

Arthur

‘Transparency is the enemy of procedure. To get things done, there has to be a certain uncertainty, a barrenness to the narrative, large gaps in knowledge. A void. Holes in the history, mirroring the shape of a woman. Here is hegemony: don’t let them see what is done. Make truth impossible to piece together from dismembered parts. Only tell part of the story.’
– *The Quickening*.

It starts like a love story, but don’t be fooled. I was eighteen. Love was a concept that still carried weight when I met her. Like faith before it, love is an archaic abstraction now, a thought-relic from a more fanciful past.

That was before society distorted: The Change.

Now, I am a gentleman. The clue is there: *gentle*, as in benign, tame, trained. I am a functioning heterosexual man, a significant societal minority. I have a job, a good one: Executive Administrator at the Westminster Academy for Non-Gendered People – *eunuch farms*, we call them, amongst ourselves.

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Every bad action I have ever taken, the awful things I have done, the compromises I have made, are as a direct result of falling in love . . .

It was 2015, and the house was indistinguishable from any other student digs: dilapidated, Edwardian and too far down the Cowley Road. Set back from the pavement behind a skinny privet hedge, with a chequered path of red and white quarry tiles to the open front door, a mess of overflowing plastic wheelie bins was its most obvious feature. Back then the world was over-ridden by plastic: we were drowning in plastic, ingesting it in the water along with female hormones and animal antibiotics – plastic was swallowing us and we were swallowing plastic. From the bins came the stench of wet cardboard and rotting fruit. Things were ugly before *The Change*. The garbage was an excess of freedom, the waste symbolic of our indifference. We wasted our freedom.

I had gone out that evening in search of sex. I was hunting. In the dark, the house seemed den-like and dangerous. The sounds and warmth, the moving shadows, I felt a thrill of opportunity as I crossed the threshold. The house-party was as far removed from a Christ Church bop as anything I could imagine, and there were girls everywhere, their bodies pressed close together.

Sanderson had invited me but was nowhere to be

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seen, and I didn't recognise a single face as I pushed my way through to the drawing room. It was an awful house, sticky and unclean. Underfoot there were dirty beige carpet tiles like squares of furry pigskin, the walls were painted a dark aubergine, the colour of clotted blood, and the sparse furniture had been pushed back against the walls. The only ornament was a torn poster of the Waterhouse *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.

I must've been nervous. Men were already being softly conditioned even at that time, before The Change, before *she* was directly involved. What I already felt was guilt, the unremitting anxiety of the perpetually pampered, a low-level cavilling against my very existence: I was too public-school, too white, too privileged, too male. I had red hair and was in my first term at Oxford.

The wine was shit; there were boxes of the stuff stacked in the kitchen. But clutching a single-use tumbler of something dark and acidic was somehow vital, life-giving. No one cared if I was there or not and I moved through the house like a ghost.

Sanderson found me back in the drawing room, grabbing me in a bear hug and slapping my back.

'So glad you made it, dude,' he said, laughing, his arm around a pretty blonde girl.

I raised my plastic cup and said cheers in a sarcastic way, and Sanderson laughed again.

'You don't come here for the booze, mate, you come here for the girls.' He shook me by the shoulders

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in boisterous good humour and I took the opportunity to shove him back.

We'd been a year apart at school, in different houses, and now at Oxford we mostly passed time in the corridors of Exam Schools after morning lectures. I didn't like him. But when he had mentioned this house of good-looking and wildly bohemian girls on the dodgy end of Cowley Road, I had allowed myself to get interested.

Suddenly, over Sanderson's shoulder, I saw *her*. That moment of seeing Dana, that was when the universe fundamentally shifted. Back then she was just a particularly attractive girl with a detached, proprietorial air as she glanced around the room. Not exactly beautiful, certainly not sexy, but there was something about her that made it impossible to look away: she was mesmeric. Impossible then, for me to tell what she would become.

'That's Dana Mayer,' said Sanderson's girl, helpfully.

'Fuck no,' Sanderson said, 'stay away from *that*. She's so opinionated. About everything.'

I kept enough of a distance so as to not be marked a creep, but followed Dana's slender figure as she skimmed through the crowd and poured herself a glass of water from the kitchen tap. Her posture was remarkably straight, her skin luminously pale, and her angular jaw jutted proudly as she drank. She was dressed in vintage clothes: a long, flowing skirt and a high-necked shirt with a trench coat draped over

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her shoulders and a beanie styled like a beret. Her choices created a strange sense of rigid femininity, the full skirt offsetting the primness of the starched buttoned shirt and its pointed collar. She was other-worldly and untouchable, massively pretentious but undeniably attractive.

We made eye contact and I remember feeling physically shocked by the coldness of her gaze. Dana's eyes were so dark it was impossible to distinguish her pupils from her irises, and these murky hollows communicated one fact: I was worthless. It felt like she despised me on sight. That no matter how hard I tried, I would never mean anything to her, and yet some terrible compulsion *urged me to try* – I wanted her more knowing this, not less. What was it, that yearning for something so out-of-reach, so distant, and fundamentally unloving? Why did it cause a swirling feeling in my stomach and my balls, a lurching, tugging desperation – a delicious agony? It was a challenge that could never be met: I was turned on by my own inadequacy.

I hoped she had come alone, but Dana settled in a dark corner with a group of girlfriends. As she joined them, they each took her hand in turn and raised it to their lips, kissing it solemnly and without a trace of irony. It was an old-fashioned, courtly gesture and seemed inappropriate and weird. The ritual hinted at some wider significance and my brain was troubled by it, but my fluttering response to sexual cues, a

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lifting-then-falling motion in my stomach, was activated by watching them and I was broadly aroused.

They spoke of politics and other impenetrable things, building a wall of words designed to keep me out. I remembered Sanderson's warning: she's so opinionated, about everything. But Dana made no sound, her coterie were doing all the talking. Dana was silent, listening to the conversation with half-closed eyes as if in reverie. She looked like a Celtic priestess, her hair so dark and her skin so white, about to deliver some ancient rite.

When she did finally speak – I had edged close enough to the group so as to almost seem a part of it – her voice had a synaesthetic quality and my skin tingled as though she had brushed her fingertips across my neck. It hadn't previously occurred to me that the voice was a powerful, musical tool. She spoke curiously slowly, unlike other girls of my acquaintance, who generally articulated streams of very fast consciousness. Her tone was surprising; there was nothing girlish or light about it, nothing apologetic. She didn't finish her sentences with rising intonation, but with certainty and authority. To me it seemed like she only spoke to be sexual, the content was irrelevant.

And then finally, miraculously, the group had disbanded and I was alone with her. We stood side-by-side, but she didn't move away. The background noise rose in my consciousness and I became annoyed with the loud conversations and bad music.

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I took my cue from her outfit, the long skirt and romantic styling. No girl would dress like that if she was just out looking for a good time. I would need to offer more.

‘Parties like this make you want to fall in love or run away, don’t they?’ I said, smiling at Dana conspiratorially.

‘Yes,’ came the somewhat encouraging reply.

‘And you’re not going to fall in love with me . . . are you?’

‘I am not.’

‘Then let’s run away,’ I said, and offered her my hand.

I must have possessed some level of confidence at that time, or I would never have been able to take such a risk. Approaching or speaking to an unknown girl is impossible now, horrific, in fact – wrong and punishable. But before *The Change*, men and women existed collectively and with a level of unimaginable freedom; we had the opportunity to forge real friendships, the kind that could engender long-lasting, deep love. There were casual carnal encounters, mixed colleagues and co-workers, boyfriends and girlfriends, partners, lovers, admirers . . . a whole spectrum of affection was possible.

Dana looked down at my outstretched hand and I half expected her to take it and kiss it. Instead, she gently placed her own small hand in mine, looked up at me and smiled. ‘I’ll run away with you. But only if you promise to actually run.’

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I nodded, weak with the victory, and true to my word turned to leave, pulling her along behind me. She followed so close that as I frantically pushed my way through the other students I could feel her chest bumping against my back.

As soon as we were outside, with the cool night breeze pricking our faces and every exposed bit of skin, we started running. I led her towards my part of town, my flight compass instinctively attuned to its dreaming spires and the promise of heightening beauty. It was difficult to run, and laugh, and hold hands, and dodge obstacles, *and* avoid her voluminous skirt, but these hazards only added to the frisson of our singular performance. Eventually we gave in when painful, body-shuddering laughs and nearly-twisted ankles took precedence over the frolic.

We rode the night bus in respectful silence, her hair looking blacker in the blue fluorescence, her thoughts impossible to judge. I was terrified of breaking the spell, confounded by my own good fortune.

She looked tranquil and unmoved, as though she frequently ran away with strangers to unknown destinations. The bus was half full. The other passengers were mostly semi-drunk students returning home early, in defeat or victory – there was no middle ground at this time of night. I wanted to get her back to my room, but it would have to be done in increments.

Christ Church Meadow was the most romantic and geographically convenient spot I could think of

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taking her, short of simply dragging her inside the college and up to my chilly single bed. We sat on the cold grass, Dana settling her skirts neatly around her, drawing the trench coat tightly around her body and clasping it at her throat.

‘I’m Art. My *name* is Art,’ I clarified. It was annoying to waste time on introductions and banalities, but I wasn’t sure how else to begin. I wondered how much we would have to talk before I could kiss her.

She told me her name and then said, ‘It’s late. It’s dark. There’s no one around. Aren’t you frightened of being out here alone with me?’

It was a provocative flirtation, because there was nothing frightening about the physical reality of her: she was slight and breakable. But as she implanted the idea in my mind, I found myself wary.

I decided to be serious. ‘Are *you* afraid of being out here with *me*?’ I asked it kindly, and with respect for any potential fears, because I knew I was a monster. What I wanted to do was to push her back on the grass and open the ridiculous trench coat, muddy the white shirt, rip the red beret from her head and touch the slender legs hidden beneath her skirt.

‘Not at all. Female intuition is a very powerful thing.’

‘I couldn’t agree more.’

I leaned in to kiss her, but then she said, ‘Does the

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world seem right, to you?’ and I hastily shifted my body back to a neutral posture, knowing it had been too easy.

‘Has the world *ever* seemed right to *anyone*?’

‘Oh, *ad populum*!’

This was what I had pictured when I imagined coming to Oxford: fascinating girls spitting Latin fallacies with barely disguised sexual frustration. But I would have preferred action to conversation. I had already decided that I loved her.

‘Look, obviously the world is fucked up,’ I said, adopting a superior tone. ‘Where do you want to start? *Do* you want to start? This could take us all night . . . I can imagine a better way to spend the time.’

‘Can’t you feel it?’ she asked, leaning forward and grabbing my hand.

‘Feel what?’ I replied, making sure to grip her hand tightly, so she couldn’t pull it back.

‘The quickening!’

‘The . . . what?’

‘We’re at a pivotal moment in human history. A pre-revolutionary moment. The world as it is, is *wrong*, can’t you sense it? Change is imminent. We’re at a tipping-point; it’s a quickening, a happening, a moment-of-no-return.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t feel it,’ I said firmly.

‘Try this,’ she whispered, and to my surprise she guided my hand down towards her groin. I could do

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nothing except stare as she pushed the palm of my hand flat against her lower abdomen. ‘Historically,’ she continued, her voice low and seductive, ‘when a woman was pregnant there was no way to tell how the foetus was developing inside her. There were no scans, no blood tests, just a lot of waiting and praying. Until . . . the quickening: the fluttering feeling a woman gets the first time her baby moves discernibly inside her. Nature’s proof of life; what has been done will not be undone.’

Her bizarre actions muddled my brain and made me stupid. We were sitting so close together, our heads bent near enough to whisper. ‘Are you pregnant?’ was all I could think to ask, my eighteen-year-old self unable to cope with her theatrics. I was only conscious of the heat of her body radiating through my hand.

With a quick movement she lay flat on the ground and rolled away from me, like a cat. My hand was left reaching out to cold air. She stared at me contemptuously.

‘No, the world is pregnant.’

‘Well, if you ever *do* feel like making a baby, just let me know,’ I said, full of bravado, desperately trying to regain some control.

She didn’t flinch at my comment, just stared harder. ‘I’ll bear that in mind. But there’s no time for that now: a revolution has begun and is far enough along to be a viable opportunity for people like us. It could be ours . . .’

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I nodded, mutely. As I watched her speak, my mind was beginning to create sinister diversions. In the moonlight Dana's skin had taken on a deathly quality, and shadowy hollows had appeared around her dark eyes, which now appeared infinitely lightless. She reminded me of Bloody Mary, my favourite childhood ghost story, and how as a boy I had terrified myself trying to call up the spirit of the dead queen. In the dark of the night, shivering in flannel pyjamas, I used to stare at my own reflection in the bathroom mirror, leaning on tiptoes over the cold sink to get as close to the image as possible. A cracked whisper, '*Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary . . .*' and before I could muster the courage for the final summons, my face would begin to morph into that of a ghostly visitor.

I still felt the sheer dread of those remembered moments, when my physical identity had been clouded by some apparition – conjured from my own mind or some alternate reality, I found both options hideous and unbearable. In the dark, Dana now wore the face of that phantom.

'We've hit a political singularity,' she continued, her voice very clear, very human, and very alive. 'All times of unrest promise great change. I'm going to be part of it.'

I smiled at her. Clearly, she was unhinged, but her gothic intensity appealed to my naturally superstitious temperament. I found comfort in her brazenness. 'Why the burning desire to change the world? Why

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not just settle into comfortable apathy like the rest of our generation?’

‘They’re not apathetic. There’s a tremendous well-spring of untapped energy that has been ignored and suppressed for generations and that is just now starting to come forward.’

‘Okay,’ I said, semi-mockingly, drawing out the word, aiming to highlight her intensity, since I had little idea to what she was referring. There were easier girls. Girls who would be grateful to be with me, who wouldn’t be so preoccupied and . . . angry; girls who would go out of their way to please me and keep me. But I wanted Dana. And it was important that she should want me too, my pride demanded it. I wanted her mind and body to be filled with nothing but desire for me – which was why I was prepared to resign myself to any number of wacky conversations rather than rush for her half-hearted consent. I did not want to rest upon the inevitability of our sexual union, I wanted to earn it. In my mind, our meeting held a weight I associated with destiny, that our lives would be forever connected. It was too perfectly weird, and she was too witch-like.

‘Why did you come with me tonight?’ I asked. ‘Not that I’m uninterested in the plight of our generation – I am – but this feels like the right time to get personal.’

‘That’s very progressive of you. I believe that everything should begin with being personal.’

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‘Great!’

‘By sharing my opinions I *was* being personal. I was being *very* personal. And I like that you brought me to the Meadow. I prefer being outside.’

‘Great!’

‘At the party, when you asked me if I wanted to fall in love or run away, you struck a chord. Not in the way you meant it, but because I am only interested in having the fullest experience possible in any given situation. I don’t have time for anything less.’

I was pleased that my bold gamble had been correct, and shuddered to think of how she might have reacted to a boy crass enough to offer her a simple ‘hello’.

‘Because you’re too busy feeling the quickening, and plotting how to change the world?’

She laughed delightedly. ‘Yes!’

I laughed too, pleased to have reached her. The laugh emphasised how young she was, and when her self-control was breached, she looked all of fifteen years old. It gave me hope. She had captivated me with her capricious conversation and her Gallic good looks.

‘And,’ she added, ‘I don’t believe in judging someone on their physical appearance, so I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt.’

‘Oh Jesus, *thanks* . . . what’s wrong with the way I look?’

‘You scream of white male privilege, but I wanted to see if you could be an ally.’

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‘And?’ I asked hopefully.

‘I don’t think you’re suitable.’

Dana’s words were dry and dead and they crumbled my hopes. I remembered the way she had first looked at me in the kitchen, with barely disguised hatred.

‘It’s my fault,’ she continued, ignoring my distress. ‘You’re unsuitable because I find you attractive.’ She lay down flat on the grass, and stared up at the black sky.

I nearly let loose a burst of bewildered and joyous laughter. This girl was so confusing; she was my very own modern-day Mary Shelley, a rebel and non-conformist – a maker of monsters. She was teasing me!

‘I find you attractive too,’ I said, abandoning game theory.

‘The thing is, I just don’t want any kind of romantic relationship.’

‘Well, I think you’re being slightly presumptuous—’ I began, but stopped when her mouth tightened, rightly unimpressed with the lie. ‘Okay, well why *don’t* you want a relationship? Are you bi? Or poly?’ I remembered the way all the girls at the party had kissed her hand.

She rolled her eyes. ‘No.’

‘So why don’t you want a relationship?’

‘Because I don’t want to be distracted from my work.’

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It was my turn to roll my eyes. Oh. That. How ordinary of her. Well, it might take time, but that was easily overcome. I lay down next to her, feeling optimistic once more. I turned to look at Dana's strong face, her white skin pulled tight across her bones, the mass of black hair falling from her high forehead, and knew I had achieved as much as was possible for our first encounter; I would be going to bed alone. 'Look, can I have your number? I'd like to take you out for a drink sometime.'

'I don't drink.'

'Fine. A hot chocolate then. Not to distract you, simply to support whatever it is you want to do. I promise I'll just be a devoted observer.'

I won another smile. 'All right,' she replied. 'You can watch me work.' She turned her face towards mine. She was close enough to kiss. We stared at each other, not blinking, not speaking. 'But I don't have a mobile phone,' she whispered after a tortuous moment, 'I don't believe in idolising a technology that's made on the other side of the globe by corporations renowned for labour abuse, using blood minerals that have been the cause of millions of deaths. And besides . . . phones are surveillance devices.'

God, she was exhausting. 'So how am I supposed to get hold of you?'

'You know my name, Arthur. I'm at St Hilda's. You can leave a message for me there.'

It was enough of a victory for the evening. Dana

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had excited in me a passion so great that any past encounter now seemed grey and dull in comparison. I was besotted.

Sometimes, I fantasise about being able to go back in time to the moment of our first meeting, back to sitting alone with her late at night, and I think *I had the opportunity to kill her*. It's easy to kill a woman. It happened all the time before The Change, women were murdered every day.

It would have been so simple to reach across and push both my hands down on her neck. I could've just pushed down until her windpipe crushed and buckled, and her spine cracked in two. I could have sat on her chest, my full weight on her ribcage, and punched her in the face over and over again until her brain was curdled in her skull.

I could have prevented everything that was to come. Then how different might my life have been. And not just my life, but the lives of countless others.

Victoria

'History has proven that people are able to live out their lives against a myriad of possible backdrops, exist in every type of regime, and tolerate multiple physical hardships.

Nothing yet has been existential. The abnormal can be normal.' – *The Quickening.*

I'm in a field somewhere near Hull. The cisgender heterosexual men line up in front of me at a safe distance, shuffling as they get into position. A couple of them look scared, like it's a firing line. It's 2043: you'd think they'd be used to having guns trained on them.

From the cover of my female entourage, I look at their faces. There's about twenty of them, hand-picked by the forewoman, a mix of ages and ethnicities. A few stare straight ahead, gazing at nothing. Most look at their feet, heads bowed like they're praying. Maybe they are. Praying is a habit that doesn't die easy. None of them meet my eyes; fair enough.

Behind the men, a field away, is their encampment.

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From this distance it looks festive: rows of khaki tents, fluttering flags, fire-pits. A bunch of guys are playing a rowdy game of football, armed members of the Erinyes Guard looking on bored from the sidelines, like old-school mums at a weekend game. The buildings for the Erinyes and their armoury – corrugated tin sheds and little wooden houses with container-gardens – stand safe behind electrified barricades.

Don't question it. That's what I keep telling myself. I'm alive, safe – heck, more than that, I'm part of the privileged 0.001%. So, I don't look too closely. Why scrutinise the structures that hold me up? It's a game I can play and I'm winning.

I've walked through roving Infrastructure Initiative Towns before, and they're all the same: companies of men who live and work together; contained, kept occupied and separate from the rest of society. Heavily guarded. They move from project to project as needed, up and down the country, and their towns move with them, the tents and bunks and barricades. We keep them all moving.

The Infrastructure Towns have different specialisms – farming, building etc. This is a Demolition Town. These men are responsible for removing all of our pre-Change architecture and patriarchal infrastructure, '*clearing the way for a golden hereafter*'.

I look back at the row of male bodies in front of me and try not to fetishise them. It's distracting, being so close to so many intact hetero-males. I should

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get myself a gentleman, except those guys are too fucking wet.

These are the men who didn't sell out. They wear identical cord trousers and cotton shirts with their sleeves rolled up over taut forearms. They look healthy and lean, thriving on that winning combination of manual labour and rationed food. A few begin to sneak glances; and I wonder if they want me too, if they think I'm a beautiful, exotic thing. Or maybe they're just shit scared, scoping me out like prey under the gaze of a predator. Hard to tell.

Jessica Slater, my permanent secretary and my closest friend, clears her throat next to me. 'Victoria Bain, Minister for Culture and Media,' she says. No one claps. We discourage them from clapping: too violent.

I give my little speech, mouthing the words on autopilot like bad lip-synching. I sound unconvincing as I talk about the value of their work, and how proud the nation is of their strength and ability.

I know the theories behind my words, they are as natural to me as thought, and straight from the pages of our pre-Change manifesto, *The Quickening*, our guide on how life should be: *'Men must feel like they have a purpose. They need to be given just the right amount of praise. Not so much that it inflates their ego and makes them overestimate their ability, but enough to acknowledge their hard work. Men know they are*

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judged by women. It is intrinsic to their nature to wish to earn our praise and affection.'

I wonder if the men before me wish to earn my affection. I've tried not to stare too long at any one face, but I've spotted the best-looking, two in from the left. He looks bored, instead of scared.

I stop talking, and now that it's quiet I can hear the birds again and the sounds of the camp carrying over the fields. The forewoman, dressed in the all-black uniform of the Erinyes, smiles at me. 'Would you like to talk to them before we tour the town?'

I work my way down the line from right to left, so that it doesn't look too weird when I single out the good-looking, bored one. I'm struck by the smell of them up-close, it's warm and raw and I can feel my nostrils flare trying to catch more of it.

'How is work?' I ask my favourite.

He bows gracefully and my eyes linger on the exposed nape of his neck. 'We're razing the old retail estate, ma'am,' he says. I can smell cigarettes on his breath. The smell of cigarettes mixed with sweat is so foreign to me. It is so good.

The men on the Infrastructure Towns get all the cigarettes they want, but no alcohol, alcohol would make them violent, turn them outwards. But we provide opportunities for them to kill themselves in as many *silent* ways as possible.

He continues to talk. 'There are a lot of light-framed

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buildings, so we're using the wrecking ball. It's quicker that way and there's not much worth salvaging, they weren't built to last.' He sounds genuinely interested in his work, a professional.

'And your leisure time?' I ask, imagining him on some grotty camp-bed and wondering about the company he keeps. Infrastructure Towns are their own little communities: black markets, gambling, sport . . . homosexuality practised-out-of-desperation.

'Well, I wouldn't mind some more of it,' he grins cheekily. 'But, yep, we get down-time, alright. I play the guitar, so that mostly keeps me out of mischief.' He's practically winking at me. I admire his attitude. And his arms.

'You're able to talk to your Erinyes officers about other opportunities and advancements? The government is very keen on social mobility. You know there are paths to becoming a gentleman open to you?'

I wonder if it sounds like I'm flirting with him. I hope I don't sound obvious. For the first time he seems cautious, the playful light gone from his eyes. 'I'm happy where I am, ma'am, for now,' he says, with a small bow of his head.

I nod. 'Thank you for the work you do. The nation values your contribution.'

I need to just get over myself: existing, that's what's important. I live a life of absolute luxury. No one can hurt me. The problems are all in my head now.

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In the old world I had been a reality-TV pop star. I was only twenty-two when I headlined a sold-out national arena tour, culminating in a performance at the O2 in London.

It was 2017. The night before the O2 gig, I was a mess. I had curled myself into a little ball in the darkness, right on the edge of the mattress, my back turned on my boyfriend, trying to stop the bed from shaking with the force of my sadness. We were in a hotel suite; I can't remember which one. There used to be so many hotels in London, thousands and thousands of them, I guess. Now there are twenty.

I was screaming silently in the dark, opening my mouth as wide as it would stretch, calling for God, for help, from anyone. *Help, please help me.*

Geoff snored on the bed next to me. He'd taken something from his pill pots, some mix of sleeping pills and painkillers, and he'd drunk a load. Because he couldn't stand my complaining any more. Because he needed me to shut-the-fuck-up.

He wasn't about to wake up, but I was scared; before he'd passed out, he'd raped me. The tears and the silent screaming weren't going to give me away, but there was so much gunk coming out of my nose and mouth that I had to keep sniffing, and loudly. The sniffs were dangerous – what if they woke him up? I was going to drown in misery because I was too scared to breathe properly. *Help me.*

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I used my hair as a pillow, pushing my stuffed nose into the tight, black curls around my face. The smell of my hair made me feel less alone. It was the same smell as Mum, argan oil from the shampoo. I tucked my thighs closer to my chest and held onto my feet, grabbing my toes as tightly as I could, squeezing myself into the smallest little ball.

And fuck, it was cold. Geoff wouldn't let me wear any nightclothes because he said it was important that my naked body was always available to him. That night he had set the air-conditioning really low and dared me to change it. I thought about my mum's house in Milton Keynes with its double-glazing and the radiators always on maximum, whatever the weather, and the hot air silky from the deep fat fryer. *Mum, help me* . . . I used to pray to my mum for help, even before she was dead.

I was frozen in agony. I didn't dare move in case that woke him up. I was trapped. My jaw was juddering from the crying and the cold, my teeth banging against each other like those little wind-up toys that bounce across a table.

The fear wasn't as strong as the sadness, even though you'd think it would be. If he killed me, he killed me. That was where fear took me. I had already imagined him strangling me, or drowning me in the massive bathtub, making it look like an accident, doping me, holding my head under until my lungs gave up. Fear, at least, had an end point.

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But the sadness went everywhere: the sadness went beyond death. Sadness made me ask how I ended up like that, made me wonder if I was to blame, if it was some test-from-God that I was failing. Sadness made me cry for my mum in the dark, made me hate myself soul-outwards, made me question everything I'd thought was real.

Growing up I'd always been loved, always been safe. I'd gone to school in fucking Buckinghamshire, where there were loads of normal kids like me; kids who were dorky or self-obsessed, who were mean, or loud-mouthed and sharp, kids who were fun, but did-what-their-mums-said. I'd never seen Class A drugs before I met Geoff, but by the time I was twenty-two and dating Geoff, drugs were everywhere. He used them casually, socially – he said they helped girls to 'relax' and 'have fun'.

I was used to casual racism from childhood, the usual microaggressions and unimaginative bitchiness, but it was nothing I couldn't handle. So when Geoff and I first got together and it was all new and exciting, and still like a fairy-tale – I'd won *UK SOUND!*, and he was managing me, and we were alone in his hotel room and both a bit drunk – and he'd said, 'Come on then, Vikki-B, let's see what you can do. All my black girls are good at singing, dancing, and fucking,' I'd actually tried to help him out, to save him from the embarrassment.

'Those sound like alright things to be good at,' I

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had joked, trying to forgive him. But he had just put me down on the bed . . .

It had been Gemma's idea to put me up for *UK SOUND!* We both loved to watch it on Saturday nights, curled up on the leather couch too close to the TV, while Mum cooked us chicken and chips in the kitchen, or brought us kebabs from down the road.

Gemma filled out the online application on her phone, giggling, while Mum said that though I could definitely sing, it would be better if I stayed focused on my Beauty Therapy NVQ, because going on the telly was a dodgy thing. Gemma and I had laughed at that, choking on Diet Coke, Gem saying, 'You're so dodgy, *yeah?*' But perhaps Mum had known that the wider world was rotten and bleak. She hadn't been an educated woman, but that didn't mean she wasn't smart.

The first audition room was massive. Twenty or more people sat behind square grey tables set in a U-formation. They didn't look up when I entered, they were looking at their phones or talking to each other, so I quietly walked to the middle of the room with my guitar and stood waiting to be told what to do. Eventually, a man looked up, and said, 'Get on with it.'

When I started singing, one-by-one they went quiet, and it felt great to know that the power in my voice could change their behaviour. The man that had told me to begin interrupted before the end of my song. 'You're incredible,' he said. 'You're absolutely

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fantastic. I think one of the best we've ever had, no bullshit. Geoff's going to love you . . .'

On the day of the televised audition I didn't feel too nervous. It was like playing the lottery and already knowing that you're going to win the jackpot – buying the ticket doesn't seem like the exciting part any more. Hair and make-up had made me look completely different: they'd plaited my hair in a complicated way and applied some extreme contouring to my face. I didn't look bad though. And in a way, even though the outfit was more revealing than anything I would have chosen and looked a bit out-of-date (but who was I to say?) it was kind of helpful to have a disguise.

I walked into the new audition room, where massive scaffolding supported a bright purple and red *UK SOUND!* backdrop. There were loads of cameras and enormous lights directed at the middle of the floor, so it felt hot when I stood on the stage. The level of production was intense; my eyes couldn't really focus on the four judges even though they were only a few feet away, sitting in a row at a table displaying the *UK SOUND!* logo. I looked up and saw Geoff, and my heart almost stopped with excitement and nerves.

'Hello, and who are you?' asked Geoff, with his trademark gentlemanly smile.

'Victoria Bain.'

'Go ahead, Victoria,' said Crystal Meth, the American mega-star.

It went fine. The judges were all pretending to be

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completely amazed, even though they'd heard my audition tapes and knew what I sounded like. Crystal Meth had tears in her eyes. 'Wow. Just wow,' she whispered.

They said a whole bunch of other stuff and clapped and stood up for a mini ovation. 'I have a feeling,' said Geoff, 'that you're someone really special. When I hear you singing . . . this slip of a girl standing in front of me . . . with all the power that's coming from inside you, I just think it's astonishing. You're *powerful*. Do you know that? I think we can expect great things from you, Victoria Bain.'

The way he said the words and looked at me made my tummy feel weird. What he said was fake, but it felt real then.

Geoff Marks was the 'nice guy' of reality television. He had a trademark look: red braces, thick-framed glasses, and a flowery pocket-handkerchief. He wore a lady-killer smile of impossibly white teeth, and was always kind to contestants, even the moronic ones. Hounded by paparazzi, Geoff had also been the person to come up with the original concept for *UK SOUND!*, which back then made him God. And it was definitely a strange feeling to have God look directly in your eyes and say complimentary things.

'In fact, I think,' Geoff continued, 'I think that we might hear a little more from you now, Victoria. Do you write your own songs? Do you have anything you could share with us today?'

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The producers had decided I should play something of my own, to set me up as more than just a ‘sound’, and so I knew exactly what to say next. ‘Well, yeah, I do like to write my own music. I have one song that I don’t mind sharing. It makes me think of my dad, who left when I was young.’

They had made me add the part about my dad. Although why a song I had written about the first bloke I’d kissed would make me think about my absent father, I didn’t know. It seemed weird to me at the time, like a too-obvious lie, but they didn’t care. Now I understand propaganda and production and realise that truth and subtlety are monumentally unimportant.

My lover’s eyes are deep and mahogany/ Pools of delight in which to discover me/ Temptingly bright, no means of recovery/ Such are my lover’s eyes/ My lover’s voice is haunting my memory/ Displacing all calmness, destroying serenity/ Urging me now, an inhuman entity/ Such is my lover’s call to me.

It was all just made-up crap from my imagination. How could I think I knew anything about love? That kind of love didn’t exist anywhere except in my own mind. It doesn’t exist anywhere now. Now, those lyrics wouldn’t even be legal. The whole farce has vanished.

After my song there had been more clapping from the judges and Geoff had made a point of coming around the table to give me a hug. The way he touched

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me, flattening his hand across my lower back and pressing hard was flattering. It made me feel safe and sexy, all at the same time.

‘I think I detect a little something else in you too,’ Geoff said, turning to the other judges and smiling. ‘I can sense a naughty twinkle in there. I think you’re maybe holding out on us. There’s something of the street about you. Something raw and real.’

The judges nodded and laughed, agreeing with him in smiles that seemed to say, ‘Yeah, she’s a real bad girl.’ I didn’t know what they were getting at, other than the fact that they’d dressed me up like a ghetto twat, but I didn’t want to disappoint him, so I just nodded and laughed and said, ‘Yeah,’ and tried to look raw and real, and like I was into grime and drill, even though I was an acoustic singer-songwriter who idolised Joan Baez and was studying to be a beautician.

Was that the moment that I sold my soul? It is hard to remember. Hard to pick one definite moment. It was a crazy short journey from there: from being Victoria Bain, the wannabe singer who was a nervous people-pleaser, to being what I became: the multi-platinum-selling recording artist, Vikki-B, who held the UK record for the greatest number of digital downloads of a song within ten minutes, topped the US and the UK billboards more than once, with over

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eleven million Twitter followers, a devoted fanbase called the *Bainsbuds*, sold-out arena tours, and had a boyfriend who smacked her around. It has been a longer journey from that place to here: from tacky mega-star to terrifying political minister. I've been so many other people, and seen so much. I'm a survivor, a chameleon, a temptress, a snake . . . You can't trust me.