

The Spiral

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ZAFFRE

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To my sister, wherever she is

If you're trapped in the dream of the Other, you're fucked!

Gilles Deleuze

PART ONE

2004

ERMA

The plastic door jolts and a man shouts, *Come on.*

I open my eyes, wipe my mouth.

Another filthy airplane bathroom. Another mirror.

All this off the back of one email. It came through in Gijon, two minutes before my keynote. Subject line: *Disciplinary Action Pending. Dr Erma Bridges is advised,* and so on. *Meeting scheduled.* Rattled, I blasted through my presentation then sat in the corner of the conference dinner (dead-eyed, alone) before retreating to my hotel to pace around and call the travel agent. That's how I ended up on a thirty-four-hour flight back to Brisbane, back to the campus, back to confront this *meeting* head on, to show my face.

This face.

I hit the Centre by 8 a.m., coming straight in: plane cabin to customs to cab. The disciplinary meeting starts at nine. They aren't expecting me. That's why I'm here.

My office neighbour, Kanika, is already in for the day. She gives me the once-over. 'Have you showered?'

'Sure.'

‘It doesn’t look like it. Come here.’ She takes a hairbrush from her drawer and hands it over.

‘How’s Harlowe?’ Harlowe is my cat, a jet-black short-hair who set up house in my apartment two years ago. Despite his mysterious origin, Harlowe gets a bit fretful when I’m away. Kanika’s between rentals, so she’s cat-sitting.

‘He’s a fucking little turd,’ she says. ‘He’s killing everything in your yard. You know that, right? Birds, lizards, mice. He even killed a snake. I didn’t know we had snakes in New Farm.’

‘Well, he’s a cat.’

‘They’re not all like that.’ She points at my head. ‘Hair.’ I pull a clump of Kanika’s thick mane from the brush and start pulling it through.

Kanika says, ‘Are you worried about this meeting?’

‘I came back from Spain for it, didn’t I?’

‘I don’t know. Did you? No one’s saying a word. HR set a separate meeting with me next week.’

‘They ask you to bring anything?’

Kanika shakes her head. ‘Just a meeting. Do you know what this is *actually* about?’

‘Nope.’

‘You sure, Erma?’

‘It has to be about Jenny, right?’

‘Fucking Jenny.’

And here it is: Jenny Wasserman, my research assistant, the problem child. Jenny and I had a falling out before I left for Spain. We ended up screaming at each other outside

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a nightclub at four in the morning. It was bad. A big mistake. But for months now Jenny has been creating delays. She wants more money, *for transcription*, she says. *It takes forever*. It's a fucking shakedown, is what it is. I'm writing a book off the back of her work for me and she knows it. Her job was to conduct thirty interviews and transcribe the audio. Now, I have twenty-five interviews and an important missing piece: a face-to-face with Archibald Moder. The celebrated author. The recluse. No one gets to talk to him. But Jenny somehow got it done.

And now she's screwing me around.

'You want me to come in with you?' says Kanika.

'No.'

'I'll come in with you.' She spins in her chair. 'Can I ask how the book's going?'

'No, don't ask me that. How's this?' I nod at the wall beside us. This is Kanika's project. One whole side of her office is adorned with fourteen postcard-sized photographs, each with a name and date listed on a small sticker underneath. This is the result of a three-year research fellowship looking at representations of missing women in the Queensland media. The project's located here because the university has a history. We've lost fourteen female students in a decade. Three are dead. The remainder are at large. Some have been spotted. Some have called home once or twice. The majority are missing, presumed dead like the others. It is this sombre wall display that has earned Kanika's office its nickname, 'The Squadroom'. And it's true. Her

wall is like something out of a detective novel. Recently, it's become more and more like the dramatic end of that novel: Kanika drinks in here, eats in here, sleeps a couple of nights a week on a yoga mat on the floor. I'm no different. My work isn't as life-or-death, but I sleep in my office too. Thing is, I keep my office tidy and there are no pictures of dead girls on the wall, so no one calls my office anything.

At five to nine, a procession of admin people files past. The front three are dressed in formal greys and black but a straggler, a young man, is dressed like a student. He locks eyes with me. Seconds later, Kanika's desk phone rings. She answers it, puts the receiver down. 'Here we go then.'

My boss is Howard Chandler. His office is the kind of academic accommodation they don't make anymore: spacious, comfortable, quiet, three tall windows that catch the morning sun. Today, Howard is warming himself in that sun, sitting with his arse on a short filing cabinet. He doesn't look happy: he has his glasses off and he's furiously rubbing at them with a handkerchief. 'You shouldn't have come back for this,' he says, as a greeting. 'But now that you're here, take a seat over there.' He puts Kanika and I off to one side, against the wall. The people from the procession are clustered around a small round table Howard reserves for student consults. Howard turns to them and says, 'You better tell her who you are.'

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The admin people introduce themselves. I try to memorise the names:

Delia Something, Deputy Director of HR.

Tall like a vampire.

Beside her is Donna, her assistant. Assistant to the deputy.

Redhead.

Then there's a man called Aaron Frill. He says he's the Assistant Dean but he can't be assistant to the Dean of Research because I've never seen him before.

Zip-up boots, grey slacks.

Last is Danny Hemult. He says he's from the union.

The student.

'I asked Danny to join us,' says Howard. 'What is this about? There's no agenda attached to the appointment and, to be bloody honest, I don't like coming in this early. It messes up my wife's schedule and that fucks up my schedule.'

'We've had a complaint,' says Delia.

'Complaints,' clarifies her assistant.

'Yes, that's right. Complaints.'

'And they pertain to?' says Howard.

'Misconduct.'

'Of a personal nature.'

Howard goes over to his L-shaped desk and sits there, apart from all of us. 'OK. What sort of misconduct are we talking about here?'

'We can't disclose the details,' Delia says. 'But we're going to need to speak with . . .'

Her assistant has a pile of loose-leaf pages on her lap. She lifts one and reads, 'Cynthia Dunstan.'

'Cynthia?' I hear myself whisper. She's a former postgrad of mine.

'Yes,' says the assistant. 'And David Brier. I believe he's a PhD candidate here. And then there's . . . one, two, three others, all postgrads who've been attached to the School at some point. Ryan Solis, Dylan Copson and Anita Milburn.'

No mention of Jenny.

Definitely the complainant, then. They can't name her.

They all turn and look at me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I say, 'Anita's not even—'

'No, I'm sorry but hold on, Erma,' says Danny Hemult. He's terrified. 'What is the exact nature of these complaints? Let's start there.'

I thought we had started there but Delia answers it. 'That's to be determined.' She stares into space as she says this, either completely unable to deal with conflict or flat-out dangerous.

Her assistant is a lot clearer. 'I *said* it was personal.'

Howard sighs. 'Have the police been contacted?'

There's a pause.

The assistant says, 'No.'

'Then get the hell out of my office. All of you.'

Delia turns quickly. 'We're here today to—'

'What? Get our permission to talk to these students? You don't need it, and if you did, then, no, you can't have

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it. Or do you want me to talk to them? Or to her?’ Howard squeezes out a laugh. ‘Find someone else to do your job for you. Or maybe, just talk to Erma yourself, ask her about what she’s supposed to have done and go from there.’

‘We can’t do that,’ says the assistant.

‘She’s right,’ says Danny. ‘They can’t do that.’

I stand up. No control now. ‘I’m right here.’ I’m jet-lagged, scared, over-caffeinated. ‘I’m right here! I’m not in Spain where I’m supposed to be, I’m not writing my book, I’m not in Singapore where I was nine hours ago. I’m right—’

‘OK, Erma, OK, OK,’ says Howard. ‘What about you, Aaron? Do you have anything to add to all this?’

I’d almost forgotten about the Assistant Dean of Whatever. As Kanika hustles me towards the door, Aaron Frill draws back his lips and shakes his head. ‘She’s sleeping with her students.’

It's 9.48 a.m. The red vinyl punching bag in front of me compresses and re-forms, compresses and re-forms. I can hear the counter rhythm of my punches bouncing around the rest of the campus gym. There's only one person in here with me: a short Japanese woman working on ladder drills. She's way over the other side of the room but the sound of her feet slapping the mats blends into what I'm doing.

Jab.

Cross.

Jab.

Kick low.

Jab.

Low cross.

Jab.

Kick.

With the rage burning off, I lose count of the reps. My vision blurs. I push harder and the names float through the routine, consonants landing with each strike. *My victims*, apparently. I feel tears coming up. The floor tilts. Saliva foams in my mouth. I keep punching. I keep sweeping low with my leg.

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Jab.

Cross.

Jab.

Before I have much of a handle on it, I find myself kneeling over the bin by the gymnasium mirrors hurling airline food into a plastic liner. It all happens to the pattering step-work of the woman behind me. To my eternal relief, she doesn't break from her workout. She doesn't ask if I'm OK.

Here's what's at stake. This is my academic career in a nutshell. Straight out of high school, I did a quick business degree in Melbourne, then fell out with my family and came north to my first office job in the Queensland state government. Hated it. So I started a coursework masters in arts. I graduated with a seven average, which led to research work for Griffith Uni, sessional tutoring for UQ, and, eventually, an APA scholarship and the research job I have now. In that research position, I'm full-time on my book, the one Jenny is stalling. The working title, *Secret Interactions: A History of Reader-Deployed Young Adult Fiction*. It's about the books of my childhood, the Choose Your Own Adventure novels, Fighting Fantasy gamebooks, Archibald Moder's Zone Mover series and the vast array of spin-offs and extensions these books introduced to YA fiction in the eighties. This topic was a surprisingly easy pitch to publishers. Those novels are full of cultural studies tropes: postmodern fracture, non-gendered protagonists – always presented in the second

person *you* – and characters of ill-defined race, class and creed. I had multiple offers to publish. And it was more than just a good pitch for career advancement. It was personal.

I own a vast, vast collection of these novels. When I was a kid, my father brought them home from all over the world and I kept collecting them way past the age where the hobby seemed appropriate. I clearly remember reading them in the latter half of high school. Then later, my sister and I revisited them while I was home from uni, spending a long painful summer inside those branching narratives and arcane gaming systems as my family fell apart. At final count, my sister and I own over four hundred paperbacks in the genre, all carefully stored in the basement of the Centre.

I willingly levered this obsession of mine into my career. Working on something you love makes you productive. It's why academics spiral into workaholism. It's how I did it. I've put my whole life into *Secret Interactions*. And the rewards are coming, if I get the manuscript finished in the next month.

I'll be twenty-eight years old.

A full-time academic.

Research-only.

A regular keynote at conferences.

Writing a big book that people are waiting on.

And when I'm promoted – almost a lock, at this stage – I'll be the School's youngest associate professor. The youngest. So sure, it's been a rough couple of years – I've

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lost friends and family and I'm alone and notice it more and more – but I'm also getting exactly what I want. At an age when most people barely know their place in the world – while everyone's Saturn is in return ripping through their lives like a black curse – I'm getting over.

Or I was.

Until Jenny.

My muscles twitch. The gym shower blasts down and a cloud of grey steam envelops me. There's dark red blood snaking down my fingers.

David Brier.

Dylan Copson.

Anita Milburn.

Cynthia Dunstan.

Ryan Solis.

And Jenny.

No one said her name, but she was there.

The originator of all this. The architect.

Jenny the common denominator.

Jenny who knows all those people.

Jenny who binds them together.

Jenny and me.

Jenny was like a little sister to me, at the start. I saw myself in her. I encouraged her. Hired her. She's been to my apartment multiple times. I liked her for a lot of reasons but mainly because she wasn't a *sweet* woman. She didn't aim to please strangers. She appeared to have so much sly

self-loathing in her that it made her unassailable, outspoken, interesting. She once told Howard – to his face – that one of his papers *sucked*, because why not. What could he say – or anyone else – that could be worse than what she told herself every day. But the flipside of that soon availed itself. Jenny just couldn't get out of her own way. Self-loathing is also self-obsession. Jenny got so petty and particular. So weirdly money hungry. She totally lost sight of our professional relationship. Kept making it personal. Kept assuming the work was secondary. That's exactly the vibe I *didn't* want from her. I wanted the self-critical, overcompensating Jenny. The brutally honest Jenny. But, over time, she became more and more like my actual sister, Dora, who trades in the same currencies of personal obligation and dependency. I don't have the bandwidth for any of that.

Thankfully, I'm not as close to the rest of the people on that list HR read out. I met the first one, David Brier, two years ago, at Ric's Bar after some work function. He had a white wine cask loose in his backpack and offered me a pour. Right there in the club he told me about his two failed passes at a PhD scholarship, then pitched me at 3 a.m. It worked. The second one, Dylan Copson, used to live with David in a share house three blocks from my place in New Farm. Dylan already had a PhD scholarship, and a girlfriend: Anita Milburn, who is supervised by Roberta Binyon, one of the poets on staff. David, Dylan and Anita all kicked around the School, then the Centre. They all did research assistant work for us. They all worked

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alongside Jenny. The last two, Cynthia and Ryan, are more like former colleagues. They were in the sessional teaching pool alongside Jenny a few years back but have moved on. I co-supervised Cynthia's PhD. I sat in on Ryan's thesis reviews. That's the extent of my scholarly involvement. When I met all these people, I was an overachieving twenty-five-year-old and they were early-twenties arts degree alumni scratching for scholarships and work. Until two hours ago, that's all it was. People who knew each other. People who worked together and lived near each other. It wasn't some corporate hierarchy. It's a university. We're all glorified students.

In the gym showers, I lift my busted knuckle to my mouth and taste coins and sea salt. My stomach rises, trying to push up through me again, but I breathe into it, slowing myself down. There's only bile left now. I can smell it.

I'm in trouble.

I know.

I should reach out to that union rep, the kid Howard invited to the meeting. *I should do that.* But I'm ashamed to admit that as a purveyor of critical theory and literary studies – two disciplines forged in Marxist critique – I'm not in the union.

I'm on my own.

I call everyone mentioned in the meeting and no one picks up. I send emails and get an immediate response from David Brier. He's on campus. He's procrastinating. He tells me he has a chapter due – which is news to me as his supervisor – but he agrees to a coffee without asking why.

I sit on the lawn by his office, in the afternoon shadows. I watch him schlep out of the Michie Building, tall but always slightly hunched over, as if too tall. His hair is kept short but it's never neat and the same could be said of his work uniform: brown corduroy trousers and an oversized knitted sweater. This is all part of his appeal. David hasn't grown into himself yet. He wouldn't look a bit different in his high school uniform.

'Aren't you cold?' he says, standing over me.

'What? This? I'm from Melbourne.'

'I need that coffee you promised me.'

'Merlo's closed. Have you seen Jenny?'

'No. Why?'

'She disappeared on me and she's been extra weird lately. Now she's causing trouble.'

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'None of us in the postgrad room talk to her anymore.'

'Really?'

'The last time I saw Jenny, she was screaming at me from across the street in the Valley one night. It was fucked up,' he says.

'When was this?'

'Ages ago.'

'Last year?'

'More like the start of semester.'

'I thought you two were OK?' David and Jenny used to fool around.

'We were, well, sort of OK,' says David.

'So why was she yelling at you?'

'How the hell should I know? That's what she's like sometimes. What's this about?'

I stand up and dust the grass clippings from my hands. 'Has anyone from the uni contacted you recently?'

'About what?'

'About me. About . . .' And I wave my finger between the two of us.

David smirks, the little arsehole. 'About *us*? Bloody hell. What's going on?'

'Have you told anyone?'

'No.'

'You sure?' I know the answer. It's all over his face. He's insulted that I've lingered on this.

'No, Erma. I haven't told a soul. I promise.'

Boys like David Brier are always in my orbit for some

reason. Nice men who offend easily. All honour and valour over the little things. I flash back to David here insisting on accompanying me to the GP for the morning-after pill and the memory of it grinds.

I start backing up and say, 'I think Jenny's behind something going on with HR. If someone from admin comes and talks to you, say whatever you like, but just know that that's where it's coming from.'

'Erma, what? Wait.'

'Tell them whatever you like.'

'Wait. Wait.'

I hold up my hand in a muted wave for goodbye.

He says, 'Jenny said something about that.'

This stops me. 'About what?'

'On the street at the start of semester. She was screaming all sorts of crazy shit, but she mentioned you and me.'

'What did she say exactly?'

'She was acting crazy.'

'Just tell me.'

Nice guy David averts his eyes. 'Something like, "Go fuck that whore who got you into uni."' Something like that.'

I feel myself wince. I take off, walking way too fast now.

Fucking Jenny.

You little—

'Erma!'

Talk about cutting to the chase for once in her good-for-fucking-nothing life.

'Erma!'

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If Jenny's out there, I'm going to find her.

You hear me, arsehole?

Tonight.

Jet lag is a miracle drug. I catch the bus into the city where I wolf down coffee and a cheeseburger then change buses and start searching through the Valley. This is Fortitude Valley but it's anything but. It's Brisbane's nightclub district, a place where pain and adversity are created rather than defied. I start at the bottom of the barrel tonight, which is RGs, The Royal George Hotel at the top of the mall. It's two-for-one jug night and it's already a nightmare. Clumps of students I recognise sit out in the beer garden, all keeping politely clear of the day drinkers and ranting junkies. A tense standoff.

A kid from my cultural studies reading group invites me to come sit with him. We drink room temperature VB while I scan around. A girl at our table mentions discount cocktails at The Empire. An older guy from a band comes past with flyers for The Shamrock. The warm beer churns in my gut.

No sign of Jenny.

I pour my dregs into a planter box and make to leave. As I stand up, the kid from the reading group says, 'I might see you later, yeah?'

'Sure. Where are you headed?'

'610. Then The Depot.'

This is a good start. There's a lot happening tonight and

I've already got a bad vibe. She'll be out. Jenny always prefers grit over glamour. She'll be here somewhere, darkening up some corner.

Outside RGs, I stand in the crowd streaming through the mall and check my phone for messages, thinking of my next move. Out of the corner of my eye, I see something smack into a guy's face. A plastic beer jug skids past my feet. The guy slowly slumps over. His friends gather round. Meanwhile, a scream belts out from back inside RGs. We all turn and watch as a stocky shirtless man stands on a wobbly table in the beer garden. He hurls another empty jug out at the crowd, followed with, 'Fuck my cock. Fuck my fat—' Security crash-tackle him to the ground and his body lands with an ugly wet thud.

As I was saying, this isn't the greatest part of the city.

Ric's Bar is empty. The cute guy (Rowan) playing records tonight is a friend of Jenny's so I hang out by the Galaga machine and sip water. Rowan sticks to his B material, careful not to blow his load over the post-work suits.

'Eye' by the Smashing Pumpkins.

Portishead live in New York.

'Spit on a Stranger'.

People come and go.

No Jenny.

10.15 p.m. I push on.

The Empire is empty. Two lesbians sipping Cosmos at the bar. A table of tourists.

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The Zoo has a twenty-dollar cover charge.

At The Troubadour the band has already started and it's some terrible country-rock thing, and the room is full of beards and Nancy Sinatra knock-offs. These are not Jenny's people. The bartender there is a former student and he has the coffee machine on. I grab a long black, Irish style. Feeling momentarily invigorated, I hit 610, a dingy rehearsal studio and ad hoc venue up the street. Inside, I wade through the smoke machine fog and up the stairs to the small kitchen and it's there that I find Dylan Copson, already loaded, hitting on a short girl wearing what looks like a maid's costume from a sex shop. I plant myself beside him. Dylan glances over but doesn't say hello.

'I don't think any of this is true,' I announce loudly, interrupting him mid-sentence.

'Who are you?' says the girl in the costume.

'This is Erma. She's my . . .' Dylan screws up his face, reaching back through the haze of whatever he's on. 'You taught me "Intro to Media Studies", didn't you?'

'Among other things. Are you old enough to be in here?' I say to the girl. 610 is run by a teenager and they let anyone in.

'I'm nineteen.'

'Good for you. Can I borrow this idiot?'

I take Dylan's hand and drag him away before either of them can answer. There's a fire escape downstairs and I lead Dylan through it, out into the dark alleyway that runs

along the side of the building. The alley is suspiciously wet under foot and smells of bleach and cigarettes. Dylan's laughing. I don't know why.

'Have you seen Jenny?'

'What? Tonight?' he says.

'Yeah. Remember Jenny? Baby-faced, blonde hair, the girl you cheated on your girlfriend with. Ringing any bells?'

'What? That was you. I was with Jenny after that.'

This is true. And, for the record, while I did teach Dylan 'Introduction to Media Studies', nothing happened while he was in undergrad. Nothing. Our fling happened later.

'Dylan!'

He wipes his brow. 'Fuck, all right. Nah. I haven't seen Jenny in ages.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah, I'm sure. Jesus, why are you being so weird?'

I step closer so I can see his eyes. It's too aggressive. I sense it immediately.

Dylan breathes beer onto me. 'Can you just—'

'Jenny. Where is she? I know she's hiding from me.'

'I honestly haven't seen her. No one's seen her. Last time I saw her it was . . . it was for like ten seconds, on campus.'

'When was that?'

'I dunno. Back in April. Fuck, could have been even earlier, hey. It's been ages.'

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‘How do I find her? Where would she go if she’s avoiding everyone?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Where is she living at the moment?’

‘No idea.’

‘None? Weren’t you fucking dating her six months back?’

‘I didn’t date her. We just fooled around. I hooked up with Jenny after you, which was, like, two bad ideas in a row.’

I grab Dylan by the arm and drag him in real close, our faces an inch apart. ‘I *am* a bad idea at the moment, Dylan. You hear me? And *you’re* a fucking bitch. Stay away from that girl inside.’

He’s so surprised it takes a moment for the anger to flare up. ‘Let me go.’

‘You better not be lying to me, Dylan. And you better not be talking shit about me behind my back.’

‘Fuck, Erma, OK, OK.’

I let him loose.

We stand there a second. He rubs his arm.

‘And you better be working on that lit review for Howard. I recommended your dumb arse for that gig, so don’t make me look bad.’

‘Jesus, OK. Why are you like this?’ he whines. ‘It’s Friday night.’

‘It’s *Thursday* night, dickhead.’

I’m ashamed to say it but I’ve always been a little bit

mean to Dylan. A bit rough and prickly. Never quite like this but always sharp and impatient. He reminds me of someone I hate. This guy called Euan. They look the same.

I'm fading. I drag myself to The Depot and it's a nightmare, a total collision of flesh and booze. I have a gin and tonic. I do the rounds.

No Jenny.

At the edge of the dance floor with my face washed in orange swirling light, I start to wonder if I'm losing my mind a little bit.

Maybe it's not all about Jenny?

Maybe she's going to turn up with the transcripts tomorrow?

Maybe I should just pay her . . .

Maybe this is all me?

But no, that's not where it's headed. It's not where it started either. Not really. I tell myself, *We're just going to talk this out.* I'll find her tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow. The orange light keeps coming, rolling over and over in sync with the music.

Where is my luggage?

At the office?

At the gym?

I was in a foreign country this morning.

I live on Moray Street, a long bowed road around the edge of New Farm, which is the suburb next to the Valley. I'm halfway there on foot when I realise there's one more place I need to check: the Alibi Room, my local.

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I find Jenny's sister Gloria holding up the bar. Gloria's a little thinner than Jenny and a little taller but it's the same deal. They both have that ghostly hot-girl thing going on. Too weird to be beautiful but always threatening to grow into it. I take the stool beside her and pour us both a cup of water from the canister on the bar.

'Rough night, Glory?'

She lifts her head. Her eyeshadow's a mess. 'What the hell do you want?'

'I'm looking for your sister.'

Gloria's eyes blink and then, without a word, she starts gesturing around so wildly that I need to steady her on the stool. 'You know . . . Jenny's in sooooo much trouble. Sooooo much trouble. My parents are gonna . . . fucking . . . kill . . .'

'Where is she? Do you know?'

'Nobody knows, man! Nobody!'

The barman glances over. I push the water Gloria's way. She tilts her head sideways and lays a cheek flush against the bar. She looks at me through the glass, a giant fisheye watching.

'Am I OK?' she says.

'I think so.'

'I mean, I hope *she's* OK. She's missing. *Missing* missing. She was staying with me and with my folks, kinda splitting her time . . . but . . . my folks called the cops a week ago. No one's seen her, no one's seen her in . . . She's just fucking gone. Have you seen her? You must have seen her.'

I take a sip of my water. 'I've been away.'

The house music cross-fades from Idlewild to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. The staff are watching us now. I figure Gloria's been a nuisance tonight.

Someone taps me on the shoulder.

Quick glance: a guy in glasses. A stranger.

'No,' I say.

He taps again and when I ignore it, he says, 'Glasses or no glasses?'

Gloria gives him the once-over. She lifts her head and her face is wet with Christ-knows-what from the bar. 'Do it again,' she slurs.

The guy tips the glasses off then on.

'Off,' Gloria says. 'You don't need to . . . hide all that.'

I turn around. The boy has short brown hair and is wearing that terrible combo of a collared shirt under a regular T-shirt. He's completely unremarkable bar the eyes. The eyes are a piercing bright blue.

I tell him, 'Hey, buddy, fuck off.'

Gloria shushes me and laughs a plastic laugh. 'What's your name?'

'I'm Drew. I bet you'd look good in these. I bet you're a glasses-on type of girl,' he says. 'They make everyone look smarter.' It takes me a second to realise he's directing all this at me.

'I'm already smart enough.'

'I figured. You dress a little bit like a nerd. I like nerds.'

Gloria laughs again.

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I lean forward. 'Your bullshit doesn't work on me, mate. Go back to Dungeons & Dragons or—'

'I love D&D,' he says.

'Hey, Drew, I'm serious. Fuck off or I'm going to get someone to toss you out.'

Drew holds up his hands and mouths, *OK*. Just to be sure, I watch him walk back to his friends. There's no high-fiving. One of Drew's friends is watching us but there doesn't seem to be anything serious in it. Still, it's that time of night. I ask the barman to call Gloria a cab and then I walk her out to the street. When the cab arrives, I say, 'Jenny'll turn up,' even though I don't know if it's true.

'Who?'

'Your sister.'

Gloria huffs. 'You know, she's always been weird,' and Gloria trips a little as I ease her into the cab.

I take Moray Street the rest of the way home. I'm so tired I can feel myself stumbling. My mind is a loose list of worries and thoughts. I can't fight them off.

Glasses on.

My keys. Where are my fucking keys?

Kanika.

. . . that whore who got you into uni.

Cold. Should've worn a jumper.

Is it technically Friday? Was Dylan right?

Glasses off.

I find my house.

IAIN RYAN

My bed.

I call out for Harlowe but he doesn't come.

As I slip into sleep, I hear my voice murmuring, semi-conscious, *you, you*, before I roll down into the dream void and that's when the barbarian comes alive.