loud, shouting at them from the farmhouse.

'Get down from up on there, you two!' their father had shouted. 'What have I told you about the silos?'

Nate had put down the binoculars and looked to his sister.

'Hand them over,' Anneka had said.

'But Dad—'

'Hand them over, Nate,' she'd said.

And so he'd passed her the binoculars and later they'd both been in trouble. But at least they'd been in trouble together: equally miscreant, equally punished.

He held the same binoculars now; it was late in the day, the heat of the afternoon clinging still. He picked up the binoculars and focused them on the Carters' garden. A recent interest, this: one started when the casual rentals began a few years before. On weekends and school holidays he watched families and friends, small children and teenagers, hen parties and stag dos, sometimes catching a furtive glimpse of breast or buttock. The Carters had installed a hot tub where the old patio had been and Nate liked to see the trunkless men and bikini-stripped women hopping in and out of the water, lamp-lit at night, sun-blushed in the day. Once he'd seen some sex. Some oral too. He'd meant to put down the binoculars, but hadn't.

The garden was hoed and manicured, better appointed: a wood-burning oven where the Hibachi had once been; an eight-seater table on a grey slate patio; blue-matted sun-loungers stacked beside the hot tub. There were two cars parked out front, but no one in the garden. They'd come outside soon, though, before the sun downed, he was sure of that. He wanted to see Carter and Tommy first; wanted to see them before Anneka arrived. Brotherly, that.

He checked his phone and it was fully charged and fully barred; there were no missed calls and no messages. From the sack at his feet, he took a can of beer and offered it up in toast to the dusking sun.

‘I remember,’ Nate said, ‘when all this was nought but fields.’

It was Carter’s joke. Carter now, Uncle Jim then. His big hands on Nate’s slope shoulders; Carter’s laugh booming like a story-book giant. Nought but fields, ha!

Just two fields, in fact; the land divided by a dirt track and a parched hedge of hawthorn and blackthorn. The Carters’ land on one side, his on the other. Down the hill, the grass on his side – thistle turf and clod, tinder dry – led to a tree-crowded dell. He’d not been down there in years. A check with the binoculars. Nothing. No car coming through the leaves. No sign of Anneka. Not there, nor by the cowsheds that huddled close to the farmhouse.

He drank from the can and the beer was cool. He checked the phone, replaced it in the cup-holder. Anneka had never called him, not once. He no longer knew her voice. When he called her number, it rang out until the call was caught by another woman’s voice, one owned by a telephone network. At first he left messages; later, he simply rang off as the once-real woman answered his call.

Hers was one of many voices he could no longer remember. In his head, when Anneka said, ‘Hand them over,’ he didn’t hear her voice, just something generically female, generically young. Same with lovers, school-friends, teachers: they all sounded underwater and muted. He remembered his father’s voice though. The dead have insistent voices; they cut and jab. His father’s especially.

He checked his phone, still fully barred, still fully charged, and picked up the binoculars. As though this a new idea; one just alighted upon.

There was no movement in the garden save for the drowse of the tarp on the hot tub, the shiver of olive tree fronds. Inside though, there was the suggestion of occupancy: shadows in the windows; figures behind the glass. He watched them gather, then the outside lights came on, casting bright over the patio, the French doors; the doors opened by a woman he didn’t recognize. The woman was followed outside by Tommy. Certainly Tommy. So close through the lenses he could spit and reach him.

They walked out onto the patio, Tommy pointing, the woman, his new wife, Nate assumed, following the line of his arm. Nate watched them sit at the table, drink from tumblers, talk, laugh, clasp hands, kiss. No one joined them. He watched Tommy and his wife stand and take in the view, loosely linked by arms, smiling, their tumblers abandoned on the table as they walked back inside.

The first time he remembered seeing the Carter house he was four or so. They'd driven for what had felt like the whole day and it was not quite dark, but all the windows burned bright, burned in golds and silvers. They pulled up outside the gabled facade, the date 1848 carved into a white stone surrounded by umber brickwork, the ground-floor windows framed with lush red velvet curtains; the bedroom windows sashed with blue gingham. The size of the door and its lionhead knocker; the smoothness of the parquet on entering; the size of the room he was to sleep in, the hugeness of the bath, the glitter of chandeliers as they ate. He couldn't believe any of it quite existed.

'Am I dreaming?' he'd asked Anneka.

'No,' she'd said, 'It's real.'

A few years later, when his father told them they were moving north, Nate had assumed they would live with the Carters. That he would become part of the household, share Tommy's toys, run riot through the garden. He'd tried not to look disappointed when they were shown to a stone cottage not much bigger than their house back home. It was cold and austere, a look of furious utilitarianism, but with a stout front door that seemed loaned from a medieval keep. When the lights were on, it would be fine. When the fire was lit, it would be home. And it was. Remained so.

He finished his can, crushed it under his shoe, folded up the chair. Dark had come, fleet as rabbits, and he used the phone's torch to guide him up to the farmhouse, its kitchen window now unlit, though he knew he'd left the lights on. Bulb gone. Fuse

blown, most likely. The electrics were shot and had been for years, another chore he'd left to fester.

In the bulb-blown kitchen he opened doors and cupboards looking for candles. In the third drawer down he found them, along with some matches. He lit one, let the wax drip onto a saucer and set it down. The light haloed, a golden caul. He went to light another candle and saw something reflected in the window. A glass half full, an open bottle of wine. He didn't turn, but looked into the window, the glass and bottle in the candlelight, blurred and sketched in the pitch. He heard the sound of water from upstairs, the sound of feet on the stairs, saw the light of a phone dance through the open doors, then stop as it entered the kitchen.

'Hello, Nate,' she said.

What to say to that. How to speak, how to form words. Forty years or so, and her voice again. Her face again. What to say to that.

'I assumed this was for my benefit –' she pointed to the wine – 'I know I should've waited, but it's been such a long drive. And then the lights went out. Almost as soon as I poured it.'

A smile in the window pane. To turn now. First thing to do. To turn. And he turned, but pinned himself to the lip of the counter. Wanted to say hello but could not say anything. Fuses blown up and down the body.

'What's wrong?' she said. 'Cows got your tongue?'

She laughed and it was her laugh, immediately her laugh. Same laugh at the same joke she used to make. A private joke. Something he'd said once, getting the idiom all wrong, and her never letting him forget it.

'Sorry about the lights,' he said. 'I need to look at the fuses.'

'I like the candles,' she said. 'Look at the fuses later.'

He nodded. She sat down and sipped the wine.

She looked changed and unchanged: the same thin nose and cleft chin, but sharper around the cheekbones, lined at her seaboard eyes. Hair the same muddy brown, but dusted with ash

and tin, cut short and boyish; her hands blue-veined now, thin-skinned. The same sprung vigilance to her posture, though; like she was ready to dodge an oncoming hazard.

‘How did you get in?’ he said. ‘All the doors were locked.’

He remembered her shrug – Where’s my ball? *Shrug*. Have you seen my jacket? *Shrug*. When are you coming back? *Shrug* – a slight movement, little more; not quite disdain and not quite not.

‘The spare key,’ Anneka said, holding up a Yale. ‘All those years and you keep it in the same place. Lax security, Nate. Very lax.’

She wagged her finger, an old impersonation. Their father warning of something, a danger or a threat.

‘I didn’t see your car,’ he said.

‘I parked it around the back,’ she said. ‘Didn’t want to announce my presence too soon.’

The times he’d imagined it, this reunion: where it would happen, how. Sometimes hugging her in a house she owned; sometimes sitting beside her in a cafe or bar; sometimes here, in the kitchen, slapping her across the cheek. All the rehearsals, their drama and their intrigue, and her now here, in their childhood home, as he asked her about door keys and car parking.

Her face clenched, then softened, her eyes inching over his face, something invasive about it, as though forty years would be revealed in a few seconds’ staring.

‘Are you not going to hug me?’ she said, approaching him, her arms slightly splayed, inviting without encouragement. Nate held her limply, like he was transporting a body or an imbecile. Anneka kept her arms by her sides at first, then tightened them around him. She smelled of nothing. Not a thing. Like the scent of fresh water, the scent of cold.

‘You haven’t changed,’ he said, whispering into her ear. ‘Not at all.’

Anneka pulled back and put her hands on his biceps, kissed him on the cheek, faint lips grazing his beard.

‘I wouldn’t have recognized you,’ she said. ‘I could’ve walked



past you a hundred times and I'd never have known it was you. Maybe I did once. Imagine that.'

She studied his face, seeking him out beneath the broken nose, the weather-etched skin, the sag beneath his jaw.

'Time moves different when you're up with the dawn,' he said. 'It beats at you. That's what Dad always said.'

'You don't look like him,' she said. 'I thought you'd grow into him. I thought I'd open the door and see him here as clear as you are now.'

She left him by the sink and sat at table, taking their father's seat. Straight to it without thinking. He wondered whether she remembered or not.

'You don't look like Mam either,' she said, picking up her glass. 'You ever consider you were adopted?'

They both laughed. Another old joke, one Nate had forgotten until then. She seemed to know exactly what to say, when to say it, when to run through the old routines.

'Sometimes,' he said, taking his own seat at the table, 'I feel like I'm standing just like him. Saying the same things as him. The exact same things. Does that happen to you?'

She sipped her wine. Her face clenched again. The softness of the light, the gutter of the flame, softened nothing, cosied nothing.

'Let's not talk of him, Nate,' she said. 'Please let's not.'

She looked to where the clock had once been, an old ticker that had given out years before, never to be replaced.

'This house stinks, you know that?' she said. 'I noticed it as soon as I came through the door. The stink. Like something rotten.'

Her thin-skinned hands, the blue veins. Hands like their mother's, delicately fingered, resting on the table as though ready to play piano.

'I thought maybe you were dead. You know' – she made a pistol with her right hand and put it to her temple – 'bang, bang to the head. Farmers do that a lot, so I've heard. I read about it once. It's an epidemic, apparently.'

'It's a farm,' he said. 'Things stink.'

She shook her head.

'But that's just it. It doesn't smell of farm. I was prepared for the smell of shit, but this . . . this just stinks.'

'It smells the same as it ever did,' he said. 'You've just forgotten.'

'I haven't forgotten anything, Nate,' she said. 'Not a thing.'

She looked back towards the missing clock.

'Or maybe I have,' she said.

Her eyes lit for a moment. Something suddenly recalled.

'I remember spying on the Carters,' she said. 'You remember that? We'd take the binoculars and sit on the silos, thinking we were secret agents.'

She was smiling, encouraging a response, an engagement, something confederate in her eyes. It felt cruel. Why that of all things? No accident, no accident at all. Like she'd been snooping, like she could pluck his most recent thoughts from his head. He felt her there, kicking around, looking at junk, sifting through rubbish.

'Secret agents?' he said.

'You must remember,' she said. 'We used to sit on the silos and watch the Carters eat dinner and play in the garden. You wanted their paddling pool and you wanted their tennis racquets even though you couldn't play. You don't remember?'

'Maybe,' he said. 'It sounds like something we might have done at least.'

She looked at the walls, the stone flags, the stove. She drank her wine. After four decades, you are a different body; different cells, different biology, let alone different character. And yet Aneka was so much the same; the same slight judder as she inhaled, the same skittishness as the weeks before her A-levels. Welcome home, Aneka. You have been missed. Hated sometimes, but always missed.

'You cooked?' she said, pointing to the pan on the hob.

'I thought you might be hungry.'

Aneka carried her wine glass to the oven and stirred the pot,

held up the spoon and let the liquor fall, the sauce slapping as it hit the surface.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘I’ve not eaten meat in twenty years.’

‘Really?’

She looked back at him from the stove, as though cooking there a long-standing chore.

‘No,’ she said. ‘But it’s possible, isn’t it? You should have done a ratatouille or something.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever had ratatouille, let alone made it.’

‘I don’t care for it much myself,’ she said. ‘I’ve never liked aubergines. Don’t think I’d even seen one before we had that moussaka at the Carters.’

‘That I remember,’ he said. ‘Mam gave us that face that meant we had to eat whatever it was on our plates. And you looked up all innocent, and said, “What’s all this purple stuff?”’

‘They had a good old laugh at us, didn’t they?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘A good old laugh.’

Nate lit the gas ring under the casserole and took the wooden spoon from Anneka. The two of them, side by side, her getting down bowls from the shelf above the stove, placing them on the table, like they did this every Friday night. Once it was hot enough, he brought the pan to the table, set it on a trivet, got them a ladle. Anneka filled the bowls; Nate cut them slices of bread.

Steam from the bowls, from the casserole, and all the things to say and nothing right to say. He could not quite look at her; she could not quite look at him. He picked up a slice of bread and buttered it to the very edge of the crust, dipped it into the sauce. She did not move and did not eat; the clock did not tick.

‘They’re here, you know,’ he said at last, looking down into his bowl. ‘They’re both here. Carter and Tommy.’

‘You’ve seen them?’

‘Yes. I saw them out in the garden. Tommy at least.’

They looked at each other then, met eyes across the table, suddenly so much to say, but neither knowing how to start.

'We don't have to do this, you know,' he said.

She shook her head.

'We have a deal,' she said. 'You agreed. I have the emails to prove it.'

'But—'

'No buts, Nate.'

He looked at his sister, his sister older than he could have ever imagined, yet still the girl with the lucky elastic band.

'You agreed too,' he said eventually, going back to his bowl. 'Mum's looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. You promised, so no welching.'

She put down her spoon.

'You sounded like him then,' she said. 'Such a Dad word, welching.'

Nate smiled. A big chip-tooth smile.

'As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew you'd say that.'

He put his hand across the table, and she accepted it, squeezed it.

Her there, definitely her. In that face, looking back. He smiled and drained his wine glass. She did the same and Nate passed her the bottle. Aneka poured for them both. At their most together there, at their most together then.

*Doom Town and the One*

1959

January



## I

Floodlights pool at the western edge of the civil defence base; their beams hazed with low-lying fog. They are lit but are usually dark in the mornings, no matter how bad the visibility. From the stoop of a Nissen hut, Drummond watches his former comrades dance the last steps to the parade ground; the waiting transports idling there, ready to take them to railway stations and bus depots. They are a ragtag rush of men, youths really; like him all just shy of majority, all reacquainting themselves with the lightness of shoes, the thinness of suits. He hears their chatter, their whoops and hollers, their fetterless joy. It is the joy of men who are alive. The joy of men who have survived. The joy of those who have earned their liberation. No joy like it, that joy. The fools that they are.

Two years of enclosure; two years and now no longer prisoner or protectorate. He is free to leave. Expected to leave. To take a wagon with the lads, board a southbound train, ride a Tube carriage, walk the last stretch to home, open the door to backslaps from his grandpa, kisses from his great-aunt, something rustled up in the kitchen, never mind the hour. He looks at his wristwatch – a quarter to eleven – and calculates the distance, the time it would take to reach home. From Cumbria to Essex. North-west to south-east. Home for midnight. Midnight latest.

A transport drives off, another quickly follows it. The grind of tyre on pebbledash, the hammer of accelerating engines, the cheers of men, the opening of a gate, the closing of a gate, and then nothing. No voices, no bootsteps, no shouted orders. The windows of the surrounding Nissen huts are unlit; the study block, the mess room, the kitchens are similarly dark. Drum stands, the

last man alive. That's how it feels, upright in the chill wind: the only survivor, kit bag in hand, alone in a deserted coastal town.

He could leave. He could stay. He has, for once, options. Two years of being told, of being instructed, of obedience, and now expected to make a decision alone. Sometimes it's better just to be told; it's easier that way. Heard it's the same with criminals. His Uncle Nudge, the black sheep never out of prison for long before being sent back, said he preferred it inside. 'Four square and a bed every night, no one mithering,' he'd say. 'Who's going to argue with that?'

Drum walks towards the parade ground, eyes left, distracted by the floodlights on the training ground, their beams glinting from wire and strut and mesh. There are no exercises planned – all men are to be off site by midday – so why the floodlights? No such light was ever afforded the servicemen ordered there; they were never even given torches. Must be for the benefit of others. Ministry men, government officials, field marshals. Likes of them. Dignitaries given a short tour of the civil defence training ground: its reconstruction of a town in the aftermath of an atomic strike. Look! The bombed-out houses. Look! The stricken roads. Look! The fallen church. A slow shuffle around, floodlights picking out authentic touches. A shoe burned into a floorboard. A dead-body dummy behind the wheel of a Ford Anglia. The melted keys of a Remington typewriter.

Or perhaps this is when they add those details, when the sergeants and staff add more provocations, more images to harrow, more smashed glass to the asphalt streets. Maybe this happens every time the men leave, Drum never noticing because usually he'd be prepping dinner in the kitchens by now. Perhaps that, yes. Preparations for the next show.

The lights are a distraction, one welcomed, open-armed. His eyes are on the floodlights as he makes his way towards the parade ground. A walk to Millom. A walk to Gwen. Walked it many times, takes no longer than half an hour. Or wait for another transport.



Cadge a lift to the railway station. One of two things. To stay or to go. A binary option. He looks at the lights. There's time enough to make a decision. Plenty of time. No rush. He can go to Doom Town for a final time, take a last look, to fix it fast in the memory. He has the time to do that.

The pathway between the study block and the mess hall is cinder and stone; it scuffs boots, let alone shoes. He's wearing his good shoes, the oxblood brogues, the pair Carter bought him. He does not look down to the damage done; he does not want to be reminded of Carter. In the hospital, in the infirmary, Carter. Not to think of him. Nor think of Gwen. Concentrate on the lights instead.

Between the main campus of the base and the civil defence training ground, an open stretch of scrub and turf; an untended no-man's-land. He walks across it and does not think of Carter or of Gwen, of staying or leaving. He does not mine the past, though it weighs on him; does not consider the present, though it is pressing; does not look to the future, though he knows he might glimpse it. He concentrates only on walking; the eating up of time and of distance, the distant light.

At school he was told if he found himself stuck on a question he should move on to another. His mind, without him realizing, would still be working on a solution, and on revisiting the problem, he'd be more likely to know the answer. A kindly tip from his mathematics teacher, but one that sat uneasy. How can you trust yourself if the mind works without your consent?

Reaching the outskirts of the town, the first ghastr houses behind the fence, he remembers something from a book Carter lent him, a poetry collection: the words *grimly gay*. His face, he imagines, is that: *grimly gay*. He says the words as he walks – *grimly gay grimly gay grimly gay* – until they are white noise and companionable gibberish.

The gate to the training ground is open; its padlock and chain coiled inside the fence. The roofless houses and brick-strewn streets are boldly lit despite the fog. On his unauthorized visits, so

many of them over the last three months, he's seen it only by torchlight, by thin sunlight at dawn. The lamps make it seem stage-set, ready for cameras; actors waiting somewhere for their scene. It is no less terrifying for that. No less real. No less choking.

On the street, close enough to kick, amongst the masonry and glass, he spies a rusted washboard, its frame cracked, but still recognizable as a washboard. He does not think of Gwen, of Carter. Instead he is reminded of a washboard strummed percussively; a skiffle band from back home playing a song in a room underneath a pub. The sweat on the washboardist's brow, the tubthump in the heat, the rolled shirtsleeves, the loose strings of the guitars. In the silence, he hears the song they played. 'The Rock Island Line'. You're gonna miss me when I'm gone.

The pub has a thick-beamed door and three solid locks; it is a job to open: the bolts requiring guile and power; the mortice an unhurried coaxing. Gwen is practised, but it still takes longer than she'd like. Once it is unlocked, she sets her mouth, touches her hair, checks the clock. On the stroke of eleven, a half-hour earlier than most other pubs, she opens the door, its gaoler clank, its whine and scrape. Always on the stroke. Pride herself on it.

She opens up onto pale winter light, sky a shade of cinderblock; so dull an illumination. So dull and no one there to darken it. She fastens the door to the latch and someone is swiftly behind her, his smell familiar.

'Morning, Nick,' she says, turning around. Old Nick smiles between demented side-whiskers, below hood-lipped eyes. He shakes his head and from the hip pocket of his tattered herring-bone jacket takes out a fob watch.

'Late this morning, my dear,' he says.

'No,' she says, hands across the door, barring his entry. 'On the stroke, as always.'

'No,' he says. 'Late. Late by five minutes . . . six now.' He taps the dial. 'I wound it this morning and set it to the pips.'

He smiles, gently forgiving, a pastoral look; an aged, reverend face.

'I'm sorry,' she says, accusing eyes on the smug clock.

She releases her arm and he walks into the bar, a ream of paper under his arm. He brings his smell gusting inside: clothes half-laundered; cooling sweat, woody almost. He hangs his overcoat on the hatstand, drapes his white-fringed scarf on top: just so.

Eleven in the morning and his cheeks red from rambling hills, from the salt-spice of the coastal pathways. Always mud on his boots, always mud on his trousers. Like he's missing a dog. Like he's lost one out in the fields.

Gwen lifts the hatch and starts pouring his black and tan, layering stout on pale. Old Nick sits at his table, the biggest of the barroom, closest to the fire, and organizes his work into three neat stacks.

With a pencil, he scores through a line of text. He licks the pencil tip afterwards, quickly, as though tasting his words. The pumps gutter beneath Gwen's feet; Nick's black and tan settles, the stout floating, still miraculous. With care, she carries it to his table and sets the jug down on the beer mat. Same as every day. Exactly the same.

She remains there, but he does not look up; one hand on the page, the other absently filling his pipe. Such thin and filthy fingers, long nails lured with tar and dirt. He says he can't work without slag under his nails, without earth on his palms. It's never looked like work to her.

'There you go,' she says.

'Ta,' he says. She looks down at his pages; he covers them with his arm. He glances up and there is a cold blue in his eyes, like the gas burner on full blast.

'Let me finish with this,' he says. 'And then we'll talk. I think that's best, don't you?'

The frosted turf on either side of the path gives way to the beginnings of the terrace. The first house he comes to he enters; its front gashed open, like a wrecking ball has been taken to it. The houses are like those on the estate on which he grew up; smaller, but similarly proportioned. The kind of properties everyone lives in, familiar to all.

Entering the town that first time, three months before, he noticed the church most of all, its absent spire, a small flock of seagulls on its still-standing archway. Ordered in through the gate on the south side of town, and there it was in front of them. Deliberate, this. To remind them that the bomb respects no god, no society, no man nor ideal. A true leveller. They were made to stand to attention, to look straight ahead, to take it all in. The exploded terraces, the paneless windows, the motor-car husks, the church. The town smelled of smoke and something malty, a brewery stink. The sergeant walked behind them for a time, then marched them to the makeshift field hospital for instructions.

The inside of the house is typical: dust and brick and reminders of the lives once lived there. The upstairs is obliterated, there is no roof or ceiling. In what once was the kitchen, a stove is partially melted. Above it, on the last remaining plasterwork, somebody has scored their name. *Chazzer*. Underneath, somebody has added *Spud*. Underneath that, just three letters, *b-o-n*; the graffito unfinished, its author clearly interrupted.

★

At Ford's they'd called him Tin; at Ford's they'd called him Kettle. Sometimes they'd called him Kit; sometimes Bass. So many names

for the same Drum: so many names for the tall young man with the chestnut-coloured curls who riveted doors in silent shifts, who always kept pace with production line speed, who listened and nodded and never complained when the men went out on strike. Unassuming, shy, but a good bloke. Agreed by all. Told that all the time. A good lad. A good worker. Two good years at Ford's; two good years of being a good comrade, of being called Roll, or Stick, or Oil. Then service. Where they called him Horse.

The first morning of his initial training, at the National Service base in Shropshire, they were called to the shower block. The first time he had been seen naked by anyone since boyhood. The other servicemen saw his cock. They did all but point. Even in the cold, so much bigger than everyone else's. He looked down and it appeared grotesque. Animal. He hid himself. It did not matter. From then on he was Horse. Even to the sergeants.

Newly named, he undertook the first days of training, days of blade-sharp trouser creases; boots shining like fresh paint on bonnets; sergeants' voices loud and close. Nissen hut and drill ground, Nissen hut and mess hall. At night there was light bullying: some lads mocked for prayers; some for wanking once the lights were out; some for quietly crying. At dawn, the sergeant banged a copper kettle to hasten them from bed. *Wakey, wakey, girls!*

Drum talked only when spoken to, same as when he'd started at the factory, advice from his grandpa. Listen as much as you can, say as little as you can muster. There were other factory lads there; they seemed to take to it easier than the others. Understood routine. Understood to do what was necessary and no more. He wrote to his grandpa and told him he was taking his advice. That he was showing no fear, and all was well.

Before lights out on the fourth night, a card school opened at the end of their hut: a small group involved, the rest of the thirty watching. Drum saw the con by the fifth hand, had seen the same scam at the factory: new lads taken for their first pay packet. There were six in, four skates and a pair of marks. The posh lad was

called Carter, was up by a lot. He would be dealt an enticing hand, one almost unbeatable, then be soundly beaten.

Over his cards, Carter looked up to the assembled servicemen. A small, satisfied smile. Drum could have watched him lose; could have looked away, could have quietly predicted the hand Carter would be given as incitement. But their eyes met and Drum tipped him the slightest of winks. A suggestion of a wink, nothing more. Enough though. Enough for Carter to go back to his cards, study them again as the skates hurried him up. After reconsidering his cards three times, Carter folded. He took his winnings as the skates cleaned out the other mark. Factory smarts. Always have someone else to fleece.

The following night, Carter stopped Drum midway between Nissen hut and mess hall.

‘Not tonight, Josephine,’ Carter said. ‘Tonight we eat with the officers. My treat.’

‘You’re an officer?’ Drum said.

Carter smiled. Drum had never seen a smile like it. A smile of intense pleasure, one derived from providing something another man could not.

‘No,’ Carter said. ‘But tonight we’ll eat as officers. My way of thanks.’

In the officers’ mess, they were sat at a table for two. Drum looked around, expecting to be turned out, sprung from the room; something that seemed to amuse Carter.

‘Don’t worry, we’re all friends here,’ Carter said. ‘Thank you for bailing me out last night. That showed some guts.’

It hadn’t felt like courage. It hadn’t felt like valour. It had felt like a dumb risk, stupidly taken.

‘That’s all right,’ Drum said. ‘Thanks for all this.’

‘You are more than welcome. More than welcome.’

Carter nodded, bringing his thanks to an end as a bottle of wine arrived at their table, two plates of meat in sauce and potatoes with it.

Carter poured the wine and picked up his glass. Drum did the

same. They chinked glasses and Drum tasted the first wine of his life, thin and sour on his lips. He looked down to his food and began to eat, the meal appreciably better than in the mess. He ate and he drank and he listened. Listened perhaps most of all.

Unbidden, Carter began his grandstand and spiel, the stories of his short life. How he'd been sent down from Oxford; how his 'rather important and powerful' father had insisted he take his National Service; his erotic adventures undertaken in foreign climes. His tales came at speed: exaggerated, tall, and without restraint in language or imagination. Drum had met men like him at Ford's, full of themselves and full of shit; but no one who seemed to believe it quite the way Carter did.

At the conclusion of an almost certainly untrue story of a gypsy woman who'd loved him but given him the clap, Carter put his hands on the table. He didn't say anything, didn't eat anything, didn't reach for the wine; just looked at Drum from a series of angles, as though what he saw might quickly change.

'You don't say much, do you?' Carter said. 'I thought cockneys all talked twenty to the dozen.'

'I'm not a cockney,' Drum said. 'I'm miles from being a cockney.'

'But still,' he said. 'You've said no more than ten words all night, and I've given you chapter and verse on yours truly. So, your turn. Tell me about you, Moore.'

To be called Moore was already a kindness. It was appreciated. More than the wine and the food. The consideration of that.

'There's nothing to tell,' Drum said.

'You have a girl?'

'No.'

'We'll have to fix that. Especially since . . .'

Carter lowered his eyes to Drummond's crotch, then quickly back to his reddening face.

'Come now,' Carter said. 'Tell me something you've never told anyone before. I told you the gypsy woman story, after all. Fair's fair.'

He leaned in to Drummond, rested himself on his elbows. The



intimacy of it, the proximity of his face: there was no chance of saying nothing now. Not with a wine-loosed tongue and a sense of owing; the keen of Carter's face, his elbows on the table. The closeness of him.

'There's nothing to tell,' Drum said.

'Indulge me.' Carter said. 'If we're to be friends, we need to share our stories, do we not?'

Drum looked down, closed his eyes. No chance to demure. No chance of escape.

'I almost killed a man,' Drum said.

That face. That face looking back.

'Go on,' Carter said.

'We were at a dance,' Drum said. 'A skiffle group was playing and this bloke said something to a girl I liked. He touched her. He said things to her. And something just went snap. I don't know. Something just snapped inside of me. Barry and Danny had to hold me back. If they hadn't, I swear I'd have kicked his head clean off.'

The effect he'd expected. Carter's face glowing, a locus between horror and deep admiration. The same look he'd seen on the faces in the canteen at Ford's as O'Driscoll had told the same story. That rushed disbelief, the sweet nip of the violence, the quickening of the pulse.

'Well, well,' Carter said. 'Still waters and all that. Still waters indeed. I think you'll be a very useful friend to have, Moore.'

A useful friend. Yes. Useful.

★

Drum walks through the blasted house, out of its open back rooms, into a collapsed ginnel. The cobblestones are rucked, displaced, skittled around like shot. The three cobbles he arranged into a pyramid on his last visit are still there. They are approaching permanence now; surviving intact for over a month. Three stones, laid and placed, ready to be kicked.

Nick works in silence, kitten licks of the pencil, kitten sips of beer. He is a published poet, a memoirist, playwright, professional wildsman, approved of by London society, a society he disdains. Once a year he goes there, providing him with a year's worth of reasons never to leave home again. He claims to have never spent more than one single night away from his flat in the town, and all of those under sufferance.

In a letter, stowed inside a loaned copy of *Women in Love*, Nick once asked Gwen what it was like to be raised in a public house. She never replied to his letters or his questions – casual enquiries included amongst digressions on birds, on the turning of the seasons – but this one had troubled her time.

‘There is, I believe,’ the letter said, ‘a certain kinship between those who live above places of business, as I have these last sixty-odd years. The divided kingdom: the public space below; the private realm above. The stairwell a kind of *purgatorio*, a portal between our exterior selves and our interior existence. I wonder, though, whether this is different in a tavern. A shop is a space of quick interaction, of expedited process; an inn, on the other hand, is a place of contemplation: an intermediary between private and public. How does that affect one, I wonder? What happens to the public space when the last patron has ambled from the fire and the doors have been bolted on the world?’

Over the course of that week, she mentally drafted and redrafted a response. Point is. (She would start.) The thing is. When you think about it. What you don't understand is. What it comes down to is. She would meander this course, wishing her brother were

back from Service, wishing her mother were back from the dead, both around to add some pepper to the pot. Her father was no use; if she asked about the past, he embarked solely upon his own fool nostalgia, stories that were never her own.

Point is, the bar was forbidden when we were young. Mam and Da would be downstairs, but might as well have been in Barrow or Berlin. We always had breakfast with them before school, the two of them walking us to the gates when we were young; doing the dishes and kissing us goodbye when we were older.

The thing is, the pub was just home, nothing more. John and I used to fight a bit, him being the younger and things to prove and all that, but we were close. We all were. Mam smelled wonderful; Da did too. Mam like a fairground; Da like new shoes. Tea every night in the kitchen, watching Mam putting on her make-up, Da combing his hair. At just before six, even when we were of age, we'd kiss them goodnight and watch them walk down the stairs together, their clothes starched and their hands together, ready for the night ahead.

When you think of it, pub hours are good for kids. Mam and Da would take us out after school walking, rambling in the afternoons, no matter the weather. We'd look for birds' eggs and rabbits, walk the dog. Out in the fields, we'd talk Welsh, scare pigeons and magpies. Gill and Patty, they never saw their das. My da was always around when you needed him. Just don't go down to the bar. That was the only rule.

What you don't understand is that we were a little frightened of the bar. Just enough. When I was little, I used to hear singing coming up from the saloon. Men off to war, those coming back, those who became names on the plaque behind the pumps. I thought singing in the pub only happened when people had died or were going off to die. I hated to hear Da sing downstairs. I thought maybe he was going to war too.

What it comes down to is that the pub is less of a home now. Da rots upstairs, not long for the world, or so he says. John will be

home in a few months to take his true position behind the bar. He will play Da to a T. His wife, that shrew of a woman, will be a hire-purchase Mam. And what shall I do, Nick? What will become of me? What shall I now call home?

This well before she met Drum, but those last thoughts – what shall I now call home? – have come back strong over recent weeks. Is this merely expedience? Would it have mattered who it was, so long as they could offer a home far from here? These the thoughts too tender to press for too long, so she lets them settle like the stout on the pale. Do not agitate. Just pour the drinks, just tend the bar, just wait until Jessie comes to relieve you. Just another hand-over, just another change of shift.